

The Crucial First Ride

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Make Sure a Newcomer Returns for a Second Ride!

By Ed Pavelka of www.RoadBikeRider.com

If you've been in this sport for long, you've probably seen it happen. An enthusiastic person shows up for his (or her) first ride with the local club. He's a bit intimidated by the lingo he overhears, but that's nothing compared to his anxiety about what to do and how to do it once the ride gets underway. Before long he's trailing behind, spooked by the interplay of bike wheels and feeling as wanted as an IRS agent in a Super Bowl pool.

Do you think this guy will be back for another ride next weekend? Not likely.

It's unfortunate, but experienced cyclists are often pretty tough on newcomers. It may be intentional because of the risks that an unskilled bike-handler creates for everyone, but more often it happens because we forget how much a novice cyclist doesn't know. If you think about it, riding a bike isn't all that easy.

Gero McGuffin has thought about it. She was 30 years old before she climbed onto a bike the first time, so she vividly recalls how intimidating beginning can be. Now a polished cyclist and the wife of cycling author Arnie Baker, M.D., Gero enjoys helping new riders get started in a way that ensures they'll have a great time and come back for more.

Gero's recommendations can be used anytime we're riding with a newcomer. If you're a beginning rider, these tips can help you have a more positive experience as you learn the sport.

Be Gentle

Gero's core advice is useful when helping any new rider: "Treat them kindly, go slowly, and keep your expectations low. Give it your best shot, and you will help a person become a cyclist for the rest of their life."

Now, here's a digest of her specific tips.

- Don't project your own cycling goals. They are much different for an experienced rider compared to a new rider. Let the person evolve. If he's interested only in casual cycling, let him be. If he's interested in fast recreational riding or racing, encourage him – but explain the dangers of trying to advance too fast before developing a foundation of skills and fitness.
- Take nothing for granted. Err on the side of proceeding too slowly and explaining too much. A new rider has lots of knowledge gaps.
- Watch your language. If you're saying things like "upshift one cog" or "feather the brakes," a newcomer isn't going to understand and may be too embarrassed to admit it.
- Be polite. Even if made in jest, negative actions or comments can have a long-lasting impact. Ask the person about his concerns. These could include fear of traffic, fear of being left behind, fear of riding close to others, fear of the saddle, and even fear of wearing form-fitting Lycra clothing. Then work with the person to resolve the specific worry.
- Keep costs in perspective. Don't make the person feel that he has to spend a lot of money to be a cyclist. Explain, however, that some things are a smart investment. For instance, if he's in the market for a new bike, it should be the best quality he can afford. It should have a triple crankset for plenty of easy gears if there are hills in the area. He should buy a good saddle, cycling shorts with a padded liner and a helmet.
- Simplify the pedals. New cyclists are often afraid of toe clips and straps or clipless pedals. It's helpful to install platform pedals that don't require any technique to enter or exit.
- Check riding position. A newcomer will master pedaling and handling faster if he's in a good position. Make sure there is a slight bend in his knees at the bottom of the pedal circle and that the handlebar is within an inch or so of saddle height. To really nail his position, use the guidelines in the RBR article, "How to Perfect Your Position and Technique." **Now We're Rolling**
- Stay off the road. When helping a first-timer learn to ride, use a big sports field or empty parking lot. Keep traffic out of the equation. Next, try park paths or quiet residential streets.
- Ride as slow as the beginner. Don't do anything to make him go faster than his comfort level.

- Watch his eyes. Remind a new cyclist that he'll ride a smoother, straighter line if he looks 10 or more feet ahead rather than directly in front of the wheel.
 - Watch his grip. New riders are apt to be tense, locking their arms and squeezing the bar with white knuckles. Explain the advantages of flexed elbows and a secure but relaxed grip.
 - Take away a hand. After starting, stopping, and maintaining a straight line, the next skill to work on is riding with one hand. This is important so the person can signal or reach for his water bottle without swerving. Next, move on to shifting gears – how and when.
 - Keep it simple. Don't overwhelm a newcomer with techniques. Let him get comfortable with the basics. As you see skill and confidence increase, add something new to work on.
 - Stay back. If you ride behind the person he won't feel like he's always trying to catch up. Let him set the pace. Don't ride beside him until he feels confident in his basic riding ability.
 - Introduce drafting. Explain the advantages of riding behind a wheel, but let the newcomer keep a gap of several feet until he's ready to move in closer.
 - Take a real ride. For your first ride in regular conditions, plan a course that has a fun place to stop at the halfway point. It could be a coffee shop or an ice cream parlor. This is a good chance to relax, give pointers, answer questions and provide encouragement.
- Make It Good for You, Too

One problem: Too many rides like just described can take some of the fun out of cycling for you. Here is Gero's advice for how an experienced rider can get some training while riding with a newcomer. She saw her husband use these techniques while he was helping her get started. Don't do these things during the initial rides. Wait till the newcomer has basic skills but still lacks speed.

The stronger rider can...

- stay in the same gear throughout the ride, spinning on downhills to work on leg speed and pedaling forcefully on climbs to build strength.
 - assist the new rider up hills with pushes (assuming traffic conditions allow and you have the skill to do this safely).
 - pedal with one leg at a time to benefit from the technique of isolated leg training.
 - sprint up the road or to the top of a hill and then ride back, or drop back and then sprint to catch up.
- Way to Go!

After a ride, always congratulate the new cyclist on his progress and welcome comments. As Gero notes, "They will have questions that you can hardly imagine, because you have been cycling for so long."

Finally, encourage the person to ride on his own between rides with you. This will give him the chance to practice skills and gain fitness with absolutely no pressure. Just make sure he doesn't go off the deep end and turn cycling into a physical and mental chore. This can happen when enthusiasm causes a person to boost their riding too fast. Firmly recommend an increase in time or distance of about 10 percent per week, with at least two rest days.

(A portion of this material was adapted from the coaching manual for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, copyright 1999 by Arnie Baker, M.D.)

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