

ROAD RACING

Overview

Road Racing tends to be raced over the winter season. The distances vary from a few kilometres to more than 200km. Courses may run from place to place or comprise one or more laps of a circuit; some courses combine both.

The term "road racing" is usually applied to events where competing riders start simultaneously (unless riding a handicap event) with the winner being the first to the line at the end of the course.

Tactics

Though the objective of a race is quite simple – to be the first rider to cross the finish line – a number of tactics are employed.

Drafting

Tactics are based on the aerodynamic benefit of drafting, whereby a rider can significantly reduce the required pedal effort by closely following in the slipstream of the rider in front. Riding in the main field, or peloton, can save as much as 40% of the energy employed in forward motion when compared to riding alone.

Some teams designate a leader, whom the rest of the team is charged with keeping out of the wind and in good position until a critical section of the race. This can be used as a strength or a weakness by competitors; riders can cooperate and draft each other to ride at high speed (a paceline or echelon), or one rider can sit on a competitor's wheel, forcing him to do a greater share of the work in maintaining the pace and to potentially tire earlier.

Break Away

A group of riders that "breaks away" (a "break") from the peloton has more space and freedom, and can therefore be at an advantage in certain situations. Working together smoothly and efficiently, a small group can maintain a higher speed than the peloton, in which the remaining riders may not be as motivated or organized to chase effectively.

Usually a rider or group of riders will try to break from the peloton by attacking and riding ahead to reduce the number of contenders for the win. If the break does not succeed and the body of cyclists comes back together, a sprinter will often win by overpowering competitors in the final stretch.

Teamwork between riders, both pre-arranged and ad-hoc, is important in many aspects: in preventing or helping a successful break, and sometimes in delivering a sprinter to the front of the field.

Terrain & Conditions

To make the course more selective, races often feature difficult sections such as tough climbs, fast descents, and sometimes technical surfaces (such as the cobbled *pavé* used in the Paris–Roubaix race). Also weather may be a discriminating factor. Stronger riders are able to drop weaker riders during such sections, reducing the number of direct competitors able to take the win.

Climbs

Climbs are excellent places for a single rider to try and break away from a bunch, as the lower riding speeds in a climb seriously reduce the drafting advantage of the bunch. The escaping rider can then further capitalize on his position in the descent, as going downhill singly allows for more maneuvering space and therefore higher speeds than when in a bunch. In addition, because the bunch riders are keeping more space between them for safety reasons, their drafting benefits are again reduced.

Cross Winds

Wind conditions can also make otherwise routine sections of a course potentially selective. Crosswinds, particularly, alter the position of the "shadow" when drafting a rider, usually placing it diagonally behind the lead rider. To take advantage of this, an attacking rider rides at high speed at the front of the peloton, on the opposite side of the road from which the crosswind is blowing.

This tactic is known as "putting it in the gutter" in English. Following riders are unable to fully shelter from the wind. If such tactics are maintained for long enough, a weaker rider somewhere in the line will be unable to keep contact with the rider directly ahead, causing the peloton to split up.

Types of Riders

Within the discipline of road racing, different cyclists have different (relative) strengths and weaknesses. Depending on these, riders tend to prefer different events over particular courses, and perform different tactical roles within a team.

The main specialties in road bicycle racing are:

- Climber - can ride especially well on highly inclined roads (hills or mountains)
- Puncheur - specializes in rolling terrain with short but steep climbs
- Time Trialist - can maintain high speeds for long periods of time
- Sprinter - can finish a race very explosively by accelerating quickly to a high speed
- Domestique - who works for the benefit of his team and leader (French translation as "servant")
- All Rounder - who excels in both climbing and time trialling, and may also be a decent sprinter

Key Advice

General

- Know yourself including strengths, weaknesses and those of your major opposition. Once you are comfortable with this analysis race accordingly and expose your strengths and your competitor's weaknesses.
- Analyse the course including the climbs, descents, road surface, cross winds, finishing set up, i.e., corners roundabouts.
- Know the vital points of the race and prepare for them
- Be patient, but decisive. Always have a reason for doing what you do within the race. Ask yourself what have I to gain? What have I to lose?
- Be ready to capitalise on any situation that arises, turn negatives into positives.

Breakaways

- The longer the race the less likely an early break will succeed. Always check who is in the break. If you are not sure go with it, but do not drive it until you have something to gain from it.
- Be prepared to take a calculated chance. Play the percentage game. If you play safe all the time, that's where you will finish, safely back in the bunch. Put it on the line when the odds are going your way.
- Keep positive, but don't deceive yourself. Don't make excuses after the race is over.

Good Times to Attack

- Immediately after a break is caught, or just before
- Over the top of a difficult climb
- Straight after a sprint
- At “that moment” when everyone hesitates after a major effort
- Just near the finish
- Change of wind direction

Bad Times to Attack

- Down Hill, unless very technical descent and you are very confident. This is often not worth the risk especially if it is wet
- Tail Wind, or when the race speed is fast
- On long straight roads into the wind, unless you can take a strong group with you.

How to Split the Bunch?

- 5-6 good riders across the road riding into a side wind. 1-2 gatekeepers (riders to allow the working riders back in to the front group whilst preventing other riders from behind joining the group).
- For this tactic to be successful you must have other willing riders
- Can be achieved within 500 - 1000 metres in some circumstances when things go the right way.