

Riding bikes in formation

Of all the joys in motorcycling, one of the most exhilarating for me is formation riding. Please do not do this yourself it is downright stupid and dangerous. But if you, do it properly, in the right space, with the right partners!

Tight formation riding: Where a rider formates on a leader for some tight riding together. Whether you know it as 'riding wingman' or 'riding shotgun', riding in formation is exhilarating stuff. However, you need to be willing partners who are skilled to ride on gravel or on tar in close proximity. There are rules. Yet to see any written down unless this document counts, but rules nonetheless. I know RULES exist because I latch on as wingman or someone latches on to me and rides on my '7'. And in every case where it works the same 'rules' have prevailed.

So what are the RULES?

1. Know your partners and their skills and stress handling well!
2. Leader is not responsible for the wingman on his '5' or his '7'.
3. Leader rides his ride at his pace but his situational awareness knows where the wingman is at any time
4. Leader does not have to factor in wingman when things go awkward.
5. Leader should blip ahead in a corner where single file is necessary, and not just keep to same speed,- that's what separates the good leader from the leader.
6. The wingman must break way from all danger
7. Wingman is responsible for avoiding accidents and trouble and must not touch the leader.

It is certainly not every rider's cup-of-tea.

99% of riders do not, will not and look at it as beyond reason.

I have come up on a likely 'known' rider's '7-o'clock' to ride just between their rear end and their dust rooster tail and I soon realise they are not in my orbit, in the same space- just not comfortable with close proximity. They scoot ahead (stupid move), try wave me past, (good move) or slack off and drop out (best message). Not all your known partners want to ride tight when you do, and vice versa. It's a spirit of the moment thing.

In fact most 'good' riders I have tried to ride shotgun with have not been up to the game and shown disinterest. And I let them be, no issues. Comfort zone & Safety must never be compromised.

But I have ridden in close, tight formation with many riders and the 'rules of engagement' are very clear to each of us. Whether there is two, three, or four of us the 'rules' are sacred and well observed.

I am not talking about that person who always insists on riding No:2 behind the ride leader in a group. Because they just want cleaner air and never ever ride in formation.

In fact they can be frustrating groupies at times. And anyway they sit well far off the rear.

Way down field or at the back of the pack, is where we ride in close formation.

I mean CLOSE formation.

My action cam footage shows 1 meter to 1.5 meters on the leaders 7-o'clock.

That is formation riding. Not 100 meters, I'm talking double digits – 20, 35 kilometers...

My most exciting and enjoyable formation riding - as wingman and not really as leader.

I've often been the leader of the formation but then... still exhilarating fun however you just ride and while it's lekker to have a kindred spirit on your '7' who knows his trade and sticks to you like glue, it is not the nicest.

No, I love riding on the '7' o'clock position behind the leader.

I used to watch my friends Geoff and Chris Boltman riding in formation thinking..."now that's what I want to be able to do when I grow up".

Well I've not ever grown up yet, so I started to do it myself anyway in the meantime.

Riding bikes in formation

It has wound my clock back and put many years more living back onto my life, making my heart & soul much younger than the body they are packaged in.

The best in class, not necessarily in any order are regular ride buddies - Charles (Brenda Buttercup, Mr. Badger), Geoff, Annie, Herman and Marchant.

I revel in riding in formation with Herman and Marchant of the BMW Country Trax Riding Academy!

I love watching my footage of trips through the Southern Cape mountain passes and back roads with either Herman or Marchant's bike just a mere 120 cm ahead to my right. We have ridden in 3-bike close formation, 2-bike formation, for many miles.

We have soared like fighter pilots, our con trails are dust trails, our spirits soar with the bikes on a plane and in a heaven few reach or attain.

Many glorious kilometres soaring swooping, turning, twisting, and bonded by utter faith and enjoyment of the moment.

Here I learnt a valuable lesson from Marchant.

While up on the pegs I looked over his shoulder 'cos his engine note was a bit higher than mine to see him in 4th gear, when I was comfy in 5th.

And I learnt then and had it confirmed later that he does this so he always has a bucket full of revs to dig into in case he needs to get out of trouble- either by engine braking on compression or by twisting open and lunging forward.

We've done rough terrain, technical riding, open gravel roads and hills n dales together.

Herman is so skilled he drags you on and takes you to a new level.

I'm fully aware that if we do go down in this formation we will go down hard.

Maybe that's part of this game that is the closest to being a Spitfire pilot as I will ever get.

I've often followed behind or watched the approach of James Redlinghuys and Clayton riding together with that 1.5 metre 'wire' holding them together in perfect formation and in clear abundant joy and harmony. They've been ride buddies for years and they do this all the time. Real kindred spirits.

Charlie n I have done many of Johan Rossouw's Gravel Seeker trips in tight formation. My bike knows every inch of Brenda Buttercup's rear end very well.

We two have covered many many miles, sometimes me leading, sometimes him leading.

Hell we've passed the camera between us at high speeds on gravel roads and shared the joys of little boys playing together. The utmost trust in each other's judgement & ability kept us feeling very safe and able to just enjoy

Letting our Genie's out the bottle on rides has also given me great times with Geoff. Geoff is very good at situational awareness and a gentleman to ride with.

We've chased all over the Gifberge, the Cedarburge and lately the Maluti mountains together in perfect harmony. It was orgasmic to stick to him like glue through the mountains, choosing lines and dodging ruts, rocks and washaways.

Hard on the brakes, hard on the throttle.

Geoff will surge ahead if he wants my line and then let me catch up after the obstacles.

Something few others have done as consistently well.

Geoff really enjoys close formation and I recall quite a few trips where his left arm would come out and point to his close '7' to invite you into the envelope.

No matter the terrain, I often see his eyes in his angled mirror when my scanner goes past doing its 12 point checks every 4 to 5 seconds

Annie is solid.

She just rides. I only tag her on tar because gravel is out her comfort zone.

But she does not waver, slow down or take any prisoners.

Riding wingman to her is my risk and my business and I come as close as I like for as long as I like and she will keep her eye on me in her mirror and let me play.

Riding bikes in formation

So here's how I do it.

Close formation riding 101 sop:-

Come up slowly on the chosen leader's '7' o'clock position.

When I am sure he/she is situationally aware of me, I edge in closer into formation.

If I see they are not comfortable, I admit, I wait to see if they throw me out, rather than back off and go find another playmate, another fellow fighter pilot with sand.

If they will have me in tight formation then I do the following....

My field of vision from my helmet is roughly 180° to 190° laterally in the X-axis and 45° to 57° in the Y-axis up-n-down, and then far on the Z-axis- ahead of me.

So in the range of my field of vision, I place my 'cursor' on the tail light of the bike leader after typing his light intensity and brake light intensity differential into my RAM. I lock my cursor on the tail light, and then I close in until my windscreen (sitting position) top right edge is on the line from my eyes to his left butt. That brings me to ±1.5 meters distant.

Then I lock this into my processor and switch on "auto track n follow"

Thereafter my subconscious activity will keep me in this formation and react to the tail light and dog the leaders every move, while my peripheral vision will scan the road ahead, both mirrors and my tyre behaviour and search for threats – IFF (Identify Friend or Foe mode).

Now I can leave all that to run in the background & I can get on with standing up and enjoying the ride, the scenery, operating the action cam, still cam, radio, music, and revel in the blissful affair of a life being lived.

Should any signs/symptoms of risk rise up, my CPU will process and take the required action long before I am aware of it and that it has occurred.

It's sheer adult fun!

It's as safe as crossing Commissioner Street can be if you are awake and the buzz is great!

Now here's the rub.

All this does actually pull more amps so you need to recognise when the solenoids that drive the muscles are getting sluggish, because that spells trouble.

When you notice you have to intervene and change more often than you need to, hit the 'disengage' & break formation.

Go fly a circuit and then come back, recalibrate all the senses and lock on all over again.

Or change roles and take the lead for a while.

In the Eastern Cape I was using some new tar road skills Harley Gibson taught me in Lesotho.

I admit I bullied past Geoff's constant shadow and came into the envelope in tight formation.

I saw the signs Geoff was aware and at his invitation it was game on!

Geoff is one person who can hold a line.

He can go into a corner, round a corner, out a corner and hold his line, notwithstanding road surface, weather, bike load, or sun's position like no other rider I have had the pleasure of riding with.

(Others will break and come onto your line if they encounter a change in road condition) not Geoff, it must get real bad before he does, and then if he does he surges ahead so that I can maintain formation pace and vector (course & speed) irrespective.

I've never managed to tag and keep close to Geoff on tar before, but with my new skills learned from Harley, and Geoff's preference on the day to get to Tsitsikama before sundown, not teatime, we engaged in some very tight formation flying on roads that twisted, turned, climbed, fell away etc.

Biker dream stuff. It was if the bikes were connected by a 1.5m 'wire', in fact it could have been so.

I had such tremendous fun in this tight formation, it was really like flying. The miles just smiled by in double digits....

We negotiated traffic, passes, potholes, and lekker tar road for many kilometres, occasionally I broke away, flew a circuit, came back into the envelope, recalibrated and latched onto 'that wire' again.

With thanks to all the kindred spirits who have ridden in tight formation, and enjoyed biking at this level.

Riding bikes in formation

P.S, you need to be in the right space to do this, you need to be on the sweet spot in terms of tyre, suspension, dampers, and your Kama settings.

Don't go fly in formation on your off day.

And you need a willing partner/s.