

# Road Racing Tactics

## How do you win a road race?

'How do you win a road race?' asks an inexperienced rider. I think I may assume that he doesn't want a detailed set of training plans beginning when he was 16. I assume that what he's asking is primarily a question of tactics.

Tactics as used in cycle racing describes a sort of syndrome of factors which combine to enable the rider to work out how to maximise his strengths relative to those of his opponents in order to achieve the best possible result for himself. It is primarily a mental exercise but is closely related to physical skills: for instance, a rider skilled at cornering will have tactical advantages on a technical course, and so will a skilled descender on a descent.

The mental part of road racing is very like chess: the basic principles are very simple, but the complexities of their application are virtually infinite. However, all forms of massed-start cycle racing on road or track are based on one principle. That principle is that the rider nearest the wind is doing the major share of the work. A rider at the back of a line of four is probably using 20% less energy than the one at the front, and a rider in the middle of a large group may be using up to 45% less than the leaders of the group. This is the basis on which all tactics rest.

If two or more riders are of equal ability and have achieved the same training status (are equally fit), it is an advantage for one rider to ride in the slipstream of the other (or others). There are two advantages for him: the riders towing him will tire themselves more by doing all the leading, while he will tire less quickly than otherwise because he is riding in shelter. In practice there will be many occasions where two or more riders share the lead, and therefore the work, in order to try to break clear of the main field.

Imagine three ideal riders in what are, for them, ideal situations:

**Rider A** is so powerful and has such endurance that he can ride alone faster than any of the others, who will be unable to stay with him, and he will therefore win alone and unaided.

**Rider B** has so fast a sprint that no-one can beat him, and he persuades the others (by whatever means) to carry him in shelter to the finish, where he is unbeatable.

**Rider C** is such a dominant climber that if there's any kind of a hill on the course he will drop the others and win alone.

If all road races were run like this, then they would be very dull, completely predictable and one of three people would always win.

Fortunately very few road races are like this. In real life Rider A can do his thing once or twice in a season, but most of the time he can't shake off Rider B or a substantial number of the others. But much of the time the others won't let Rider B do his thing either. They drop him, or work him over to such an extent that his finishing sprint is blunted. There have actually been a few riders like Rider C (Charly Gaul, for instance), and over a very long climb, or a series of long climbs, they may indeed be virtually unbeatable; but the kind of hills that feature in most races aren't long enough or steep enough to guarantee their victory, and their results show that they win much less often than do sprinters or all-rounders.

In real life everyone has to find ways of maximising their strengths, playing on their opponents weaknesses, and minimising their rivals' abilities. These methods we loosely call 'tactics', and as I suggested in my chess analogy, they're pretty well infinite. However, there are basic principles which underlie a host of variations.

## Knowledge of the course

It is a great advantage to know the course. If possible always try to ride it beforehand. Always have adequate gears for any course. If the course is completely unknown to you, then take spare cassettes or rear wheels so that you can make a last-minute change. Fortunately in the UK nowadays, with 9-speed and 10-speed set-ups, few riders are likely to lack a low-enough bottom gear or a high-enough top. Even so, it is important, or sometimes crucial, to know that after a sharp bend the hill steepens, enabling you to be in the right gear beforehand; that a sharp turn will bring a change in the wind direction; that the gear for the finish hill, and where you should make your effort, will change radically according to whether there's a tailwind or a headwind.

On a circuit you usually get a lap to settle in, but don't count on it. If you can't go over the whole course, at least ride

over the last half-mile and reconnoitre the finish. Is the straight long enough and wide enough for you to delay your sprint until as late as possible? Or must you be round the last bend, or over the last crest, already in the lead? Observe the wind direction too: a headwind suggests you should leave your sprint as late as possible; a strong tailwind will allow you to go earlier; a side wind means that you'll want to attack up the sheltered side of other riders. You'll also have some idea of what gear to be in.

### **Observation**

An experienced rider arrives at the start of a race with a certain amount of knowledge. He will usually know a number of riders in the field, will know that X is a good climber, that B is a good sprinter, and so on. Based on his knowledge of their current performances he can also form a good idea of their state of form and fitness. He will know which riders will work well in a break, will always do their turn, and so on. He will know which are the best sprinters and that he would be wise to shed them before the finish if possible.

The astute rider concentrates and is alert throughout the race. Don't be one of those riders who sprints for seventh place and thinks he's won because he didn't know that there'd been a break of six away for the last 30 miles; or who turns to other riders halfway through and says, 'Is there someone away then?' You should know who's in the break (or at least the most prominent riders). If a break gets away and is out of sight, try to get accurate information about how far they're ahead.

All the time you should be watching the other riders, judging their strengths, their state of fatigue or otherwise. You'll want to know these things before committing yourself to joining them in a break, for instance. When you're in a break, look for signs of fatigue in your companions, but remember they'll be watching you too. Always try to look impassive and unconcerned, never show that you're tired.

You may, of course, fake fatigue in order to lull your rivals into a false sense of security, a belief that they don't need to worry about you as a threat. There have been some famous examples – Lance Armstrong on the stage to L'Alpe d'Huez in 2001, for instance.

### **Positioning yourself in the bunch**

Your first aim is to ride near the front of the main bunch. In a peloton of 100 riders this may mean 'in the first 20'; in a group of 40 riders it means 'in the first ten'.

### **Working with other riders**

More often than not you'll find yourself obliged to form alliances with other riders so that you can work to your mutual benefit against the majority.

### **Why break away?**

When the entire field stays together throughout the race and arrives at the finish together, then the strongest finishers have an advantage. In any case, in a large field finishing on a relatively narrow stretch of road even the strongest rider may find himself blocked: when the odds are lengthened everyone's chances of winning are greatly reduced. Riders with a serious intention of winning will therefore try to shorten the odds by breaking clear of the main field, either alone or in company with a group of other riders. Such a group might consist of three or four riders, or as much as a third of the field. Those unable to make the break will be effectively eliminated from contention. Those in the break will have a smaller number of riders to watch.

### **Breaking away in company**

Most breakaways will be made by a group. This group can form in many ways. It might be built up from a number of riders who break away individually, first one, then another, and so on, until half-a-dozen are clear of the bunch. In other circumstances all six might get clear more or less in a body. If one rider is going through much more strongly than the others, try not to be the one who's just done his turn on the front when he does so, otherwise you'll find yourself constantly making exhausting efforts to get on the back. This is particularly important as you get near the finish. In any case, if it's early on, advise him to go through more smoothly, because his action (often unintentional) is breaking up the rhythm and effectiveness of the break.

**At this point, if the riders hope to gain time and stay clear, they must commit themselves completely to working in the break: there is no room for hangers-on.** If any rider won't take part in the joint effort then the break is unlikely to succeed, since others will, one by one, refuse to participate. However, if one rider is visibly unable to share the work at first, it may be worthwhile for the others to persist in the expectation that he will join in as soon as he has recovered. The point at which any rider decides that this break is not going to succeed and sits up will depend on a judgment based on a number of factors – previous experience, knowledge of the riders in the break, knowledge of the riders left behind in the field, knowledge of the course ahead, his own state of fitness and freshness, the direction of the wind.

There are exceptions. A larger break can succeed if it contains enough strong riders willing to carry passengers during the time it takes for the break to get established, with the intention of shedding them later. A group of six to eight riders working hard together is more efficient than the main bunch, where perhaps at first only two or three riders are willing to work, while others may be getting in the chase line and not coming through, or even actively hampering the chase because they have team-mates in the break (see **Blocking**).

Many riders make breaks without ever having a chance of sustaining them. If you go with everything you can exhaust yourself carrying companions who are contributing nothing. This is where your previous knowledge of the other riders, or your current observation of them, counts. There are always riders who make a show of breaking away but are unwilling or unable to sustain their effort, and sooner rather than later they're pulled back. There is normally no point in joining in attacks with such riders as long as they are kept within striking distance. However they can sometimes be a focus for attacks by stronger riders, and you should always be ready to join them in a bridging move. If or when you catch the earlier breakaways, the chances are that you'll go straight past them, but the bunch will relax for a moment thinking the move is over. This will give you a little more time to consolidate the break.

Out of sight, out of mind is a good principle to bear in mind, whether you're back in the bunch or in the break. For this reason it's often worth trying breaks on twisty sections of the course, in narrow lanes with high hedges, and so on.

**Everyone knows you attack on a hill, don't they?** Well, up to a point. Since everyone knows it, everyone will be expecting it, and will be prepared to take countermeasures. And where on the hill? In fact, the majority of breaks that go on hills do so as the hill levels off over the top, not on the climb itself. Most riders feel they've got to the top safely and unconsciously ease up a little. This is particularly the case where a long false flat follows a severe climb.

A surprising number of breaks go downhill, which is a good reason for practising your descending skills. A group which reaches the foot of a descent with a small lead can often consolidate on the flat.

### **Size of the break**

The ideal size for a successful breakaway will to some extent depend on the quality and experience of the field. The better the field, the more difficult it will be for a group to get clear. In a weak field, three or four riders may be enough to be effective. In a better field it may require more riders. In general terms, however, once a break exceeds eight riders then it is likely to become less effective, because of the tendency mentioned above of some riders to take it easy on the back of the group. A break of ten riders will almost always include one or two who are along for the ride, hoping to be towed to the finish where they can outspurt the rest. This same pattern tends to emerge even in top-ranking European classics and Tour stages.

A break of six is usually strong enough to get clear and stay clear, and is likely to be composed of well-matched riders willing to work for the common good. In an event where teams are operating, a break made up of riders from several teams is likely to have better chances than one containing riders from only one or two teams, since their team-mates can hamper any chase.

### **Bridging to a break**

An experienced rider learns to identify key moves. If you find you've missed what is obviously (to you, at least) the key break, then you need to get across to it. This is preferable to towing the rest of the field up to it. Look around and see where the remaining strong riders are – ideally, unless one of them can come with you, you need to wait until you're separated from them. You have several decisions to make: where to make your attack from (up the side, from ten places back; from the front?), how hard to go. If the break is half a minute away, your effort will be that of a pursuiter. If only ten seconds, of a sprinter. Jump hard enough to open a gap – why make it easy for the others?

The worst outcome of a bridging attempt is that you get stuck, alone, in no-man's land between the bunch and the break. Unless this is very near the finish, so that you may hang on for a placing, or unless you can look round and see reinforcements coming up, then sit up and wait. If you continue, others will simply use you as a stepping stone to the break and you'll be too exhausted to hold on to them.

### **Breaking away alone**

There are examples of riders breaking away from an entire field and riding a long way to the finish alone. We've all seen this happen in televised stages of the Tour de France, and very strong riders have done it in classics. But the fact remains that such rides are exceptional. Such rides in a big stage race may be made possible largely because the rider is so far behind on General Classification that he is no longer a threat and may be allowed to win, especially following a time-trial or a hard day in the mountains when many riders want an easy day. In practice, most lone wins occur when (1) a rider leaves behind a small group of breakaway companions who have decisively distanced the main field; or (2), if the field remains substantially together, in the last two or three miles.

In the first case the strongest rider has only a few rivals to watch and has plenty of opportunity to observe their strengths and weaknesses. Even so, it's a mistake to try to split the break up too early. You should make sure that it's well-established, and that you're confident of staying clear on your own for the remaining distance. The gap between you and your former companions needn't be very great, as long as you can see after a short time that they're not gaining on you. There are no rules about what conditions decide your move. An excellent sprinter may feel confident in remaining with half-a-dozen breakaway companions to the finish, knowing he can beat them; but if he finds he can also drop them and finish alone, he should do so. A puncture with 200 metres to go doesn't matter much if you've got a 30-second lead.

In the second case (breaking away alone from the field) the rider will usually delay his move until he's close to the finish, within two or three miles. He is gambling on being strong enough to withstand any chase, or, more likely, on the likelihood that no-one will chase so close to the finish for fear of towing the others. By the time the field decide to react, the attacker hopes to have a big enough lead to stay away. These moves are usually risky, but they succeed on a surprising number of occasions. Occasionally, of course, the attacker really is so strong that he can stay clear in any event.

### **Breaking away early**

In professional road races on the mainland of Europe early breaks rarely stay clear to the finish. This is not to say that they've failed, since their first priority is to display their sponsors' names and logos for as long as possible on the television cameras. But the present-day dominance of large teams, and the use of the intercom with which *directeurs sportif* can instruct all their riders, mean that when a nine-man team goes to the front and rides hard they can reduce a substantial lead very quickly.

Sometimes it's worth persevering. I was once in a large break which went after 20 miles of a 110-mile race, the first stage of a three-day event. After 60 miles of very hard work, during which riders were shed from the back every ten miles or so, a motorcyclist came up and said, 'The bunch is one minute behind'. Clearly there were strong and determined riders still chasing hard. But we kept working, and it was shortly after this point that the bunch finally gave up and the gap opened to four minutes. The remnants of the break remained the first six on GC for the rest of the race.

### **Blocking**

An experienced rider, or riders, can help a break in which one or more of their team-mates is present by blocking at the front of the main field and so disrupting the chase. Sometimes merely refusing to take part in the chase may be enough. But actually going to the front, slowing down, and so reducing the pace of the whole field can be enormously effective. Note that such tactics are likely to provoke resentment from the riders who are trying to organise a chase. A skilled blocker will keep inserting himself into the line so that he is always the third or fourth rider to come through. The most effective tactic is to come through slowly, reach the front and then slow down very gently while still pedalling. Many riders will suppose that the blocker is merely a not-very-strong rider, but by the time they get round him and take up the chase again, the break will have gained another ten seconds.

Tour de France followers will notice that blocking hardly ever takes place in the professional peloton – merely not taking part in the chase is as far as they go.

### **The type of race often determines tactics**

Tactics in the stages of a stage race may be very different from those which we observe in a single-day event. In a stage race there are races within the race. One rider may be pursuing a quite different aim from others, perhaps concentrating on stage wins rather than overall victory, sprint or hill points, or the team-race. In a stage race a rider may legitimately sit on a break or be towed up to a break in the interests of his team leader or the team as a whole. A well-organised team may attack from the start of the stage in order to provoke splits in the field, or to reduce the number of riders in the lead group by a process of wearing-down. A common defensive tactic for a strong team which contains the race leader or a top sprinter is to maintain a high pace at the front in order to deter attacks. Tour de France watchers will have observed this tactic in use on many occasions.

### **Fast starts**

Fast starts can catch you unawares which is why it's always a good idea to warm up for twenty minutes or so. But it can work in your favour, of course: you can also catch others unawares, so warm up with this intention. I have seen a key break of six go as the flag was dropped and stay away for the entire 65 miles of a race. It's a move worth trying early season when others may not be very fit.

### **Using the conditions**

This applies particularly to the use of the wind but astute and well-prepared riders can take advantage of any weather condition, such as snow or heavy rain.

### **Approaching the finish**

If you're a sprinter you have to watch for non-sprinters who may try to get clear in the last few kilometres. If you're alone, the least tiring method of controlling them is to ride near the front of the group and instantly jump on to the wheel of anyone who attacks. Letting them gain fifty yards or more means that you'll have a tiring chase, but very short bursts shouldn't damage your sprint. If you have team-mates, ask them to close down attacks. These tactics can be very important in a stage race, especially where there are time bonuses for placings.

### **The finish**

In European professional races the speed is wound up from two or three kilometres out, and the rider who wins the sprint may have to jump on a 12 or 11-tooth sprocket from a group already travelling at 40-plus mph. But in many road races in Britain the riders approach the finish much more slowly and an explosive jump is often a more valuable asset than a very high finishing speed. Probably the commonest fault in British road racing is to start the sprint in too high a gear. Gear down slightly for a rising finish or a headwind. This is where study of the finish on the day of the event pays off.

### **Be unpredictable**

The most dangerous riders are those who are always doing (or at least trying) something different. Try to become one of them. Don't become known for always attacking in a certain place, for always trying a particular move. Try never to telegraph your moves. If you can make sneaking away work, then sneak away.

The manual says all sorts of things that sound like good sense but don't take into account actual circumstances and conditions. For instance, the book will say, 'Don't try to break away into a headwind'. In actual fact, and in the right circumstances, attacking into the wind can be very effective. Consider: there will almost always be a marked reluctance to chase on the part of the others. They're thinking: 'It's bad enough helping to tow other riders up to a break – into the wind it'll use twice as much energy.' While they're arguing you're gaining. And remember, if you're riding on a circuit there will eventually come a point where the wind's behind you. If you reach this point while the others are still struggling in a cross-wind, you'll be accelerating and getting out of sight while they're still hampered.

Some manuals say, 'Don't attack from the rear'. It's true that often, by the time you reach the front, there will be a string of riders waiting to jump on your wheel, but sometimes they're disorganised and it works. It depends on the

group size and your speed. It can be very effective if a move has just been brought back and there's some confusion at the front.

Others say, 'Don't attack from the front, everyone can see you.' But it can work if you're strong and have a good jump. Try to have a rider behind who you know is lazy and has a poor jump. Another method is when you're in a line working at the front of a group, to accelerate through very fast and keep going. This is obviously a way of attacking a small break as you near the finish.

I recently saw a rider open a gap by freewheeling down the side of the bunch down a straight descent. Nobody went with him and the bunch decided to let him sit out in front with his lead of 200 metres and wear himself out in the wind, though they were in fact going so slowly that he could maintain the lead effortlessly. After about five miles the riders reached a steep climb, where another rider got across to the lone breakaway. There were still nearly 40 miles to go, but the bunch never saw the pair again.

### **'Reading the race'**

There is no doubt that some riders are able to read a race, to be constantly aware of everything that's going on, and to be able to identify the moves that are worth going with and those that will almost certainly come to nothing. Some riders seem born with this talent: they can do it from their first rides in road races. Others acquire it through experience. Some, even strong and otherwise talented riders, seem never to manage it.

Reading a race is something you can learn, but it is the most difficult art to teach. It is the result of a whole bundle of factors: preparation, knowledge of the course and conditions, experience, observation of a thousand tiny details of which the rider may not always be conscious – the sort of details which, added together, give the impression of a sort of natural instinct.

### **Catching a break**

If the field sees that a chasing group has caught a break it may assume that the move is over. This is one reason why the chasers should persist and ride right through the break. When the field catches the remnant they may well suppose that there are no more riders ahead and sit up, at least for a time, so giving the new break more time to establish itself.

### **When you have to make a move**

Eventually every rider faces the prospect of having to make a move because no-one else will do it for him. This is particularly the case when a rider is race leader in a stage race.

### **Keep it simple**

Don't try to be *too* clever. The simplest tactic that will deal with the situation is the one to go for. If you over-complicate things you can lose control and get in a mess.

### **Conclusion**

It goes without saying that the cleverest tactics are wasted if you're not fit enough to seize the opportunity they give you. Tactics are a combination of intelligent riding, technical ability and physical fitness. Anyone who saw Paolo Bettini win the Olympic Road Race in Athens witnessed an outstanding display of head, legs and skills. Bettini was in the first quarter of the field throughout the race and took part in two attacks which looked promising at first but were brought back. On the penultimate climb of the big hill Bettini made sure he was at the front at the foot of the hill and attacked strongly, maintaining his effort over the false flat at the top. He took with him Sergio Paulinho, the Portuguese national time-trial champion, a strong rider whose best chance of a medal was to go with Bettini and work as hard as possible. Both riders knew that he would be unlikely to beat the Italian in a sprint. The pair stayed clear for the whole of the final lap and held a 40-second lead at the summit of the last climb. From here it was around five kilometres to the finish, where Bettini comfortably beat his companion.

## **Exercises**

Here are three exercises for you. **For each there are several possible answers**, and there is possibly no

absolutely 'correct' one. What you have to do is decide on the tactics that each rider should make to maximise his chances. 'Answers' below – don't cheat.

1. A break of a hill-climber, a pursuiter and two sprinters from the same team are in a four-man break 4 kilometres from the finish. Now comes a 1 km climb followed by a 1 km descent, a stretch of flat, and a slight rise to the finish. What should the hill-climber do to maximise his winning chances? And what should the others do?

2. Two riders of the same team, Riders A and B, are in a three-man break with Rider S who is known to be an outstanding sprinter. The break is well-established and unlikely to be caught before the finish. What should Riders A and B do to maximise their chances of winning? And what alternative strategies does Rider S have?

3. Rider A is a strong all-rounder with a good finish, known to be the favourite, and the likely winner of the Tour of the Villages. He is in a group of around 15 riders which includes three members of the Wheelsuckers Racing Team, Riders X, Y and Z. These last three begin attacking in turn. Their target is obviously Rider A whom they rightly regard as their main threat. As each of his three rivals attacks, Rider A finds himself obliged to chase each one down, with little or no assistance from the other riders in the group. As soon as he brings back Rider X, Rider Y attacks. As soon as he brings back Rider Y, Rider Z attacks. What is Rider A's best chance of defeating these tactics and winning?

## Exercises: most effective moves

1. The climber should attack at the foot of the climb, attempt to open as large a gap as possible, and stay clear to the finish. It's not just a question of physical ability: knowledge of the terrain and psychological factors come into play. The climber knows that his rivals are unlikely to be able to close the gap on the descent – they will all descend at the same speed. The pursuiter, who might be able to chase down the climber on the flat, will be unwilling to bring up the two sprinters who will get a relatively easy ride to the line. The sprinters will be unwilling to work for fear of blunting their speed. The best tactics for the sprinters would be for one of them to sacrifice his chances and work with the pursuiter to bring back the climber while his team-mate had an easier ride. The pursuiter's best chance of winning is to work with the sprinters and then, when they're temporarily tired, try to open a gap and stay clear.

2. Riders A and B should attack in turn, forcing Rider S to chase while the other sits on his wheel and is towed up. As he gets near to the attacker, the towed rider attacks in turn. If Rider S makes no counter move, four outcomes are possible: Rider S will become so worn down that either A or B, whichever is the stronger, will be able to stay clear and win alone; Rider S will succeed in staying with his rivals but will be so weakened that either or both will beat him in the sprint; Rider S is so strong that he can counter his rivals' moves and still win the sprint; Rider S is so strong that when (say) B attacks, he tows rider A up to him and then attacks himself, dropping both and winning alone.

Garcia Acosta actually did this in the 2000 Tour de France, dropping Frenchmen Hervé and Simon.

In another actual example run on rather poor-quality minor roads in the UK Riders A and B rode so as to force Rider S to ride close in to the side of the road in the gravel and pot-holes, and he punctured.

3. This situation actually occurred in a veterans' road race in 2003. If you're a victim of such tactics your position may seem hopeless, but it's always worth remembering that their attacks also tire your rivals. After five miles during which Rider A managed to bring back the attackers in turn, the race reached a long drag culminating in a short, steep hill. On the drag A forced the pace at the front. The group was strung out with only Rider X of the attacking team near the front. On the hill A attacked and X, eager to

maximise his personal chances, went with him. The pair quickly established a lead of 200 metres and despite the fact that the finish was still 34 miles away, Rider A recognised that this was his best chance of winning.

Riders Y and Z now faced a dilemma. They could chase and bring back their own team-mate, X, or leave him in a break with a rider known to have a superior finish and take the chance that he could still win. In the event they didn't chase, the pair stayed clear, and Rider A beat Rider X at the finish. The team's best move would have been to chase down the break and resume their earlier tactics. Rider X's correct behaviour would have been to sit on Rider A's wheel and wait for his team-mates to come up. Rider A was aided (A) by his knowledge of the course (he knew about the hill); and (B) by his knowledge that Rider X would want to maximize his own chances and would therefore probably take the chance of breaking away in defiance of his own team's best tactics.