

Tips for Safe Training and Riding on RAGBRAI®

The main goals for RAGBRAI are to have a safe and enjoyable time. If you get injured while training for RAGBRAI or on the ride itself, you won't have an enjoyable time. So safety is the number one priority as you prepare for and ride RAGBRAI. Here are some tips to keep you safe as you prepare for your ride.

Traffic: A major concern when riding on roads is to deal with vehicular traffic. Bicycles do have the same right to the road as vehicles but you should make attempts to co-exist peacefully with cars and trucks. Here are some points to keep in mind when riding on roads.

1) *Always obey traffic lights and signs.* Vehicles expect you to stop at stop signs and signal. If you don't, it not only can create an unsafe situation but it may anger the motorist and cause them not to treat you with the respect you want from them. It has to go both ways.

2) *Ride on the right side of the road.* Because you are slower than motorized vehicles, they will need to pass. Help them out by staying right and not riding in the middle of the lane. Try to stay close to the line on the right side of the road. You don't necessarily want to ride too far to the right if there is gravel or other trash on the side, but ride as close to the right as practical. If you have to swerve to avoid hitting something, be sure to look back and signal before riding out into the lane.

3) *Always assume the motorist does not see you.* Before crossing an intersection, side road or driveway, be sure to make eye contact with the driver to make sure s/he sees you and knows you are there. And even after doing this, be ready to hit your brakes in case they decide to pull out in front of you anyway. Often, motorists think you are going more slowly than you are and will think they can pull out before you get there.

4) *Watched for parked car doors opening.* If you are riding along a row of parked cars, ride far enough out in the lane so that if a car door opens, it won't collect you. Also make it a habit to look into cars to see if anyone is in them that may open a door and if you do, be sure to move out far enough to avoid their door.

Road Obstacles: Roads and even bike trails have a number of obstacles that can cause you to get a flat tire, bend a rim or crash. Here are some pointers to avoid these problems.

1) *Cracks in the pavement* are very dangerous, particularly the ones that run parallel to your direction of travel. Even small cracks or those filled with the rubberized patch can catch your narrow tire. So keep an eye on the road and if you see a crack coming up, ride to one side or the other and point and call it out to others. If you find yourself caught in a crack, do not try to steer out of it. This will likely make you topple over. Rather, sit back on your seat to unweight your front wheel and try to hop your front wheel up and out of the crack. Your rear wheel will tend to follow.

2) *Sand and gravel* can make you crash faster than anything (except ice and you won't find that on RAGBRAI in July). If you are riding along and see a patch of sand or gravel, it's best to avoid it. Look back and signal and ride out around the sand/gravel patch. If you can't avoid it, then try to ride

straight through it without turning your handlebars or braking. If you are on a curve be sure to look ahead. You have less options for avoiding a crash if you hit sand or gravel while turning, so the best solution is to keep a sharp eye out and look ahead and steer around it while you have time. Sharp gravel, especially limestone rocks like we have in Iowa, can also puncture a bike tire so that's another reason to avoid it.

3) *Holes in the pavement are another obstacle to be avoided.* Unless they are very large, holes will not likely cause you to crash but they can certainly damage both your tires and rims. If you see a hole coming up, ride around it. If riding with others, be sure to point towards the hole and yell 'Hole' before you get to it so they have time to react as well.

4) *Railroad Tracks need special attention.* Railroad tracks cause a couple of problems. First, they tend to be very rough and can give you a pinch flat or a flat spot in your rim if you hit them hard. So slow down and ride over them carefully. The other problem with railroad tracks is when they are not perpendicular to the road direction. Railroad tracks that are at an angle to the road they are crossing can catch your wheel in the groove next to the rail. If you come upon a railroad crossing where the tracks are at an angle, approach the tracks at a right angle. Be sure to look ahead and behind you before swerving at railroad crossing and be sure to shout them out to others behind you. Similarly, never ride over street drain grates. Some of these have slots that are parallel to your direction of travel and can catch your wheel.

Riding with Other Cyclists: Riding with other cyclists is enjoyable and can add to safety while training, and you will certainly be riding with many others on RAGBRAI. Here are some tips to stay safe while riding with and around other cyclists.

1) *Don't follow the rider in front of you too closely.* Never overlap your front wheel with their rear wheel. The rear wheel of a bicycle is more stable than the front wheel. If you put your front wheel where it overlaps the rear wheel of the bike in front of you, and they make a change of direction and clip your wheel, you are very likely going to go down. Keep a safe distance from the rider in front of you. If the rider in front hits their brakes you want to have enough time to react and not pile into them. Also, avoid the tendency to stare at the wheel in front of you. This happens late in the day when you are most tired. Rather, watch the body of the rider in front of you, or better yet, two riders up. This will give you more warning and a chance to slow down.

2) *Do not form pacelines on RAGBRAI.* Pacelines are rows of riders who draft off of each other to save themselves some energy and to go faster. This is a technique done by racers but is to be avoided on RAGBRAI. The high speeds and close proximity of people riding in a paceline can lead to a big pileup. On RAGBRAI there is a mix of very experienced and very inexperienced riders. The inexperienced riders may be startled by a fast paceline going by and may swerve into you.

3) *Be careful when passing slower riders.* The greater the speed difference, the more likely they won't see or hear you coming by and may decide to pull out in front of you. Be sure to pass on the left with a wide berth and call out 'On Your Left'. Avoid passing on the right. Cyclists don't expect this. If you are a slower rider, please stay right to allow room for others to pass on your left without crossing the center line in the road.

4) Talk and signal to each other. There are certain phrases and signals people use when bike riding that are fairly standard. These will help you communicate with other riders of your intentions.

- Signal a turn – to signal a turn at an intersection point either left or right in the direction you are heading and shout out ‘Left Turn’ or ‘Right Turn’. Put your hand back on the handlebar before entering a turn to add stability to your turn.

- Cracks, holes, sand or gravel, or other road debris – if you see one of these obstacles, or someone in front of you points it out, point down towards the road on whichever side of the bike it is, and call out ‘Hole’, ‘Gravel’, ‘Dead Skunk’ or whatever it is. Do this as far in advance as you can to help those behind you react as well. Don’t wait until you ride through a hole to shout ‘Hole’ unless you weren’t warned either.

- When slowing or stopping, put one hand out with the hand open and shout ‘Slowing’ or ‘Stopping’. If you are stopping to pull off the road, signal to the right and slow down and shout ‘Stopping’ or ‘Off’. Never stop in the road. Slow down and pull over and off the pavement. Be careful as there may be a lip between the pavement and shoulder. When getting back onto the road, watch for an opening, signal with your left hand and shout ‘On’ or ‘Getting On’. Stay to the right side and try not to swerve as you get up to speed.

Use these tips and have a safe time riding and preparing for RAGBRAI. Remember, the only way to have a fun ride is if you stay intact so you can do the ride!

If you would like more cycling training information, check out my website www.CyclesportCoaching.com where you will find numerous free articles.

Coach David Ertl

David Ertl is a USA Cycling Level 1 (Elite) Coach. He coaches individual cyclists, the Des Moines Cycle Club Race Team and the JDRF Greater Iowa Chapter for the Ride to Cure Diabetes. He is also an NSCA certified Personal Trainer. He can be contacted at Coach@CyclesportCoaching.com .