



# THERE IS NO WE IN TEAM

Bike racing at the professional level is very much a team sport. While individuals get credit for winning races and tours, they cannot do so without the support of a strong team. Sometimes the support is obvious, such as when a strong rider in the Tour de France has no chance for the overall because his team does poorly in a team time trial, or when a sprinter's team controls a stage from beginning to end to ensure a sprint finish. Other times the teamwork is far less obvious, such as when a rider joins a break, seemingly on his own initiative, but in fact slows the break to allow his team captain to ride back into contention. Either way, the support of strong, committed teammates makes or breaks the chances of any given rider in a professional race.

One often hears that there is no teamwork in local amateur races in the U.S., but this is not true. Even category 4/5 masters are learning that in the absence of well-organized teams, any team that even begins to work together can dominate a field. The major obstacle to team work in the novice categories is said to be the fact that all team members are equally trying to get up-grade points, so they are unwilling to

do the team-work thing, unless it helps them win. In fact, I've questioned clubs about this, and it turns out that there are clubs where everyone wants to win, but there are also clubs where no one is willing to accept others' sacrifices. In lower category races, a team that works together and designates a different rider in each race can often get points for several of their riders over the course of a season. If working independently none would get points. Even riders who are not the strongest can get top-10s with enough well-orchestrated support. After all, strategy is what one does to enable one to beat stronger riders or teams.

## LEVELS OF TEAMWORK

There are three levels of teamwork: Mutual non-sacrificial support; mutual non-aggression; and actual professional-type sacrificial support. Mutual non-sacrificial support is the stuff that anyone who is not a total prick will do for teammates. It helps all but costs the individual nothing and includes things like having one rider pump all the tires while another fills the water bottles and a third stands in the reg line, sharing a feeder, pinning each other's numbers, telling teammates

when on-line registration opens for a popular race, or inviting teammates to carpool. Mutual non-sacrificial support makes teammates feel included rather than isolated, and leaves more time for warming up. It is a good place to start even if a rider wants to win far more than he or she wants to help a teammate win.

Mutual non-aggression is the first really powerful level of teamwork: "I won't chase your breaks if you won't chase mine". Mutual non-aggression makes the team much stronger because it means that non-chasing riders are emotionally free to sit in for much of the race while their teammates are off the front. Many riders in their first few years of racing lose when they are strong enough to win by joining too many chases. Skipping a few leaves team riders with unburned matches for the finish. Since no one knows if a break will succeed as it forms, this level of teamwork doesn't involve serious sacrifice. Letting a break go, one doesn't know if one is increasing or decreasing one's chances, but letting a break with a teammate go does improve the chances for the team. If no team in a race is doing anything beyond mutual non-aggression, this type of teamwork can bring the win or at least podium spots to the team that does it.

Professional teams and well-organized amateur teams go quite a bit farther in their teamwork by having certain riders deliberately sacrifice their own race to increase the chances for the team captain. When there is only one team doing this level of tactical racing and the members of the team are decently strong, they become unstoppable. In a race where the majority of riders are playing the team game, there is virtually no way for a solo rider to win unless he or she can take advantage of the games played by the dominant teams. Being part of a strong team can be the only way for an individual to have a chance of racing success.

### MOTIVATING TEAMWORK

Once one rises through the categories to the level where professional type team tactics are applied, one must be part of a team to win, with two exceptions: A rider who is hugely stronger than the competition can win without team support, or a smart rider can win solo by playing off the team rivalries. In general the best bets are to join a strong team and play a supporting role for a while to learn the team game, or, if one is among the stronger riders, to build or join a team where one can be a star. One doesn't join a team out of a desire to sacrifice. One joins a team because sacrifice or accepting sacrifice is the route to success.

The only dependable way for the solo rider to consistently have a shot at winning race prizes is to get a place on a team.

Why would one rider sacrifice for another? At the professional level it's simple: Some riders are paid to sacrifice in some races, maybe with the promise of a free rein in other races, but often simply with the promise of a new contract if they do a good job and no contract, even with another team, if they don't. Professional teams often split the prize money among all members, including partial shares for the mechanic, soigneur and other staff. All riders have an incentive to work for the one or two riders with the best chance of bringing home prizes to split.

Amateur teams face a bigger challenge in motivating team behavior. How can a rider be motivated to pay his or her own gas, hotels and entry fees and then sacrifice for another rider on an amateur team? Some mature riders enjoy having a role because they have figured out that they aren't going to win themselves, but still love to race and to participate in 'sticking it to' the other teams. These riders measure their success in terms of the team. I've seen several teams adopt a rule that they will work for whoever is closest to an upgrade, but that the rider who benefits by the support then rides support in the old category until the next best placed rider is also ready to upgrade. The first rider then passes the torch or even stays to help all team riders with any chance to upgrade at the same time. Some clubs adopt a policy that teamwork is required for race reimbursement.

### HOW TO DO TEAMWORK

Professional level team strategy starts with the assumption that each rider knows and accepts his or her role in the race. Some riders are supposed to win, while others are supposed to provide support throughout the race, while others do their job early on and do not even finish. Some team members might be in the race just for the experience and with no other goal. Depending on the size or depth of the team, there may be just one potential winner or there may be several. Many times the team is built around the potential winner, and is made up of riders specifically chosen to support the winner. A sprinter's team will be filled up with leadout riders and riders who can neutralize breaks. A climber's team will be made up of riders who can ride in the wind and chase breaks on the flat to deliver the climber to the mountain as fresh as possible. What one does to support one's team depends on what one is good at. The star's job is most often to do as little as possible until there is no choice or until the star makes the decisive move, while the other riders' jobs are to make it possible for the star to do little or no work by keeping the star close to the leaders until the star makes that move. Teams do battle in part by trying to isolate the other teams' stars, forcing them to ride without support.

Blocking once the star has taken off in a break is a typical team strategy. Blocking usually does not mean physically getting in the way of other riders but rather simply means disrupting the smooth flow of the pack, preventing the formation of a smoothly operating paceline. If the break has a good paceline going, but the field does not, the break can build its lead.

If the team's potential winner is a sprinter, the team's strategy revolves around making sure that the sprinter is in at the end and that the sprinter doesn't have to work earlier in the race. This means pulling the field back to any breaks that form, or keeping the pace high to discourage the formation of breaks. If the team is successful in getting the sprinter to the finish fresh, the next step is the leadout. The leadout is often misunderstood. Some people think that giving a leadout

means pulling the sprinter off the front of the field so that he or she has a clear shot at the line with no one else nearby. While this is a beautiful image, it is not close to the reality of most races. Generally the leadout simply helps the sprinter be in amongst the other sprinters when it's time to sprint, after which it's up to him or her to deliver. Only a team with several superb sprinters can actually pull a rider free of the field at the vital moment.

These are just a few of the ways that a team can support its star. There are dozens more. Learning team tactics is most easily accomplished by riding on a team that successfully employs team tactics. Joining such a team is like taking a class that is required for graduation. One must pay close and constant attention if one hopes to succeed.

### FOR THOSE NOT ON A TEAM

A solo rider or a rider whose teammates are not strong enough to really participate in the race can sometimes succeed in an event dominated by teams. The key is to read the strategy of the other teams and to imagine oneself as the star of the strongest team, while one makes the leader of that team one's own strongest lieutenant. That is, if a solo sprinter can figure out that the strong teams are keeping the race together for a sprint, one can sometime win by making the strong sprinter one's own leadout rider, or launching a break before the strong team starts its leadout but after it's committed to that strategy. If the strong team is setting up a particular rider to get in the break and will then block for that rider, one must leave when that rider leaves to have a chance. A very strong team however may neutralize a break that includes any riders they don't want there, even if that means bringing their own star back so this strategy doesn't always work, and often the solo rider who is not a superb sprinter is simply out of luck. Consider a race where three or more teams have riders who are designated to chase and neutralize breaks. What chance does the solo rider who must save energy for the finish have of sustaining a breakaway against several riders who are willing to chase hard enough not even to complete the distance?

The only dependable way for the solo rider to consistently have a shot at winning race prizes is to get a place on a team. When a rider reaches the level of racing where the outcome is determined by team strategies, joining a strong team becomes as essential to success as training, eating right or having a good bike. There is no excuse not to do it. At that point the decision to join a team is a selfish one. One can't simply demand a place on a team though. Most teams have tight budgets and full rosters. The solo rider and any rider who might someday need to change teams should be constantly cultivating contacts with riders on good teams, and asking about openings for the following season. Riding strongly and getting noticed are important, but lots of riders ride strongly and get noticed. Many teams exist in the minds of riders and managers in the fall, but never actually enter a race in the spring. For the rider with serious race-winning aspirations, developing contacts and having several options for teams to join is essential to individual success. *R*

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**SCOTT SAIFER, M.S.** and the Coaches of Wenzel Coaching help prepare and support road racers through all aspects of race preparation, from planning the training year to contracting with teams and everything in between. To inquire about working with Scott or his colleagues please visit [WenzelCoaching.com](http://WenzelCoaching.com) or call (503) 233-4346.