

In the bunch

Hone your group-riding skills this winter with the AIS

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE THOMAS

Being able to ride effectively in a bunched situation is an essential part of much cycle training and an area often skimped on by athletes. We asked national cycling team manager **Brian Stephens** and the southaustralia.com/AIS team to show us how it's done.

Brian Stephens has been a key figure in putting Australian cycling where it is at present—the top. A former pro racer, he has for many years been involved as manager and trainer of the national team, as well as controlling the southaustralia.com/AIS team, the team and system that grooms top racers for life as pro bike racers.

It's truly a pleasure to watch a well-trained and well-groomed team of cyclists performing at speed together. Turn on the TV during the Tour de France and watch the maestros in action, cutting through the air at breakneck speeds, rumbling through narrow streets like a high tensile machine turned to max. It really is an art to be able to do this.

The tried and trusted AIS cycling program is not just about boosting physical performance levels by increasing fitness; it is in fact far more about teaching and priming young talent in the fine art of bike racing. It's all very well being the strongest rider out there, but if you haven't got the skills and knowledge to administer that power you'll never prosper.

Learning these skills and using them on group rides will make you much more effective and a whole lot safer in the bunch. The off-season makes for a great time to get out with other cyclists and to work on your skills. Read on as Brian and the team show us the basics.

BUNCHED BASICS

Riding in a bunch should be a relaxed and safe experience. The idea is to make the ride easy for yourself and to use the cohesion of other riders to its maximum effect to attain your goal—a faster and easier ride.

Staying relaxed, alert and aware of your fellow athletes and surroundings is paramount. Where you position yourself in a bunch will depend on various factors—your personal objective, wind and terrain.

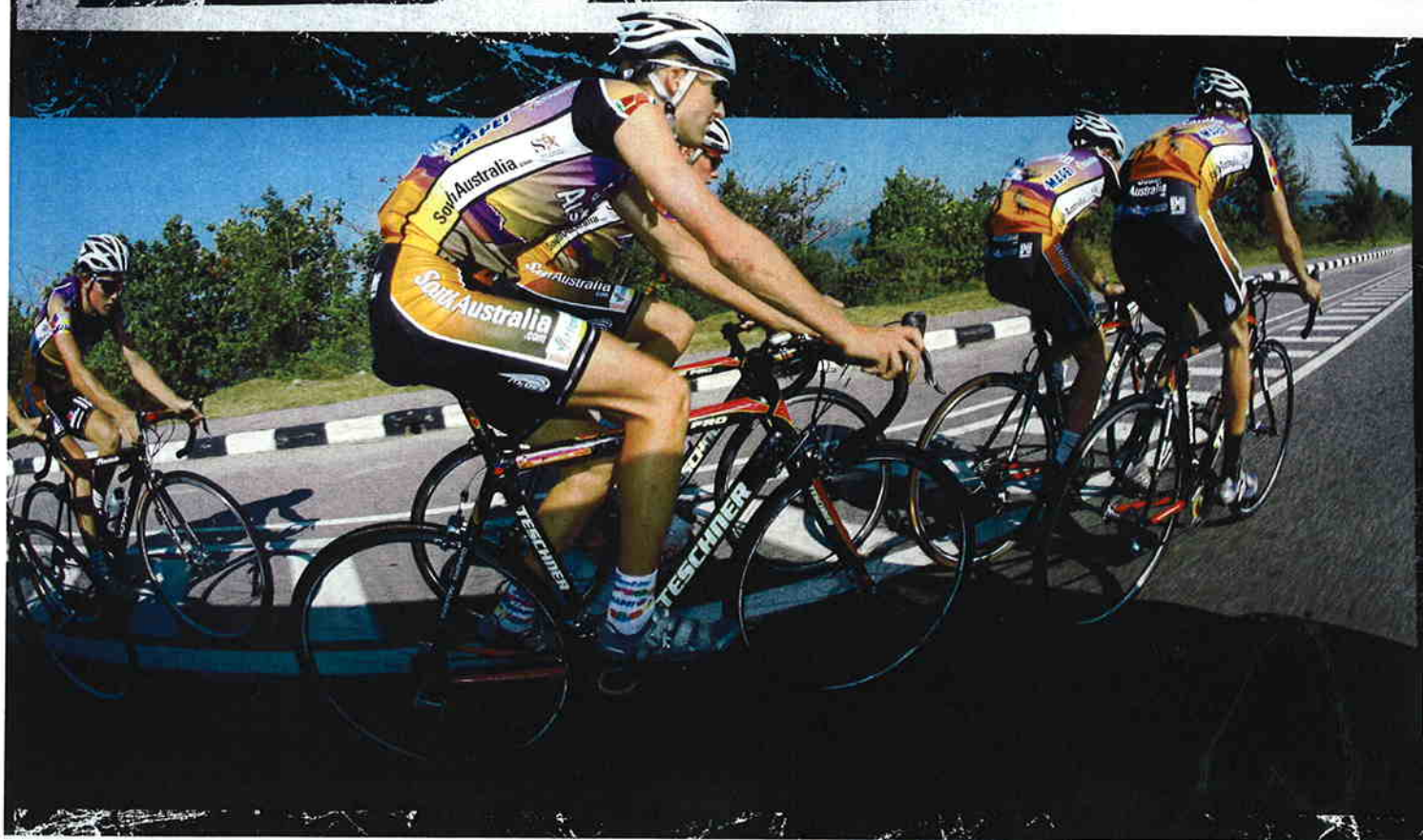
In general it pays to stay fairly close to the front of a bunch, especially if it's windy, hilly or twisty. The back of the bunch is rarely a good place to be, as it can leave you struggling. Try to avoid being boxed in, but also stay out of the wind and away from the grit and roadside obstacles. >>



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Training



ROLL THROUGH: Being smooth and predictable is key

Keeping calm is essential; panic reactions or sharp moves could leave you and other riders in a heap, which is never good. Braking, climbing out of the saddle and other moves should be done smoothly, with awareness of the other riders around you. Always take a short glance around before changing position.

WIND CHEATER

The wind is a cyclist's worse enemy, even more so than hills, and the best way to deal with it is to manipulate the situation you're in as much as possible to avoid it.

Awareness of wind direction and how it changes with the direction of the road is the first thing to note and to be prepared for. You may be neatly tucked out of the way when suddenly the road swings right into a howling crosswind that blows you out the back. Knowing this may happen and getting into position before the change will help.

Wind only occasionally comes fully head on, so riding directly behind another rider is rarely the best place to be. Alternate to either side of other riders to get the maximum effect of drafting and keep as tightly packed as possible. Needless to say, try to ride behind a bigger rider than yourself to get maximum shelter.

HOLDING THE PACE

To be efficient a bunched line out needs to be smooth and fast, which means as near perfect uniformity in pace as possible. Riders sprinting through and then easing off blows things apart, so keeping that line rolling at the same place is crucial.

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When it comes to how long a turn on the front should be, it's about quality not quantity. With short, fast turns you will keep a pace better than with longer turns, but that will depend on how many riders you have. If you are in a group of 10 riders that's easier than with just four, when turns may need to be a little longer to allow for recovery.

On straight roads it's quite easy to keep things even, but when it gets hilly or you have lots of corners you need to think more. On the climbs things can split easier, so keep an eye on the situation. When cornering, try to change after the corners and avoid sprinting out of the corners. Keep it even.

SWAP SHOP

The two front riders control everything, so swapping off efficiently is vital and something that takes a lot of work. Keeping the pace smooth and high is the main consideration. When the first rider swings off the rider behind should not have to boost his pace to come through—his effort level should rise naturally as he's now breaking the wind and that pace should be maintained, not allowed to dip. If you start to slow then it's time to swing off.

You need to stay smooth and ride as close as possible to the wheel in front, or to the relevant side in crosswinds. When the rider on the front swings off he should swing slightly into the wind, not too far out, and ease back just a fraction, but not too much.

From swinging off the most important factor is to get back in to line and to recover. How you do this will depend on the number of riders in the line. If there are only three or four riders you cannot afford to drop your pace much at all, as you will be fighting to lift it again to get back on. With a longer line you will need to drop it faster and then pick it up again as you sense the end of the line coming.

What a lot of riders do not realise is that there is a lot of turbulence at the end of a fast moving line out, meaning that you must be at near full pace to even jump back in line. ■