

HOW TO RACE A HANDICAP

The Basics

All the starters are grouped into similar abilities by a "Handicapper" preceding the race. Yes, all the starters (old, young, fast, slow, men, women, boy and girls). On race day all the riders are let off with their respective groups onto the same course at different intervals. The slowest group will start first, the second slowest group will start a few seconds behind and so on. The time intervals between the different groups is determined by the Handicapper [Alex Mann and Steve Caldwell]. The Handicappers will take all sorts of things into consideration when determining who is to be in each of the groups and the start interval (previous race results, weather conditions, course profile, etc). Please note that the handicapper is 'deaf' to your comments regarding recent illness or lack of training!

The first group starting the race is called 'Go' (could be starting with a 5-6 minute advantage). The next group that starts is called the 'Early pack' for example. All the way down to the second last group which is called 'break' and the final group to start is called 'Scratch'. Scratch is obviously the fastest group of the bunch. Scratch starts the race with a large time disadvantage (eg. 5-6 minutes) and need to catch up to every other group in order to win. If the race is handicapped properly and fairly, all of the groups should catch each other in the closing kilometres of the race.

The Strategy

The best way to approach a handicap race is for everyone to work together to keep your group ahead of the one behind and catch the one ahead and place your bunch to the front of the race (on time) so one of you can try and win it.

In contrast, some people ride handicap races the same as graded scratch races, treating others in their group as threats, and sitting in the bunch conserving energy waiting for the sprint, or even attacking their own group. Others seem to treat handicap races as a group ride and are happy to get towed along, doing little, if any, work. Others may try for a while, then see latching on to a faster chasing bunch when it goes past as an attractive option.

In a handicap event, there is a clear expectation that everyone should rotate and do a turn on the front. Even if you are a sprinter thinking of the win, then you should still try to do your fair share of the work.

It is acceptable though in handicap events to just roll through and drift to the back again. But don't just sit the entire race and then jump everyone at the finish, leaving other riders wondering whether you've actually been in the same race. You'll make no friends racing this way!

Caution

In a handicap event, you should not attack your own bunch for most of the race as this disrupts the flow and slows things down. You should be working with them, not against them. But feel free to attack inside the last few kilometres, and as a group, you can attack any other bunch at any time. Being part of a well-functioning

group in a handicap race where everyone is sharing the workload, aiming to close the gap to the group ahead while working hard to stay ahead of chasers behind, can be an exciting and satisfying experience.