

## **STAR CHAPTER 287**

### **GUIDELINES FOR GROUP RIDING**

Enjoyable group riding is the goal and intent of STAR and of Chapter 287. Everything from the meeting place, to the journey, the destination, and the return home are considered when rides are planned. The leadership, along with everyone else within the chapter, is composed of volunteers. The ride crew, road captains, Tail Gunners, shepherds, and the number of unofficial but still very important involved people, are all dedicated to creating and maintaining an atmosphere of safety and chapter fun. One of the primary ways of doing that is through a common agreement and understanding of group riding safety.

This handbook has been compiled with the express purpose of laying a foundation of group riding guidelines for the safety and enjoyment of all riders that chose to ride with South Jersey Star Chapter 287. These are guidelines only and do not absolve the individual rider of his or her responsibility for riding within the laws and statutes of the New Jersey DMV code or for riding as a conscientious group participant. Group safety is ultimately reliant on the individual rider's commitment to personal safety.

The material within this handbook supplements information distributed and/or endorsed by STAR National in the past, including references to the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) and its publications, which are available on our National website and available in "hard copy" upon request of any chapter member. Furthermore, STAR National has recently distributed additional Group Riding Guidelines, all of which are referenced at the end of this handbook. This is a reference resource for our chapter to use. It is based on the most current information available to the Safety Committee. As riding practices improve and better safety procedures become available, our intent is to update and disseminate that information in a timely manner.

A side effect of a well organized group ride is that it produces additional safety for the group itself. In the spirit of maintaining an organized group ride, and yet still allowing for the individual differences each rider brings to the chapter, we humbly offer this handbook.

## Before the Ride

The three major areas of pre-ride preparation are your **body**, your **clothing**, and your **motorcycle**.

Your **body** needs liquids to survive. It is important to pay attention to your current physical condition (allergies, illness, tiredness, too much caffeine, etc.) days before a ride. It is recommended that you hydrate; drinking as much water as you comfortably can, two to three days before a ride. That will decrease the chances of dehydration being a distraction, and therefore a safety issue, to both you and those around you.

Proper **clothing** can actually enhance the enjoyment of a ride. We strongly recommend layering your clothes, especially when the temperature may vary widely during a ride due to weather and/or geography. Individuals differ in their tolerance to weather and in their response to changes in the climate. With that in mind, it is safest to base what you wear on your own tolerance to the elements. Keep in mind that if your clothing is right, you won't be distracted by the heat or cold, which could affect your safety and the safety of those around you.

Proper helmets, gloves, eye protection, and foot protection are part of a successful group ride. Helmet laws vary throughout the many states that we ride through during the year. We highly recommend wearing a DOT approved helmet while riding with the chapter.

Gloves, eye protection, and good foot protection are also part of an enjoyable ride. We recommend, per the MSF Guidelines, that foot protection cover the ankles. This is for protection against the occasional road hazard as well as fall protection.

In preparing your **motorcycle** for any ride, we recommend the TCLOCK method:

**T** = Tires and wheels (air pressure, tire condition, brakes, etc.)

**C** = Cables and controls (clutch and throttle cables, shift lever, brake lines, etc.)

**L** = Lights and switches (front and rear turn signals, brake lights, high beam, etc.)

**O** = Oil and fuel (include brake fluid check)

**C** = Chain and chassis (handlebars, nuts and bolts, windshield, bags, etc)

**K** = Kick/sidestand (test that it stops the bike when in gear and deployed, if so equipped)

## Beginning the Ride

Generally, we will conduct a safety briefing, which reviews our group riding hand signals and observations from our pre-ride experience. As we grow, most, but not all rides will be pre-ridden by the Ride Crew to ensure smooth navigation and identify stopping points for fuel. The Ride Crew looks for and will brief on particular problems or issues for each pre-ridden route. For instance: road conditions, congested areas, need and location of turn-outs, and freeway entry/exit issues are examples of briefing items.

The groups will form in the parking lot just prior to leaving. This will allow time for arranging the distribution of the members to ensure that our groups remain manageable in size, and allow for specific placement of some riders.

If a group is too small, it may overtake the group in front of it. If it is too large, it will become difficult to change lanes, get through traffic lights, and can be a nuisance to other motorists. As motorcyclists, we want to be noticed. However, being noticed in a negative way can actually be dangerous as motorists may respond to our presence in an aggressive manner.

When leaving the parking lot, gas station, or any stop, it is safest to exit in a modified loose staggered formation. This will allow time for riders of all abilities to adjust to getting moving again. We assume a side-by-side formation at stop lights and stop signs, and then proceed in a staggered formation. When riding through town at slower speeds, riding side-by-side is considered acceptable if both riders are comfortable with it. This allows the group to pass through stop lights and intersections with fewer separations from the main group. **However, a rider should never sacrifice his/her own safety because of peer pressure to ride side-by-side. There is no space on an accident report under “Cause of Accident” for “peer pressure”.** Allow a little more room for those riding with a passenger because the extra weight requires extra skill in close riding.

## Shepherds

During the initial formation of groups, newer riders may be assigned a “Shepherd”, which is a Ride Crew member chosen to “mentor” new riders with our group riding practices. Shepherds will be placed behind new riders, assuring new riders in advance of rides that they may use as much of their riding lane as needed and that the Shepherd will not “cross the fender” or obstruct the new rider’s lane movement, once underway. This is done to minimize the initial pressure of riding in formation that newer riders may experience. It is of utmost importance that new riders do not succumb to peer pressure or compromise their own safety, while becoming initiated into riding with Star Chapter 287. This is for their safety and the safety of the group. Familiarization with our style of group riding goes both ways. As a new rider spends time with us, he/she becomes more accustomed to our methods of entering and exiting parking lots, gas stations, lane changes, and more. The other riders also get a chance to adjust to the individual riding styles of those newer participants. Our Shepherds are also our liaisons between the group and the newer riders. We have all benefited by the wisdom passed down to us from our Shepherds.

## On the Road

In the north east, freeway riding (frequently under crowded conditions) is virtually unavoidable for traveling to our various destinations. As we enter the freeway system, everything speeds up; reaction times, motorcycle speed, wind, etc. It is important that we exercise maximum safety when riding on the freeway.

### Entering the Freeway

Enter the freeway on ramps in a loosened staggered formation. Do not feel pressured to maintain our grouping upon entering the freeway. There is usually sufficient time to regroup after entering the freeway. Do not simply follow the bike(s) in front of you. Make safe choices as to the speed and maneuvering of your bike, without regard to maintaining our grouping.

### Tracking

We recommend abiding by the MSF Guidelines, as well as other publications on safe riding, to ride within the tracks of the wheels of four-wheeled vehicles. This is mainly for two reasons: 1) there is less oil and debris within those tracks, 2) it allows the most room within a lane for the other bikes to maneuver during an emergency situation. However – regarding debris on our freeways – we’ve noticed that debris “bounced around” by cars often settles between lanes. Occasionally there are potholes and road damaged areas that require moving into the center of the lane for a short time. Be alert to abrupt movements of bikes in front of you and foot/hand signals from riders in front signaling obstacles. Look for any signals or clues that can forewarn of obstacles you cannot see and if you encounter an imminent obstacle and have time to safely pass back a hazard signal (discussed below, we recommend a foot signal to keep your hands on the bars for maneuvering), please signal the obstacle.

While we all admire the orderly appearance of riding formations, safety is more important. A staggered formation allows leeway for each rider to “track” throughout his/her riding lane, providing a “space cushion” on all sides. In addition to front/back spacing, spacing between lanes is also important. It is not necessary to track in a narrow part of the left or right part of the riding lane, crowding adjacent lanes. Remember our bikes are wide and if you track **one** foot away from the lane divider with a bike that is almost **four** feet wide, you probably have **one** foot of handlebars and mirror encroaching the adjacent lane. Furthermore, we encourage left/right tracking to improve your forward vision and a “high visual horizon” to identify hazards well in advance of the rider in front of you.

When traveling through curves, the Road Captain may signal “single file”, depending upon the speed, conditions and “tightness” of such curves. On curves, trying to hold a narrow segment of the left or right side of the lane can be dangerous. In single or staggered formation, use the entire lane to maintain your safety through curves. The staggered formation is intended for this purpose. Do not crowd the bike in front of you, compromising that bike’s available use of the entire lane width.

### Hand Signals

The importance of passing hand signals to the other riders in the group cannot be overstated. It is the primary form of communication among ride participants. Passing back signals ensures group uniformity in lane changes, directions, hazard avoidance, emergency situations, and more. We review these hand signals regularly and for good reason. Please make them as much a personal priority as we do a group priority.

The most common hand signals that we use are:

**Right and Left turns, lane changes** – The traditional left arm up at a 90deg angle, and straight out to the left. (More specifics will be discussed in a following section.)

**Single file** – Left hand index finger pointed straight up and held above the top of the helmet

**Staggered formation** – Index finger or thumb and baby finger rocking back and forth (like the Hawaiian “hang loose” hand motion), also held above the top of the helmet.

**Problem** – This is used for mechanical difficulties, urgent potty stops, loss of an item, etc. Pat the top of your helmet several times and safely move out of traffic. **NOTE:** This is the only signal that is not passed back. A Tail Gunner will accompany a rider who signals this to the side of the road, assist them, and return with them to the group or will stay with them until they are at a mutually agreed upon safe destination.

When the above signal is given, the Road Captain may choose to find a suitably safe place to pull the group over and discuss with the other Ride Crew the most appropriate manner of response, or may elect to continue to the next scheduled stop location as the Tail Gunner should know the preplanned route and also may have radio communication with the ride captain. Keeping the group together is important to keep members from getting lost, so please stay with the Road Captain until directed to do otherwise.

**Road Hazards** - This is a foot (and occasionally a hand) signal that can be given by any member of a group. Point in the direction of the hazard with the appropriate foot or hand. We recommend the foot because it keeps your hands on the bars.

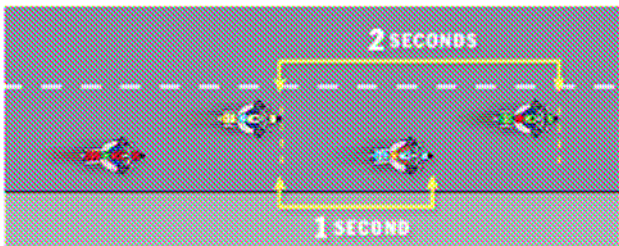
**Tighten up** – This signal is given by the Road Captain for various reasons to decrease the spread of the group. He/she will hold their left hand up, palm facing forward and fingers spread, and alternately open and close the hand several times. As you pass this signal back, decrease the distance between yourself and the riders in front of you.

**Move To Side Of Lane** - This signal is given by a raised open faced left hand simulating pushing the group to one side of the lane. The purpose of this signal is to move the group to the left side of the lane to allow more clearance past right side obstructions such as bicyclists (moving the group to the left), or moving the group to the right to allow passing motorcyclists to utilize the left side of the same lane. When given while riding in staggered formation, this signal actually causes the group to behave in an *almost* single file formation for a brief moment. Beware, when passed by other cyclists, that there may be additional cyclists following them.

## Spacing

As riding protocols go, this is one of the most important for any chapter ride. Consistent spacing intervals make a ride more enjoyable for everyone. Road Captains and Tail Gunners use spacing as a guide to determine how a particular rider is doing. If a rider has too much space, they might suspect everything from bike trouble to being tired and dozing. If there is too little space, a Tail Gunner may ask that bike to back off a bit for the safety of the other rider. Inconsistent spacing throughout a ride can monopolize the attention of the Ride Crew and become a distraction to other riders. On the longer rides, decreasing distractions increases safety and the enjoyment of all.

In a staggered formation, the proper spacing is about 2+ seconds from the bike directly in front, and 1 second from the bike adjacent to you.



This distance obviously varies with the speed. At 70mph, 2 seconds equals about **200ft**, or the equivalent of approximately 5 car lengths, end to end. As the group speed changes, the distance should be adjusted appropriately, remaining as constant as possible. The accordion effect that groups normally experience is reduced when everyone maintains as constant a distance as possible.

Rapid traffic slow-downs are common and combined with a group accordion effect, they can be disastrous. **Don't be a follower.** Maintain what the Highway Patrol calls "high visual horizon". This means to constantly scan for traffic and obstacles far ahead of you and the bikes in front of you. Bikes are easier to see around and you should maneuver your tracking to get the best view and the highest visual horizon. Don't just follow the bike in front. Be alert for the clues that forewarn of a rapid traffic slow-down. This may include, but is not limited to, the smell of tire smoke, abrupt movement of cars or bikes far in front of you, a slow-down hand signal, erratic congestion and traffic speed. Increase your spacing upon detecting such clues or even if your instincts make you feel it's the right thing to do. While we try to avoid the accordion effect, it is far better to have a loose accordion than a tight accordion. In any event, maintaining an adequate and safe "space cushion" is paramount to individual and group safety.

## Lane Numbering

You may hear ride briefing references to lane numbers. On any given freeway or multilane highway, the "fast" lane is lane #1. Each subsequent lane towards the "slow" lane is sequentially numbered. If a car pool lane(s) exists, it is not numbered and is referred to as a

car pool (or diamond) lane(s). The Ride Crew uses lane number references to choose ideal lanes to navigate the group, usually identified during pre-rides.

### **Intervening Traffic**

Intervening traffic is inevitable, especially on crowded freeways. We generally avoid traveling in the fast lane (lane #1), which puts us between lanes and cars who want or need to get through our riding group. In various states there is a Vehicle Code governing “caravans”, which applies to our riding groups. It requires that we allow sufficient spacing (100’) to permit cars to overtake or get through our groups. Underway, outside of business and residential areas (mostly highways and freeways) and at higher speeds, our 2+ second rule will provide the necessary spacing.

Watch for cars (signaling or not) trying to get through the group, especially if they appear erratic or aggressive. It does not matter whether they are needlessly lane weaving or earnestly trying to catch an off ramp. They present a danger to you and the group. As a matter of courtesy and safety, allow them to pass through the group, providing additional space as you deem needed for your own safety and an adequate “space cushion” between you and the intervening car. If they appear uncertain, you may elect to signal them through the group. Do not challenge intervening cars.

### **Lane Changes**

When making lane changes it is **imperative** that every rider pass the Road Captain’s hand signals to the riders behind him/her. It is common and acceptable for riders (and Road Captains) to use their other hand signals during lane changes. The distinction of the Road Captain’s hand signal – which should be passed back – is that it will be a deliberate “strong-fisted” signal. Other hand signals need not be passed back.

Our chapter rides may use any number of lane change techniques. The most common are the **rear fill**, the **front fill**, and the **secured front fills**.

In the **rear fill**, the Road Captain will signal either a right or left turn (strong-fisted) and hold it for a few seconds. Pass this signal back. The Tail Gunners will move into the indicated lane, securing the lane from the rear. Safely scan your mirrors without fixating. When you see the rider directly behind you turn his/her signal on and begin to move, 1) turn your head and check the lane you are moving into, 2) turn your signal on, 3) change lanes. Remember, your safety is primarily your responsibility. Do not move until you believe it is safe. Be very careful checking your mirrors and your lane movement. Remember, at freeway speeds, one second will propel you 100’ further down the road and towards impending obstacles. Motorists often will move into the lanes that we are trying to move into without realizing what we are doing, or bikes in front of you may slow down. Keep your eyes moving and scanning without lingering on any distraction longer than needed.

In the **front fill**, the Road Captain will turn his turn signal on and may point to the ground in the direction of the lane he/she is moving into. His hand signal need not be passed back (it is not a strong fisted signal). He will then begin moving when the lane is safe. This

signal is often used when passing slower moving vehicles or large trucks. **Do not signal until you are moving into the lane.** This will avoid confusing those behind you and the Tail Gunners as to your intentions. Note: When passing and changing lanes to a position in front of slower moving vehicles (like trucks) do not cut them off (forcing them to slow down more). Instead, allow a safe distance between you and the passed vehicle.

In a **secured front fill**, the Road Captain radios back to the Tail Gunners to secure the intended lane. The Tail Gunners will radio back that they have secured the lane, and the Road Captain then signals a **front fill** and moves into the lane. Execute this lane change in the same manner that you would a regular **front fill**. Always check your mirrors and the lane throughout this maneuver.

If you are at the back of the group and see the Tail Gunners move over a lane and **front fill** strong-fisted signal has not been passed back, do not change lanes in front of them. Wait until the Road Captain initiates the lane change and fill in from the front. This is important because traffic conditions may change at the front or back and the Tail Gunner or Road Captain may radio an abort of the lane change, or the Tail Gunners may have been instructed to secure a terminating lane.

## **Intersections**

Intersections present some of the most hazardous situations for motorcyclists. Ultimately, the individual rider is responsible to get through any intersection safely. We advocate obeying all traffic laws. However, we realize that riding in a group presents certain dilemmas at intersections. We always attempt to handle the various types of intersections with group safety in mind. That is one reason why the individual rider within a group must always be alert for his/her own safety. The group relies on the individual to make wise decisions.

Some motorists wave us through intersections as a courtesy, some do not. Some get impatient and make abrupt movements. Be wary and do not feel pressured to get through an intersection to maintain our grouping. Do not assume passing through an intersection is safe just because of the presence of other bikes in the intersection.

**FACT:** Somewhere in the United States, every **four seconds** someone blows through an intersection, endangering everyone near that intersection. Scan every intersection, no matter where you are in the group formation. Also, when we are traveling through residential areas, remember every driveway is an intersection.

## **Separation of the group**

Often on a ride, groups will become separated for one reason or another. Traffic lights, turns at intersections, lane changes in traffic, can all split up a group. The Ride Crew (Road Captain and Tail Gunners) have procedures in place to reform the group.

Road Captains usually know (those with radio communications are alerted by Tail Gunners) if the group is separated and will find an opportunity to reform. If the group becomes separated and you find yourself in the lead position and either don't know where to go or have lost sight of the group, tap your helmet several times. The Tail Gunners will recognize this signal and will take the lead until the group reforms. If you have the separated group in sight or know where they're heading and feel comfortable leading the group until it reforms, do so.

Normally the lead bike of a group rides on the left side of the lane, but during a temporary segmented group situation, it is perfectly okay for the bike on the right side of the lane to lead if this occurs (and will 50% of the time). Maintaining your bike position even when separated will make re-joining the front group easier.

### **When a group pulls over**

Sometimes it is necessary for a group to pull over to the side of the road or a turn-out. This happens often on rides through the mountains when we have been single file for a while and there are cars behind us. As a polite gesture, we may pull over to let them pass. It is imperative that the group pull off the side of the road as quickly and safely as possible. When doing this, no matter where we are, make sure that all riders pull out quickly and move as far forward as possible to allow the Tail Gunners to be able to pull over out of traffic. If riders pull off too slowly, the members at the end of the group are exposed to vehicles that are sometimes moving at a higher rate of speed. We can minimize their exposure to danger by pulling over quickly and in an organized fashion.

Finally, the Ride Crew is always watching for anything that might affect the safety and overall enjoyment of the ride. Tail Gunners in particular have a good view of the group from their position in the back. If any of the Ride Crew makes an observation or suggestion to you during or following a ride, please do not be offended. They are only trying to ensure the safety and enjoyment of everyone on the ride.

**Although we have attempted to be as accurate as possible and base this handbook on the most current and responsible material available, STAR Chapter 287 disclaims any liability for the views expressed herein.**

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## References

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[www.msf-usa.org](http://www.msf-usa.org)

motorcycle\_operator\_manual.pdf

msfgroup\_ride.pdf

riding\_tips.pdf

msfgroupridingguide.pdf

MSF Experienced Rider Course

<http://www.shadowriders.org/ridingrules/ridingrules.html>

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## Guidelines for Group Riding