



# CHAPTER 1

## A Tactical Toolbox

### Reading a Race

Do you ever wonder why some racers *always* seem to make it into the winning breaks and others, despite their strength and speed, rarely make it? Sure, some of it has to do with fitness and persistence. Some guys attack so many times that they can't *help* but make it into a winning breakaway now and again.



Over the years, I've watched the best racers in the United States and have seen how the best of the best do it. It's always amazed me how some racers—despite the fact they were world class on the track or in time trials—could never get the hang of tactical racing in a mass-start road race or criterium. Other racers I watched and learned from would sit back 10 or 20 into the field. Through countless attacks and breakaways, they wouldn't budge. Then another group starts off the front of the pack and, in a flash, these “slouchers” would be there, right in the middle of the winning move. Time and time again they would do this in races. Psychic? I'm sure they wish they were but they are not.

These racers aren't sitting back, resting and daydreaming. In fact, they're doing anything but that. They're reading the race: watching, surveying, evaluating everything that's going on around them. They're watching the course. They're watching for the reactions of the pack to each attack and block. They're keeping a running tally of who's off the front, who is blocking, and how well they are blocking. They're watching for signs from key individual racers and keeping tabs on the pulse of the pack as a whole.

Reading a race is a process by which you evaluate all available information and arrive at an educated guess. These educated guesses can help you save energy, help you determine when to attack or where to attack for the best results.



By reading a race correctly, you can unravel the underlying currents of the race. While some of it is intuitive, learning to read a race is mostly a matter of paying attention to what's going on in the race around you.

### **Assessing the Race before It Happens**

You start reading the race before it ever begins. You need to make an assessment of the course and your competitors. What is the course like? What are the noteworthy points about it? Every course has something that will contribute to the outcome of the race—even the most unremarkable courses have something. When you are warming up, always look for potential spots where you can capitalize. Before the race begins, you should consider how the race has been won in the past. This should be a strong indicator for how the race is likely to go this time around.

I recall a flat and fast East Coast circuit race. It was on a perfectly flat circle with no corners. Going into such a race you can figure that, without anything to slow the pack down, the race will be fast and furious from the start. Don't bother to try and jump off the front, unless you just want to warm up or show off to the crowd.

It's likely that most courses will offer more opportunity for decisive race moments than the flat circle. A major climb that splits the field or a particular section on a criterium course that strings out the field will have a bearing on the



outcome. As well, the distance of the race plays a significant role in reading the race.

On a criterium circuit, look for points on the course that will slow up the pack or that could be easier for one solo rider to negotiate. Look for places where it will be easy for a strong team to block. Look for areas like a series of corners or a narrow windy road where a breakaway could open up some distance without the pack realizing it. Keep the weather conditions in mind. What effect will wind and rain have on the course, the riders, and yourself?

In a race in Baltimore, Maryland, the course was bound to have a role in determining the outcome. It went from a wide five-lane road at the start/finish to a downhill, off-camber corner and onto a narrow winding roadway. The nature of the rest of the course discouraged breakaways. The narrow road fed into a wide boulevard that climbed gradually up around a bend to the start/finish line. All it would take was one attack by the right folks across the start/finish line with the pack lagging a half lap behind to start the chase. When five top racers sprinted for a prime and opened up a small gap, the pack hesitated, thinking they would slow down after the sprint. Once the riders saw they were clear, they kept their speed up around the off-camber corner and through the narrow section. The pack couldn't negotiate the corner as fast. When they were on the narrow section, three



riders at the front who were unwilling to chase plugged up the road. That was the winning move.

The competitors entered in the race can also be evaluated before the event. For example, is there a strong team that'll probably dominate the race? What individual racers are the strongest, fastest, or tactically the smartest? Historically, how do the key riders or teams ride the race? If there's a team that always does a good job of blocking, you'll want to keep track of their guys off the front. What combinations of riders are going to be dangerous off the front? Who has a strong finish? Who seems to fade?

Does it seem like I'm just posing a lot of questions? That's really all reading a race is about. It's about evaluating all of the information and then trying to use it to determine what's going to happen.

Exercise your judgment. You can sit in the race and day-dream, or you can figure out what's going on so you might ride a more intelligent race.

### **As the Race Develops**

Once you're in the race, you should be concentrating on everything that's happening. Who's making the attacks? Is there anyone blocking? Who is it? How is the pack responding? How long is it taking for the pack to chase the attack down? Are the riders off the front a threat? If it's a threatening move, you have



to respond even if the pack doesn't. Remember that when a critical move goes, you rarely have but a few seconds to go with it. Otherwise, it's gone.

One of the fundamental methods of reading when the winning breakaway is going to finally go is by keeping track of the duration of each break that takes off the front. Very typically, it takes longer and longer for the pack to chase down the breakaway until finally it doesn't have either the strength or perseverance to do it. At the start of the race, the attacks last for half of a lap and they are made one after another by all sorts of competitors. This is normal, because early on there are a lot of riders who are strong and fresh. As the laps tick by, more and more of the pack start to tire. The attacks later on are only from the better racers, and often it's the same people chasing down these moves. Each time it takes longer for the pack to catch the attacks. Perhaps the breaks stay away a lap or two. Now they're starting to get threatening. Finally, a couple of strong racers go and they have teammates to block. This time it takes five laps to catch them. I'd make sure that I was in the next attack because it's probably the deciding one.

Obviously, the ideal situation is for you to jump only into that final breakaway. Calculating when that will be isn't an exact science. If you have a lot of speed, you can sit near the front of the pack and watch the breakaway start to roll away. At the last minute, when it seems that the pack is not respond-