

# Driving in a Racing Cavalcade

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## A Quick Outline

Driving in a bike race cavalcade for the first time can be a daunting experience. For some who are used to a more sedate form of cycling it's like jumping from a pony trek to the Circus Maximus chariot races.

Suffice it to say, the cars run as close together as the bikes and if you're not used to the etiquette it can be a baptism of fire.

It's also a really fun way to experience a bike race. If you're no longer up for jumping into the bunch, there's plenty of vicarious thrill to be gleaned from supporting the riders at close quarter from [the club car](#).

To make it safer for all, and to encourage more people to volunteer for what's a really useful supporting role in the activities of the club, here are a few tips on how to get up to speed quickly and how to make the most of the experience in a safe and enjoyable manner.

## Get There Early

If you're bringing the team car to the race it's odds on you'll have a few riders with you so make sure you get to the race headquarters at least an hour before the start. An hour and a half would be even better. (Try to plan your exit strategy when you're parking. It can be a real mess when cars and riders start to leave the HQ.)

Getting there early gives your riders time to prepare but more importantly, you'll have a better chance of getting a two-way radio from the organisers. You'll have to pay a small sum for this, occasionally refundable on return, and there are rarely enough radios to go round so get there early!

If you don't get one the day can turn into a bit of a magical mystery tour. You'll have little idea what's going on up front and it's likely the first time you find out one of your riders has punctured is when you flash past a yellow and green person with a red face jumping up and down waving a wheel in the air...

## Sign On

You must sign on as a driver so some sort of a Cycling Ireland licence is required – a non-competition leisure licence is fine. When you sign on, find out where and when the commissaire briefing and 'car draw' is taking place. This is not a raffle to win a motor vehicle, by the way, it's way more important than that. It's the draw for your place in the cavalcade.

This takes place after the commissaire's briefing and it's required that you attend both. You'll be called forward to take a number from a hat or turn a disc upright revealing the number that you'll occupy in the cavalcade. They'll then hand you a sticker or a piece of card with that number and it's important that you put that prominently on view and the right way up (unless it's number 13) in the back window of the car. This task has proved surprisingly challenging for many owners of hatchback cars over the years.

The rule of thumb is, the bigger the race, the bigger the cavalcade. Stage races have big team support and consequently big trains of cars behind the bunch. One-day events have decent cavalcades in the A1-A2 races and smaller numbers for the remaining categories.

It's not unheard of for the only car behind an A4 race to be asked to do lead car, especially if the bunch splits and the organisers are short staffed. For those smaller cavalcades you're less likely to need or be given a radio either. If you are offered an official role and you don't feel up to it, don't hesitate to tell the Comm that you're a bit new to all this sort of thing but do help out if you can.

## Go!

Many races start with a neutralised section, the primary function of which seems to be to get the first (bike) crash of the day out of the way. While the riders dust themselves off and trundle back to the bunch there might be a radio check among the organisers. This is just to make sure everyone can hear and is in communication and it's mostly for the organisers. Unless you're asked and all the other team cars are doing it, say nothing. The general rule of race radio or 'Radio Tour' is to keep the airwaves clear for the commissaires to do their work.

The neutralised section is also when the cars start to sort themselves out in the cavalcade. If it's big train then this can take a while and, really, it doesn't have to be like the first lap of the European Grand Prix at Donington back in 1993... but it often is.

Here's the skinny: if the car in front of you has a higher number displayed in the back window (or no number) then you're entitled to overtake them. So keep overtaking cars until the one in front is a lower number.

Where this gets a bit awkward is when the car in front has a lower number but the car in front of the car in front has a higher number than the two of you. In that instance the usual practice is to tootle politely on your car horn to attract the attention of the driver in front until their ears bleed. The higher the cavalcade number, the quicker you can service your rider and, more importantly for many, the more likelihood there is that you will actually see any of the bike race.

There really is no need to get too excited at this early point. The cavalcade sorts itself out quick enough without blazing down the right hand ditch ripping the right hand wing mirrors off your lesser favoured brethren.

## **Keep it tight**

The basic rule of cavalcade driving is pretty much the same instruction that everyone from Tommy Dorsey to Paul O'Connell would give their crew: Keep it tight.

It may seem challenging to maintain close proximity to the car in front, especially with the car behind apparently trying mate with yours at the same time but remember, 90% of a bike race is conducted at 40-50kmh which is the speed so many people find difficult to stay below around town. The rule is 5 metres between cars.

For the riders, though, it's critical that the cars are close together when they're working back to the bunch after a crash, puncture or other mishap. Cars in the cavalcade leaving big gaps can finish a rider's race there and then so stay close to the car in front until a rider comes past, then lay off ever so slightly to allow them to slot in behind the car in front if they want. Then when they go past, tighten up on the car in front again. Believe me, it makes a huge difference to the chances of riders getting back on.

If a rider latches on to your bumper, don't panic or do anything suddenly. Don't brake or accelerate abruptly, just maintain a constant pace and let the rider work out where they need to go. You might think you need eyes in the back of your head but all you need to do is focus on what's going on ahead of you, take regular glances in the mirror and do everything smoothly, just like your driving instructor told you...

Riders should come past on the right hand side but they don't always do so and remember that other riders can be dealing with issues on the left so, in an ideal situation, try to maintain a position in the centre of the left lane, leaving as much room either side if it exists.

As the rider comes past a few toots on the horn lets the driver in front know that a rider is coming through. It's a very helpful courtesy.

Watch out for cars in front stopping to service riders and be prepared to move right to make your way past. Neutral service will usually pick up the first rider from the bunch but be primed to spring into action. Know your riders numbers – they should be written on a piece of paper, attached to a clipboard and checked constantly by your mechanic against the numbers called out on race radio as having crashed, had a mechanical or, better still, joined a breakaway.

Service in Ireland is always on the left hand side of the road. You'll be penalised if you're seen fitting a wheel on the right hand side (unless, of course, the rider crashed on that side of the road...) so make sure your riders are au fait with the rule. If they stop on the right they'll be stuck for what seems like an age while the whole cavalcade makes its way past. It's a tough way to learn that lesson.

You must, according to UCI rules, have a second person in the car with you and, ideally, they need to adopt the role of mechanic in order to make the most of having a car do service in the first place. To do it right the mechanic needs to sit in the back clutching a front wheel in one hand with the other paw poised hair trigger-like beside 10-speed or 11-speed rear wheels waiting to hear which rider has come to grief.

When you're called into action try not to squeal with delight – your rider will actually be livid at this point – and also take care not to add injury to mechanical insult by running them over... Brake to a halt behind the rider, let the mechanic get them safely on their way again and don't drop the clutch until your mechanic is safely back in the car for fear that he might clout his knee on the car door and potentially wreck a promising A1 racing career (see Brian McArdle for full details...)

## **Mercy sakes, we got us a con-voy...**

If you do have to communicate on the radio, usually to request the right to go up to the break into which the club superstar has infiltrated or to feed or collect/deliver clothing to one of your riders at the back of the bunch, then announce your club and car number to the chief comm and make the request clearly and succinctly. He or she might say 'no' cause it's all a bit hectic at that time. Don't be offended. Wait a while and ask again.

If you're called up to service a rider behind the bunch make your way safely and smartly up the outside of the cavalcade and behind the commissaire's car. Your rider will then drop back to the car. Once your rider goes back to the bunch, drop back to your previous position.

The general rule is that if a break goes up over a minute then the commissaire will let the team cars of the relevant

riders move past the bunch and up to take position, in car number order, behind the break but a comm might delay letting the cars through for myriad reasons: maybe the road is too narrow for cars to come past safely or there's a big lump of a hill coming up that's likely to kill the move and put cars in among the bunch are two of the usual reasons for a commissaire adopting a 'wait and see' attitude.

At the end of the race, there may be a 'deviation' near the finish line directing team cars and other vehicles away from the race route, often into a car park or holding area. Even if there's no deviation and you proceed though the finish line make sure to follow directions and don't hang around. Getting roads clear at finish lines is a major challenge for organisers.

Have fun. At the end of the day you'll probably feel like you've ridden the race yourself and your presence will have been a major boost to all the riders in the squad. Fair play and many thanks for your help.