

Ramblers Cycling Club Tips for Handicap Races

In handicap races faster groups of riders are given a later starting time than slower ones (a handicap) so that in theory (if the handicapper gets it right) everybody gets to the end of the race around the same time with a chance of winning. The winning time is the lowest result of actual time less the handicap.

Particular terms are used for handicap events but they tend not to be heard around Ramblers as our handicap groups are grades. Elsewhere however, in the case of there being eight groups (like Ramblers) the slowest group would be referred to as Limit, and goes first, followed at intervals by groups called Breaks and numbered 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 and just Break, and lastly by the fastest group, called Scratch.

A handicapped Ramblers race could look like this. G grade would start first on, say, 27 minutes; Fem might start next on 22 minutes; F on 17; E on 12; D on 8; C on 6; B on 4; and A grade would start on 0.

How handicapping works in practice was illustrated by a Pukehemoama – Crownthorpe handicap race where an A grader posted the fastest race time of 1:33:36. Because he started on scratch (0) this was also his handicapped time. An E-grader on the other hand posted a race time of 1:42:10 but because he rode with a 15 minute handicap this was deducted from his race time making his handicapped time 1:27:10 and him the winner.

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 pull 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!

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. In your next handicap race get your group working together properly and really have a go!