



Pulling Lapped Riders in Criteriums

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Funny how some things never change. Pulling lapped riders was an issue when I started officiating 27 years ago and not much has changed about that. It is always a tough call whether you should or should not pull lapped riders. Take it from me, someone who has cane marks on his neck from all the times he was pulled, it is no fun being pulled. I pay my money, I want to race as long as I can. It is my best opportunity to train that day. If I keep getting pulled, I just keep getting behind all my competitors. Thus, as a basic premise, we want to avoid pulling lapped riders.

There are two reasons to pull lapped riders: Safety of the riders (both those being lapped and those doing the lapping) Sanctity of the results (i.e. are the officials getting lost or are the dropped riders messing up the leaders chances)

Safety of the Riders

How unsafe is it really to have riders being lapped? Riders train every day on city streets and are pretty good about moving in and around traffic. I would argue that passing a lapped rider is far more safe than 90% of the things riders do on a bicycle. Many times officials pull the “rider safety card” when really what they mean is their lives would be more convenient if all those lapped riders were not there. Pulling a rider because it would make your life more convenient is never, repeat never, a valid reason for pulling a lapped rider. It is akin to saying you can’t or don’t want to do your job.

Sanctity of the Results

Probably a more commonly used reason for pulling lapped riders is that the judges are becoming confused and if they remove lapped riders they will be less confused. Your ultimate responsibility at a bike race is to see that the right person won. Following that are the other money places. About an order of magnitude down is everyone else. However, this logic is often used to eliminate all but a handful of riders. I have seen fields of 10 cat four women where the officials pulled lapped riders. I have seen masters road championship events where a rider less than 1 minute behind the field was pulled on lap 2 of 7 because it was clear to the official he would eventually be lapped. Such decisions do little for our customer service reputation.

Now, all that being said, there are clearly times when it is very appropriate and necessary to pull lapped riders. One of those times is probably any criterium for Pros. If a pro cannot hang with the field, then he should probably go home and come back next week. Besides, leaving pros in to get lapped over and over just asks for all kinds of funny stuff to go on with team tactics. In general, the arm should come out stronger the higher the category of race you are officiating and should be left limp for all of the novice classes. What about Pro/1/2 races. Well there you have a unique situation. It is clearly not training for the pros. It probably really is training for the cat 2 riders. In some locations, once you make cat 2, the rest of your career is spent being pack fodder in Pro/1/2 races, another scenario I am all too familiar with. I would suggest you play that one by ear. Early in the season, I would try to give dropped riders a break even in a Pro/1/2 race. I would probably become more strict as the season advanced or the race became more important.

Another reason might be one of those nightmare races that combine problems with results sanctity and safety in one fell swoop. You know, the ones where there are riders spread out all over and all the officials are totally lost. One of those ones where you want to just hang a clipboard on the stage and let the riders fill it out while you are drinking away your sorrows.



So, how do you decide? There are lots of considerations. We have mentioned some already, such as whether this is a cat 4 race or a pro race. What is the field size? Go ahead and try to convince me that you should pull lapped riders when there are just 12 of them. Of course, what if you have 125 of them on the line? Different story. Very different story. Still, that does not mean you have to pull anyone. Maybe they all stay together. Maybe just a few get lapped. If so, you might not need to pull them at all. Here are a couple of things I and others have tried and that seem to work:

Give yourself some flexibility. You don't have to do each race the same way. The important thing is that the riders on the line know how you are doing it for their race. I might not pull anyone all day and then pull ruthlessly in the pro/1/2 race. You do not even have to pull the same way at all stages of the race. While it is best to be consistent, if I have not been pulling riders and I know that I have lapped riders in the field, there might still be a situation where I would pull riders near the end of the race if a situation was developing that might cause a loss of results or in a safety issue. An example might be a situation where it is clear the breakaway is about to lap a large dropped group at the worst possible moment on their final lap. Even in that case, though, rather than pulling the dropped group, I would prefer to just finish them early and get them off the course. Another option might be to have a lead motoref zoom up to the dropped group and just move them over so that the leaders can pass cleanly. There are lots of different ways to handle it, but most of those decisions have to be made in the heat of the moment.

Finish riders early instead of pulling them. Near the end of the race, there are times when you could just ring the bell for riders off the back and let them finish, recording their finish and taking into account where they were on the course. This would make for much happier customers than having them get pulled late. It also clears out the course for the big sprint coming up for the money places.

Analyze your audience and make the best decision for them. When I used to do a lot of local events, I would often tell the riders something like this, "I would like to avoid pulling lapped riders today if I can. If I have to pull you, you will either be pulled by me here at the line or by the motoref. If you are lapped and have not been pulled, you are to go to the back of whatever group you are in with 3 laps to go and stay there until the end." Then, woe be unto any rider that got lapped and finished in the bunch sprint. In about 5 years of doing that technique, I had a total of 2 riders make me regret it. The trade off was a lot of happy riders who were allowed to finish. For me the math is simple:

Many happy riders + 2 suspended riders + 2 annoyed judges that had to remove a lapped rider from a results sheet = hundreds of unhappy riders

Keep track of the judges and how they are doing. I like to let the judges be a big part of the decision, but recognize that there are big differences in ability. If someone I know is the world's best judge and he or she is getting lost, then I would resort to pulling lapped riders with less hesitation as it must be one of those nightmare situations. With newer officials maybe I just need to try to help them understand how to handle the maintenance of the list of lapped riders.

Just some thoughts. Ultimately, you will have to decide how to run your criteriums. Please remember that the riders are your customers, they paid really good money to be there, and that they are, in fact, paying your huge salary for officiating. In a perfect world, every rider will get to finish whether lapped or not and the officials will know exactly where everyone finished. All else is settling for something less than the ideal. Don't settle. As my major professor had posted on his wall, "Strive for perfection in the hopes of attaining excellence."