

CLIMBING THE CATEGORY LADDER

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One of the most important functions of any athletic governing body is to create a framework for the different levels of athletes they serve. In the United States the framework for cyclists is broken down to include "Citizens" or "5's" and the category numbers 4, 3, 2 and 1 (often referred to as "Cat"). Although the process to upgrade categories is fairly clear, what isn't as clear is what type of rider each category is intended for.

All riders begin as Citizens or 5's and as they gain experience and results they advance to the next lowest number category. A rider upgrades from category to category by submitting their results to the regional officials. Upgrading from either a Citizen or a Cat 5 to a Cat 4 requires the experience of participating in certain number of races. Upgrading from a Cat 4 to a Cat 3 involves a combination of race experience and results that prove you are capable of keeping the pace and racing safely in the group. Upgrading to a Cat 2 or Cat 1 is based primarily on results and abilities. Cat 1 is the highest a rider advances without signing a professional contract. But what type of rider should you expect to find in each category?

The three most important things to consider when gauging whether you should race Citizens or Category 4, 3, 2 or 1's are *experience*, *ability* and ultimately- *time commitment*.

If you are brand new to the sport of competitive cycling, have just started training, and haven't done a lot of group rides, then you should definitely begin with the Citizen categories. No annual license purchase is required and most promoters lower the fees for citizens interested in trying the sport. The distances are often shorter for Citizens too so that even those riders without a lot of training get a taste of the competitiveness.

Once a rider has trained consistently for period of time, done a few citizen races, and can keep up with and feel safe on a moderately-paced group rides, they should have the confidence to jump to the Category 4's. It's a good challenge for yourself and keeps the Citizens category open for the doe-eyed (and possibly terrified) newbies like the rider you might have been not so long ago. The category 4 races will be faster and longer than the citizen race, but this is the fertile (and sometimes dangerous) testing ground for race tactics and strategy- whether it be for an individual or a team.

Success in bike racing comes from using your strengths at the right time and training your weaknesses. Riders in a Category 4 race should be testing themselves to discover their strengths and weaknesses and also determine where their energy expenditure is most effective. Do you need to build your endurance for longer races or your jump to stick with attacks? Can you attack from way out and hold off your competitors or do your best results come from waiting to explode in the final 400 meters of the race? Or are you most effective at identifying how to set up teammates for attacks and sprints?

It's time to move to the Category 3's once you

meet three criteria:

- 1) You've identified how to use your strengths and sufficiently trained your weaknesses
- 2) Are comfortably safely racing your bike in a group
- 3) You've learned some basic race tactics and strategy.

The amount of time required to meet these criteria can vary greatly from athlete to athlete depending on the amount of time he/she has to commit to training. However, many riders linger too long in the Category 4's because they don't think they are ready physically to move up. These riders don't understand that the jump from a Category 4 to a Category 3 is much more mental than it is physical. Yes, a commitment to training is required, but most Category 4's already train every day. The key is that once you identify your strengths and weaknesses- train smarter, not harder. Research some of the basics of training or hire a coach. Not only can a coach or a great cycling book help you improve physically, but they can help you learn the best ways to apply your strengths to race tactics. The thing I hear from most new Category 3 riders is "Wow, this is easier than I thought... and fun!" New Category 3's quickly discover that they're no longer worried about staying upright in a field of riders with a wide-range of bike handling abilities, but instead are competing with riders that use tactics and strategy to figuratively break some legs.

Now the jump from Category 3's to the 1/2's is the "danger zone", although it's easy to understand why riders are eager to make the jump to push themselves farther and see how they measure up against better riders. However, a fact to carefully consider is that 98% of the time a Category 2 rider will compete against the Category 1 and Pro riders. This level of racing is where a rider's time commitment to cycling is one of the most important factors as it directly affects his or her ability. Category 1 and Pro riders usually train 12 to 24 hours a week and are acutely aware of how to use their strengths to inflict pain on the competition. A moderately-successful Category 3 rider should carefully consider the jump to the 1/2's if he/she doesn't have the time to commit to training due to other priorities that might provide much more comfort and satisfaction in life than doing a 4-hour tempo ride in the rain! It might make more sense to stay a Category 3, maintain that balance between "real-life" and cycling, and enjoy the occasional success of your outlet. Racing can certainly lose its "fun factor" if you upgrade to a level that turns your weekends into suffer-fests of trying to keep your tongue out of your spokes as lactic acid seeps out of your eyeballs.

Ultimately, the fun factor is the reason all of us get into this sport and become addicted to it. The high speed combination of physical and mental requirements of pack-style racing aren't found in many any other sports. Placing yourself in the right category can help you push the limits while having a great time.