

Question: I'm fairly new to road riding and one technique eludes me. I can't look behind without veering several feet to the left, into traffic. Any tips? -- Gerard S.

Coach Fred Matheny Replies: You're not alone, Gerard. Some people who've been riding for years still have a hard time holding their line while looking back.

The reason is that they keep both arms straight with elbows rigid. As a result, turning their shoulders to glance back also turns the handlebar.

Instead, relax the arm opposite the shoulder you're looking over. So to look left, relax and slightly bend the right elbow. Your bike will be less likely to swerve.

Also, slide to the side of your saddle. Move your crotch toward the right as you look over your left shoulder, so you're sitting on the inside of the left thigh.

Finally, don't put your entire focus to the rear. Tune in to your peripheral vision too. By staying aware of your bike's line compared to lane lines or other cues, you'll be more sensitive to drifting.

Practice these techniques where there's no traffic (like in an empty parking lot) before you try them on the road. If you just can't get it and are often in situations where you need to check behind, consider a handlebar- or head-mounted rearview mirror.

Question: I'd like to get rid of the black marks and scoring on my new alloy rims. I use Shimano Dura-Ace brake pads. Is there any way to remedy these problems? Would it help to switch to aftermarket pads like Kool Stop? -- Chris R.

The Unc Answers: The black marks are simply the brake pad compound transferring to the rim surface. You can easily remove it with fine steel wool, the kind a furniture maker would use to smooth a wood surface. Acetone works, too -- just don't get it on the brake pads, tires or any other rubber or plastic you don't want to melt.

The "scoring" is a different problem.

When you brake hard, some of the rim metal transfers to the pads. If it's left imbedded, it cuts grooves into the rim. I find that this scoring is more common on the front rim than the rear.

Take out the wheels so you can get at the working surface of the brake pads. Look for shiny bits of metal in the pads and pick them out with a pointy instrument like an awl or small screwdriver. A file, sandpaper or small stiff-bristle brush will do the job too, but they tend to remove the pad along with the metal.

If your wheels are gritty from riding in the rain, this too can cause scoring. Wash them with a soapy solution, rinse and dry. While they're out, wash the brakes and check the pads for imbedded grit.

Consider using this opportunity to clean the rest of your filthy bike too. Then you won't look ridiculous with sparkling wheels and brakes on a frame that apparently hasn't been washed since the first Paris-Roubaix.

Keep in mind that rims and pads are the sacrificial lambs of the braking process. Both will wear out no matter how well you maintain them. Eventually, you'll need to replace them.

Aftermarket pads may reduce rim marks. At least you won't notice the marks as much if the pads are a color other than Dura-Ace black. Kool Stop pads are good. I've used Mathauser pads with great success (but they squeal louder than girls at a Justin Timberlake concert if you don't clean them periodically).

But usually, I just use stock stuff. When it comes to stopping a bike, Shimano's pads will do it on a dime and give you 9 cents change.