

THE PRIMARY POSITION

British author John Franklin will change the way you think about road cycling

by John Schubert

There was a substantial buzz among U.S. bicyclists when the British author John Franklin announced he would write a North American version of *Cyclecraft*. The 1988 U.K. version was widely regarded as a level-headed and cheerfully-written “all-about” book for cycling, with an extraordinarily clear description of how to ride well in traffic. Since British books about traffic are hard for us colonials to understand (swap left for right,

pavement for sidewalk, and spell kerb with a “ke”), *Cyclecraft* needed a North American version to gain greater appeal to U.S. readers. Franklin obliged. He collected a group of North American experts to review his manuscript and help him get all the Americanisms right, and only a few months later, the book appeared.

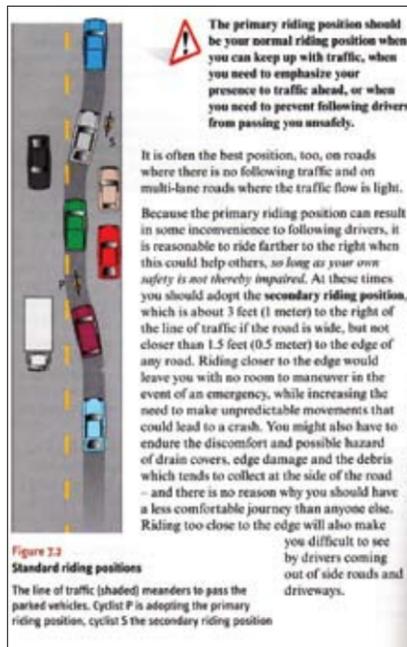
Franklin’s “how to ride” description is the big news here, just as it was in England. This is no surprise. Franklin helped establish the U.K. National Cycle Training Standard, and that standard’s syllabus is based directly on *Cyclecraft*, which is required reading for U.K. instructors. And *Cyclecraft*’s back cover carries endorsements from the League of American Bicyclists and the Canadian Cycling Association.

There are chapters of important-but-familiar information on brakes, gears, components, lights, and so on. Then we get to the heart of the book: making you a better rider.

Franklin begins with control. He likes his cyclists to be in good control of their bikes. He has clear, concise, and cheerful explanations of emergency turning maneuvers. He points out that being able to sprint (modestly, to 20 MPH) can be a safety benefit, and you need to be able to spin a high enough cadence to do that.

And then Franklin sets himself apart in Chapter 7, when he introduces the primary position:

“The primary riding position is in the center of the rightmost line of traffic for



Cyclecraft diagrams traffic situations.

the direction in which you wish to travel. Here you will be well within the zone of maximum surveillance of both following drivers and those who might cross your path, and you will have the best two-way visibility of side roads ... The road surface will usually be flatter here than it is nearer the edge ... you should be able to maintain the straightest and fastest course without the need to deviate at side roads.”

In two words, Franklin slashed through all the hand-wringing about

what to say about claiming the lane. He just said “primary position.”

So when do you use the primary position?

“The primary riding position should be your normal riding position when you can keep up with traffic, when you need to emphasize your presence to traffic ahead, or when you need to prevent following drivers from passing you unsafely.”

So when don’t you use the primary position?

“Because the primary riding position can result in some inconvenience to following drivers, it is reasonable to ride farther to the right when this could help others, so long as your own safety is not thereby impaired. At these times you should adopt the secondary riding position, which is about 3 feet ... to the right of the line of traffic if the road is wide, but not closer than 1.5 feet to the edge of any road.”

A few paragraphs later, he continues: “Follow the traffic, not the edge of the road. The secondary riding position is always relative to the line of moving traffic, not the road edge. Riding farther right, even if there is space, will reduce your ability to be seen by other drivers and the notice they will take of you.”

Franklin goes on to analyze how rider position affects your visibility at curves and intersections, and notes that there are indeed exceptions to the primary-position rule. Among the exceptions:

poor visibility in fog and closing time at the local bar. He shows you, with an excellent diagram, truck drivers’ blind spots. He explains signaling, overtaking, and optimal positioning for approaching intersections. Then follow many pages telling you how to handle turns on and off multi-lane roads, roundabouts, free-way ramps, the hidden hazards of filtering forward in stuck traffic, rural riding consideration, and (you knew this was coming) how to out-think bad bike-lane design to avoid accidents. There are brief sections on carrying children and cargo, touring, commuting, and recumbent bikes.

Franklin is polite and scholarly in his firm opinions, of which he has many. In some places he disputes American myths. He points out that the “wear bright clothing” advice has never been shown to have an actual safety effect, and I share his skepticism on that point. He laments the overselling of helmets as a safety amulet, and I share some of that opinion. He has an excellent even-handed description of the overselling of mirrors as a safety device. (No, it’s not

anti-mirror, it’s anti-overselling!)

Criticisms? I have an intense enthusiasm for tandeming, and Franklin’s more ho-hum attitude toward tandeming left me wanting more. I doubt many people will say, “Gee, I gotta get a tandem” after reading Franklin’s section on tandeming, and I regard that as a lost opportunity. Franklin doesn’t include specific product names or models when describing equipment, which has an advantage (otherwise, the book would quickly become obsolete) and a disadvantage (you’re left on your own to find suitable examples of the products he describes). His description of maximum-performance braking technique is not as good as what many other authors have written. The book is not all things to all people; if you are interested in recumbent riding or touring, for example, it doesn’t have enough detail to answer all your questions.

Inevitably, people will ask: How does *Cyclecraft* compare with John Forester’s *Effective Cycling* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 6th Edition, 1993)? In three words: shorter, kinder, gentler. *Effective Cycling* is a revelation, but it’s also a headache, full of

rage against the machine. Forester’s reluctance to suffer fools gladly is the subject of several lengthy chapters. By contrast, *Cyclecraft* is mild-mannered and understated. Each has its place. If you can get past Forester’s rage, his book has far more information, but *Cyclecraft* presents itself in a more enticing way. (A revised 7th edition of *Effective Cycling* will be published later this year, by the way.)

Bottom line: next time a friend asks me to recommend a detailed all-about book (or borrow one from my library), it’ll be *Cyclecraft*. The presentation is clear, the shortcomings are few, and if we all rode like Franklin teaches, we’d all enjoy it more and be far safer. **AC**

Franklin, John. *Cyclecraft, North American Edition* (\$32.99): The Stationery Office, 2009, www.cyclecraft.org. Purchase information: (800) 865-3457, www.bernan.com.

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