

Strategy and Tactics – Part 2 – Controlling the Pace and Track

By Susan Ellis

This is the second in the Strategy and Tactics series. If you have not yet read Strategy and Tactics – Part 1 – Overview – December 2008, I suggest you do so now before continuing this article.

Picking your race strategy

To know what strategy to employ you first need to know your strengths and weaknesses as well as those of your competition.

Are you/they good at top end speed, ie: sprinting? How long can you/they hold top end speed? If the pace is very fast in the beginning will you/they have anything left at the end to pass or hold off a pass? How is your/their endurance? Are they easy to pass? Are you hard to pass? What type of track do you need to skate at different points in the race to be where you need to be in the pack? Do you make the break, or do you let your competition make the first move? Who will you allow to be ahead of you, who will you need to be ahead of, and at what points in the race?

Controlling the pace

If you have decided to lead the race or go to the front at a certain point in the race, you will then need to decide what pace you will lead with. The easiest pace to pass is a steady pace as it is easy for your competition to calculate the speed they will need to pass you. Same with skating a constant track pattern. Thus it is best to constantly either change your speed or change your track pattern. Be aware, this does not mean severe pattern changes each lap or you will get called for cross tracking! It means subtle little changes such as entering a little wider or coming out a little narrower, or skating more of a peanut shaped track to block up the middle of the straight, or going a little deeper down the straight each time to make it harder to calculate the pass set up for those behind you.

Breaking away: Perhaps you have great endurance and think you are in better shape than others. You may decide to break early in the race, skate at 100% and hope to hold off your competition. The only drawback is if your competition is right on your tail when you break, they are getting a bit of a draft and may conserve a bit more to pass you at the end. If you break, try to make a clean break from the pack so they can't draft.

Building pace: Another way to keep the pace changing is to gradually and subtly build the speed so that by a certain lap you have built up to a pace that is harder to pass. This works well if you are skating against people who you know to always break on a certain lap, so you get the pace going before they have a chance to make their break.

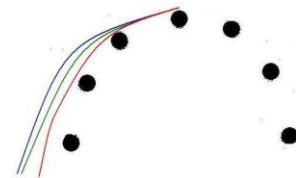
Hammer Float: The Hammer Float is a way of changing the pace within each lap and also a way to gradually build pace. The Hammer part takes place on the corner, either by increasing pace through the whole corner or just on the exit. Then you just skate the straightaway easy or 'float'. How much you 'hammer' the exit will depend on how much

you want to build the pace at that point. A great advantage here is that it is really hard for the competition to gauge the speed they need to pass on the exit as they don't know what pace you will come out with. Also, if you need to continue the acceleration out of the corner in to the straight you have already built the speed to do so.

Setting pace in a heat: One of the most common and biggest mistakes skaters make in heats where there is a time qualification as well as a place qualification is to assume others will lead and set a pace which will qualify you on time. The race takes off too slow, and voila, within the first lap and a half you have lost your opportunity to qualify on time. If you are not the strongest skater in the heat and are unsure of qualifying on placement, go to the front right way, set a qualification pace, and then after a few laps, you can come off the front and slide in to 2nd for the next couple of laps to conserve a bit of energy, or just stay in the lead and keep the pace going yourself. If coming off the front, you need to be very careful not to let any more than one person go by you. If needed, you are then in position to pass to the front again if there are passing attempts behind you.

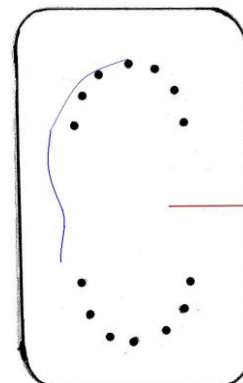
Controlling the track in the lead

Changing your track pattern is one of the best ways to keep people behind so they can't figure out the easiest place to pass you. If you just skate the same track lap after lap, and then change it only when you are being overtaken you are at greater risk of being disqualified for cross tracking. Also, you can't just change from one track pattern to a totally different pattern each lap as that is also cause for a DQ. Your pattern should change gradually over a few laps to a pattern that makes it increasingly harder to pass. For instance, in the beginning of middle to long distance races, many skaters are content just to follow the leader (you), so there is not as much need to protect the exits. You can afford to come out of the turn a little wider.

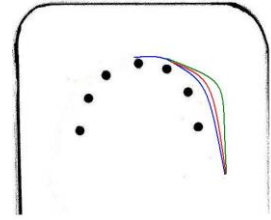


But as the pace increases you may want to gradually narrow up your exit to protect your track.

You can also change how wide you allow the exit to stay before coming back across the track to block up the inside. Be very careful not to cross track!



As a slower pace does not require a wide entry your competition may have spied an easy pass set up on the entry. But if you gradually widen out the entrance you will have made their set up harder as they will not have room to set up so easily. Also if you go deeper (further down) in to the corner before making your turn you force them to go wider and further down.



Another way to control the track is simply to skate a wide track and use your speed gained from not fighting centrifugal force to keep people behind. This doesn't work so well though if the people behind you also have great speed and are good passers.

Blocking the track when following

If you decide that leading is not the best strategy for you then you will need to skate a track that prevents other skaters from passing you too easily putting you further back in the pack than you should be. You should NEVER follow directly behind a skater, except when coming in to and immediately after the apex block. First, it sets you up to be easily passed, and secondly, it makes it harder for you to pass as you can't accelerate your speed with someone directly in front of you. As a general rule, you should be slightly to the inside of the person ahead on the exit as this blocks up the inside track and prevents passing. The one exception to this is if the person in front is already skating a very tight exit. In this case you might want to come off the last 2-3 blocks on their outside shoulder.

Going in to the corner you should be slightly to the outside shoulder of the person ahead to avoid getting jammed up (cut off) coming in to the first block. This also puts you in a better position to set up your own pass and have room to accelerate if necessary.

General race strategies

The 500

Most people think of the 500 as the top speed, go from the gun, get to the lead, stay in the lead, and hold on for dear life at the end race. This is a proven strategy and this is how most sprint races are won. It requires great top end speed, good speed endurance, and great blocking ability. The track most often used at the beginning of the race is a wide entry with a wide exit to get up to top speed within the first two laps. This track requires two crossovers in to the apex block and two crossovers after the apex. Then, top skaters will switch to a narrower entry, with one cross in, with a wide exit using 2 or 3 crosses out. How wide they exit depends on whether or not they need to block up the exit path to prevent passes. As well, how narrow they enter will be dictated by whether or not they need to prevent an inside pass on the latter part of the straightaway.

However, another successful strategy, provided you win the start, is to open hard for the first 1.5 laps, then cut back on the speed just a little, skate a defensive track for the next 1.5 laps, and then hammering top speed again for the last 1.5 laps. This is a good strategy for those you may not have the best speed endurance as you can conserve a

bit for the end. You'll want to make sure though that you have great blocking ability, and can hammer hard on the exits where most attacks (pass attempts) are made.

The 777 and 1000

With the 777 and 1000m it is important to get position in the pack early in the race. If you leave it too late the pace will have picked up to the point where passing is more difficult. While it isn't as important to win the start on these distances, it is important to plan your passes early. You will need to decide if you will be the person to make the break or follow a break. Your goal in these two races should be to be within 90% of top speed with 5 to go and start building the pace from there.

In heats and semis you should always move to advancement positions right away. That way, if you are taken out at least you are in position to be advanced. You also need to stand tough on your position and not just let people in. If you do it sends the message you are easy prey and can be moved aside any time they want. Make sure not to leave gaps for other people to slip in to and if someone comes up to pass accelerate your speed to encourage them to back off.

As always, you need to be aware of who is ahead of you and who is behind you at different points in the race. If you are in 2nd with 5 to go and the strongest skater(s) in the race are still behind you, you must move in to the lead and do it soon, before you are passed. If you are in the lead or in 2nd and are ahead of weaker skaters, you can do one of two things: accelerate for a lap or so to open a gap and then settle in to a finishing pace, or build the speed gradually with just enough speed to keep them behind you. This works especially well in a heat or semi where it is two to qualify for the next round. If it's a final, you have to decide if being in the lead with 5 to go is a good thing for you and if it is, make sure you are skating a pace and track that is hard to pass. If you decide to leave your pass until later make sure to set it up well and finish the execution. It's always a good idea to make your pass with more than a lap remaining in the race so that if that attempt fails, you have another shot at it before the end of the race.

The 1500 and 3000

One of the greatest 1500 I have ever seen from a strategy point of view was a young skater from Wisconsin at a National Championship. This kid was definitely not the best skater in the competition. To get out of his heat he knew he had to pull something unusual. He basically went as hard as he could from the beginning and opened a large gap on the pack. The others, thinking they could reel him in later because he wasn't a very strong skater, let him go. But this kid had a lot of guts and great endurance and was not about to let them catch him. They left their charge too late and he crossed the line in qualifying position. His strategy worked for him for a number of reasons: 1) he had confidence in his conditioning, 2) he skated to win, not skating out of fear wondering if he would be caught, 3) he caught them by surprise as this is a strategy not often seen at his age and ability level. Some people try it, but then don't have the guts to follow through where this kid did. This strategy sometimes works well in the 3000 as well where skaters try to lap the field. One of the ways to counter this strategy to make

sure the skater is catchable is to never let them get more than $\frac{1}{4}$ lap lead in the 1500 and no more than $\frac{1}{2}$ lap in the 3000, and begin the chase early enough to be able to catch them.

A general rule of thumb for the longer distances is never to be any further back in the pack than half way. If there are 6 in the 1500 you should be at least 3rd or higher and if there are 8 in the 3000 you should be at least 4th or higher. If it is the heat of a 1500 with 2 to qualify you should be in qualifying position with no less than 5 to go, and if you want to win the 1500 final the same top 2 position applies. There will be a lot of skaters wanting to take your position away from you in the final laps so expect passes to come at you fast and furious and be prepared to pass again right away yourself if you are passed. The best place to win a race in the dying laps is at the front and protect your position with your pace and your track.

The 3000 is where the endurance people really shine. They tend to want to increase the pace with 8-10 to go. If you are too far back in the pack when the pace goes, you might get caught back there, stuck behind someone with a gap opening up between you and the front pack. Sticking near the front 3 positions with 10 to go makes getting gapped less likely, especially if you are always in position to set up your pass if someone tries to break away. If you are in the lead you can choose your method of pace control, or, if you are following, decide when and where to make your move and then make it decisively.

NEXT MONTH – The moves and the counter moves!