

## The Tale of the Tape

*It's a science, and an art, to wrap your bars*

By Sheldon Brown

**Y**our frame may be a work of art, but you don't see much of it when you're riding your bike. What you mostly see is the handlebars. If your handlebar tape is ratty and raveled, you'll notice. In addition, a well-taped handlebar will be more comfortable and easier on the hands.

There are lots of variations in handlebar-taping technique. I'll tell you my technique.

### Ends to middle or middle to ends?

There's some controversy as to whether you should start taping your bars at the ends, and end at the middle; or run from the middle to the ends.

In the early '60s and early '80s, when thin, non-adhesive plastic tape was the fashion, middle-to-end was the way to go. The start of the wrap would be covered up by an overlapping layer. The loose ends would get tucked into the ends of the handlebar, and secured by the plugs.

This worked well for thin, non-

adhesive tape, but not so well for cloth tape nor for the modern padded adhesive tape. The problem is the corner area of the bars, where they bend forward toward the brake levers. The force of the rider's hands pressing forward in this area tends to roll the edges of the tape down, exposing bare aluminum.

If you wrap from the ends toward the middle, the tape layers in this critical corner zone will be overlapped upper-over-lower, like the shingles of a roof. This will help keep the tape from curling or creeping.

### Clockwise or counterclockwise?

Less clear-cut is the issue of which way to spiral the tape. At the very least, it should be symmetrical, so if you wind the left side clockwise, you should wind the right side counterclockwise.

My preference is to start the right side counterclockwise (as viewed from the end of the bar) so that the tape runs outward below the bar. The advantage of this is that at the middle, where the tape ends, it comes backward over the top of the bar. Thus, when climbing with the hands on the middle of the bars, the pull of the hands will tend to pull the tape tighter, rather than loosening it.

Before you start taping, make sure you have a good pair of scissors in reach to trim the ends of the tape. Also, make sure your hands are clean and dry.

### Brake Lever Position

Once you've removed the old tape, check the positioning of your brake levers. It's important to make sure that they are the same height. Generally, a good rule of thumb is to set the levers so that a straight edge held against the straight bottom part of the bar will just kiss the bottom of the brake lever.

Normally, the brake lever hoods should face straight forward as viewed from above, but in some cases, angling them inward or outward may be desirable. Angling them slightly inward may provide a slightly more comfortable grip when riding on the hoods. Angling them slightly outward can help short-fingered riders to reach the brake levers.

### Securing the Cables

If you have modern "aero" brake levers that run the cables under the tape, the cables (and ERGO gear cables, if you've got them) should be secured with electrical tape. The cables should be absolutely snug against the bars, or there may be some sponginess to the braking. Some people use two or three short lengths of electrical tape for this, but I prefer to use a single spiral, starting at the brake lever, running up along to the middle of the bar. I wind it so that the gap between the spiral loops is about as wide as the tape itself.

If you are using a Shimano Flight Deck cyclecomputer, this tape will also secure the wiring that connects it to the shifters. (Excess wire can be tucked into the back of the shifter body.)

### Traction Tape

I don't much care for the old-style cloth tape by itself, but I use two lengths of it as underlayment every time I do the job. I run a single length down along the upper-rear of the bar from the middle down to just above the lever clamp. The cloth tape provides a better grip to the final tape than the smooth aluminum does. A little bit of extra padding in this region never hurts, either.

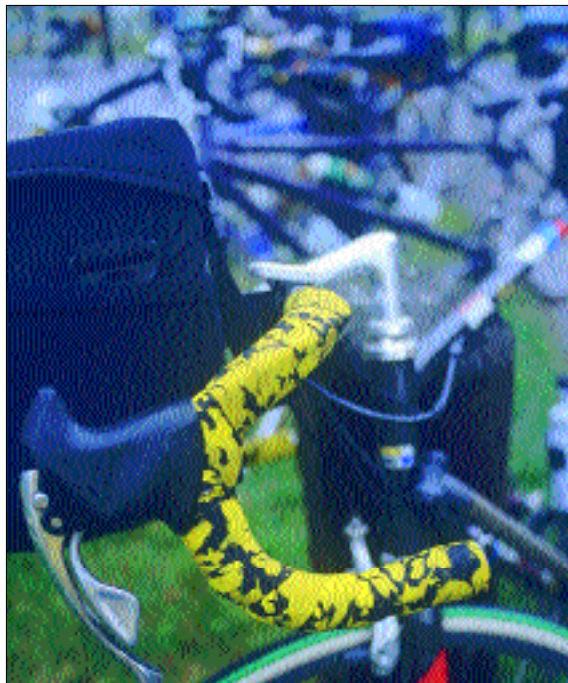


PHOTO BY GREG SIPLE

**A well-taped handlebar will be easier on your hands.**

### **Around the Brake Levers**

Before taping the bars, you should roll the rubber hood covers forward from the back, so the tape can get under them. With older, thin tape, it used to be common practice to wrap repeatedly around the levers in a sort of figure 8 — but with modern, padded tape, this creates an awkward, unsightly lump.

Instead, run a short length of handlebar tape around the back of the bar at the brake lever, covering up the lever clamp. The ends of this short tape strip will be covered by the rubber hood covers.

The brake clamp covering tape should go at about a 30-degree angle. It should be opposite to the angle of the tape winding. For the direction I wind the tape, this means the brake lever tape angles up toward the outside. I usually trim these strips to about a three-inch (75 mm) length, at a matching angle, so that the ends will be vertical.

### **Start Trim**

Before I start winding the tape, I trim the end at a bit of an angle. I cut off a triangle, about 3 inches (75 mm) long and about 1/3 the width of the tape at the end. If you don't do this, there is a bit of a lump at the end of the bar where the tape overlaps itself.

The key to durable taping jobs is to keep the tape under very considerable tension at all times as you wind it on. If it's slack, it may wrinkle or slip.

### **Evenness**

Starting from the ends of the bars, I count turns until I get to the brake levers. I make a point of ensuring that there are the same number of turns below the brake levers on each side.

I like to keep the overlap below the brake levers to a minimum, to ensure that there's enough tape to be fairly generous in overlapping the section above the bars.

It is good for the tape to be fairly thin below the brakes. When you're riding in the drop position, you're not usually resting much weight on the bars, so you don't need that much padding. Keeping this area fairly thin also helps people with short fingers to reach the brakes.

When you're tired and your hands are sore, you tend to ride on the tops of the bars. Therefore, it is better to lay the tape on a bit thicker up above.

### **End Trim**

If the tape is long enough, it's best to trim the end so that it tapers to a fine point, over a length of about five inches (250 mm). If your bars have a reinforcing sleeve, this cut angle should fit neatly against the ends of the sleeve. The tapered end allows the thickness of the tape to be roughly constant right up to the end, with no lumps

from excessive overlap of square-cut ends.

If you're going to secure the end of the tape with the peel 'n' stick strips that come with it, the taper cut is the only way to do it without causing wrinkles. Before peeling the peel 'n' stick, do a trial wrap around the bars to see where best to start it so that the end of the peel 'n' stick will be out of sight below the bar.

Try to avoid getting your fingers on the part of the peel 'n' stick that will be covered up, so that the goo can get a good grip on it.

If you don't choose to use the peel 'n' stick strips for one reason or another, electrical tape will work. It also comes in a lot of different colors, so you may be able to color-coordinate it.

When using electrical tape, start winding it fairly tightly, but make the final go round quite loose. If you wrap it tight to the end, it will be stretched. It will gradually shrink back to its original size, exposing adhesive goo.

It really isn't difficult to tape your own handlebars; it just takes a bit of care. Many professional mechanics don't actually do all that good a job of it. I know a very fine local frame builder who actually takes a perverse pride in being lousy at taping bars!

---

*Visit Adventure Cyclist columnist Sheldon Brown at his website, [www.sheldonbrown.com/harris](http://www.sheldonbrown.com/harris).*