

Full Circle: Cycles in American Track Racing

The foundations of competitive cycling in the United States were built at its velodromes, from the early days of Major Taylor and Bobby Walthour, to the high point of the Six-Day racing era of the 1930s. Velodromes were one of the most popular sporting venues in the U.S. at that time and attracted the world's best riders. Yet from those early days of widespread national and international popularity, the sport declined during and after World War II, with the last annual Six-Day race occurring in Madison Square Garden in 1961.

The capital expenses of building new velodromes, the up-keep costs to maintain aging tracks, and a shift in popularity to other forms of cycling, like mountain biking and road racing, caused a general decline in U.S. track racing's popularity and participation numbers. Despite a brief resurgence in the 1990s, there are fewer track competitors in the country today, and there is less direct investment from USA Cycling than in the past. Hence, and unfortunately, many aspiring and otherwise talented racers tend to get isolated or simply lose interest, due to lack of training, development and competitive opportunities.

To get a long view on the history, current context, and future of track racing, **The Outer Line** recently spoke with various participants and contributors to U.S. track cycling. Among those interviewed were former Olympic and pro track star John Vande Velde – one of U.S. track racing's most successful champions in the 1960s and '70s – and a leading coach, promoter, and investor in the sport today. Andy Sparks is one of the sport's most highly regarded coaches and the current Director of USA Cycling's track programs. Sparks' spouse, Sarah Hammer, is one of America's most decorated cycling champions ever, and has literally "owned" the individual pursuit (five World Championship golds), as well as two silver medals at the 2012 Olympics. Marty Nothstein is arguably U.S. cycling's most successful men's champion of the modern era, having medaled at the 1996 and 2000 Olympics, and won multiple World Championships; he is currently the Director of Lehigh Valley's (PA) Trexlertown velodrome.

In terms of its recent history, U.S. track racing enjoyed an international resurgence for about a 15 year period starting in the late 1980s – including Vande Velde's son Christian's 1997 World Cup championship, and a bronze medal by the men's team pursuit at the Sydney Olympics (a team which included new USA Cycling CEO Derek Bouchard-Hall.) However, according to Vande Velde, Hammer, and Nothstein, around 2001 USA Cycling began to shift its focus, and its funding resources, more towards road racing development programs. This was likely a reflection of the popularity that road racing was beginning to develop in the United States, with the emergence of Lance Armstrong as an international star. Whereas track racing had been robustly funded and supported by USAC during the 1990s rebound, the support dried up almost overnight.

This abrupt shift and lack of support wasn't just at the national federation level. Vande Velde recalls that while riding in the Postal Service team car with Johan Bruyneel at the 1999 Liege-Bastogne-Liege classic, he worked out a gentleman's agreement that would have allowed Christian to compete in a limited track schedule, to prepare for the Sydney Olympics. Bruyneel agreed, he recalls, but also "made it pretty clear there would be no place for a rider's track program in a top level pro road team."

In contrast to the Vande Veldes, Hammer had a reverse experience that was perhaps more difficult and career-defining. When the support dried up, she was isolated in Colorado Springs without a team and a formal track program. "I basically had to go it alone. In name, I was the sole member of the endurance track team, but I had no coaching or guidance. I joined the T-Mobile women's road team so that I could continue earning a living through cycling, and then cross over to the track for World's, which was my goal." After seeing her track performances suffer though, Hammer re-dedicated herself to become a specialist in the pursuit events in 2005 and road racing has taken a back seat to her track career ever since.

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But change may be in the air again. Track racing may be about to get a new shot of adrenaline; new people are getting involved, and new ideas are emerging around televising track racing and ways to revamp racing formats. New talent development programs are being developed, and participation in the sport once again seems to be on the increase. **The Outer Line** has singled out several critical issues or challenges that need to be recognized and addressed for track racing to once again take center-stage.

Funding: One of the most critical requirements for track racing to move forward is new investment in a national talent development program, and stronger financial support for more established programs at the local level.

USAC needs to re-establish a new top-down approach to supporting track racing, and it should develop and communicate a well thought-out program for national growth over the next two years. This plan should include financial support for national teams for men, women, and juniors – perhaps more akin to the scale of its investments back in the 1990s.

However, recent statements by CEO Bouchard-Hall about USA Cycling's current financial state may mean that this sort of overhaul is not feasible in the near-term. With an anticipated budget shortfall of at least \$1 million, most of the short-term change may have to be driven more by policy and coordination than direct investment in rider development, equipment, and new facilities. Although U.S. riders have won 21 medals at the Elite World Championship level in the last eight years, USAC Director Sparks is keen to separate perception from the reality of USAC's situation.

"The medal results have been really good, but this isn't the only or necessarily the right indicator. Most have been due to our women's teams, and there is no formal junior's or men's track endurance program today," explains Sparks. "We want to relaunch a complete endurance program after the Rio Olympics in 2016, but the basic math is that there's only so much money to go around." Hammer has led a resurgence of women's track racing, which has led to more investment in the women's endurance program today, but she is keenly aware of the funding shortfalls. "Before the 2012 London Games, our team (including Dotsie Bausch, Jennie Reed, and Lauren Tamayo) moved to Majorca together so that we could train and gel as a unit. But we did this on our own, with our spouses and partners. It was a huge sacrifice financially for all of us at the time, a big, big risk – but it paid off."

Nothstein thinks that USAC can do more to leverage successful investment models at the local track level, and gradually adopt these changes and improvements in a national format. "USAC needs to look at how they can incorporate the most successful parts of more localized programs like ours. We need more people helping them at the top who can really see the big picture – how all the pieces of coaching, management, and promotion can fit together."

Coaching: Better training methods and coaching support are two critical factors that will be important determinants in the success of any revitalized track development program. A good trainer can help the athlete improve overall physical performance, while a good coach can teach tactics and skills from personal experience – and these two attributes are not always found in the same person.

Prior to the organizational changes that created USA Cycling, the former U.S. Cycling Federation had well-defined plans and a pipeline for riders, coaches, and trainers. The shift away from track in the 2001 timeframe led to a type of "privatization" in the track racing community – something many affectionately call "cottage coaching" businesses. Several highly successful programs emerged, often led by former U.S. champions who themselves had developed in the 1990s USCF-supported environment.

Private programs aren't new. In the mid-1980s, Gibby Hatton and Roger Young transformed track programs in the Midwest and East coast with new ideas and successful talent development efforts. These

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programs typically have a more agile structure and often produce more with fewer resources than large programs can, and without a lot of the overhead and bureaucracy. In some respects, USAC may have encouraged these private programs to flourish over time in a kind of “athlete outsourcing” model, bringing the talent together at the national level only when needed for certain international competitions and the Olympics.

But the “privatized” model also has its disadvantages. Talent identification isn’t as broad reaching, and many potentially talented riders lack the financial means to buy into a private coaching model. As a result, most observers believe that American talent development in general could be improved. Compared to the centralized, highly-focused, and well-supported programs in Great Britain, Denmark, and Australia, the U.S. has obviously fallen behind. In addition, these kinds of programs have also developed an impact felt well beyond the track; some of these nations have turned their successful track programs into “academies” which graduate tactically and physically strong riders capable of dominant track performances *and* high-level road racing.

Great Britain is inarguably the current gold standard for using the track cycling academy model to create a generation of road champions, including such top-level stars as Bradley Wiggins, Mark Cavendish, Lizzie Armitstead, and Geraint Thomas. Its program has been well-funded, technologically advanced, with cutting-edge bike development, and excellent medical oversight. The program has had ample financial resources, so that the teams can live and travel together to race internationally. According to Vande Velde, this centralized coaching and support model is sorely needed in the US. “We don’t race our athletes together enough and we don’t train them together enough to be cohesive. Their skill levels, tactically and physically, end up all over the board because their programs never interact with each other’s, and sometimes their coaches have different objectives. We haven’t had a good USAC coaching program like the UK’s in a long time.”

Nothstein – at one time the world’s best sprinter and the anchor of the strongest U.S. track racing teams for a period of over ten years – is more direct in his assessment. “This country doesn’t lack talent. We could be a powerhouse if we could get more kids involved and keep them focused. For the U.S. not to have a strong men’s team pursuit today is just embarrassing.” But he believes Bouchard-Hall will make track a big priority in the coming years. “Derek is absolutely the right guy to turn things around.”

Talent identification, Development, and Continuity: The U.S. needs to develop a much stronger means of early talent identification, and a more defined and better-structured system for developing and maximizing that talent.

Athlete development programs could learn a lot by looking at the employee development programs and structures that many private companies have designed and implemented. These programs typically include (a) a strong mission statement so that everyone understands the objectives of the organization; (b) assistance in career planning, education, and mentorship; (c) a regular system of checks and reviews to monitor progress; and (d) specific processes to guide new employees from their first assignment, to possible leadership, subject matter expertise roles, all the way to post-retirement planning. The keys to success for many of these companies – across such diverse fields as engineering, information security, technology and healthcare – are the development and sustenance of strong performers, and ensuring the continuity of that operational knowledge as the market evolves.

Nothstein believes that a more centralized approach to talent identification is the best way forward. “Right now, if a kid asks how they can make it to the Olympic track cycling team, there’s no clear path that we can outline for them.” A good starting point in this regard would be to put more support into hosting free events at velodromes nationwide, to better encourage children from a diversity of backgrounds to give cycling a try. In line with a top-down USAC national program, a larger and more diverse pool of regional participants could begin a step-by-step program to build awareness, interest, and eventually, competitive

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careers. In part, this was how Hammer gained her love for the track; she was introduced to it as part of a USCF *road* talent development camp in 1997. Unfortunately, nothing similar is in place today.

Riders already on a development path could also benefit from talent identification changes. Track racing observers unanimously believe that riders on the various other U.S. national teams (road, cyclocross, BMX, and mountain) should be encouraged, or even required to try racing the track in different disciplines as part of their development plan. High speed pack racing skills and tactics easily transfer from the track to the other disciplines. Sparks believes track is the perfect way to teach the true craft of bike racing. “One of the most important aspects is that track teaches technique, efficiency, and workload intensity. We do a lot of work around a ‘three-minute power peak’ – which is invaluable for sharpening your condition.”

“We have literally thousands of fantastic criterium racers who are struggling to break through,” adds Vande Velde. He believes that many of these athletes could potentially have successful track careers, opening the door to more opportunities, but there is no formal program to make this happen. Vande Velde points to the recent changes being driven by ex-pro Steve Bauer at Cycling Canada, which elevate track racing to nearly the same importance as its road program, creating opportunities for advancement and competitive improvement in both disciplines. This kind of truly cross-fertilizing model can enrich and add longevity to racing careers due to the breadth of opportunities; athletes who might burn out in one discipline can adapt and continue by finding new motivation in another.

Collegiate track racing is also generally under-recognized and under-valued in terms of the contributions which it could be making. The National Collegiate Cycling Association (NCCA) has provided the entry point for many of today’s top level cyclists, and Sparks is a big believer and supporter of its role in the rider development framework. For example, by having access to track facilities nearby and excellent institutional support, Marian University, University of Colorado (Boulder), and Indiana University have produced many championship-caliber riders in the last 20 years.

Additionally, officials, organizers, and coaches in many long-standing track programs could provide a new and integrated system of “best practices,” which USAC could use to positively reshape the sport’s talent development foundation on a national scale. Private programs and USAC have invested a great deal of time, capital and knowledge into creating those elite talents. All too often, there is no forum for capturing that experience for the next generation when these highly-successful riders walk away from the sport – whether in clinics, coaching, or through other mentorship opportunities. “Not that every champion is a great coach, but a more systematic network for distributing this base of experience and introducing these folks around could be a very worthy developmental cause,” says Phil “Bilko” Stephens, a longtime competitor, observer, and velodrome promoter.

Better Physical Facilities: Another key concern is the general lack of development of new tracks, or reinvestment in existing facilities. New velodromes should be introduced in areas where cycling is growing in popularity, which could also help raise the profile of track racing across the country.

Many tracks in the U.S. are in need of repairs and improvements to make them ready for “prime time.” For example, in order to televise live racing, lighting at many sites would need to be improved to provide a better image quality and TV experience. Kenosha’s Washington Park track (the oldest in the U.S.), was recently resurfaced but lacked funds to complete the striping, updates to its electrical systems including lights, sound, and timing, as well as basic needs like backstretch lap cards and a PC for registration needs. Instead of municipal or USAC funding, that facility has had to fall back on a Go Fund Me account for donations and other community fund raiser activities.

The VELO Sports Center is considered a premier velodrome, and was developed as part of a mixed use and stadium complex (the StubHub Center in Carson, CA, which also includes the LA Galaxy soccer

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team's home field). VELO has played host to UCI Track World Cups and the World Championships, and has the distinct advantage of being an indoor track. This means that it can qualify for the standards put in place after the 1996 Atlanta Olympics – international events must now be indoors, so as to avoid any weather delays or cancellations that might affect scheduled TV broadcasts.

Incredibly, VELO is the only purpose-built indoor track in the U.S. today, and one of only three in the Americas (Toronto's recently opened Milton Velodrome, and Colombia's Cali track are the others), although the USAC recently covered the Colorado Springs track with an inflatable dome. "But old ideas are new again," according to Vande Velde. His 1990s "Vandedrome" portable 170-meter velodrome concept was a successful venture, which allowed the rapid setup and takedown of a short track in an arena or similar staging location, and provided racers with an experience similar to racing many of Europe's steeply banked 250-meter tracks in the future. The expense of building new tracks can be at least partially overcome through portability, and two decades after the original Vandedrome, new materials and building techniques could make a traveling race series possible. Buildup of demand for track racing, and the lack of facilities capable of televising racing, could drive a new successor to the Vandedrome utilizing more recent technology.

TV Coverage: Changing to a fan and television friendly format could be the turning point for track racing's future.

There are many long-standing racing series at velodromes across the U.S., and local promoters have the leeway to experiment with changes in the format to keep the schedule tight and the fans interested. Trexlertown has been successfully promoting a "Bicycle Race League" locally for many years, for example. But the problem is that in major competitions which have to follow certain USAC and UCI guidelines, the top race is the omnium – including individual time trials – which is certainly not the most exciting or gripping of track events. In Nothstein's words, "I've seen spectators just get up and leave. They don't understand the format, and it turns them off." The sport clearly has to do something to address this type of spectator response – to make the events more exciting for both on-site spectators and potential TV viewers.

Vande Velde and many promoters would like to see the entire format revamped. Multiple heats of timed current events can quickly stretch a night's racing schedule past five hours; most promoters interviewed think the upper time limit of an event should be about three hours – similar to the duration of other major American sporting events. Nothstein is pragmatic. "I know what our fans like, and we could never do our weekly series with the UCI style format. Sprint and multiple mass start events are at the top of our list, because our fans want to see a good sequence of fast, action filled racing. Shorter races are better for the fans, especially new fans."

Sparks agrees with many of Nothstein's points. "We have to get people into the velodromes first. There is a place for time trial events, but more in the context of World Championship or Olympic finals. The average fan doesn't understand what is going on in a UCI omnium. To market to the U.S. audience, I'd like for us to focus on stand-alone racing with first-across-the-line winners."

Vande Velde has developed a re-worked omnium of team-based, mass start events that could be tested out locally in 2016, with the goal of persuading the UCI to review and consider adopting new formats in future years. While many traditionalists bristle at such changes (the backlash over the loss of individual medals for the 1-kilometer and 500-meter timed events was heard for several years), track racing could benefit from a new format that builds a stronger connection with new fans and which could be easily televised as a continuous live broadcast.

The natural television-readiness of track racing may ultimately be its greatest asset and opportunity. Relative to road racing, for example, production of live televised events is far more economical due to the

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arena-style staging of velodromes. There are several new “racing league” ideas in development, in which franchise-based regional and international teams compete against each other using one of the proposed new and tighter mass start racing formats. Producing and promoting a season’s worth of races at relatively low cost could drive a new context for marketing the sport and position it for rapid success, if – and this is a big if – it can find the right financial backers.

Summary: Vande Velde’s notion that sometimes old ideas can “cycle” back around again may in fact be true in track racing. With the right format, funding, developmental programs and talent pipeline, the track may be able to find new popularity and profitability – allowing waves of talented new racers to build successful athletic careers. Hammer is a strong proponent of the idea that great track riders aren’t necessarily cyclists in the traditional sense. “When I started out, we had to race everything. But I really think we could come up with the right incentives and programs where we could spot talented kids in other sports and say, “Hey, why don’t you come out and try the track?” I think there’s a tremendous opportunity to introduce kids to the velodrome culture this way.”

Nothstein fervently believes that an inviting and friendly “velodrome culture” could be the driving force behind America’s next great champions. “I started at 15, volunteering here at Trexlertown to hang flags before, and clean up after the races. I never thought I’d be a World Champion. As a little kid you’re in awe of the big riders, and they reach out to you and encourage you and you want to be a part of that. I don’t think you get that experience with the current international omnium format. But racing under the lights on Friday night here – there’s nothing else like it, it’s just incredible fun. We have to get kids to think, “I really like riding my bike, now I want to *race* my bike.”

Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, January 4, 2016