

## Home Sweet Home: How U.S. Racing Can Reshape Pro Cycling

Bicycle racing in the United States has always charted a maverick course. American Six-Day track races were the most successful and lucrative cycling events in the world in the early 1900s – think of the “Madison” events, so named because many originally took place in New York City’s Madison Square Garden. The sport was hugely popular across many segments of the American public, and the U.S. produced the majority of the star racers throughout that era. But in the many decades since then, if an American wasn’t winning the Tour de France, then the coverage and interest in bike racing simply hasn’t been there. In short, bike racing hasn’t really captured the attention of the broader American sports audience, and has fluctuated in popularity ever since the Second World War, when those “golden days” wound down.

Enterprising bicycle race promoters stepped into this gap during the 1970s and 1980s, and rather than wait for American talent to improve to European levels, they tried to re-create the general formula of European racing – particularly that of the Tour de France – in America. The Red Zinger race series in the late 1970s raised the visibility of road racing, inspired many riders and helped provide a platform for such notable talent as the Stetina brothers and Greg LeMond. It also provided women athletes like Connie Carpenter some of their first opportunities to take center stage. The success of the “Zinger” in Colorado helped it to evolve into the internationally-renowned Coors Classic in the 1980s, and later enabled races like the Tour DuPont to succeed in the 1990s. In a way, these events set the stage for today’s Tour of California and the US Pro Challenge. However, history shows that most of these marquee events tend to have fairly short life spans, and are just as likely to drop off the calendar altogether as they are to have widespread success.

Despite this spotty and irregular history, weekend sprint trains and breakaways have nonetheless become common in many corners of the U.S., due to the continuing and often tireless efforts of numerous promoters to build regional identities for their races. This regional focus has created value for sponsors, community involvement, and has helped to build the sustainability of races as businesses. U.S. racing seems to be building momentum once again, and with the World Championships coming to Richmond, Virginia in the fall of 2015, American racing is poised to make a huge rebound – if it can capitalize on this once-in-a-generation opportunity and continue to build at the grassroots level.

**The Current State:** In contrast to how pro cycling evolved in Europe, racing in America never really took on a distinctive national character. The Tour is certainly France’s greatest source of sporting pride, just as the Ronde van Vlaanderen has come to define the spirit of the Flandrian people. “The challenge for U.S. cycling is that we’ve tried too hard to duplicate the UCI’s European model – but we’d be better off building an ‘American’ reality,” says David Chauner, best known for creating the CoreStates U.S. Pro Championship race in Philadelphia, the San Francisco Grand Prix, and many top one day UCI road races in the US between 1985 and 2005.

The unsuccessful attempt to copy the European model on U.S. soil has led to a situation today

where we have five different tiers of U.S. races, according to veteran promoter Michael Aisner. The first tier of U.S. racing is comprised of the big events like the Tours of California, Utah, and the US Pro Challenge in Colorado. In the past, races like the Tour du Pont/de Trump, Tours of Georgia and Missouri also fit this mold. The key characteristic of these larger and more visible races is that they have all essentially been underwritten by wealthy patrons and/or state or governmental entities. From the late Fred Mengoni, to Donald Trump, to the Anschutz and Miller families, or to the states of Georgia and Missouri, these big races have not always been big profit centers, and have often had to cover start-up and operating losses through direct financial contributions – rather than sponsorship investment. The former Tour of Missouri was a rare example of a successful race that should have continued, and was financially stable by its third edition, but political changes led to its premature cancellation.

The second tier consists of races which are unfortunately mostly no longer alive, but which had a model that could work well in the future. These events had excellent local and regional support, and were run by entrepreneurial promoters on tight budgets which carefully balanced sponsorship dollars, merchandise sales, and volunteer contributions. Races like Aisner's Red Zinger and Coors Classic, Dave Pelletier's Mayor's Cup, Rich DeGarmo's Tour of Texas, and the late Jim Rabdau's Ore-Ida women's stage race all fit this mold. But largely due to the UCI's rule that criteriums cannot be included in any stage race sanctioned higher than 2.2 on its ranking scale, the second tier no longer exists. On its face, this rule seems today like a pointless constraint which should be reevaluated and removed – for the overall betterment of the sport.

The third tier, according to Aisner, can be summarized as “volunteer” events. These races enjoy excellent local support and modest sponsorship budgets, and often have the look and feel of the first and second-tier races just mentioned. But despite perhaps some local TV coverage, they typically generate very little income and often survive by the slimmest margins year over year – often only by virtue of considerable volunteer labor contributions. Philadelphia, the Nature Valley Grand Prix (Minnesota), Redlands (California), and Tour of the Gila are all good examples.

The fourth tier is comprised of all the major criterium and weekend omnium events – the “weekend memorial” races – like Chris Thater, Tour of Somerville, Artie Longsjø, Manhattan Beach Grand Prix, and other similarly themed events. These races have been the cornerstones of the U.S. sport since the 1960s, and at a regional level provide high-level sporting entertainment in bike-friendly communities. These races often take place as part of wider holiday celebrations such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day.

And finally, the fifth tier is basically everything else: hundreds of local club criteriums and road races. These events really provide the backbone of grassroots racing and talent development in U.S. cycling.

**Promoters and USA Cycling:** The national cycling Federation – USA Cycling – has developed a road competition model that focuses on two series: the National Racing Calendar

(NRC) of premier road and stage races, and more recently, its complementary National Criterium Calendar (NCC). Unfortunately, many promoters believe that this disjointed model doesn't work very well. These series have too many overlapping dates and involve too much geographic dispersion – few teams except for a few deeply funded programs have the resources, and hence can't cover the distances necessary to essentially field two teams at once. Chauner explains, "Plus, it's pretty hard to explain to a casual or first-time fan that cycling is a team sport when one team has six racers and another team has only two in the same race."

While part of the current situation can be attributed to a lack of cooperation between promoters to settle disputed dates, the origin of the problem may lie in how the USAC has changed priorities over time – from a focus originally on growing participation in the sport, to perhaps an over-emphasis today on winning medals at the international level. To make American athletes competitive and to build recognition, the USAC had to place riders into the toughest UCI events and European races. But this of course created conflict with the U.S. promoters – who pointed out that the strategy actually devalued U.S. races by sending the best up and coming American talent to races *elsewhere*, hence thinning the depth of the race fields at home.

The NRC series was created in 2003 to elevate the status and competitive level of U.S. racing so that USAC could realize its goal of developing internationally-competitive American talent on home soil. The NCC series was created in 2012, but it seemed to add to the calendar confusion rather than provide clear differentiation for racing priorities. Logistically, the sheer size of the country, and the relatively small number of promoters available to execute many of these races – and to deliver a consistent professional experience to participants, sponsors, and viewers alike – put everyone at a disadvantage. There simply was not the level of public support nor the necessary investment marketing from USAC and its Local Associations (the many regional branches USAC supports to deliver its mission locally across the U.S.) to make the model work.

As a result, race promoters and USAC are often still at odds with each other regarding overlapping dates, especially during the summer holiday season. For example, the Air Force Association (AFA) Cycling Classic squares up against the Tulsa Tough Criteriums every year. And a major casualty of this problem occurred when the Tour of Utah expanded by a day in 2013; the Tour of Elk Grove in Illinois – a highly-regarded regional omnium-format race which had a road race and criterium – could not guarantee a pro field and simply folded. Furthermore, calendar confusion makes it incredibly difficult to monetize broadcast content; when two races of equal importance are taking place at the same time, one race will always lose out, not just in terms of participation, but also viewership, sponsorship and advertising buys. It is difficult to align all of these races because different promoters have unique financial drivers and sponsor interests. Unfortunately, the USAC hasn't taken strong steps in the past to resolve the situation, or from a business perspective, package the sport in a more logical way.

Current USAC Vice President of Race Promotion Micah Rice is working hard to remediate some of these past problems and past perceptions. It's his job to align these top-tier event calendars with the USAC vision: to grow the sport of competitive cycling in America. Whereas the USAC "Performance" group is still focused on developing talent for the global stage, Rice sees the

two USAC departments as having intertwined missions. “When we can, we have to send our top athletes where they can advance their careers, and those stepping stones are often the big European stages races,” says Rice, “but we also have to build this capability in races here at home.”

Rice continues, “My perspective is that U.S. races can go head to head if they so choose – if a promoter says ‘I don’t want to move my dates,’ I won’t stop them. I can set the table, and make suggestions for a logical calendar, but if races compete for a desirable date, they simply have to compete against each other. That’s just business.” An additional business pressure is the competition for sponsors; promoters are often trying to identify, attract and lock in the same investors, and this also limits incentives for cooperation to resolve date conflicts.

Many promoters feel that not enough emphasis is given to NCC events. “The NCC may be the real lifeblood of U.S. cycling,” notes Marc “Marco” Colbert, an organizer of the Chicago-based Intelligentsia Cup racing series. “Criteria are inherently spectator-friendly and a highly effective way to grow the cycling fan base in the U.S. But it’s no secret that we are challenged by a somewhat incoherent calendar of NCC, NRC and other UCI races. A more logical calendar could help build participation and even more sustainability for all of us. A lot of pro teams have a hard time getting from one event to the next, in terms of costs and logistics. If the NCC and NRC events could be spaced closer together regionally – and in some new logical way – the events could feed off of each other. It would be a win for the promoters, a win for the teams and a win for the sport.”

**Taking it to the Next Level: Capitalizing on “the Worlds”:** The upcoming Richmond World Championships could be a catalyst that boosts the profile and interest in competitive cycling throughout the U.S. (See [recent article](#).) The broad visibility of these events will likely inspire many young athletes to take up cycling as a sport, and will hopefully also spark interest from a new fan base. But US racing had this opportunity once before, when the 1986 Worlds were held in Colorado Springs. Rather than kick-starting the American sport, the ‘86 event ended up being a small peak, and the Coors Classic – America’s answer at the time to the Tour de France – folded just two years later. If Richmond is to spur sustainable success for U.S. racing, then promoters and USAC must come together on several key initiatives:

**1) Focus on the community first.** Successful U.S. races have historically developed strong relationships with and investments from the community where they take place. One of the prime examples of this cooperation is the former U.S. Pro Championship race in Philadelphia. Philadelphia may have risen and fallen in its size over time, but it has been a 30-year mainstay of the U.S. calendar – despite the “U.S. Pro” prize having moved on to other venues. This is in no small part due to the people of Philadelphia – itself an important urban and cultural center on the east coast – making the race a high point of the summer calendar, in which music, food, and community celebrations coincide with the race.

Focusing on the specific attributes and interests of the local community more closely aligns the sponsors’ messages, products and services with the customers they are trying to reach. These

close ties to communities imbue races with regional character and longevity, but also provide sponsors more incentive to commit year-over-year support. Whereas “national” sponsors are often temporary, regional sponsors are more vested in the local economy and can build market value through long-term success of the event.

**2) Develop a true professional promoters association.** Rob Laybourn promotes the AFA Cycling Classic and the Grand Cycling Classic (which served as the U.S. Pro Criterium Championships in 2011 and 2012). At the conclusion of the November 2014 USAC Race Promoters’ conference in Bend, Oregon, Laybourn brought together many key race organizers to create a promoters’ association. This group quickly gelled, with everyone seeing the potential benefits of creating a business association, comprised of professionals in the field to coordinate calendars, share knowledge and best practices, and build a collaborative framework for engaging sponsors and building the value of North American racing. “Aligning calendars is always a challenge, due in part by the local pressures of the host cities,” says Laybourn. “Whether or not they are aligned, our key emphasis must be growing team participation and building better value for sponsorship investment.”

“I’ve been an NCC promoter for only a few years,” adds Marco Colbert. “It soon became clear to me that promoters interacted with USAC but not much with each other. That changed when the new association formed. One of the main objectives of the new association is the sharing of knowledge and best practices. For instance, we had a talk by an intellectual property attorney about how to protect the intellectual property of our events. We have also started to promote each other’s events on social media.” This association could have a profound effect by bringing the promoters together on a common platform that could positively influence how the calendar is set, and drive change where USAC hasn’t. More importantly, it could put mentorship and the tools of successful race promotion within reach for many, helping educate promoters on how to gather and manage money effectively, and how to think creative and big.

**3) Calendar normalization.** Although the promoters’ association is still in its formative stages, race promoters should not wait for USA Cycling to devise and execute a plan to better coordinate the NRC and NCC series. As a business discipline, race promotion has traditionally been an independent and fiercely territorial affair, but the upside for true schedule cooperation is too great to ignore. The race promoters have to band together and solve this issue. Structuring events in such a way that teams can handle the logistics, and with enough financial and personal development opportunities for the participants, can only help to build viewership and expand the fan base of the overall sport. A challenge for U.S. racing success is to make the racing understandable to a wider audience; having a more consistent calendar with better viewing opportunities and a simple to understand format could help the sport to connect with and draw in new fans.

**4) Investment in Women’s racing.** Traditionally, in the U.S., women’s racing has never really had much of a chance to develop its own identity. As a matter of logistics, most women’s events have coincided with – usually preceding, as a warm-up for the crowd – the men’s events in major race events. It may be time to buck that trend. Robin Farina, a former U.S. National road champion and a principal behind the Women’s Cycling Association (WCA), believes that the differences in the quality of women’s events from one race to another is partially caused by

this inadequate focus. “If we have the right format, we have a great opportunity to offer our potential sponsors the right coverage and the right audience. Right now, this isn’t happening,” says Farina. “We can do a lot more to bring in sponsors and fans – and inspire girls to compete – if we send out the right message. We want to make this our sport, and not just borrow the space.”

On this issue, Rice believes that the USAC is taking steps in the right direction. “We have combined the Women’s and Men’s Pro Championships dates, and required equal prize money for the winners. We want to push race directors to have equality in our races; we mandated web-tracker and equal TV coverage for the Pro and Criterium championship races as well.” Promoters should look at the opportunities to make women’s races more of a focal point in their events. As cycling is a sponsor-driven enterprise, race organizers should embrace and expand their ability to connect sponsors with their target markets – women as well as men.

**5) Improved sponsorship metrics.** Wisconsin-based race promoter Tom Schuler has a very broad experience in domestic racing as a U.S. Pro champion, team manager, and now, as the promoter of the America’s Dairyland race series. He has an indisputably strong track record of delivering value to his sponsors. “But you have to have research, direct customer feedback and third-party audits to document the real returns to your sponsors. Our best practice application is to hire a marketing research company to report on our marketing data and independently calculate the return on investment for our sponsors,” says Schuler. “Yes, we have to demonstrate value, but more importantly, we have to know what we’re getting right and what we might be doing wrong. And we shouldn’t be afraid to get a second opinion in order to validate the first.” Schuler believes that this kind of research and reporting is woefully under-utilized throughout the domestic sport. Perhaps in the future, Laybourn’s emerging professional association can help to introduce and integrate these types of monitoring and measurement services, to improve both promoter and sponsor access to such business-critical data.

**6) Avoid the temptation of joining the UCI calendar.** Many people believe that a race is only truly successful if it makes it into the UCI’s pro calendar, but the truth is, UCI status is often overly expensive and by its very nature can limit spectator and sponsorship opportunities. Having “ProTour-level” fields might entice viewership, but the actual costs to do so can basically break the bank. The economic burden of meeting the requirements of the UCI can cut heavily into the budget needed to plan and market an event effectively. Everything from [UCI rules](#) on paying appearance fees, covering travel costs for riders and team staff, to multiple layers of organizational oversight (often redundant to USAC’s NRC and NCC requirements) adds cost, but does not add proportional value to the quality of the event. In essence, many UCI requirements preempt community priorities and as a result, the shortfalls can doom a race to failure if it doesn’t have enough sponsorship, participant and fan-base momentum to financially scale to such expectations. A recent example of this is the Tour of the Gila, which currently maintains a UCI 2.2 ranking. The event grew organically and has been a focal point for regional teams for over 30 years, but it is located around a small municipality, not easily accessed except by car, with limited local sponsor opportunities to cover these kinds of UCI-level, top-tier obligations. “The Gila” nearly folded due to accumulating financial pressures, until a mysterious ex-racer donated the necessary funds to continue staging the event – at least

for this year.

**7) Continuity of institutional knowledge.** Many promoters note that “best practices” of good race management have been lost over the years due to attrition. There simply may not be enough people who know how to run profitable races who are able to share their knowledge and experiences to help other races start and grow. As a result, new promoters have often been at a disadvantage; while many may have the basic skills to organize a race, they may lack the more detailed tools and guidance to execute effectively because they’ve never actually done it before.

Again, Rice has been working to change perception of USAC on this issue. His management team implemented a race director certification program, which provides guidelines on how to stage events, communicate with sponsors, and coordinate with municipal agencies. In addition, USAC’s Membership Department offers assistance for obtaining event permits and insurance coverage, and can refer promoters to work with many Local Associations across the country for technical assistance.

However, Schuler also points out that promoters who are fresh to the business can bring new perspectives and knowledge and help the sport “think outside the box,” and change with the times. “There are now three major American Tours, but there is a big gap from there to the rest of the regional events. Some knowledge may have been lost, but a lot of new thinking has come in, which adds to the sustainability and creativity in organizing the races.” Almost all observers and race promoters agree that there is a need for greater business and management expertise in the sport, a need for new thinking and new people – that the sport has to reach beyond ex-racers for its leadership in the future.

**What Comes Next?** One answer to how racing might evolve in America may be the framework set up by the National Collegiate Cycling Association (NCCA). This under-recognized organization has gradually developed a mature and successful regional format over the last 25 years. Teams compete against each other in individual regions, earning points which allow them to advance and compete in the national championships. In fact, the “test” event for the Richmond World’s course was the 2014 Collegiate National Championship race.

This format could be modified to promote more participation at the club level and opportunities for aspiring racers to gain experience. The NCCA model prioritizes talent development through goal-oriented, season-long team competition – and could help build the foundation for a logical race calendar. This kind of regional series model could help maximize value for the sponsors by offering consistent market presence, and provide promoters with fair leverage when pricing the sponsorship “buys.”

But Rice notes, “We’re not even maxing out our fields in all the NRC and NCC races yet. We used to have a similar “District” model in the old US Cycling Federation (*the predecessor to today’s USAC – editors*). There may be opportunities to move to a regional model when we have the critical mass of competitors in the future.” Ultimately, the USAC owns the

development model, providing a system for young cyclists to move up through the ranks from club, to local, to collegiate or regional status, to amateur elite, and up into the pro ranks. Currently, none of this is linked together in a clear path – and to be fair, it never has been. It may be time to rethink the system which Rice is working to improve, and which incoming USAC President Derek Bouchard-Hall – a former pro who came up through the NCCA and USA cycling’s development path – will inherit.

Another challenge for American racing is the lack of significant financial contributions from television exposure in US racing has become a bottleneck. All of the big American teams have now developed the mindset that getting invited to the Tour of California is the only way to truly achieve their sponsors’ marketing objectives. This boxes the promoters into a corner: they have to invite the best teams and buy television airtime to develop Aisner’s “first tier” type experience, but the fees to bring the best teams over from Europe and the high cost of broadcast production can mitigate any profitability. And to put on a race with only the *best* teams, many *good* teams can end up excluded from selection altogether, which diminishes their own sponsors’ investments. An unavoidable factor in the success of American racing will be how to build an affordable broadcast production model, and derive revenues from broadcast rights to the benefit of the promotion company, teams, and riders. The calendar, as noted earlier, would have to be completely re-thought in order to effectively package and sell the races.

It will take more than viewership to change the sport’s fortunes, though. The old standby for measuring sponsorship success, called impressions – or the amount of time a sponsor’s logo is visible on media – is dead. The true measurement is now engagement, which is more than just recognizing a name for a product, but putting people into the show room to touch the product first-hand. This factor is why Criteriums are a critical link for US racing success. Criteriums provide live spectators an immersive experience with the racers screaming by every three to four minutes, something which is impossible with a 250 kilometer point-to-point road race.

More importantly, criterium venues are tailor-made for television production teams, closely linking the broadcast and human resources to deliver content. These races can be held in key urban areas and staged to coincide with local prime-time coverage. The predictability of lap times makes it possible to time the finishing sprint with the nightly sports newscast, increasing the probability of viewership, and the opportunities for sponsors to engage with potential customers in a meaningful way. Racing can be structured around music, bicycle clinics, and product expos and can keep fans engaged throughout the race day. As Aisner points out, “Races don’t need to spend money on racers who are bigger than the event. We should build rock stars, not pay to bring in rock stars. This helps promoters stay responsible to the budget and focus on the product. And that product can be big, like a community festival that everyone can get behind and sustain.”

In summary, the U.S. road racing sport faces numerous challenges as it looks to the long-term future, but promoters like Chauner, Colbert, Laybourn, Rice and Schuler all see nothing but an upside to the opportunities. Perhaps this is U.S. racing’s best chance to change the game. Despite the challenges faced by U.S. promoters, the fact is that the calendar has an incredibly deep library of racing which could be organized into a cohesive, easy to follow, and highly

marketable racing series. And unlike the European scene, the promoters in the U.S. are less constrained by political frictions or nationalistic objectives; there is no reason not to cooperate for the greater good. As Rice suggests, if the market forces some races to lose importance or give way to others that are more successful, the result might be a truly healthy calendar. But it doesn't have to be like Europe; in fact, it should be different and it could be even better.

U.S. racing must take the opportunity to see itself in a new light and define its own version of the sport. Bouchard-Hall is in the promising position of taking executive control of a troubled organization at a time when there are great opportunities to guide it to greater success. But he may need to rethink USAC's operating model in the process – perhaps proposing new models or new approaches to solving some of these historical challenges. Under its new leadership, USAC can help drive this change by providing expectations for a calendar that facilitates talent development, increases regional participation, and creates a positive atmosphere for adding new races or moving existing ones to new dates. And the promoters can also take the initiative to drive this kind of change by better collaborating to create a true American series. A revised pro event calendar could build momentum from one race to the next, and by adopting a simple format, be easier for the sporting public to understand, view in person, and tune into across many different broadcast media. If these elements of change can be realized, U.S. racing might be able to recapture its glory years. In the process, it could create a new version of the sport where aspiring top-level pro riders can build their careers at home, and entice foreign riders to come here and do the same. It's time for professional cycling to come home to America.

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Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, May 15, 2015