

Leading by Example: A Discussion with Marco Pinotti

During his professional career from 1999 through 2013, Italian Marco Pinotti was one of the most respected racers in the pro peloton. He won the Italian national time trial championships a record six times, as well as numerous stages in the Giro d'Italia, and he wore the race's pink jersey on two different occasions. In 2009 he joined the record-setting Columbia High Road team of Bob Stapleton – a team which set new standards in terms of clean racing as well as competitive results. He finished his career in 2013 with Team BMC, where he still remains as a sports trainer, and where he recently guided the team to victory in the World Time Trial championships in Richmond, Virginia.

Pinotti was perhaps never a household name in pro racing, but during his career he established himself as much more than an accomplished bike racer. While training to become a professional cyclist, he also studied to gain a graduate engineering degree – an accomplishment of which he is at least equally proud. Throughout his career, Pinotti was recognized as one of the most observant and analytical riders in the peloton. He always and publicly maintained a strict anti-doping stance – something of a rarity in Italian cycling during those years. In 2013, he released *The Cycling Professor* – a book not just about his own racing history but also his insights and acute observations on the sport – which was well received in the cycling community and beyond. Highly-respected cycling blogger *The Inner Ring* said this about the book: “Pinotti brings an analytical and observant take to his career and pro cycling. It's rewarding to see Pinotti's hard work and application pay off, and satisfying that he sees beyond the bubble of pro cycling.”

In 2014, Pinotti was named to a seat on the Pro Cycling Council of the UCI – the committee which acts as a policy-making and review board for all of professional road racing. Despite his racing record and his more recent and successful managerial career, there is no hint of boastfulness from Pinotti. He clearly has a broad perspective on the sport, and the rare ability to look beyond day-to-day events – to see the bigger picture in terms of the challenges and opportunities facing pro cycling. He is not timid about speaking his mind and addressing more controversial issues, or taking on some of the sacred cows in the sport. Indeed, his insights and deep knowledge of the sport, along with his humble yet confident style seem to suggest that he might one day have a much bigger role to play in pro cycling. *The Outer Line* recently talked with Pinotti in Richmond.

TOL: [Marco, congratulations on the BMC team time trial victory. Tell us a little bit about how you prepared your team for the race.](#)

Well, there is always the issue of just the physical ability and training – making sure that the guys are in good shape, and peaking at the right time. This is hard to do for one person, but obviously more difficult to coordinate the training schedule and physical conditioning of six or eight men, to try to have them peak at the same moment. But perhaps more important in this event is the psychological or mental preparation for the event. As the day of the race approaches, it is my job to assess which are the stronger riders, and in which order should they ride. And sometimes this has to change, depending upon the individual rider fitness and strength levels. When I make changes, then sometime the riders are unhappy, or they lose confidence, and I have to work with them to rebuild that. In the TTT, all the pieces have to be correct, and then they all have to work together. I have said that it is like baking a cake: you have to have all the right ingredients and put them together right, or else your cake will fail. Everything that we do on the road has to be a team action, everyone must learn to race without any ego. So, I would say that the mental preparation for the event is the most critical part of the preparation.

TOL: [What were your overall thoughts or comments on the Richmond events?](#)

I thought the event was very well organized, and the main course was a good one – it had some good hills and cobbles, and it was easy for the fans to find a good place to watch. But it seemed like Richmond was very empty, and so I wondered, “Where are all the people that live here?” I understand that many people

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were warned that the downtown would be very crowded, and the schools were closed, and so on. It's too bad – I think more of the townspeople would have enjoyed watching the racing.

TOL: You retired from active racing in 2013. Looking back over your career, what was your personal highlight as a racer?

I was fortunate to have many highlights in my career. But as a lover of the sport as a whole, and being aware of the message that sport can deliver to the world, I would say that participating in the Olympics was the real highlight of my career. There is a meaning in the Olympics that goes beyond the racing results or the purely sporting criteria. I felt very privileged to participate for my country.

TOL: What would you say were the most important things that you learned as a rider, which you able to apply and utilize today as a coach and trainer?

I learned a lot from some of my earliest coaches – one in particular who saw in me the potential of also being a good trainer and coach. And I also had some negative experiences which I have learned from some things that I want to not be like. If you can deal with it, sometimes you learn more from your negative experiences.

TOL: OK, let's move on and talk about some of the critical challenges facing pro cycling. Few people have the breadth of experience that you have already had in your career. You have been a racer, a journalist/writer, a coach/manager and now you have a role on the Professional Cycling Council (PCC) as a regulator and policy-maker. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing pro cycling?

Well, where should I begin? I see many challenges, but I can also see further out to the future for some possible solutions and new opportunities. First, I believe that we have made some big steps forward in our anti-doping controls over the past decade – particularly in terms of the out-of-competition testing systems. It is important that we do not reduce the regularity of testing, and it's critical that we stay current in terms of detecting new substances and new doping methods. I believe we should keep very tight controls in place, and we should increase the punishment – I think we should consider life bans for these dopers. It is also important that we try to reduce the time between the possible violation event and the disqualification.

(Editor's Note: For a deeper and perhaps more philosophical take on Pinotti's perspectives on doping, consider this quote from his 2013 book. *"Doping should be seen as wrong, not for fear of controls, but simply because it is not right to do it. It pursues an end with the wrong means and it leaves you empty-handed. Or does anyone really believe that winning while cheating makes us truly happy? And then are we really sure that it's worth it? Beyond the possible effects on physical health, perhaps more importantly, shall we talk about the wounds of the soul? Or what message we pass on to future generations? It's like hiding toxic waste in your own garden hoping, by burying it, to have solved the problem. I have learned that sometimes to take the road less travelled is a good choice, if you respect your personal values. There are some principles and natural laws that transcend personal values, different cultures and religions: there really is a sense of fairness, honesty, respect that has no time and is superior to all opinions and diatribes."*

TOL: What are your thoughts about the ownership and control of the sport? Should we be moving more towards a franchise and league type of structure, like we see in other sports?

I think the current system of ownership could remain, if only the owners were willing to look at the longer term, and try to make the sport more attractive as a whole. The consolidation of the sport into a single entity somehow – where teams, organizers and media partners all had a stake – could be good for the sport; it could make the whole "pie" bigger for everyone. And the UCI would of course still regulate it and

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maybe provide some other services, like anti-doping officials and commissaires. But we have to understand that the sport is a market, and when someone sees an economic opportunity to collect or bring together different ownership, it will happen.

From the team perspective, obviously I would like as many teams as possible be more stable franchises – teams with a history and a hard-core fan base, so that they can make long-term decisions about hiring and developing certain riders, building a stable coaching staff, having a consistent training location and venues. A league structure would create more stability for the teams, and in turn it should be possible to create longer and more permanent sponsorships, a strong core group of fans, and so on. The disadvantages are for those on the outside of the league – how would they be able to survive? But maybe they won't survive anyway? These questions are very difficult to answer.

My biggest concerns and ideas are for the teams and the fans – and the possibility of building a single and unique platform where it would be possible to find all of the cycling content. Right now, if I want to see Canadian races or the Tour of Poland, or San Sebastian, either I need to have many different TV subscriptions or I have to look through some “pirate” websites that show the race in bad quality and a different language! All the biggest races should have a common platform where fans could see the content – with the same graphics, and the same high quality product available to all viewers.

TOL: Any thoughts on how to move the fans' focus away from individuals and more towards the teams?

Well, people have always cheered more for a rider than for the teams. That is because teams have always been constantly changing names, as their sponsors come and go. If we want people cheering more for the teams, then they have to be more stable and recognized. This gets at the base of the whole problem we are always talking about. If cycling became more financially stable and secure, it would naturally go towards more of a team focus. The World Championship TTT is a good example, and it is a big thing for the teams. The same team behind Etixx-Quickstep won the first three editions, but if you look at it, they won under three different names.

TOL: What are your thoughts about televising the sport, and making it more interesting to the casual fan? What could we do with the calendar and the race schedule to make it more interesting and accessible to fans?

It seems to me there are several things that can be done easily. The race organizers should try to avoid the very long and flat stages – they are difficult to cover and just not very interesting to watch. They could also put more cameras in the team cars – when race strategy decisions are being made; that could be very interesting to watch. There are many opportunities to bring new rider information and graphics to the screen to also make it more interesting. And as I said, we need a new single media platform where fans can get all the information on everything about cycling.

And having to do with all the discussions about the racing calendar and the future of different racing events, I cannot comment too much, because of my role on the PCC. As you know, we are considering some changes there and have already made recommendations that will begin in 2016 and 2017. My own view is that we will see a different schedule in the future, simply because of the economic realities. In the long-term, only the races capable of generating an economic return will survive.

TOL: Since you bring it up, let us ask a couple of questions on the PCC. Obviously, being selected for participation on the PCC is a high honor for a retired rider. Can you tell us a little bit about how the Council works, and how you view its role in the development and future of pro cycling?

The Council is entrusted with the technical and administrative organization of the UCI World Tour, setting up regulations and criteria by which the teams obtain licenses. We have our voice in the other matters, like

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in the current reforms, but it's the management committee who has the final say. You have seen the various announcements about the reforms which the UCI is proposing for the sport going forward. I believe these reforms are moving in the right direction, but I would like to see things happen more quickly, with less bureaucratic discussion. Also, in my view, these changes are only small steps; they don't really address the larger structural and economic problems, or the challenges of developing a better revenue generation model. We need to preserve certain races with a long history and tradition, but, on the other hand, those races have survived because they were somehow somehow profitable or at least sustainable for other reasons.

TOL: [What other new ideas or initiatives is the PCC looking at?](#)

One interesting area that we are examining is the issue of prize money allocation at the WorldTour level. One idea that I have proposed is that instead of the organizers setting aside a certain amount of money for the race winners, this amount of money (or maybe more) would be contributed into a different type of financial account, to fund the retirement needs of all the riders. This type of system would have several advantages. Besides greatly strengthening the retirement benefits for all riders, it would also acknowledge the role of the domestique, who is not currently highly compensated, for their back-breaking labor in delivering race winners to the line. These funds would be professionally managed, and would be made available to racers after they retire – based on the number of years and races in which they participated. The other strong motivator here would be in terms of anti-doping. If a rider was caught doping or cheating, he would get nothing. Anything this rider “paid into” the system would get redistributed to other riders who played by the rules.

This could have a big impact on doping, and especially on the thinking of older riders at the end of their careers. Today, an older rider may say – “in order to race another couple years and make more salary, maybe I should dope in order to improve my results; if I get caught, it's not a big deal because I was about to retire anyway.” Under the new system, this same rider would say – “I have spent years as a clean rider, and why would I dope now, and risk losing my retirement benefits?” A system like this could create a more equitable bonus distribution model, could help continue to clean up the sport, and would reinforce rider unity. Whether or not this system could be actually implemented, well, that's another story.

TOL: [Very interesting.... Finally, there has been a lot of discussion lately about the need and value of a stronger riders union. How do you feel about this, and what are the most important changes that can be made to improve rider health and safety concerns?](#)

First, it is important that the riders have a better pension and retirement plan, so that they can better develop a career and economic stability after their racing days are finished. That is a big gap now. And of course, as we saw this season, there are many health and safety issues that urgently need to be addressed. Personally, I have always advocated that a reduction in the number of starting riders in a race is the best way to improve rider safety.

More generally, I'm a believer that a strong riders union is necessary in this sport. The riders need to have some of these other support issues covered, so that they can focus on their job – competitive racing. The problem is how to build support for this, even from the riders themselves. Sometimes the big guys do not care too much about it, and the little guys have no power. When I was a young racer, I remember an old pro telling me, “The smaller riders are the ones who really need a union, but to be strong a union has to have the big riders too. But when a rider is lucky to become a big one, he doesn't care anymore, because he is a millionaire.” There is truth to this; it is one of the problems. Without the support of the big riders, maintaining a union is more difficult.

I also believe that the union should be run by a lawyer or a businessman, rather than someone with a cycling past. Such a person would be more willing to take the hard decisions and make tough calls – or

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demand better conditions without worrying about being blackmailed by the teams or organizers. The riders need to find such a person or entity, and then delegate authority and pay that entity to look out for their other interests, so that they can focus on racing.

TOL: Any other thoughts about other critical issues in the sport?

At the World Championships here, I have seen a lot of people following the elite women's races, and I have always wondered why can't this sport promote and market women's cycling better? We have to figure out a better way to do that. The sport could be much more popular, and I think global sponsors would be very receptive. We are leaving out half of the world here!

TOL: Marco, right now you are focused on sports science and rider development, but would you consider moving into more general team management in the future? Is running your own team a possibility?

Right now, I feel like I am fitting well into this role. Twenty years ago, I never would have thought that I might be a bike racer. And five years ago, I never thought I might be in a coaching role. So I have learned never to rule anything out! As long as I have the passion and the will to learn, I am looking forward to the future.

TOL: Given your background, education, and strong reputation with the riders, would you consider a future role in helping to better govern this sport, for example with the Italian Federation or the UCI?

As I said, at the moment I am enjoying very much being on the sporting side of the operation. There are many sometimes radical ideas for how to change and fix pro cycling. Some of these ideas I agree with, but you always have to be cautious, and analyze the possible outcomes, think about how it will affect the riders and other people working in the sport. I always try to play the role of keeping my feet firmly on the ground. But I love this sport, and I can't rule out anything.

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By Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, October 30, 2015