

## The Path to Parity

A major priority of the UCI under President Brian Cookson has been to raise the profile of women's cycling. This may have helped spur the return of a women's event to coincide with the Tour de France for the first time in over a decade, and is just one of several positive changes in the sport since September 2013. The recent Cycling Independent Reform Commission (CIRC) report suggested several additional changes, but – like so many of the UCI's new broad and sweeping proposals – they lack the actionable details needed to truly advance the sport in a coherent or timely fashion.

Nowhere is the desire and need for positive reform more immediate than in women's professional cycling. A meaningful long-term strategy which will improve the opportunities and treatment of women has yet to materialize, and this is especially distressing for the current athletes who are attempting to make a living as professional cyclists. Their careers have a very short lifespan – about four years on the average – and for them, critical changes cannot come soon enough.

In the wake of the CIRC report, there is overdue debate on key women's issues in the sport – particularly about the pervading sexist culture, abusive coaching relationships, and exploitive financial arrangements. There remains a great deal of anxiety over the sustainability of key races in the women's professional calendar, such as the solvency of the Giro d'Italia Femminile. The World Cup calendar itself is still a jumbled affair with sparse and widely-spaced events that force teams with limited budgets to stretch into the "red" to finance their travel, often causing great duress to the well-being of the athletes and staff.

These uncertainties leave women's race organizers and team owners at a distinct disadvantage in terms of being able to effectively plan and execute multi-year business strategies. The athletes are cautious to commit to full-time professional careers because their earning power is typically greater outside of the sport than from racing year round, and is still nowhere near that of the men. And of course in turn – and most critically – this makes it more difficult to provide sponsors with the confidence to invest in the sport.

Women's professional cycling appears to be at a crossroads. On one hand, the UCI is lending support and momentum to reforms and enhancements which could benefit the athletes, teams, races, and sponsors. Cookson's selection of Tracy Gaudry as one of the three vice presidents in his inner circle was a bold move. The UCI recently held its inaugural women's summit in conjunction with the Strada Bianche event in Italy, and used the occasion to announce the new women's "WorldTour" for 2016. The UCI has also become more active in engaging with the team owners and promoters of events, seeking to build out an inclusive, expanded calendar and to enhance the value of women's racing from a financial and sponsorship perspective – although the timeline to realize the fruits of these changes appears to be long, and somewhat uncertain.

On the other hand, the nascent but growing Women's Cycling Association (WCA) has been separately developing a strategy for growth and a strong following among women racers to rally

for changes in the sport. The WCA – which formed before the UCI elections in late 2013 – has already mobilized 90% of the professional women racing in North America under its banner. They have also been active in outreach to women outside of North America, and more importantly, have been forging relationships with race promoters, team owners, and potential sponsors of women’s cycling – in a strategy to holistically change the sport. However, the WCA lacks a formal seat at the UCI table as there is no true women’s cycling “union” as yet, and it has not developed the kind of international presence needed to drive change in a global context.

Although it may seem that the WCA and UCI are on parallel paths, they may actually be on a potential collision course that could set the entire sport off on a new direction. This is due to the fact that there are certain key differences between the women’s peloton and its drivers for team success, compared to the men’s sport. The traditional focus in men’s cycling has been on sponsors seeking to achieve global recognition and placement of their brand through viewership of sporting events. Many sponsors have achieved great commercial success by having their brand associated with the winners of races like the Tour de France or the World Championships.

But women’s pro cycling lacks this race and brand association model, and the races have never been consistently marketed or broadcast with an eye to building this sort of commercial value. From year to year, big events are drummed up and then disappear, while others languish in the shadows of the men’s events which they precede. This variability and almost universal lack of consistency in the calendar – and the public perception that women’s pro racing is nothing more than a few races tacked on to the coattails of existing men’s events – has prevented women’s cycling from developing a true sporting or commercial identity. More importantly, these shortcomings have stunted the ability of women’s racing to develop content monetization, marketing potential, and the sort of dedicated viewership desired by potential sponsors. Reforms which are executed solely on the existing framework of supported races will not suffice to sustain or reform the women’s sport; there must be more significant policy changes and new avenues for investment in the sport.

The WCA appears to be taking a different approach by instituting and executing changes from the ground up. The group is putting brains and muscle behind efforts to reform key areas of talent development, race promotion, sponsor identification/investment facilitation, and race development. WCA’s general strategy – although yet to be fully communicated – was summarized in this recent [opinion feature](#) by two of its most visible emissaries, Robin Farina and Janel Holcomb. The WCA doesn’t believe the women’s sport has to wait for changes, but rather believes it can spur organic change by disrupting the system with a thorough-going approach that fundamentally changes everything – from its competitive foundation, to its operating model and financial foundation, through to post-career athlete support.

Farina and Holcomb make an analogy to the way professional tennis elevated its entire sporting profile by bringing the women’s prize winnings and coverage into parity with the men. Although it took several years to put in place, that single move effectively pushed a women’s professional sport to the forefront. Television broadcast time increased, leading to new investment by companies seeking to target women’s spending habits. New events to emerged

and became monetizable, and viewership grew. In turn, this led to the emergence of new tournaments, the linking of tournaments into new series, and vast sponsor investment opportunities both in the events themselves, and in sponsorship deals with the individual athletes. And it spurred a new talent development model by inspiring young women to believe they too could be the next Martina Navratilova or Steffi Graf, just like many young women today – now with much greater resources and opportunities at their disposal – see themselves as the next Serena Williams.

Women's tennis is a proven success story, with direct implications and recommendations for professional women's bike racing. Could the same revolution happen here? Many close to the UCI say no, and the continued deferral by the UCI on a recommendation regarding a minimum wage for women may be an indicator of its policy paralysis on such issues. Critics believe that recommending a minimum wage would drive team sponsors into the red or out of the cycling market altogether; in fact, it has historically *not* been the role of the International Federations to set a minimum wage – wages are just the product of market forces.

However, everyone may be overlooking the role that race promoters could play, in terms of spurring new investment and revenue. New races could capitalize on specific women's market segments, driving new revenues that would be unique and separate from traditional models – just as the changes in women's tennis led to the creation of many new tournaments and series which became self-sustaining, marketable, and extraordinarily profitable. And although some say it would be a stretch for the same thing to happen for women's pro cycling right now, the opportunity is there for those who are ready to move quickly. For example, race promoters in the U.S. and Europe are already making subtle shifts in their organizing and marketing strategies to develop a more “regional” and women-oriented focus for their events.

Time will tell if the UCI and its new leadership team can reinvent the women's sport it inherited or if it will take some organization like the WCA to develop a strategy and rally the support to lead change through direct intervention. Under any circumstances, either party – whether working collaboratively or on their own – must address several key issues for sustained success.

First, women's cycling must focus on its unique sponsorship opportunities, and not rely on approaching the established sponsors, or the end-market and customer categories which have traditionally driven the men's sport. Sports sponsorship must be solely focused on maximizing the return on investment of marketing dollars, and must lead to new market presence, additional sales and enhanced brand identification. In this light, there is a unique opportunity here for the right companies to capture the attention of as much as fifty percent of a sports viewing population – that either spends money, or influences the way in which money is spent.

Reaching a more educated and higher-income female audience is a huge and largely untapped marketing opportunity.

In this light, and second, promoters should emphasize more of a regionally-driven organic model for women's events. This model can build the kind of identity, sustainability, opportunities for broadcast coverage and expansion which women's cycling has lacked. A regional focus may seem to run counter to the goal of globalizing the sport and raising the

professional standards, but the successful staging of such events, with renewable investment dollars, media rights, and prize lists, has been proven to draw higher profile teams and drive growth. Rather than attempting to build races around the promise of global exposure for the sponsor, many promoters now focus on maximizing the value and exposure for specific sponsors in a more specific regional market. Events with this kind of focus become more sustainable because the sponsor is committed to that specific community, the community becomes vested in the success of the event, and the races gradually become a priority for top riders and teams seeking success. This is precisely how the classic European men's events grew from being sponsored by local businesses like newspapers into global phenomena.

In terms of coverage, and third, the UCI and promoters must not be afraid to demand better investment of time and focus by the media, including broadcasters. Prime time, dedicated viewing slots will be required to provide the focus sponsors must have in order to consider underwriting women's events. Current and former pro riders like Rochelle Gilmore and [Mara Abbott](#) have expressed the frustrations about how the lack of coverage is one of the biggest disadvantages women face in gaining support. The sport needs exposure to build the fan base – not just automated “app” race trackers on the popular racing websites, or UCI website race feeds. While it is true that more people this year have been able to follow women's racing than in the past, the exposure is still only a fraction of what the men receive, and is too often diluted or completely overshadowed by coverage of a parallel men's event.

Fourth, the teams must rise to the occasion. On the surface, the goal of any cycling team is to win races and expose the sponsor from the podium. But women's cycling may be a bit different, and companies which market to women understand better how to inspire them with messages of personal change, health, wellness, status, and value. These companies understand how to change minds and behaviors first, and drive consumer decisions from that “win.” Women, more than men, tend to make purchasing decisions based upon their impression of the athletes as individuals, rather than necessarily the victories or exploits of those athletes. Teams which can capitalize on this fundamental philosophy could drive tremendous value to the sponsors and win over more fans. There is a great deal of untapped potential for teams to leverage their athletes – to improve their image, and that of the sport itself.

Fifth and finally, talent development must receive greater focus, with programs which provide the same level of support and oversight as the men receive. This is the only way to sustain a high level of racing, and drive the content of and financial support for the women's racing over the long-term. It will also help to grow the strength and diversity of the sport, by exposing more girls to an athletic path. The fixation on winning medals detracts national federations from the focus to invest the time, materials, and personnel necessary to emotionally connect with more female participants, drive stronger competition, create more successful events and develop more potential future champions. And this narrow medal mindset may have also inadvertently led to the culture in which women have been undervalued, and in some cases victimized by opportunistic coaches.

The issue of talent development perhaps best summarizes the crossroads to which women's pro cycling has arrived today. The sport as run by the UCI is encumbered by an outdated model which is inflexible and ineffective in many ways. If the UCI is to reform and grow the

sport of women's cycling, it has to re-invent the policies and financial underpinnings of how it supports and drives the sport from the top-down, up to and including the expectations it sets for national federations. And there is some question as to whether it has the agility and imagination to do so – in the face of tremendous pressure to reform in the post-McQuaid era – with a reasonably rapid timeline that would allow the women racing professionally today to benefit in a positive way before their careers are over. There may be a Women's WorldTour coming in 2016, but with only eight teams apparently having guaranteed "tickets" to participate in it, and no real qualifying criteria as yet defined for what is or isn't a WorldTour capable team, the UCI may just be spinning its wheels at the expense of sponsors, fans, and the athletes.

However, considering the other path, the WCA's entrepreneurial intentions and inspired emerging vision also represent a daunting task - one that will be very difficult to execute without a huge investment and near-100% participation by the world's top racers. The proposed creation of such a new "league" will be difficult to accomplish unless it is very well-funded effort. Millions of dollars will have to come from somewhere, and the source of that investment is not yet unidentified. And without a strong and cohesive consensus or "union" of the most influential athletes, the ability to sway UCI policy may be limited. While there is precedence for such sweeping change in other women's professional sports, the resistance of many traditional institutions in cycling such as race promoters, national federations, and the media to change in the short-term may represent overwhelming obstacles for the WCA. It may take several years to develop new races, create favorable agreements with existing races, and to identify, nurture and activate new sponsors to underwrite the necessary logistics.

Hence, the real question facing the WCA is how and where it will develop the capital and human resources to implement such a commercial revolution in the sport, and whether potential sponsors will have the commitment and patience to see such an investment through. And if the UCI and WCA collide while executing their strategies, it may create an impasse unlike any seen in the sport's history for sponsorship dollars, content rights, athlete commitments, and fan acceptance. It may take a hybrid model of entrepreneurial marketing and traditional International Federation oversight to achieve success – one that is a collaborative effort and something not seen before in sports management.

One thing is certain however: the dedication of people like Tracy Gaudry, Robin Farina, Janel Holcomb, Rochelle Gilmore and others is shining a light onto women's professional cycling that has been sorely missing. There will be more opportunities to watch women's racing in 2015 than ever before. And for the first time, there will be more people working in the forefront and behind the scenes of the sport to bring about change. Perhaps "La Course" will again flourish and become a true Tour Fémenin once again, or perhaps a new premier event will grow organically from a regional foundation into a globally-televised celebration of women's cycling. If the sport can address and successfully solve the fundamental challenges posed here, a new generation of racers will find themselves in a truly sustainable sport, with long and prosperous careers to look forward to.

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*your ideas or opinions heard.*

By Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, March 24, 2015