

Breaking Away - From the Tour de France

The 2016 professional cycling calendar is barely underway, but controversy has already reared its ugly head. The Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), owner of the Tour de France, reignited its historical battle with cycling's governing body, the International Cycling Union (UCI), and threatens to plunge the sport into disarray again.

The Tour de France may be the key event in pro cycling, but it is also an anchor which is holding the sport back. So – why not replace it? It is time to break the deadlock of the sport's power structure to move it out from under ASO's de facto control, and move it towards a more revenue sustainable economic system that expands its model and creates the potential for equitable profit sharing.

The privately-owned firm is upset over a small but widely agreed-upon licensing reform which would have guaranteed (for a three year period) starting spots in the Tour de France. This change would have provided a small measure of improved economic stability for the teams, and would have increased the incentives to invest in – as well as the overall value of – pro cycling's sponsorship-heavy revenue model.

ASO rejected this change, purely to preserve its own power – in effect making sponsorship in pro cycling even riskier by raising the barrier to entry for its flagship event. The core challenge for pro cycling is that the Tour de France is the one “super-marquee” competition of the sport – the only event where teams and sponsors can really profit. Don't participate in the Tour, and you're not going to make any money in this sport; it's that simple. ASO has shown it will do everything it can to protect its unique asset, regardless of the global repercussions.

There are ways the sport could sidestep the Tour de France. Indeed, if most of the teams and other stakeholders could unite and move away from the overwhelming focus on the Tour, this could potentially solve many of pro cycling's economic and governance problems – and recast ASO as more of a partner in the sport's continued evolution.

What more audacious proposal could possibly be made? At first glance, nothing could more quickly enrage cycling's stakeholders and its millions of fans across the world. Yet it is exactly this kind of “outside-the-box” thinking which could potentially lead to much-needed changes and new incentives for the sport. Consider one scenario.

What if Italy's national race, the Giro d'Italia, was moved to the first three weeks of July – directly opposite the Tour? This would only require two big changes. First, all of the key pro teams with WorldTour licenses would have to commit to race the Giro, rather than the Tour. Second, Giro owner RCS Sport would have to reschedule its race. The Italian government might have to withstand the entreaties or threats which the French government might raise. But with these changes, the monopolistic control of ASO could be broken overnight.

Timing the Giro with Europe's high vacation season would ensure greater roadside fan attendance, a higher continental viewership and the massive tourism advantages historically claimed by the Tour. Italy is a beautiful country too, and teams wouldn't have to worry so much about racing through its snow-packed passes in May. The higher profile would generate higher television revenues too, enriching RCS. Sharing some of that revenue with the teams could cement the incentive to participate; RCS is one of the few race organizers to have shared TV revenues with teams in the past, and the promise of funds could be used to lock-in “early adopters.”

The key prerequisite is that all key stakeholders have to act in unison. A forceful leader would have to command this effort, and work in conjunction with the owners of the Giro, to commit the teams and all of the accompanying logistics to support the change. But the key premise is that it *could* be done even if it

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was not unanimous. A Giro focused on reform and contested by most of the top WorldTour teams would be more entertaining – and economically valuable – than a Tour de France contested among a few French and second-tier regional teams.

ASO would no doubt retaliate and possibly blackball the renegade teams from its other events – but this isn't insurmountable. Sponsorship interests drive the sport, and so an alternative calendar schedule or league arrangement using other prominent pro races would also have to be organized. Additionally, elevating the Giro to the main event could accelerate change by providing openings for several other major races to compete on the global stage, adding more pressure for ASO to change its model.

This plan may sound improbable, but cycling needs to try something new, even if it enrages purists and unravels more than a hundred years of tradition. It is exactly the kind of creative disruption that has reinvigorated many other industries; it could be just the nudge cycling needs to finally address its core problems.

It is commonly lamented around cycling that “nothing will ever change so long as the ASO is in charge.” But if cycling could move beyond ASO's grip – transforming the company from an all-powerful overlord into a collaborative partner – it would free up the sport to adopt a whole range of reforms, encourage more fan participation, expose new markets, and diversify the revenue streams. This could all happen if cycling could agree that its best friend might just be its worst enemy.

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[Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, February 16, 2016](#)