

Shifting Gears: How a Stronger Union Could Change Pro Cycling

Stronger athlete representation is a critical need in professional cycling today. The examples from almost all other professional sports show that the players must have a spot at the table in order for overall conditions in the sport to improve. Although the influential CIRC report dedicated a mere five lines out of two hundred pages to this issue in March 2015, it *did* recommend that the UCI facilitate the creation of a strong riders' union – “to give riders a collective voice, particularly on the issues of ownership, revenue sharing, the racing calendar, and anti-doping.”

Despite the clear need for stronger athlete representation, and all the grand statements and intentions, not much has changed for the peloton over the past decade. UCI President Brian Cookson promised that he would push for a bigger role for the professional cyclists' association, and pledged to appoint a special representative “to help improve communication with professional road riders” in his election platform. However, there continue to be disturbing lapses in basic communications, and the relationship between athletes, the race organizers and governance bodies.

Perhaps most distressingly, the riders themselves are still reluctant to step forward and speak out, let alone defend their rights. Off-the-record, some more cynical riders suggest that the current situation of an existing but relatively weak union structure – the Cycliste Professionnels Associés (CPA), discussed below – actually reinforces the feudal agenda of the organizers and UCI. One prominent ex-racer put it this way. “Whenever there is a rider concern or grievance, all the officials can just say, ‘Fine, you already have a union; go ask them to do something about it.’ A weak union fits their purposes perfectly.”

But there are also some encouraging signs of new and proactive efforts to organize and represent members of the pro peloton. In this article, we will take a closer look at: (1) the fundamental needs and objectives of stronger rider representation; (2) the activities of the current rider's association – the CPA; (3) the objectives and approach of two recently-formed rider representation efforts, the Women's Cycling Association (WCA), and the Association of North American Professional Road Cyclists (ANAPRC); and (4) some ideas and recommendations to consider in the future.

Background: Pro cycling has never been focused on athlete representation. There has always been an unspoken rule that the team owners and race organizers could treat the athletes however they pleased, and if the riders didn't want to play by their rules, there was always an endless supply of other aspiring racers out there, itching to get into the sport. From the athletes' perspective, that fear of being replaced at the drop of a hat has prevented the peloton from making too many demands or formally organizing themselves.

There are some unique reasons why a strong and all-inclusive riders union has never gelled in the sport. Professional cyclists come from a wide variety of economic situations and cultural backgrounds, they speak many different languages, and they may have widely differing financial expectations. Individual athletes are mostly concerned with their own development and performance, and are laser-focused on doing whatever they can to succeed and sign that contract for the following season, ensuring their economic security. Younger riders who could really benefit from a union don't have the influence or funds to contribute, while the older, more successful and more influential riders may already be economically secure and hence don't care as much about a union. Furthermore, the economic insecurity of the overall sport and generally low average rider salaries reduce the funding sources needed to support a comprehensive riders union.

Yet, a strong riders' union is needed more today than ever before. Highly-visible health and safety issues are still common, like the inexcusable crash at this year's Vuelta a Pais Vasco, or a race moto crashing out Greg Van Avermaet during his legitimate bid for victory in the recent Clasica San Sebastian. Debates regarding acceptable race weather conditions are also frequently in the news – like the snowstorms of the

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2014 Giro, or searing temperatures of 2015 Tour of Oman. Some of these events are just part of the sport, but others truly call for clearer guidelines, communications, or even legal repercussions.

Many [retired cyclists](#) emphasize the need for better career assistance and educational programs, such as health and wellness programs, or basic life skills training in things like financial planning when they reach the end of their athletic careers. Additional issues include requirements for minimum salaries and benefits, and a limit on the number of expected racing days per year – especially for first and second year pros, or riders who are returning from serious injuries. Other perhaps more controversial topics include compensation for “image rights,” privacy protection with respect to anti-doping testing, and other personal rights which many other unions have been able to negotiate.

In this regard, the name Marvin Miller is [often invoked](#) – and comparisons are often drawn between the athletes’ current needs in pro cycling and how Miller challenged Major League Baseball’s “reserve clause” and created its Players Association in the mid-1960s. In many respects, pro cycling needs a similarly aggressive leader to step up, educate and organize the riders, and fight for a louder voice in the sport. As the NBA Players Union director Michele Roberts has recently [said](#) of basketball, “without the players, there is no money, and there is no game.” To gain perspective on the complicated reasons why this statement has rarely been heard around pro cycling, we must first look at the background and history of the CPA.

The CPA – History and Current Activities: Primary cycling nations like France, Italy, Belgium, Holland, and Spain have had some form of national riders’ association for many years – decades in some cases – but these different organizations often overlapped or simply focused on their own national issues. Hence, the CPA was formed in 1999, to act as an umbrella organization that could coordinate these various national groups, and according to its website, to “act as a reference point” in the case of issues which went beyond national borders. More recently, Switzerland, Portugal and a combined U.S./Canada group have joined.

The CPA defined some initial objectives to protect the rights and interests of riders. It was hoped that the organization would gradually gain political and financial strength, and that it would be able to speak with an increasingly influential voice for the riders. The CPA has had some successes, but it is still small, and by general consensus it remains seriously under-funded and under-staffed. It has limited power and influence in the overall sport, and is so small and obscure that many pro racers don’t really understand the CPA’s purported role in the sport; some say they’ve never even heard of the organization.

The CPA’s “executive branch” consists of two part-time officials, President (and former double World Champion for Italy) Gianni Bugno, and Secretary-General David Chassot – both of whom have other professional employment commitments, inside and outside of cycling. They are supported by a very small part-time staff. The organization is technically governed by a “steering committee,” consisting of the current eight member-nation associations, which meets four or five times a year.

The CPA’s primary funding comes from its 2% share of the total prize money offered by various race organizers for WorldTour and Pro Continental events, which only comes to about €240,000 per year. Its most important activity is to manage the “Solidarity Fund” – a small endowment set up to provide certain qualifying pro riders with a minimal retirement payment, or “end-of-career allowance.” An amount equal to an additional 5% of the prize money from the same key races is used to fund this account – totaling about €600,000 per year. In theory, most of the major race organizers cooperate and provide these funds, but the CPA has to invoice each individual race organizer and according to insiders, it struggles to collect some portion of these funds. When originally set up, it was intended that this retirement fund would grow each year, but in reality it has remained essentially flat since it began in 2002.

Secretary-General Chassot told *The Outer Line* that about 400 riders have received a retirement payment

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since it was first authorized in 2007. Qualifying riders must have had at least five years of participation at the top level, be over 30 years old, and meet various other criteria in order to receive a modest one-time payment of €12,500. And as mentioned, many riders are not even aware that they may qualify. The size and solvency of this fund has not been publicly disclosed, and it is not well understood by anyone outside the organization.

The CPA also maintains an on-going joint agreement with the AIGCP – the primary organization representing the pro cycling teams. Although the last agreement was signed more than two years ago, it is supposed to cover such items as minimum salaries, the definition of a neo-pro, maximum required days of racing, and other team/athlete issues. There is some question about the enforceability of this contract – especially since the UCI is an international federation with no legal power to mandate wages – but this *is* one vehicle by which the CPA could work to improve the status of cycling professionals. The CPA has also recently been sending a delegate to various races, to observe “working conditions” and to gather rider input and concerns.

While the general intent of the CPA may be noble, its limited impact is predictable given its modest funding and organizational structure. Unfortunately, the CPA finds itself in a “Catch-22” predicament; it is difficult to provide athlete services and support without sufficient funding, but it’s simultaneously tough to develop funding until the organization can provide a useful service. The “decision by committee” nature of the CPA is a major operational handicap, and little progress can be expected when the principals devote only a part of their time and energy to the cause. As a result of all these factors, it seems that the CPA is not yet positioned to be a very powerful voice or to sway key decisions at pro cycling’s table.

Newer Athlete Representation Efforts: Some observers have suggested that it might be more effective to build a new riders union from scratch, rather than try to work through such a constrained existing organization. However, outside of the individual country organizations, there has never really been a serious effort to develop a new riders’ group. At the same time, others argue that it is more efficient to reinforce the CPA by reforming its structure, and adding financial backing and management capabilities to make the existing institution more powerful.

The newly formed Association of North American Professional Road Cyclists (ANAPRC) took this support and reinforcement approach when it recently joined the CPA. ANAPRC came about through the efforts of several active or retired American riders including Christian Vande Velde, Lucas Euser, and cyclocross racer Tim Johnson, while other key members of the American peloton like Tejay Vangarderen and Brent Bookwalter have also thrown their influence behind the effort. Consequently, ANAPRC has quickly developed a high profile amongst American riders, now claiming 31 members, or about 80% of the total American and Canadian riders racing at the WorldTour or Pro Continental level.

ANAPRC hopes to use its new seat at the CPA table to strengthen the riders’ collective voice. “This has been a long-time in the making,” says veteran American rider Ted King. “The ANAPRC can better represent the needs of the athletes at a time when cycling is on the cusp of some pretty major changes. Our objective is to help move the sport in the right direction.” Vande Velde has been named as the initial President of the new group, and he is actively calling for a more modern and nimble organization to represent the riders. The Association recently engaged Boulder, Colorado-based Michael Carcaise to act as Executive Director of the group, and although he is only involved on a part-time basis as the coordinator of the new effort, he is passionate and energetic about the cause. He hopes that perhaps ANAPRC can promote some new ideas and approaches and thereby help the CPA become a stronger voice for *all* members of the pro peloton. “Pro cyclists are the least powerful stakeholders in the sport today, despite being the most important part of the show,” says Carcaise.

One priority for this new group must be to examine and learn from the examples of other pro sports – how they built effective athlete unions. For example, both Walter Palmer, former Director of International

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Relations for the NBA Players Association and a recognized expert, and Donald Fehr, Executive Director of the National Hockey League Players Association (and formerly head of the MLB Players Association for almost 25 years) emphasize the critical need of understanding, in detail, what specific issues are actually critical to the athletes. “These organizations only go as far as the players can take you; nothing happens until the players get seriously involved,” says Palmer.

Hence, a key priority will be to rally active riders to take a stronger leadership role. Carcaise recently travelled to the Tour of California to investigate rider concerns and to determine the incentives needed to better engage the riders in building a stronger association. ANAPRC may benefit from the fact that North American riders seem to have fewer reservations than most of their European counterparts about publicly discussing the critical issues. “Before the ANAPRC,” says BMC racer Brent Bookwalter, “we really had no recognized channel to submit feedback, concerns or ideas to the CPA or the UCI about our safety, or things like how to access the Solidarity Fund.”

One of the biggest challenges for this new group will be how to financially support a sustained athlete representation effort. Currently, pro cycling spends only about 0.14% of total salaries to support the CPA’s representation efforts (based on the Ernst and Young’s 2014 UCI review, and budget figures provided by the CPA). This is five to ten times less than other pro sports. For example, the NFL Players Association just instituted a new ruling which requires that rookies contribute 3.75% of their starting salary to the union and regular NFL players pay union dues of \$15,000 per year, on an average salary of \$2 million or 0.75%. (ANAPRC set its annual dues at \$635 – at the time, equivalent to €500 – but the Board made dues in Year 1 optional, in order to encourage initial participation.)

A very similar set of challenges is faced by women’s pro cycling. Another relatively new organization, the Women’s Cycling Association (WCA) – led by U.S. pro rider Robin Farina – has spent the last two years getting organized and attempting to create the same kind of momentum in the [women's sport](#). The group charges \$35 a year for membership, and already has 90% of the professional women racing in North America organized under its banner; it has also been reaching out to women outside of North America. More importantly, it has been forging relationships with race promoters, team owners, and potential sponsors of women’s cycling.

However, the WCA is not really functioning as a “union” yet, and it has not yet developed the level of international presence needed to drive change in a global context. It also lacks a formal seat at the UCI table. However, the WCA hopes to compensate by taking more grass-roots action in the key areas of talent development, race promotion, sponsor identification/investment facilitation, and race development. The WCA doesn’t believe the women’s sport has to sit by and wait for change to come. Farina believes the WCA can spur organic change by disrupting the system with a complete approach that fundamentally changes the competitive foundation, operating model and financial foundation, and post-career athlete support.

Finally, it should also be noted that there *has* been some progress in regards to UCI rider representation. The popularly-elected members of the UCI’s Athlete’s Commission were recently announced; Bobbie Traksel will represent men’s road racing, while Iris Slappendel will represent the women. The official job of the Athlete’s Commission representation will be to communicate with the entire peloton and carry their input to the Professional Cycling Council (PCC) and other units of the UCI. How effective this will be remains to be seen, as few stakeholders believe that the PCC has had a very strong voice in the past. However, it seems to be a step in the right direction.

Looking Forward: The wave of UCI reforms currently under consideration could help build momentum for a stronger union. The creation of a more assertive riders union might seem to run against the interests of the teams and organizers, but the success of other sports points in the opposite direction. It is time that all parties pitch in and help – financially or otherwise – to reform or create a stronger and more inclusive

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organized union. With a bit of an external push and perhaps some initial financial support, the sport is ready to take this quantum leap forward.

A critical first objective must be to truly globalize the CPA – or some future CPA-like entity – so that it represents interests of the whole pro peloton. Some countries may only have one or two WorldTour riders, but their needs are no less important. Riders from more than 30 countries participated in this year's Tour de France, many of them unrepresented by the current CPA; indeed, four of the race's five category jersey winners were from non-participating countries. Five of the last six Monument winners are from non-participating countries, as are two active world champions – Mark Cavendish and Michal Kwiatkowski. All professional riders deserve the same level of protection and representation.

The riders must also be encouraged to become more invested in the on-going reform negotiations. Outsiders or third parties purporting to speak for the athletes will not get the job done. Once a viable plan for a more powerful union is developed, and once the actual benefits to its members are clearly articulated, there will be a greater incentive for riders to assume leadership roles. If just a handful of prominent and respected champions – from a few different countries – step forward and articulate the peloton's concerns, this could provide the inspirational leadership and foundation for a stronger union.

Some riders also believe that a stronger union, combined with strict regulatory oversight and enforcement, would help the peloton to better police itself and help resolve the doping challenge. For example, in the past, doping was so prevalent that individual riders realized there was nothing they could do to control it or force out the dopers, and so more and more riders resorted to the same approach themselves. The peer-group mentality toward cheating worked to marginalize and force out anyone who even attempted to talk openly about the problem, like Christophe Bassons and Filippo Simeoni.

However, with greater rider unity and stronger external enforcement, this same peer pressure might instead be harnessed in a positive way to help clean up the peloton; a collective internal interest would emerge to isolate dopers and force them out of the sport and level a clean playing field. One prominent former racer points out that if the peloton would take this approach, there would be strong influence within the group to maintain that clean status quo instead. "People trying to cheat would be chased down and forced out by the power of the peloton. The same kind of self-protection instinct that used to be so negative could be turned into a positive. A rider's union would help reinforce that."

As we have highlighted in numerous articles over the last few years, there are many challenges – beyond simply the need for a stronger athlete association – which pro cycling must resolve. The historical doping stigma; the sport's economic sustainability; the need to attract more fans and stronger sponsors; a more logical and sensible calendar; and the need for new technologies, both on the road and in televising the sport – to name just a few. But viewed from a different perspective, perhaps a stronger athlete association should not be viewed as just one item on this "list." Perhaps stronger rider representation should in fact be viewed as *the single item* on this "to-do list" which might actually help to drive and achieve *all* of the other objectives.

A stronger association could force simultaneous progress on all these issues, following the path of other sports like football and baseball, which made their greatest leaps in popularity and revenues following the development of a more powerful voice for the athletes. Strong athlete unions in other women's sports like tennis and golf led to dramatic growth, and rapidly increased the earning power of both athletes and event organizers. Likewise, when they are able to harness their collective power, pro cyclists will also be able to enjoy higher wages, more stable employment, safer racing conditions and a more secure long-term future – all of which will lead to a more robust and sustainable sport.

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repair and strengthen professional cycling, please contact us, and make your ideas or opinions heard.

Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, August 5, 2015