

The Athletes' Commission: Traksel Gaining Traction

Bobbie Traksel has had a long and distinguished pro cycling career. While he was never a big name at the highest level of the sport, Traksel's talent and strength in the Northern Classics led to victories in the U23 Tour of Flanders, the Driedaagse van West-Vlaanderen, as well as a highly regarded and hard fought win at Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne in 2010, after a heroic breakaway in the cold and rain. But Traksel now faces perhaps his greatest challenge, and one that he might never have imagined when he started his pro career over 15 years ago: representing the professional peloton – and seven other cycling disciplines – as the newly-elected President of the UCI's Athletes' Commission.

Traksel's election last December puts him in a potentially very powerful position at the forefront of the sport. The Athletes' Commission (AC) was originally convened by prior UCI President Pat McQuaid in 2011, but it played a somewhat passive role in its first years. Skeptics viewed the effort as essentially throwing a bone to placate the riders, or even as an effort to dilute the limited influence of the CPA (Cyclistes Professionnels Associes – the riders' association).

Strengthening and reinvigorating the role of the AC was a specific component of Brian Cookson's election platform in 2013, as a way to help build transparency and trust between UCI leadership and the riders across all cycling disciplines. The Commission is now comprised of thirteen individuals – one or two active male and female athletes representing each of the eight major disciplines overseen by the UCI. These individuals are in turn elected by their peers. According to the UCI, the Commission will provide input and representation to UCI governance processes regarding “the views and expectations of the athletes....ensuring that good practices are applied and promoted.”

Beyond these generalities, however, the Terms of Reference for the new Commission are thin on details, which leaves Traksel with the tasks of both steering the process *and* helping to define a function which is still evolving. Traksel is invited to attend the UCI management committee meetings, though he doesn't have a vote. And supposedly he also has a seat on the Pro Cycling Council, although the UCI website shows that seat currently filled by Bernie Eisel. But the AC's Terms of Reference also constrain Traksel's influence and power by making clear that the Commission is only a consultative body, and that “it does not have any executive or decision-making powers.” Traksel recently talked with **The Outer Line** to discuss his new role, his observations as a pro cyclist for 15 years, and what he believes are the key issues facing the sport as it continues to change – particularly in terms of the rights of the riders.

First of all, Traksel is quick to point out that even though he has been elected president of the Commission, its role is not 100% official yet. According to him, the riders still have to ratify the internal processes and charter of the organization – and that entails a lot of work which he and the other members still have to finalize. “My challenge right now is to help define more specifically the roles and activities of the Commission, and to balance expectations for how the Commission should operate, with what is realistically possible for a new organization.”

Traksel thinks the UCI should change at least one basic requirement in their approach: that all of the AC members from the different cycling disciplines should all be active riders. “Already we see there is too much to participate in, with all of the different UCI committee meetings, like the Management Committee and the Technical Commission. This is almost impossible for the representative because there are perhaps fifty working and travel days every year in order to attend all these meetings.” This level of time commitment makes it difficult to keep focus on being a successful pro rider and a Commission member at the same time. “Maybe a better scenario is for at least some of the members to be recently retired riders – people who understand all the issues and still know everyone, but who have more time to make this sort of commitment.” (*Editors' Note:* Traksel is currently retired, having last raced as an independently sponsored rider in 2015.)

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In terms of the other key challenges facing pro cycling, Traksel runs down the list of today's familiar hot topics. "We have to make the financial situation more stable for the teams. This will help make life more stable for the riders." He underlines how quickly riders can lose their jobs when the team loses its sponsors. "We are very anxious right now about Tinkov and the situation for his riders; they say they are announcing a new sponsor later in the year, maybe at the Giro, but we don't know."

And financial insecurity is not just a problem in men's and women's road racing; similar contract and employment uncertainty is prevalent across all of the disciplines like track, BMX, cyclocross, mountain bike, etc. "No one has any job security," says Traksel. He believes that there is what he calls a strong "middle class" of riders who have found success in the pro peloton today that can expect some level of job security throughout their careers, but everyone below that line – despite being invaluable, like a good domestique – is generally replaceable.

Safety issues are another obvious concern, and there is a harsh spotlight focused on this area at the moment, after the tragic death of Antoine Demoitie at the recent Ghent-Wevelgem race. This is clearly a major concern for the riders, and has recently been the focus of increasing efforts by the CPA [riders association](#), and particularly its North American affiliate ANAPRC. But Traksel points out that safety issues, and the ability of race organizers to spend more time and resources on ensuring safety is also dependent on the financial stability of the sport.

Historically, it has sometimes been difficult to get these kinds of concerns out on the table. Many riders still fear retaliation from their teams and sponsors, or from event owners, if they speak out about controversial issues, or suggest the need for a stronger rider's union. For example, [it was surmised](#) that after Fabian Cancellara spoke out for the riders at the Tour of Oman in 2015 – during extreme temperatures conditions – his team was disinvited from the 2016 event in retaliation.

A rider of Cancellara's status and moral authority may be able to get away with speaking out like that, but many riders would suffer debilitating punishment for publicly making those sorts of remarks. Traksel hopes that the AC – and the CPA – can be more effective voices to bring forward these concerns on a collective basis. "Of course, I can't put an individual rider in that position. Everyone knows that it can end your career," says Traksel.

When asked about the difficulty of building cooperation among hundreds of riders from a wide variety of cultures, with different languages and economic expectations, Traksel minimizes these issues as sidelight distractions. He sees more problems to overcome in terms of "fixing the old ways" in which the sport is run, and the economic and financial stability changes mentioned above. "No matter where the riders are from, everyone is just trying to earn a living," he says.

Funding is one of the biggest challenges Traksel foresees for the AC going forward. He doesn't believe that the AC will be able to succeed or fulfill its intended role with the budget it has today. "Funding and rider rights go hand in hand," he says, "and it feels like we are starting from the very beginning, from almost nothing." When contacted for this article, UCI President Brian Cookson said that members of the AC are provided with a small daily allowance and coverage of their travel expenses, but he declined to give any specific figures regarding the budget for the Commission's efforts.

Another obvious question is how the Athletes' Commission will coordinate and interact with the CPA. Traksel says that he wants to try to work with the CPA, since it is an existing organization attempting to represent the interests of the riders. But it remains to be seen how the CPA and the AC will work together on their respective missions. The AC will presumably sit at the table on many issues with the UCI, while the CPA has more of an external advocacy role. Could the CPA find itself on the outside looking in, if the AC has a direct line to the UCI's power base?

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Traksel hopes that the CPA will do more outreach to the AC – and the members of the pro peloton – but there has not been any material coordination between the two groups to date. Considering that neither group has taken strong or decisive action yet regarding many of the critical issues facing pro cycling, it may be some time before there is a unified platform involving riders' rights. However, Traksel may find himself in the right circumstances, and with the right audience, to be a catalyst for exactly these types of changes. (*Editors' Note:* It should be noted that Traksel is also the President of the Dutch riders union, which has a strong voice within the CPA.)

But one thing is certain for Traksel: even though the Commission and his position are nominally supported by the UCI, he is committed to operating the AC as an independent body, and truly acting in the best interests of the riders. He firmly believes that the UCI management structure is sincere about listening to the athletes. "My first opinion is that Brian Cookson really wants to listen and work close together. A stronger voice for the athletes was a big part of Cookson's manifesto. I believe he wants to have the riders' voices finally mean something." Cookson comes up for reelection in September 2017, which is also when Traksel's post ends. Traksel hopes to have the Commission's charter completed and ratified by the athletes and UCI by that time. Cookson has sent strong signals to indicate that he is also supportive of these objectives.

Traksel has a difficult road ahead, but he also has a great opportunity to define a new leadership role in the sport and become the riders' leading advocate for change. If he can seize the moment, he can create a platform that truly improves the riders' lives while at the same time helping to move the overall sport forward. But he will have to do this despite the many challenges, differing objectives and sometimes difficult personalities. As a dedicated family man, Traksel firmly believes he has something to give back to the sport that has given him so much, and he is determined to leave the sport in better condition than he found it. Cycling is often criticized for its feudal structure and glacial pace of change, but the Athletes' Commission can be a vehicle for progress. "I think about once a week, 'why I am doing this?' There is so much to do, and so much that is wrong, and I really don't make any money for all this extra work. But I do this because I love cycling."

*Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, **The Outer Line**, April 18, 2016*