

Analyzing Bjarne Riis's Return to Pro Cycling With NTT Pro Cycling

[News last week](#) that Bjarne Riis would be returning to a leadership role in the UCI men's WorldTour was met with a healthy dose of skepticism and head-shaking from most corners of the sport. Widely reported in the cycling media as a "merger," Riis and his Virtu Cycling financial partners actually just took an initial 30 percent minority stake in the NTT Pro Cycling Team, formerly known as Team Dimension Data. The Danish 1996 Tour de France winner will reportedly have a top-tier management and Director's seat, and is bringing former associates and riders – the addition of Michael Rogers was announced yesterday – onto the team.

From the broader sporting perspective, there should be some optimism for stability, refocused competitive goals, and sponsorship activation as a result of this merger. However, there is also a sort of revolving door fatigue when characters like Riis come back in, which has a way of wearing the sport down. Criticism came thick and fast from former riders, expert analysts, and fans. No one seems enthusiastic about the situation, but no one should be surprised either.

Anti-doping observers were quick to point out that one of the most unapologetic dopers from the EPO era is once again in an official capacity to advise and steer the careers of top professional cyclists. Riis' limited apologies in 2007 for his extensive doping through the 1990s fell flat; he took personal responsibility for his actions but [also said](#), "I'm proud of my results even though they were not completely honest." That posture has always seemed somewhat hypocritical – and felt like a slap across the collective faces of the many riders who raced against him clean, and at a major disadvantage.

Riis has remained active in cycling's lower Continental ranks since selling off his former Tinkoff pro team WorldTour license, but his VéloConcept project with long-time finance partner Lars Seier Christiansen (later called Virtu Cycling Team and then Team Wahoo) never really gained the investment momentum needed to evolve into a top-tier program. At first, it was a kind of investment facilitation hub to connect Danish businesses with global opportunities, using the VéloConcept camp as a backdrop for the networking introductions. The goal was to create an investment engine that could rapidly build up Riis' pet program to develop Danish pro cyclists, in the eponymously-named men's Virtu Cycling team, from Continental to WorldTour level.

Former pro Michael Rasmussen, famously thrown out of the 2007 Tour, took this historical track when analyzing the Riis investment in NTT. As a fellow Dane – and one of Riis' former riders – Rasmussen can sympathize with the importance of having a Danish presence at the 2021 Tour, which is set to start in Copenhagen. However, in his view, Virtu's partners simply took a largely ego-driven short-cut to get back on the WT stage, guaranteeing a home "appearance" in 2021, but abandoning the Virtu project in order to buy into the NTT program. At the same time, only one rider from Virtu's past rosters, the talented 24-year-old Michael Carbel, has jumped across to NTT – hardly a game-changing advancement for Danish pro cycling development. And as Rasmussen points out, Danish cycling has done quite well without the help of Riis at the WT level – 22 WT riders this past year and a World Championship.

Journalists and observers of the sport quickly dug into the archives, and pointed out the seemingly awkward fit between NTT team head Douglas Ryder and Riis. Ryder has held the team's WorldTour license since its top-tier arrival as the innovative [MTN-Qhubeka team](#). In 2015, Riis tried to sway the team management into bringing him on board – potentially along with Riis's investors (Seier financially backed both SaxoBank and Virtu). But at the time, team manager Brian Smith said, "Our values are not consistent with his history; Riis has previously doped. It was emphasized very clearly that it would not be feasible, and it was solely because of Riis."

So, the obvious question is – what changed? Perhaps survival or financial concerns pushed NTT Pro Cycling into the same sponsorship deficit situation that many other teams have experienced. The loss of Deloitte at the end of 2018 could have made Riis's offer more appealing now than it might have been in 2015. NTT is also no different from the majority of other WorldTour teams, which employ or have consultants who either served bans for doping, admitted to doping post-career, or who are heavily suspected of having doped. In NTT's case, [Rolf Aldag](#), Riis' teammate on Telekom for many years, was a director of the team until the end of last year. Times change, and [some teams](#) make a genuine effort to go doping-free, but at the end of the day, and given the sport's history, this situation seems unlikely to change.

While the criticism of Riis from many corners seems warranted, it will undoubtedly die down once the racing season gets underway – and Riis will likely get his moment in the sun, perhaps the biggest since his jaw-dropping and inauthentic attacks up the hors-categorie Hautacam climb in the 1996 Tour. But Riis' opportunity found has also resulted in several opportunities lost.

Virtu Cycling was an innovative and commendable project in many respects. Starting out from VéloConcept, it took a novel and grassroots approach towards building a pro cycling team with a national identity, from the ground up. The program was partially based on an approach pioneered in conjunction with his former sponsor CSC, in which the corporation leveraged the team's presence at business-oriented cycling camps to reinforce current client relationships and to court new opportunities. And Riis, for better or worse, is still widely treated as royalty in Denmark; his exploits raised the country's international cycling visibility in a way it had never experienced before, and his name is still sufficient to attract attention in the country's financial and business community.

Virtu did generate moderate success within the Danish business sphere, but hadn't yet built continental or global visibility and momentum. It was able to support a modest men's program, but the sustainability of top talent (most highly-touted young male riders got poached by better-funded WT development programs) hindered the team's growth. However, the project was just starting to develop the potential for much greater accomplishments in women's pro cycling. Unfortunately, that opportunity was unceremoniously thrown out the window when it canceled its highly-successful Virtu Women's team at the end of 2019.

Arguably, the Virtu Cycling women's cycling investment offered a better long-term opportunity, and could have sparked further evolution of the women's sport with its innovative model for team investment, branding, and marketing. Led by current CERATIZIT-WNT Pro Cycling team Director Carmen Small, it had the potential to build on its 2019 women's Tour of Flanders success and sustain a competitive WWT program for many years to come. Small had steadily diversified Virtu's sponsorship outreach strategy, but Riis canceled the program in mid-flight to focus more resources on building his men's program. Some of those resources were probably used to buy into NTT Pro Cycling instead.

A successful long-term women's program, with a mix of international and developing talent, held the potential to redefine Riis' legacy, and build the image he has sought to attain since his 2007 doping admission – that of a well-meaning and repentant sinner, using his experience to leave the sport he bruised in a better state than he found it. But that is now an opportunity lost.

The positive long-view here is that the NTT-Virtu merger may help connect new complementary sponsors for Ryder's WT team in the future, despite throwing away the potential opportunity with the women's team. NTT is one of the premier tech leaders in 5G connectivity rollout, and is [betting big](#) on how its core business can reshape information consumption globally. Continuity between Dimension Data and NTT in the sponsorship lineage may be the perfect platform for it to achieve its global marketing objectives. Hopefully, this may portend more Danish investment into cycling, and hopefully, NTT will remain as a major global sponsor.

Ryder and his management team have a proven record of brand and marketing internationalization, and other cycling teams should pay close attention to the way in which NTT Pro Cycling presents itself to the market in 2020. And despite their [competitive struggles](#) over the past couple of years, the team has demonstrated they can rapidly operationalize changes and succeed in the sport; hopefully this merger will help them build a stronger organization.

According to various news outlets, Riis will have team management responsibility and, in his words, will “create one of the world’s best cycling teams.” However, Riis’s management track record has been something of a roller-coaster: Grand Tour victories with three different riders (Basso, Sastre, and Contador), but a simultaneous inability to shake [suspicions of doping](#) and, as alleged by former riders like Tyler Hamilton, facilitation of doping ([The Secret Race](#), pp.157-166). Some parties have suggested that Riis has grown erratic, and distant from his riders and the day-to-day challenges of running a team, despite his reputation as an elite athlete Director. [One report](#) even alleged that Riis was watching movies on his laptop while in the team car during crucial race stages.

One certainly hopes that the combination of Riis and Ryder will pay off, but there are no guarantees in this sport. History has shown that even the best-planned team efforts can quickly fall apart – especially when there’s a revolving door of the same central characters running those teams. It would be too bad if this gamble had only one noteworthy result – Riis’s regal presence at the Tour’s 2021 Copenhagen grand departe with a Danish-supported WT team. If this merger devolves into just another exercise in self-promotion, as Rasmussen surmises, it could constrict cycling’s investment and sponsorship climate.

However, Doug Ryder seems to have the management acumen to guide headstrong personalities toward re-building and sustaining a competitive and innovative professional cycling team. The dedication he has shown in bringing up his team from Continental roots to big-time stage wins at the Tour de France is a bright spot in cycling’s sponsorship-driven landscape. Despite the uncertainties, NTT Pro Cycling will be closely watched, and is likely to have a bigger impact on the 2020 season and beyond.

By Joe Harris, January 15th, 2020.