

Analyzing Mathieu van der Poel's Chances in Yorkshire

The upcoming men's 2019 World Road Race Championships this Sunday features a 285-kilometer course in Northern England with several punishing climbs, and finishes with a tough, hilly circuit in Harrogate. The course favors all-around Classics riders who can master the climbs and either sprint from a select group or launch a well-timed solo move in the final few kilometers (like Peter Sagan in 2015, Michal Kwiatkowski in 2014, Philippe Gilbert in 2012, or Cadel Evans in 2009). But there is no safe bet with such an open race.

Betting markets currently peg the emerging Dutch multi-discipline superstar Mathieu van der Poel, as the heavy favorite. This isn't surprising, as van der Poel appears to be a once-in-a-generation talent. But as we covered in a previous piece, his main objective at the moment is the mountain biking title at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. When he has raced on the road this year he has been imperious, and a win on Sunday wouldn't be a surprise. But a light road racing schedule next year (he has already announced that he won't race the 2020 Tour de France) means that even if his Corendon-Circus team receives wildcard invitations to some select spring classics, road cycling would essentially find itself with a seldom-seen champion who is essentially riding on the road as a side gig. This would be the first time in the modern era that the world champion was absent from the Tour de France, both the year before and the year after.

Of course, one-day bike races are often like a lottery, where luck is as much a factor as great form. Betting markets and many pundits may push van der Poel as the favorite, but does this reflect the most accurate pre-race picture?

While van der Poel won in ridiculously powerful fashion on a similarly hilly course earlier this season at Amstel Gold, and again over several stages in the recent Tour of Britain, these successes could actually hurt his chances of success on Sunday. The peloton will mark him as closely as it marked Fabian Cancellara in his prime, or as it marks Peter Sagan today. (Ironically, Sagan himself will likely benefit on Sunday from the level of focus van der Poel will command.)

Riders who exhibit strong form during the few weeks before Worlds are often odds-on favorites in the betting line, but this can also be misleading. Some have peaked too soon, and top form can be difficult to maintain through the Worlds. On the other hand, given van der Poel's seemingly bottomless talent, we also have to consider the possibility that the dominant form he has been displaying is simply part of his buildup.

Another intriguing factor is team composition – riders competing on national teams, versus their usual trade teams. This team reshuffle differentiates the Worlds from nearly every other race on the calendar, insulating it from the massive budget differentials found between trade teams during the rest of the year. Like the football and basketball World Cup tournaments, this creates unique possibilities, as it rebalances talent from sponsor “super-teams” and sets up the interesting, if at times awkward pairings of star riders who may be intense rivals during the season. Case in point: Spaniards Alejandro Valverde and Joaquim Rodríguez, who infamously struggled to work together in the final kilometers of the 2013 world championships, and were ultimately beaten by Portugal's Rui Costa.

And there are other wildcards thrown into the process by the Worlds' team format – factors that may tend to work against van der Poel and the other “favorites.” There is a long history of non-favorite mid- or support-level riders winning Worlds. National teams often liberate riders from the hierarchy of their contractual trade team obligations, and – depending on a course which suits their strengths – this occasionally allows riders like Costa or Michal Kwiatkowski (2014) to sneak off the front for solo wins.

And beyond the team format, there are other major differences in the relative strengths between countries, with team sizes ranging from a maximum of eight all the way down to one. The national team size

allotment is based on UCI World Rankings by country on August 11th. The way riders are allocated is summarized below:

- A. Nations ranked 1 to 10 may enter 8 riders to start (80 riders total)
- B. Nations ranked 11 to 20 may enter 6 riders to start (60 riders total)
- C. Nations ranked 21 to 30 may enter 4 riders to start (40 riders total)
- D. Nations ranked 31 to 50 may enter 1 rider to start (20 riders to total)

These team size differences can create an uneven playing field. Teams like Belgium, Holland, and tiny Slovenia will line up with stacked, full eight-rider squads, while teams with lesser nationwide success, like Rwanda, Costa Rica, and Ukraine will line up with a single participant. However, as recent years have shown, being on a large team doesn't necessarily ensure success. Nations with larger teams tend to have more stars, and this can complicate or even torpedo surefire race strategies. For example, in the last ten editions, the World Champion has emerged from teams with just three starters on four different occasions. Cycling powerhouse Belgium has produced only one winner during that time (Gilbert in 2012).

Still, it is worth mentioning that van der Poel will line up with a strong eight-rider Dutch team, where wily veteran Niki Terpstra will be ready to punish any hesitation in the group should rivals mark van der Poel too heavily.

All of these factors combine together in highly unpredictable ways to make the Worlds an extremely difficult puzzle to solve. Every edition is on a new course, which challenges national team directors to select the right mix of talent. Riders with aspirations of representing their countries must balance personal ambition against trade team responsibilities to successfully earn a selection in any given year. And a nation full of elite riders doesn't necessarily translate to winning World Championships.

Beyond van der Poel, the betting markets favor Tour de France sensation Julian Alaphilippe, perennial second-place Michael Mathews, and three-time winner Peter Sagan.

Could Alaphilippe add to his career season with a World Championship title? Unlikely after the massive physical and mental toll of taking fourth at the Tour de France, but certainly possible. While Mathews looks like a solid pick from afar, especially after his recent win at GP Québec, it is hard to imagine a scenario where he finds himself in the final few kilometers without van der Poel. Could Sagan add a record fourth World Title to his haul? Maybe.

Or what about Alexander Kristoff? He is rarely mentioned; on Unibet a £100 bet will yield a stunning £4100 payoff. These are pretty attractive odds considering the Norwegian is part of a strong six-rider team and is a proven threat at long, hilly races ending in a bunch sprint. He was only millimeters away from the win at a similar course at Bergen in 2017.

With so many erratic factors coming into play, placing money on this event can be a bit of a fool's errand. The fact is, when the favorites line up Sunday, nobody knows what will happen – we can only guess at who is fit but not too fit, what kind of team dynamics we will see, who will have a bit of good luck or timing on race day, and what other strange events may unfold.

Anything can, and – given the unpredictable weather in Yorkshire so far – probably will happen. In any event, it should be one of the most dramatic and exciting races of the year. If van der Poel can deliver on his pre-race hype, it will be fascinating to watch how things unfold during next year's road racing season. But that's not a slam dunk.

By Spencer Martin and Steve Maxwell, September 25th, 2019.