

Can Virtual Racing Be the Next ‘Real Thing’ for Cycling?

What is virtually real anymore in this stay-at-home virtual reality world?

As unknown ‘e-racers’ promulgate their watts-per-kilo against pro riders on platforms such as Zwift, virtual events like the recent Tour of Suisse stage race pit a gaggle of WorldTour and pro riders against each other on the Rouvy platform.

Is this a fashionable but temporary trend, or the emergence of a new sport, or segment of a sport? Or, it is a hybrid? Either way, cycling stands to gain, especially in comparison to other sports.

Other prominent leagues like the National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball have struggled to keep relevant during the pandemic, often relying on media partners to showcase past games and features. Meanwhile, cycling appears on the precipice of new offerings for its fans by presenting virtual racing which is in the words of many “pretty legitimate.”

During the first virtual stage of the Tour de Suisse, commentator and former world hour-record holder Alex Dowsett of the U.K. called it the “dawning of a new era for pro racing.”

At the same time, the great Dutch rider Tom Dumoulin [called it “not real racing”](#) and not worth real consideration.

With every passing day, as the prospects for big races this year like the Tour de France and a fall Paris-Roubaix inch closer to reality, pro teams and their athletes are adjusting to a new indoor reality. To race or not to race – virtually? In the current realms of reality, spectators are left to watch on their computers instead of the side of the road. The famous roadside parties replaced by virtual happy hours.

“My big take away from these sessions on Zwift, or even my stage 1 race of the Tour of Suisse, is that it is as good as any way to simulate a race – and even better than I thought,” said Rally Racing’s Gavin Mannion of the U.S. “A lot of us entered the race I’m sure with certain expectations not sure how to treat it as a real race. From the adrenaline before the gun went off to actually seeing the screen with other guys – some of them the top pros in the world – it became very real. It was kinda cool.”

Nico Roche took up the charge to race the first stage of the Tour de Suisse after hammering countless kilometers on his indoor trainer for over a month. He wasn’t shy about testing the waters, despite knowing how deep they might be.

“When I read about [the virtual Tour de Suisse], I wanted to do it,” he said prior to the webcast. “I asked how many stages could I do. That’s how much I wanted to try it.”

Rouvy’s partnership with the Tour de Suisse knitted together a virtual world of athlete avatars and road furniture that couldn’t be hit. It also featured action from the balconies, garages, basements, patios, and living rooms of more than 40 elite cyclists on their trainers. From Mannion in his basement in Fort Collins, Colorado, to Jumbo-Visma’s Robert Gesink of the Netherlands in his living room, to first-ever virtual stage winner Australian Rohan Dennis of Ineos in his garage, a wide array of training environs was on display. At one point, the screen was split into 16 feeds which presented as much levity as insight. Italy’s Vincenzo Nibali of Trek Factory Racing smiled easily and waved. Australian Jimmy Whelan of EF Pro Cycling grimaced while Switzerland’s Mathias Frank of AG2R (who failed to get on his bike) mugged for the camera with his child. Mannion’s main accouterment was a large Wahoo Fitness fan “blowing at like 50 mph” to keep him cool. His biggest disadvantage would be the altitude.

Dennis would go on to win the 26-mile (a little over an hour) climbing stage in what he described as an

“individual time trial.”

Elite professional cycling was essentially on the precipice of a totally new world.

“E-racing is ‘real,’ but, is it real?” asked American Bobby Julich, the one-time Tour de France podium finisher who has embraced new technology throughout his career, including stints as a pro rider, team director, coach, and manager. “Current pros are faced with this weird reality. Of course, they want to race, and platforms like Rouvy and Zwift are the next best thing. But there are a lot of problems with fans perceiving it as complete.”

Mannion added, “There’s a limit on how serious you can take [e-racing] as a pro athlete. It does trick you into thinking you’re racing and it’s a good simulation. And, you can push yourself incredibly hard. But live racing has so many more variables. In the pro peloton, you realize quickly some guys can really push themselves in racing while others can really push themselves in training. A lot of the best pro racers combine a lot of elements to become great.”

While Julich and Mannion are both proponents of virtual racing, they each cited similar factors – especially at the pro level – that could become huge differentiators:

- Weight doping – altering weight figures, which drive the ever-important watts per kilo ratios on the real-time calibrations
- Descending – it’s ‘not real’ in the realm of e-racing
- Winds – crosswinds, headwinds and tailwinds all become irrelevant
- Different settings – is the e-racer indoors or outdoors...fan or no fan...at low or high altitude
- Spectators – energy and encouragement (especially when struggling)
- Varying degrees within power output by different apps, especially on ratios of conversion

And, one very important intangible: at the pro level, the composition of breakaways, types of placement in the peloton — especially during sprints — and team dynamics are rather fruitless. Teamwork is essentially eliminated. In the case of the Tour de Suisse, the draft applications were eliminated, re-enforcing the time trial feel alluded to by Dennis.

“There is no way you can simulate a sprint like they have in the Tour de France,” said Mannion. “The placement of your top sprinter in tight pack is an art and each situation and finish can be vastly different.”

Julich’s or Mannion’s concerns don’t make them naysayers, just realists when it comes to expectations of e-racing. And, they’re still the first to say it is still racing.

The bottom line is that cycling, vis-a-vis the broader pantheon of sports, has an enormous opportunity to develop and promote virtual events – one that it should embrace.

Motorsports may be the leader in the virtual clubhouse currently. Cycling is a debatable second. Several sports that should currently be in session, including NBA and Major League Baseball have been relegated to star players competing on gaming systems. And, while networks like ESPN continue with re-runs or promotion of on-line sports, cycling is stepping up with virtual racing and exploding on the web. Factor in the value proposition of fans around the world riding virtually with elite pros, and cycling may soon be able to outpace sports like basketball and football in the virtual world. And, when it comes to simulating actual competition, groups like the NBA and MLB cannot presently create the ‘reality’ cycling can.

NASCAR has been racing simulators for more than a decade, and recently took its virtual racing to the next level with its iRacing series, which commences every Sunday on various Fox networks.

“I’ve been driving a simulator for almost 20 years,” said Bobby Labonte, the one-time NASCAR series champion and now an analyst for Fox Sports. “I’ve seen the evolution of the racing and it has become so real now that even in a simulator it feels very close to the real thing. Cycling will get there, and, actually is in a pretty good space right now compared to other sports when it comes to virtual competition.”

Fox Sports has seen its NASCAR numbers on live television, online (tape-delayed) and social media all aggregate higher than anticipated. And, the numbers on Fox Sunday afternoons have produced equal if not greater television audiences through its first five weeks of the ‘virtual season’ as the regular season. (NASCAR plans to resume its season without spectators in mid-May.)

Labonte has been an avid cyclist since 2007, when he introduced the sport to several other drivers as a form of fitness. He currently holds his own charity ride in North Carolina and participates in several others. Other drivers like Jimmie Johnson have adopted cycling as a core part of their training programs.

Labonte noted that simulating race tracks is of course inherently easier than mapping out and filming endless kilometers of roads in a sport like cycling. He added that ‘sim racing’ has evolved and helped NASCAR in other ways, including new opportunities for sponsors and fans. He continues to virtually race in a pro-competitive league and participates in several invite-only events.

“At first, it was just Bobby in a simulator. We’ve learned to position sponsors on camera, and provide social interactions on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter for fans, especially during the race,” said Kristin Labonte, Bobby’s wife and partner in their motorsport marketing agency Breaking Limits. Kristin is a former pro cyclist and sees the natural synergies between motorsports and cycling.

“The way the teams are put together in NASCAR are similar to elite pro cycling teams,” she added. “So, it’s natural to have cycling and their teams follow the path and evolution of NASCAR. Both sports embrace technology, so, it’s easy to see the momentum cycling has gained during this time of e-racing. All this e-racing will help evolve the sport in other ways.”

Bobby Labonte said it’s critical to ‘fill in the gap’ for sponsors and fans when live racing cannot be staged.

Pro cycling’s top team Deceuninck-Quick Step has embraced the e-racing. Team manager Tom Steels, a former elite pro, said it’s important for his riders to race virtually.

“It’s a good concept,” Steels said, prior to the virtual Tour de Suisse. “It’s a change for everyone. And, to be honest, it’s quite hard. For our riders, it gives them something to look forward to. It’s still a race. It’s a big fight. It’s fun to watch and the riders are quite anxious to do it. And, it gives the spectators a reason to cheer.”

For Rally Racing’s team owner Charles Aaron, it’s been another step in the evolution of professional cycling.

“What I like about e-racing is that it’s creating a new business opportunity for teams, athletes, and even spectators,” said Aaron. “As a sport we’ve many times lagged behind other sports in certain developments. With e-racing, I believe we’re at the forefront and our time is now. With the prevalence of indoor riding in general, e-racing should be able to bring new spectators who are recreating on indoor trainers to view e-racing. Most of all, it’s pretty cool to watch. For my team, we’re looking at every opportunity because it augments and helps present our sponsors in a new way.”

It may also give professional cycling teams sponsors something to cheer about, allowing them to stay relevant during this downtime for sports.

“For pro racing, I absolutely believe the platform will continue to develop and help cycling out-distance other sports online,” said Julich. He added that cycling is not the only sport evolving, but it is one of the best poised for overall growth.

The Labontes, Julich, Aaron, and Steels all mentioned ‘enhancing brand exposure’ with e-racing and with consumer touchpoints on social media gaining traction during this downtime for live racing, it provides a new frontier. And, perhaps a new audience for pro cycling races.”

“If the Tour de France was virtual, would I watch?” Julich asked both the most rhetorical and yet scary query for hard-core fans to contemplate. “I’d absolutely be watching, but, that doesn’t mean it’s eventually going to replace outdoor live racing.”

Or is it?

The renowned evolutionist, Charles Darwin, famously said: “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

Something to contemplate in these strange times.

Kristin Labonte offered this perspective: “Listen, we’re all social creatures and we want to be out there watching, especially the best of the best, whether that’s on the side of a road or side of a track. Sports is drama and best experienced live.”

She paused and then added: “But, we may need to innovate.”

Mannion, fresh off recent e-races may have the best perspective.

“We may be on to a new segment of racing bikes at the pro level,” said Mannion. “Not so different than road versus BMX. And, that’s ok. As long as it’s promoting more fans and more people on bikes.”

By Steve Brunner, May 13th, 2020.

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