

# Cycling Must Uproot Its Sexist Culture

If men's pro cycling existed in any other dimension, Iljo Keisse would have been promptly fired from his job two weeks ago. Professional cycling is just that — a profession. In almost any other professional line of work, [overtly sexist behavior like this](#) by an employee caught on film and shared virally across the globe, would have been so toxic that the only appropriate response would be swift and harsh punishment.

Cycling's historical challenges with sexism and misogyny are almost legendary. Two of the most egregious examples of sexist behavior in men's cycling have happened in full public view in recent years: Peter Sagan nonchalantly groping a hostess on the podium at the 2013 Tour of Flanders in full view of the TV cameras, and Keisse's recent and abject disrespect for the Argentine waitress. And that's only the public face of the problem. [Previous analyses](#), as well as [survey results](#) released by The Cyclists' Alliance (TCA) in 2017, highlight the extent to which women are privately mistreated and taken advantage of in their own sport, and this has been going on for decades.

Keisse's individual act was only the outward and visible shell of this much more fundamental problem. His boss Patrick Lefevere peeled back and exposed a deeper layer when he reacted to [his rider's ejection](#) from the Vuelta a San Juan by threatening to pull the entire team, ostensibly to punish the race for penalizing his rider. Lefevere's actions clearly sent the signal that he felt the team was the victim in the situation, rather than the source of the problem, and he continued to belligerently question the motives of the young woman and defend his rider's actions. (Keisse's father only poured salt into the wound by blaming the waitress for the whole episode.)

It is our opinion that this incident emphatically underlines the fact that sexism remains a pervasive cultural and ethical cancer, one that has been eating away at all levels of the sport almost since its inception. When sexism is repeatedly displayed in an organizational context — in this case, by a professional athlete representing a professional team in a professional sport — we believe it indicates the organization itself is culturally damaged, and that it does not recognize or properly teach right from wrong. From the longer-term and sport-wide perspective, it doesn't matter if the particular individual or organization admits personal fault (as Keisse promptly did) with the standard, usually hollow-sounding apologies. It only matters if the transgression forces the broader organization to embrace cultural change.

But professional cycling sometimes seems to operate in an upside-down world. A long history of unethical activities — from doping, bribery, and other forms of cheating, to name just a few — have long been compartmentalized to protect the stakeholders and sporting structure from excessive scrutiny rather than actually fix the problem at the root cause. We think that too much focus is placed on the athlete to take the blame and ask forgiveness, but the athlete is only the expression of the structural defects. Empowerment takes place at a much higher level in the sport's hierarchy and this only shelters the real enablers of the problem, which may be why the sport and so many teams have had successive scandals.

For example, in the sphere of anti-doping, the rider is tested again and again for what substances he or she might be using and may suffer career-ending bans. But there are no similar tools in the hands of the sport's administrators to explore how the doctors, trainers, or team managers are preparing that rider for competition. Again, the athletes take the focus and the blame, while the true enablers are relatively impervious to inquiries and similar punishment. Recent research consistently shows that the structure of the sport itself is fostering and often rewarding toward doping behavior in the first place.

Within this context, we believe that sexism is an abusive organizational behavior not much different from doping and other forms of cheating. The UCI only seriously addressed rider ethics in the last four years, on the heels of the Cycling Independent Reform Commission (CIRC) Report. The CIRC's panel found so many problems with the treatment of women in the sport (pg. 70) that it indicated it could take a separate study to fully address the issues — one which has not happened to date. Only in 2018 did the UCI finally

add [fair treatment clauses](#) and an [ethics declaration](#) to cover the behavior of team staff.

We need to better recognize that sexism and doping both reflect pro cycling's ethical lapses and that the consequences for either violation should be similar. Teams or individuals should have their feet held to the fire, just as they would in the case of doping positives. Would Lefevere act as crass in light of Keisse's behavior if he knew a rider could be banned, if his team could have its WorldTour license revoked, or its standing relegated to the ProContinental level? A "nuclear option" like this should have been enabled years ago for blatant doping offenses, and we might have a different sport today.

If the teams took sexism as seriously as they take doping, the AIGCP (the working association of professional road cycling teams) or VÉLON would take action against the responsible parties on Lefevere's team. In the long run, we believe this would improve the economics for everyone. But in the short run, this is impossible, because of the complete independence of pro teams. As is so often true in pro cycling, the economic structure and demands of the sport often outweigh the moral imperative to do the right thing. And if severe team level punishments for doping and cheating in the sport haven't materialized so far, no one should hold their breath that appropriate responses to barefaced sexism will soon be applied either.

Women cyclists have the opportunity to install a more progressive ethical model. They are stepping up to make a change, forcing action on some individual issues (through its TCA riders union) like the recent UCI ethics declaration, fair treatment improvements to the minimum standard contract conditions, and taking on difficult arbitration cases for its members. Men's WorldTour sponsors like Movistar, Lotto, and Trek have also stepped up to the opportunities and the growing popularity of women's pro road racing. Trek, for example, has invested heavily in a dedicated and star-laden women's program that could bring greater global recognition and legitimacy to women's cycling. The UCI should also be recognized for placing renewed emphasis on women's racing in general by re-launching a global racing series, the Women's WorldTour, with a progressive structure and regulations that could spark investment, increase wages, and improve the professionalism of the sport.

Ultimately, sponsors drive pro cycling's economy and can set the example for the entire sport by taking more responsibility for their investments, especially given the potential brand blowback and [recent information](#) about gender inequity in the wider cycling industry. What would happen if big backers like Deceuninck and Specialized and other brands demanded the ouster of Lefevere as a condition of continued support? We believe a brand like Specialized could send a very powerful message by shifting its investment mid-season from Quick-Step to a women's team. Although unlikely, this kind of move could also buy considerable publicity that a traditional sponsorship would never reach.

Meanwhile, incidents like the Keisse photo will echo throughout corporate boardrooms every time a new pro cycling sponsorship is floated. What company in their right mind would want their brand associated with that photo, and with the team's response? When one of the existential challenges in the overall sport is finding sustainable sponsorship, pro cycling is shooting itself in the foot by allowing these behaviors to continue relatively unchecked.

It is easy to fall into the trap of assigning blame to one party like an individual or a team, and then assume the problem will go away. Mistreatment of female fans and marginalization of women in cycling are on the same spectrum; sexism stains the sport, and it can't be addressed or resolved with one-off actions, compartmentalized policy changes, and other procedural band-aids. Another situation might not happen tomorrow or next week, but it will inevitably happen again if we don't intervene today.

So it falls to the UCI, which already has many challenges on its plate, to reinforce the guidelines and apply real consequences to correct this legacy behavior. Cycling has already done more than many other sports to combat doping. We believe sexism remains a huge concern because it is just as important in marketing

and sponsorship decisions, and on a basic human rights level, it denies women fair treatment and stifles equality of opportunity. And while doping is a complex issue of science, policy, education, and athlete rights, we believe that sexism is a less complex ethical issue. Dealing with it in a more comprehensive way provides a unique opportunity to push for needed organizational reforms, and the UCI should make this a top priority.

*By The Outer Line, with Chris Gutowsky, February 13, 2019. Chris lives in Bloomington, Indiana and has 30 years of sports marketing and management experience in the small world of international cycling.*