

## Cycling's Fine Line Between Strategy and Cheating

*With the [advent of legalized gambling](#) just around the corner in the United States, pro cycling needs to take a careful look at situations where corruption could creep into the sport. More than in most other sports, rational competitive strategies within pro cycling comprise a wide range of sometimes counter-intuitive incentives and unintended consequences – complicated situations where the individual rider or team may have strong and rational incentives to do something other than try to win the individual race. In this article, we examine the full spectrum of competitive circumstances – from sportsmanlike gestures or elaborate racing strategies, all the way to suspicious circumstances that start to stray into the realm of potential corruption or cheating. We ask which should be considered acceptable and natural incentives in the sport, and where we start to cross a hazy line into more dubious or potentially corrupt behavior. Finally, we investigate what, if anything, the sport can and should do to monitor and police such situations.*

**Corruption in Pro Cycling?** In the 2010 Liege-Bastogne-Liège, Alexander Vinokourov dropped Alexandr Kolobnev close to the finish after being in a long two-man breakaway. But [allegations](#) soon emerged suggesting that Vinokourov had offered his opponent a cash payment for the victory. Later investigations unearthed an email exchange between the two riders, along with alleged proof that Vinokourov wired €150,000 to Kolobnev following the race. Vinokourov swiftly denied the claims, but an Italian publication, *Corriere della Sera*, released hacked emails between the pair which backed up the allegations. The cycling community was incensed by this apparent outright attempt to buy victory in a revered event.

In retrospect, some have argued that maybe Kolobnev knew he wasn't strong enough to win the race, and felt it was preferable to receive a significant amount of money from Vinokourov for the second place result he was likely to achieve anyway. On the other hand, a first place finish might have netted Kolobnev more than €150,000 in team bonuses and potential value in future contract negotiations – supporting an argument that perhaps the victory was more of a “gift” from one friend to another. Regardless of the real incentive, the case is still pending, and if convicted, both riders could face between six and 36 months in prison, as well as a fine of between 600 and 300,000 euros.

There are other more flagrant examples of cheating and corruption in the sport, such as the “fix” that was arranged on the Thrift Drug Triple Crown of Cycling back in 1993. In June of that year, Lance Armstrong won the Thrift Drug Classic and the K-Mart West Virginia Classic, needing only a victory in the third and final leg of the Triple Crown to claim a million dollar prize. Trying to fix that sort of race would normally have been prohibitively complicated due to the sheer number of riders involved. However, in a U.S.-based race with a limited number of world-class riders, Armstrong's Motorola team likely saw the rival Coors Light and Mercatone Uno teams as his only true obstacle. Riders from those two teams later confirmed that they came to a financial agreement, something which Armstrong himself [eventually admitted](#), saying that the [deal was made](#) by then-Motorola team manager Jim Ochowicz. Despite denials from Ochowicz (he turned down the *The Outer Line's* attempts to contact him) several others confirmed the story.

**Unique Incentives in Cycling:** In situations like these, where it seems clear that cheating or corruption have occurred, the sport must do more to monitor and police the situation. However, as one digs into this to try to set some rules – to better define cheating, collusion or the potential for corruption – the situation quickly becomes murky and unclear. Cycling's unusual structure of counter-intuitive (or even perverse) incentives and outcomes tend to make decisions much messier and harder to regulate; there are frequent competitive race situations where the individual rider or team may have strong and rational incentives to cooperate with opponents or to accomplish something *other than* winning the race. And this is where it starts to get much more challenging to establish right from wrong – to draw a line between strategic or competitive nuance and the gray area of corruption or cheating.

While cycling may at first seem to be a contest between individuals, it is in reality very much a team sport.

Support riders routinely sacrifice their own personal ambitions to shelter team leaders from the wind, or chase down attacks to give their own leaders the highest possible chance of success. Fans expect this kind of sacrifice as part of the sport's nature, and while this sort of teamwork usually applies to riders on the same team, inter-team collusion is not unusual. In fact, collusion between opponents occurs in almost every race, in the breakaway. Such collusion is strictly against the rules in most sports, but in cycling it may actually add to the charm and allure of the sport, and the excitement of the race.

And there are a lot of other critical differences between cycling and sports. In cycling, there aren't just two teams battling it out for victory; there may be twenty teams – each with their own goals, strengths, weaknesses and competitive objectives. There might be 180 different competitors, each one having both team and individual goals. Some teams may only want some TV time in a breakaway for their sponsors, while others want to prove to race organizers that they should be invited to other bigger events. A competitive event may last for weeks and consist of twenty individual and very different races. Team sponsors may have their own and very specific objectives. Within this environment, there are often situations where an individual rider or team may decide it is in their best longer-term interest to let another rider take the victory, or to help another team on a given day. In short, cycling is a complex sport where competitors are frequently presented with unique and counter-intuitive types of incentives on a daily basis.

**Defining Right and Wrong:** Most team leaders emphasize the fact that these types of strategic incentives or unexpected outcomes are both very common and very difficult to precisely define or regulate. Said one team manager, “it's just the way cycling is – it makes the sport more interesting and intriguing, and besides that, there is really no effective way to police it.” But there is also a consensus that some race situations begin to open up the sport to the potential for improper collusion, cheating or corruption – that the situation can sometime migrate into a grayer zone where right and wrong become harder to distinguish. Most observers agree that the Vinokourov case and certainly the Motorola incident crossed that line between black and white.

To further explore this vexing issue, *The Outer Line* contacted a number of stakeholders around the sport – team managers, riders and officials – and there is a clear consensus that the sport needs to draw a clearer line between what is acceptable and what isn't. But where that line should be, and who should draw it is far more challenging. As Team EF's Jonathan Vaughters summarized the situation, “it is like most things in cycling .... what's gray and what's black?” But some situations clearly cross that hypothetical line; everyone agrees that something must be done to prevent the situation where incentives become contrary to the competitive nature of sport and deviate into outright cheating. And critically, setting clear rules here will also constrain the ability of gambling interests to influence the outcome of races.

In fact, cycling already has some rules and expectations barring collusion between competitors. [Section 1.2.081](#) of the UCI rule book clearly states that “riders shall sportingly defend their own chances. Any collusion or behavior likely to falsify or go against the interests of the competition shall be forbidden.” But as our examples above and below will demonstrate, these regulations are vague and typically unenforced.

When contacted for this article, President David Lappartient assured *The Outer Line* that the UCI is quite aware of the importance of getting a better handle on these sorts of challenges, and that figuring out where to draw this “red line” is a key future objective for UCI regulators – particularly as gambling starts to have a bigger impact on the sport. Lappartient said that the UCI is concerned about the potential for the manipulation of races “whether through direct agreement between riders or motivated by bets.” And he outlined current UCI thinking and efforts, saying that “the objective with these measures shall be to tackle unlawful manipulation of events, whilst the UCI acknowledges the specificity of cycling and the different arrangements made between riders, which must nevertheless remain within the spirit of the sport.”

**Honing in on the “Red Line”:** Everyone seems to be aware of the challenge here and agrees that

something needs to be done, but how and where to draw the line remains a daunting and uncertain task. However, by reviewing a number racing examples below, and by contrasting them with the clear examples of corruption mentioned above, we will suggest that there are perhaps at least a few key attributes or factors which could help suggest a way forward.

*Working Together?* The biggest star of today's peloton, Peter Sagan, won Paris Roubaix last year with the aid of the little-known Swiss rider Silvan Dillier, who had gone up the road in the early breakaway. When Sagan attacked and bridged up to the remnants of the breakaway, Dillier was able to stay with the World Champion, and the two traded turns all the way to the finish line. Dillier arguably shouldered more than his fair share of the work and took the lead riding into the velodrome, giving Sagan – the superior sprinter – a significant advantage.

Had Dillier held back for the sprint or hesitated to work with the world champion, it might have led the pair's capture. When asked what was going through his head while alone with Sagan, Dillier told *The Outer Line* he felt like he had little to lose by cooperating with the Slovakian star. "Why wouldn't I ride and pull with Peter Sagan until the Velodrome? I had nothing to lose; actually, I only could win. If he beats me in the sprint, that's ok. If I don't ride with him, eventually others from behind close the gap and a podium spot could have been lost. I was riding for my own chance and didn't have the intention just to make others lose the race. It's a character thing." As is so often the case in pro cycling, working together served both riders handsomely, as their handshake on the track afterward seemed to emphasize.

*Swapping Favors?* On stage 19 of the 2011 Giro d'Italia, Alberto Contador of Team Saxo Bank and Paolo Tiralongo of the Astana team were alone at the front of the race, having attacked with a little over 5 kilometers remaining on the final climb. Contador and Tiralongo worked together allowing Contador to put valuable time into his GC rivals. As they approached the finish line with Contador's rivals closing fast, the two exchanged words before Tiralongo put in a massive pull to keep them away, while Contador sat back and [let Tiralongo](#) take the stage win – a typical example of a GC rider "gifting" the stage win to a key helper – teammate or not.

As would be shown a year later in the 2012 Vuelta, what goes around can come around. Contador found himself trailing a stronger GC competitor Joaquim Rodríguez on stage 17. Contador attacked 51 kilometers from the finish line, sowing confusion and panic amongst the main group. Assuming he wouldn't be able to sustain an attack from that far out, Rodríguez decided not to chase him down. However, when [Contador bridged](#) up to an earlier breakaway group, he found Tiralongo there, who drove the pace and provided Contador with the firepower and support he needed to stay away and win the stage, and eventually take the overall win. Contador's gifted win to Tiralongo in 2011 seemed to be a "favor" that he was able to cash in on later to win the Vuelta stage. These types of swaps or pay-backs are often considered to be one of the unique aspects of sportsmanship in cycling.

*Rewarding Old Friends, or Grabbing the Spotlight?* Both these strategies seemed to be on display in Stage 14 of the 2009 Tour de France. The popular American rider George Hincapie of Team Columbia had made it into the breakaway on that day, and as the race unfolded it appeared that the breakaway would survive. Hincapie was set to take the yellow jersey as the highest-placed rider in the break. His friend Lance Armstrong, on Team Astana, realizing that Hincapie represented no threat in the overall GC, and inclined to reward his friend for years of loyal service, instructed his Astana team to get in front and ride a medium pace – essentially allowing Hincapie and the breakaway to maintain their lead. "The scenario of George in yellow was perfect for our team," said Armstrong. Such a tactic not only rewarded his old friend with the glory and prestige of a day or two in the yellow jersey, it also shifted the responsibility for controlling the race over the next several days off the shoulders of his Astana team.

But as the race closed in on the finish, rival American Team [Garmin suddenly jumped](#) to the front of the trailing peloton, pulling hard all the way to the finish line, narrowing the lead of the breakaway, and just

barely denying the yellow jersey to Hincapie. This inexplicable move led to [understandable outrage](#) on the part of Hincapie and his team owner Bob Stapleton, who questioned why anyone, especially another American team, would deliberately try to deny Hincapie a day in yellow. Although Garmin head Jonathan Vaughters claimed his team was only trying to protect the position of its own leaders, many observers wondered if it represented some kind of conflict between the two teams. Other individuals involved in the event told *The Outer Line* that it was a decision initiated by team sponsors to deny High Road the media attention resulting from holding yellow for a day or two.

Whatever the actual circumstances, the bottom-line was that one team sought to improve their strategic position by assisting a competing rider, while another team attacked the same rider even though it apparently had nothing to gain from a competitive perspective. These kinds of favors, revenge or jealousy situations often occur in cycling – and while they may not represent the heights of sportsmanship, they are certainly not illegal.

*Conflicting Loyalties?* In the [2013 World Championships](#), the Spanish rider Alejandro Valverde sparked controversy when he chose not to follow the wheel of the eventual winner – the Portuguese Rui Costa – essentially decreasing the chances for his own teammate Joaquim Rodriguez to take the win. Rodriguez was understandably frustrated and even tearful later on the second level of the podium. Valverde may simply have been tired after several hours of racing, but some observers pointed out that while they were racing on different national teams that day, Valverde and Costa were actually trade teammates (Team Movistar) for the other 364 days of the year – suggesting that perhaps commercial loyalties were stronger than national loyalties that day.

This situation reminded many cycling historians of Italian Paolo Lanfranchi's inexplicable and astonishing [chase-down](#) of his own teammate-for-a-day Gilberto Simoni in the finale of the 2001 Lisbon World's race. Lanfranchi's move increased the chances for a bunch-sprint victory for the Spaniard Oscar Freire, his Mapei trade teammate at the time. And that was exactly what happened – differing loyalties directly influencing the outcome of the race. Again, perhaps not the pinnacle of sportsmanship, but in very few sports do professional athletes have different teammates on different days.

In a different example of possible conflicting loyalties, QuickStep Sport Director Brian Holm admitted to tipping off his former rider (current UAE-Team Emirates employee) Dan Martin, prior to stage 6 of last year's 2018 Tour de France. Following Martin's win on the stage, Holm admitted he told Martin his team's plans before the stage and had encouraged him to use QuickStep's firepower to win the stage. "Just stay with our guys, maybe we can work together," Holm said. "I told him to speak with [Philippe] Gilbert, and Bob [Jungels]."

This explicit offer to Martin from his former director to sit on the most powerful lead-out in cycling led some to hold up the incident as an example of friendships in professional cycling. But it's also possible that Holm's tip-off could also have hurt his own rider, Julian Alaphilippe, who ended up finishing fourth on the stage. While his suggestion to Martin was perhaps not a particularly proprietary strategy, skeptics could certainly question whether Holm effectively sold out his own riders. And it's hard to imagine that the team's sponsors, who were investing millions of dollars in order to rack up wins and visibility, would be very pleased about the tactic. (Holm did not respond to inquiries from TOL.) As teams continue struggling to find sponsorships, it has never been a more important to reexamine the ethics of these sorts of legacy backroom practices.

*Other Variations:* While some are more obvious or prominent than others, these sorts of arrangements or deals between riders are very common, and are generally accepted as being a normal part of the sport. Lance Armstrong had several well-known instances of race "gifting" – including his famous gesture to rival Marco Pantani on Mont Ventoux in the 2000 Tour, and his gift to Ivan Basso on Stage 12 of the 2004 Tour, which he attributed to concern about the illness of Basso's mother. And as mentioned, sometimes

a stage may be gifted not so much as a favor or gesture of thanks, as to simply shed the responsibility of protecting the leader's jersey; this was alleged by Alejandro Valverde on Stage 5 of last year's Vuelta when Team Sky [allowed the break to ride away](#), purportedly in order to purposely lose the jersey and minimize the team's short-term responsibility. And at other times it frankly just gets so complicated, or language barriers come into play, that no one even knows for sure what kind of deal has been made.

Such a comedy of errors occurred in Stage 15 of the 2015 Tour, between breakaway leaders George Hincapie and Oscar Pereiro, when there seemed to be [confusion](#) about who was gifting whom.

**Some Initial Guidelines:** With the clear exception of the Motorola case, most of these examples can be construed as "business deals" made in the heat of the moment – as the circumstances of the individual race unfold. Some observers might even consider the Vinokourov situation to be a bit more nuanced; what if Vinokourov had said he paid Kolobnev as a gesture of "thanks" for helping him stay away, rather than casting it as "buying a victory?" What if the amount he paid Kolobnev would have been much smaller? Would that have been viewed as more acceptable?

These are just a few illustrations of how challenging it is to define "right" from "wrong" in pro cycling. But at least a few attributes begin to emerge here which might help to draw the line. The first may be when *money changes hands* as part of the equation. Swapping favors or remembering a friend may be considered an appealing demonstration of the human or sportsmanship side of the sport. But when cold hard cash is promised in exchange for a race outcome, it begins to cast a darker shadow.

The second, and perhaps more damning attribute might be the degree of premeditation – trying to determine or fix the outcome of an event before it even starts. The Motorola example is universally condemned and considered to have been a clear example of cheating. It was clearly a premeditated effort to utilize cold cash in order to determine the outcome of a supposedly competitive event.

A third consideration might be the personal history of the racer involved in a dubious race circumstance. Does he have a history of being in the middle of suspicious situations, or is this a first-time occurrence where he was most likely an innocent rider just trying to optimize his competitive position? Perhaps we could begin to reach a better definition of this hazy line between right and wrong by starting with the consideration of these attributes.

**Conclusions:** As legalized gambling starts to become more widespread, there will be exciting new opportunities to collect revenue – new dollars that could greatly benefit the financial position of the sport. But these situations of counter-intuitive or pernicious incentives could also be easily manipulated or abused by corrupt parties betting on outcomes in the race. And the last thing the sport of cycling needs is any additional aura of corruption. So – the sport must better prepare itself, not only for how to oversee more widespread betting but also how to define and police exactly the kinds of situations mentioned above. (The plethora of consequences that this gray area in cycling could have for legalized gambling in the sport – who might win today's stage, or which rider in the breakaway is most likely to survive – will be examined in a follow-up piece.)

The illicit transfer of cash, the degree of premeditation, and personal history may be some of the key attributes in defining the difference here between right and wrong – between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the sport. More detailed analysis will hopefully yield other characteristics that can help to define this line more clearly. But all in all, this is a potentially critical issue in the future financial well-being of the sport, and hence it is encouraging that the UCI is actively studying the situation. As the UCI's L'appartient emphasized, the sport desperately needs to examine the optimal means of preserving its unique strategic character and natural excitement while at the same time minimizing the potential for corruption.