

# Danish Cycling's Ethical Dilemma

[Jörg Krieger](#) has been researching and analyzing an ongoing drama within the Danish Cycling Union and in this guest feature, he examines how a national cycling federation can undermine its integrity through politics and poorly executed controls. According to Krieger, the situation in Denmark is perhaps a symptom of the larger issue of embedding good governance practices and institutional ethics in global sport. The following feature represents the professional observations and opinions of the writer and not *The Outer Line*.

Good governance has become a constantly trending term in the highest echelons of sport organizations over the past two decades. Major corruption and mismanagement scandals within prominent sporting bodies such as the *International Olympic Committee* (IOC), the *International Federation of Association Football* (FIFA), and *World Athletics* have caused significant public criticism of how sport is governed and led to pressure on sport officials to self-impose measures that allow for better control of sport organizations. The aim of these initiatives is to prevent abuse of power, corruption, and mismanagement. The control of good governance principles within the sport remains, however, with internal ethics committees, appointed to advise on potential infringements.

In simple terms, good governance in sport refers to *accountability* (separation of powers, compliance with internal rules and norms), *transparency* (reporting and monitoring internal working processes), *democracy* (free/fair elections, actor involvement, open debates), and *societal responsibility* (fulfils the role of the organization within society). Many sport governing bodies quickly embraced those principles and also altered their structures in order to quickly reflect these ideals. For example, the *International Cycling Union* (UCI), another organization that has received considerable criticism for mis-management in the past, writes in its mission statement that the principles of good governance are respected. And in fact, the UCI now belongs to the top scoring International Federations in various governance reviews, such as those by *Play The Game* or the *Association Summer Olympic International Federations*.

Official recognition and organizational structures are only one side of the story. The internal organizational culture, often defined by the individual leaders of organizations, is another. Honesty, trust, and professionalism amongst those in executive positions are equally important traits for ensuring a functioning organization. It is within the (virtual or physical) meeting rooms of organizations' executive bodies that the realities of governance play out. And more often than not, it is also here that we find severe contradictions between statutes and realities. Make no mistake, despite the introduction of good governance, abuse of power in sport is not a story of the past. When I recently received the details of an ongoing dispute within the *Danish Cycling Federation* (Danmarks Cycling Union, DCU), I was stunned by the similarities of the case to some of the historical accounts I had previously written about.

**The Case:** Broadly speaking, bad governance characterized the decision-making within the DCU over the past years. As such, one can find various infringements to generally accepted standards and practices within the organization. This is a complex case, and even though there are numerous individuals involved, the key actor is DCU Chairman Henrik Jess Jensen.

*Exceeding the Area of Authority* – In early 2020, press reports revealed some of the issues within the DCU surrounding the dismissal of Jesper Worre, the race director of *Danmark Rundt* (Tour of Denmark). DCU's board members, who constitute the organization's executive body, had no prior knowledge of the firing, which appeared to be a move driven by DCU Chairman Jess Jensen. Jess Jensen first publicly denied the firing, even though internal emails proved the opposite. This was not the first time that Jess Jensen and Worre clashed, and neither was it a first attempt by Jess Jensen to exceed his level of competency. As reported in a recent podcast and confirmed by involved individuals, ahead of the 2016 Rio Olympic

Games, then-DCU vice chairman Jess Jensen had attempted to influence the selection process of the men's Olympic squad. Jess Jensen wanted to have two particular cyclists on the team. Curiously, Jess Jensen intended that Jakob Fuglsang be one of the riders removed from the squad and argued with the team director who was in charge of the team selection. Jensen was not successful with this attempt, and Fuglsang later won the silver medal in Rio.

*Nepotism* – Attempts to directly impose his power over decisions outside his competencies and involvement in sporting matters did not stop there. Over the past years, Jess Jensen pushed for favourable treatment of his daughter, a junior cyclist on the Danish squad, demanding she be selected for international championships in 2018. Instructed by Jess Jensen, DCU Director Jens-Erik Majlund called Danish national team coach Catherine Marsal multiple times to inform her that “the boss had demanded” the inclusion of his daughter. Marsal went public with the incidents in summer 2020 after she had stepped down from her position, accusing Jess Jensen of unethical behavior and abuse of power. Other members of the DCU's Women's Selection Committee also resigned due to the power abuse that included Jess Jensen arguing the body was “destructive to women's cycling” and had “taken the girls hostage.”

*Conflicts of Interest* – Moreover, Jess Jensen was part of the decision-making panel that awarded the 2024 Amateur World Cycling Championships to the city of Aalborg despite an evident conflict of interest. Jess Jensen works in the Department for Infrastructure and Roads in Aalborg Municipality and is Chairman of the Board of Directors at the Aalborg Cykle-Ring. Two Danish cities, Aalborg and Odense, had applied to host the event and were both deemed equally capable. When discussing which city should be selected at DCU board meetings, Jess Jensen failed to withdraw himself on the grounds of bias, and the other Board members did not demand his removal from the process.

Following a chaotic DUC Congress in June 2020, at which Jess Jensen sought ways to prevent attendants from speaking during the conference, outside observers witnessed good governance in the general Danish sport system at work. Having installed an Ethics Committee in May 2019 in response to global calls for the improvement of governance in sport, the *Danish National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark* (DIF) initiated an investigation into Jess Jensen's leadership. Significantly, there was also an investigation into the behavior of Board member Bo Belhage, who had recorded Board meetings in his attempts to reveal Jess Jensen's corruptive behavior. The Committee concluded in November 2020 that there had been breaches of good governance in various ways and also reprimanded Belhage for his recording. The new supervisory bodies at least appeared to be working.

**The Continuation:** Unfortunately, the story does not end here, as Jess Jensen and his allies further reduced good governance principles to mockery in the months following the publication of the Ethics Committee's report. Tellingly, there is evidence of infringements across all four governance areas.

*Lack of Accountability* – Although the Ethics Committee unequivocally found that Jess Jensen had acted wrongly, the DCU chairman did not see the need to issue a formal apology to Board members together with Belhage. Whilst Belhage signed such a document, Jess Jensen rejected the opportunity. Moreover, he did not see the need to initiate immediate change by resigning. In a move reminiscent of typical reactions to scandal within sport, Jess Jensen set up a working group to study DCU's “good” governance. Curiously, Jess Jensen found himself backed by DIF President Niels Nygaard, who argued that it was the DCU's responsibility to take internal action. Nygaard compared the outcome of the Committee's report to a “warning” in political circles. “I am sure that most of those who have received a warning (En Næsen) in the Folketinget (Danish Parliament), thought twice about their actions in the future.” Indeed, it appears that Jess Jensen carefully considered how to proceed, not acting in line with good governance but in an attempt to eliminate the remaining critical voices.

*Lack of Transparency* – Knowing that there would be no immediate consequences and that he had the backing of the DIF, Jess Jensen moved forward with attempts to both clear his name and abuse his power

even further. In February 2021, Jess Jensen circulated an email asking the Board to approve the financial report for the previous year. However, Belhage demanded insights into individual documents when he noted that around 160,000 DKK (€ 22,000) was listed under “secretariat, other costs” that had not been presented and discussed during a Board meeting earlier in the month. Belhage’s request was initially denied, confirming his suspicions of potential fraud. When eventually granted access, it was revealed that the additional costs were expenses for a law firm that supported Jess Jensen during the Ethics Committee’s investigation. Whilst we must not consider such costs fraud (and Belhage has in the meantime withdrawn his suspicion of fraud), Jess Jensen’s actions to hide the costs nonetheless raises suspicions of the misuse of funds and fundamentally contradicts the principle of transparency.

*Lack of Democracy* – Following Belhage’s refusal to approve the financial accounts, he found himself isolated within the DCU’s Board. On March 17, the DCU’s Board of Representatives received a letter signed by five of the six Board members, including Jess Jensen, in which they called for an extraordinary congress to circumvent Belhage’s resistance and remove him from the Board. Significantly, an open debate would not take place on the matter during the congress, but merely be put to a vote, thereby ignoring the democratic principle of an open debate.

Moreover, the dispute revealed a severe issue with the separation of power within the DCU. Twelve members of the DCU’s electoral college – the organization’s legislative body and elects the members of the board – are also commissaires and act as judges during races. The commissaires are in turn appointed to individual races by the DCU board, and therefore rely on the goodwill of the board members for assignments. Such dependence makes the relationship abusable by clientelism, where the board patronizes one commissaire over another in exchange for support in the elections.

*Lack of Social Responsibility* – In the email circulated to the Board of Representatives on March 17, 2021, Jess Jensen highlights that “2020 has been a year full of development” despite the disputes within the Board and the additional challenges posed by the Corona crisis. However, it is undeniable that the problems within DCU’s leadership have considerably hindered the development of cycling. In fact, various individuals pointed out in written correspondence that the ongoing conflict was not beneficial and productive for the DCU.

**The Consequences?** Clearly, things have gone wrong within the DCU. Despite a global aim to enhance good governance within sport organizations, the DCU’s management has been marked by an absence of transparency, lack of democracy, abuse of power, and nepotism, all in the past several months. Taken together, it is evident that the employment of an ethics committee could not match the dubious structures and practices within the DCU. Instead, the ethics committee’s role was reduced to tokenism with no real power.

The ethics commission itself then becomes an ethical problem, as it prolongs the ethical and moral problems within the sport organization. The DCU case also reveals that the real issue lies in the interpretation of the chairman’s role, which does not have the necessary transparent surveillance apart from the questionable and limited ethics review. Unfortunately, a critical and independent study from outside DCU’s “bubble” is not currently planned and may not be possible.

The outlined issues within the DCU might have significant consequences for cycling’s governance on the international level, too. Jess Jensen has been a cycling official of high standing and is thought to be in a good position for an election into the UCI’s executive body, the UCI Management Committee. This has not gone unnoticed by DIF President Nygaard, who recommended Jess Jensen to the UCI even *after* the outcome of the Ethics Committee report. Ironically, Nygaard writes in his supporting letter: “Mr. Henrik Jess Jensen has during the last years shown strong skills and competences in management and leadership all competences which I hope can be of benefit to international cycling. I am therefore pleased to give my full support to his candidature for both UEC and UCI.” Notably, an ethical inquiry by Nygaard’s

DIF had investigated Jensen and raised “legitimate doubts” about Jess Jensen’s interest and criticized his actions.

However, Nygaard’s recommendation should not come as a surprise. Positions in international sport governing bodies are difficult to obtain and national sport officials usually back one another despite, as in this case, evidence of bad governance. However, the UCI appears to have made good governance a priority and has had a good track record of working toward this objective. In light of the questionable practices that Jess Jensen has introduced in the DCU, those selecting the UCI’s executive body’s members might want to think very carefully whether they can put trust in an individual that has led the DCU in the fashion outlined above.

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