

# Dave Brailsford on the Coronavirus Shutdown, the Tour de France, and Pro Cycling's Return

*The Outer Line, in conjunction with the Put Your Socks On podcast, recently conducted an in-depth and exclusive interview with Team Ineos Principal Sir Dave Brailsford. Brailsford talked about his team – how they are coordinating with each other, maintaining training programs, staying engaged with fans and continuing to build value for their sponsors. He weighed in on the UCI's current plans for the rest of the 2020 calendar, and how that is affecting the team's race strategy. We talked about what pro cycling may look like on the other side of the COVID-19 era, and his ideas for how to reinvent cycling's business model. We also asked him to reflect on his management philosophy, and how he has been able to successfully manage a team that has been stacked with superstars for many years.*

The highlights of our discussion are summarized below – and to hear the entire interview, watch for [Episode 50 of the Put Your Socks On podcast](#), due out on April 29.

**TOL/PYSO:** Dave, thanks for taking the time to sit down and talk with us today. So first of all, how are you and your family doing? How is the team doing?

**Sir Dave Brailsford:** Pretty well, thanks. We've been stuck at home now for a good few weeks, and the days are all sort of rolling into one. It's been a good opportunity to connect – I've been spending a great deal of time staring at people in tiny little boxes on Zoom! But, seriously, I have found that it's been a good opportunity to connect with people – I've actually been making more connections than I have in a long time. Lot of good sharing of ideas and community spirit around the cycling community.

**Q:** So, what are the team's formal programs during this time, with things being so uncertain? How are you keeping the team focused?

**DB:** Well, we've all been heading in the unknown here. People haven't really known what was going to happen next. And, as a team, we didn't all go into lockdown at the same time; different people were experiencing different schedules. The whole thing sort of crept up on us, and we sort of slowly sleep-walked our way into this, at least in Britain. As you know, we decided quite early to pull out of Paris-Nice and Tirreno-Adriatico. We realized around the time of the UAE Tour that this thing was going to be very serious. That made it very real for us, and we realized that, most importantly, we had to get everyone home and safe.

To help us react, we began to look at the whole time period here as consisting of three phases. The first phase was the transition into lockdown – people needed a little time to get adjusted and get used to the new environment and their new surroundings. We tried to communicate a lot, and tried to understand what the psychological impact was going to be on people; a lot of people saw their goals go out the window. Then, once we got comfortable, it was important to move on to phase two – the lockdown and how we can figure out new ways to increase our productivity, new ways to create value.

The majority of the value we create is done through the heat of racing – and when you take that away, a lot of the value start to go away. So we had to look for new approaches; how is this going to work? And phase three is the transition back into racing. Right now it looks like mid-May is when most of the guys might be allowed back out to train on the road, and then there might be about eight to ten weeks before we get back to real racing. Creating this phased approach has helped us to collectively deal with the challenges – it gave everybody some orientation or a bit of a roadmap for how to handle the situation.

**Q:** How are you maintaining your fan engagement levels and continuing to build sponsor value?

**DB:** The topic of value creation is a really interesting one. To me, it's about creating emotions, it's about

inspiring people, and right now, under the current scenario, we really need to make a big effort. There is not going to be any single really big hit. It is like the opposite of death by a thousand cuts, if you like – I think this is sort of going to be “life by a thousand cuts.” There are lots of little things we can do to have an impact, to create value – and then we’ll get a sense of momentum. I’ve always encouraged everyone in the organization to put ideas on the table – sometimes the greatest idea can come from some hidden little corner, and if you’re not listening, you’re going to miss out. I’ve tried to generate quite a lot of discussion to determine what we could do.

Early on, I spoke to Jim Ratcliffe (billionaire Chairman and majority owner of Ineos). I said, “No, we’re not racing, but this isn’t a holiday either. Guys are training and working. What can we do to help?” He came back with a project, to task one of the company’s units to manufacture hand sanitizer to supply to front-line health workers. And so we as a team grasped this with both hands – it might not have anything to do with cycling, but it’s a way of creating value. And it’s been quite a satisfying thing to be involved with, here in the U.K. and in other European countries. And in fact, we are right now starting up a similar project in the States, with our first deliveries going into Little Rock, Arkansas.

**Q:** Shifting gears, let’s talk a little bit about when we may get back to racing, and how that’s going to look. What is your view on the currently proposed UCI calendar for later in the year? (Editor’s Note: Additional delays to the proposed August 29 start for Tour de France appeared likely the day after our interview.)

**DB:** There is one basic principle we have to keep in mind here – we are heading into something that is not going to be the same as it was before. We have to focus on what we can do with the scenario we face – rather than trying to replicate or go back to what we had before. The idea of getting back to normal doesn’t really fly any more. We have to ask – what is the best scenario that we can create, given the constraints that we are now facing. There will continue to be a tension between complying with guidelines to protect the public health and trying to promote the economic basis of the sport. It’s as if we have two dials that we are playing with, dialing one up a bit, dialing the other down – trying to find the right settings, finding the right balance.

I am pleased that they have announced a proposed calendar, because at least that gives us a working target. Sure, it may change, but at least it gives us something to work towards. Big crowds and gatherings are probably not going to happen. We don’t know how the starts and the finishes of races are going to work, or how are going to move around, where are we staying and where are we eating, and so forth. But I think it’s the same thing that everyone across society is experiencing as we move through this time period. I like to use the metaphor of moving into the evening – as night falls, we move into darkness, and we can’t see where we’re going, and we don’t know exactly where we’re going. But eventually, we begin to see a ray of light, and then another, and gradually the dawn comes. It gets lighter, and before you know it, the sun is up. I think it will be like this – things are challenging at the moment, but eventually the dawn will come. There will be racing, and we can’t allow the current situation to drag us down. Let’s be optimistic, be positive, and run towards the sun.

But of course it will be a new and different calendar, and we’re certainly having to rethink our strategy. With the Tour in front of Giro, that certainly changes things. This year, you’re not going to ride the Tour and then the Giro. The Tour and the Vuelta? Maybe, that might be doable. So, our thinking about race strategy is changing quite significantly. We’re right in the guts of talking about all of that right now with our riders – there are a lot of Zoom meetings going on.

**Q:** You’ve said recently that you would pull your team out of races if you felt that safety conditions were not sufficient. Do you think different teams have different perspectives on this? Will some teams feel more compelled to race for economic reasons than others, and if that happens how does the sport deal with it?

**DB:** I think we already saw a bit of microcosm of that at Paris-Nice. Some teams didn’t go, some pulled

out mid-stream. You have to respect the decision-making of the different teams. I know the economy is important and money is important, but nothing is more important than peoples' health. And, in the moment, when you are facing this kind of decision, it's hard not to feel quite a lot of emotion. Our job as management is to try to put emotion aside, and calmly think through how our decisions will affect the athletes, their families, the team, and so on. So we are putting together plans under the assumptions of a best case, a mid case and a worst case. We'll have a clear-minded plan in advance; we're not just going to make it up when we get there. We can tweak it on site, but at least we'll have a plan.

**Q:** Has there been discussion between the teams about these sorts of risks and how they can act collectively?

**DB:** Very much so. In fact, I think its like the situation across the rest of society – I think these times have pushed people to try to work together better than they might have in the past. People are not looking for things to argue about, they are looking for better ways of cooperating and sharing best practices – you know, masks, no masks? Two riders, three riders, and so on. I think that it's truly been a time of unity for the sport; folks are trying to look after each other.

**Q:** We've been hearing a lot of discussion about how we can use this time period to help us make positive changes in the sport – things like reimagining the calendar or financing sources, changes that maybe should have already been made in the past . Do you think we can use this challenging time to force positive change, and how do you see us coming out the other side?

**DB:** Again, I think it's a question of how we transition back into a racing program given the new situation? What are the steps to achieving that? And you have another question – what were the limitations of the previous structure, that maybe have been exposed by this period? Let's remember – if we go back to just two months ago, even as recently as Het Nieuwsblad, nobody could have possibly imagined a scenario like this. Right there, that goes to show that incredible change can happen, beyond what any of us would believe. Two month ago, who could have imagined a picture of downtown New York City with no people walking around? It's like something out of a movie. No one could have imagined this. So I think one of the things you take from this is – big change can happen. It really can. Sometimes we may get stuck in a rut, thinking we can't change anything, we can only tweak this or tweak that – but radical change is possible. We're experiencing that right now. I take strength and energy from that. Nothing is out of the question, nothing should be ruled out.

What would those structural changes look like, that could put the sport on a surer footing in the future? I don't have a silver bullet, but fortunately there are some lessons to be learned. Throughout this time, the world has kept in touch through technology, just like we are doing right now. Look at all the virtual racing – guys are racing in their garages around the world, and fans are watching. We are still connecting. And there is something fundamentally quite valuable in that ability to connect, for us as a sport.

But unfortunately, that value is something that we haven't quite been able to incorporate into a single package. There are too many disparate parties not quite connecting, too many people looking after their own area first, and then the sport second. As long as you have that, you'll never get an optimal solution. You'll get collaboration now and then when it's in the interests of specific parties, but you won't have the big unifying theme.

We are a very resilient sport, but we have to figure out how get to the next step. That needs a great deal of coordination. We always talk about the same old parties – the athletes, the teams, the organizers, the UCI, etc. – but we don't have a really strong, centrally coordinated strategy that everybody can contribute to and get something back from. Therein lies the challenge. We'll survive, we'll keep on going, but until we have a centrally managed and coordinated system and strategy, we won't optimize. That is the question, how can we get there?

**Q:** You commented on BBC last week about the need to rethink cycling's basic business, and in particular, the need to decrease the sport's overwhelming economic reliance on Tour de France. We've all been talking the same story for years – growing the pie, distributing the wealth and so on. But how do you actually create a new model?

**DB:** Well, there's nothing like the force of trying to survive, to create the will to change. The desire for change is pushing upward, but the resistance to change is bearing downward; if that resistance outweighs the desire, you go nowhere. And that's sort of where we've been. There has always been the desire to change or improve, but the resistance has always been too great. That's the truth of the matter. The way the sport is organized tends to supports this impasse.

The Tour is obviously our prime event, we all know that, the data are all there. But rather than diminish the importance of the Tour, I'd say let's grow the Tour, and at the same time let's also increase the status of the other races. I say the same thing when people complain about our team budget – I say, let's don't decrease our budget, let's increase everybody else's budget.

But looking at it more broadly, when you compare cycling to the other leading sports, I personally think we should look at building a different structure for this sport. I think the time has come for that – we need to adopt the type of approaches that have worked well for other sports. You just can't have a governing body running the commercial side of the sport. The governing body has a role, but it shouldn't be running a professional league.

When I talk to my friends in some of the franchise or league sports in America, I am always flabbergasted by the way fierce competitors cooperate with each other to promote their sport. In that kind of a centrally managed sport, there is an incentive for all members to coordinate with each other on new approaches, to share ideas to build or market the sport.

Cycling needs to take a look at developing at some type of similar structure, that would better promote growing the overall sport, and that would lead to a more logical and coherent strategy. This doesn't necessarily have to be at the expense of anyone; all the same players could still be there, but under a different structure, where there is a single custodian of that strategy. Sure, we will always compete on the road, but at the top level, we're all trying to promote the same brand, to sell the same sport.

Are we close to that now? No. But, as we have just discussed, anything is possible. And we've got some really good managers in cycling. We've got some really good teams being run in a great way. We just need a better structure for everyone to cooperate within, that enables all of us to pull together.

**Q:** Turning back to your team, you have always had a talent-heavy team; you now have at least four bike racers capable of winning grand tours. How do you get them to work together as well as they apparently do? Tell us your philosophy of managing these egos and how you approach it.

**DB:** Well, first of all, sometimes you get it right and sometimes you get it wrong! But I start from the premise that you are dealing with smart individuals who have reached the pinnacle of the sport. They're not dumb, they understand how the sport works and they understand how a team has to work. They know sacrifices are going to have to be made. The key ingredients are to really know the individuals and what motivates them. Understand how they see the world, and their interpretation of events. You have respect what they are doing for the team, and you have to be consistent. The word trust comes in here too.

The first question is – how do you select the team to begin with. You have to be clear about who makes that decision, when, and what criteria that decision is based on. When riders aren't clear about why a certain decision is made, that's when you start to have problems; that's when people start to agitate, or get emotional, and then you start to misinterpret. Let's say I tell my riders I am going to stick their pictures

to the wall, then I'm going to blindfold myself and throw a dart at the wall to determine the leader. They may not agree with it, but at least they understand the process.

All of that is pre-race. Once you get in the race, everybody begins to get a feel for who is on better form. I'll tell you, there is not a big difference in form between these guys; it can be very tiny things. But, once you're out there racing, if one rider knows that someone else is genuinely stronger, they almost never have a problem with him becoming the leader. They all understand race etiquette. Our riders are quite happy to communicate, and they tell me how they see it – and we respect their opinions. Sometimes, when everybody is going really well, it's a very tough decision – but you still have to make it. You can't not make a decision, just because it's difficult; that makes for an even worse situation.

You're asking these guys to make a sacrifice for the team, but if the riders understand that these kinds of things balance out over time, they're more willing to make that sacrifice. You can be talking about different kinds of guys at different points in their careers, different circumstances, and often things have a way of balancing out. For example, Egan was happy to provide massive support for Geraint in 2018 – he knew he was learning a lot, and he was willing to sacrifice because he knew his time would come. We don't always get it right, but if you're transparent about decisions, and if you can ensure that you are racing and working together, I always tell my guys that we're improving the collective chances of someone on the team winning. And that someone could be you. That makes a lot more sense, for everybody, than competing with each other.

**Q:** One person that certainly seems to have benefited from the situation is Chris Froome. It's given him quite a bit of extra time to complete his recuperation and build up his training regimen. How is he doing? Can he win the Tour again?

**DB:** The rate of progression of Chris's recovery has been phenomenal. He has managed himself very well. Give Chris any tiny sliver of hope, and he will really go for it. I think his key attribute is his remarkable consistency – the pure volume of work he does day in and day out. In the end, it will be that consistency that will help him back to the top level. If anybody can do it, he can – that's for sure.

(Listen to the full interview on [Put Your Socks On](#), Episode #50.)

*By Steve Maxwell, April 29th, 2020.*