

Former Giro Boss Michele Acquarone on the Future of Cycling

..... As a former insider and leader of pro cycling completely divorced from the sport, Acquarone is a passionate observer now free to speak his mind

Michele Acquarone was a well-known name in this sport seven years ago, though now his name is unfamiliar to most people. Named in 2011 to head the Giro d'Italia, the world's second largest bike race, at age 36, Acquarone quickly made a name for himself, primarily through new and radical ideas about better ways to promote and market the sport. He was recently described by Jonathan Vaughters in his book *One Way Ticket* as "a visionary soul." [Falsely charged](#) with misdirecting RCS corporate funds in late 2013, Acquarone was fired, and endured six years of suspicion, economic and personal hardship before his name was [finally cleared](#) by the sluggish Italian court system just two months ago. Acquarone laments his departure from the cycling business, and believes that the Giro was on the verge of successfully creating a different business model for the sport. Although he has made a transformation, and is now an executive working in the digital media business, he admits that he still misses cycling, and that he still thinks often about how to improve and build the sport. The Outer Line recently had a series of discussions with Acquarone; now completely outside the sport, he has little to gain or lose by voicing his blunt opinions. The story below is a capsule summary of his current views and recommendations for how to strengthen the sport.

I was lucky enough to work for a few years in the world of pro-cycling. For years I thought every day about what I could do to attract new tifosi (fans) to cycling – what I could do to help grow the overall size of the sport. I felt that was the most important thing I could do. Here I was, running the second most important race in the world (and several other top races) and I thought "I could grow by trying to nibble little bits of market share from my competitors, but why would I do that? The best way for me to grow was to try to help the whole sport to grow." So when I was the Director of the Giro d'Italia I always followed one basic principle: I'm working for the good of the Giro, but I am also working for the good of pro cycling overall.

That's why, since day one, I always talked to athletes, teams, organizers, regulators, the media, sponsors – everybody! – trying to understand what is holding back the growth of cycling? But the most important people I talked to? The fans, the tifosi! I spent countless hours talking with both cycling fans, as well as fans of other sports, talking about the sports and what levers we could pull to fuel greater interest and involvement. After a couple of years working on the Giro, I felt like I had a clear vision about objectives, strategic plans and a tactical action plan. In my mind, I started to see a pretty clear and concrete action, complete with time schedules, costs and budgets, and clear priorities. But I was cut off early; I never got the chance to try to implement those objectives and plans.

Today, more than six years later, I look at pro cycling and – in many ways – it seems that little has changed. Or at least my perception is that the problems and challenges are still the same. Yes, I've been a bit "off the grid" for a few years, and I've probably missed many things – and of course I worry that nowadays my thoughts and my words have little value; most people don't know who I am. I know I have missed some things, and I'm struggling to talk today, because I'm afraid of saying incorrect things. But I have never stopped thinking about cycling, and I want to at least offer some of my thoughts – just as 'food for thought' or maybe a spark that can ignite better discussions among those who are in a position to change and improve the situation. Of course, it should be a dialogue, not an empty monologue. So, let me speak just as a tifoso, but a tifoso with some experience.

But first, let's remember that anything I say, or anyone says, about cycling must be frankly understood in the following context. In cycling, there are two strong powers: the ASO (Amaury Sport Organisation – owner of the Tour de France and multiple other WorldTour races) and the UCI (International Cycling Union). Period. These two institutions pretty much control everything, and they have always done or undone anything they want. So its no coincidence that all the money and power is divided between them.

Beyond a few small differences, they have always supported each other and looked out for their own interests; and today, more than ever, they are aligned along the French axis.

Too many people in cycling are afraid to say this, they are too worried for their own careers or position. But if pro cycling really wants something to change, a third power has to come in to the equation from within the sport – a new power that is somehow a mix of other race organizers, teams and athletes, with a strong female cycling component. In my years as Director of the Giro I tried to be the leader of this third power, trying to find agreements with the teams, with the other organizers and with women's cycling. But my attempt was crushed in the bud; those two major powers were just too interested in protecting their own turf. Nevertheless, it surprises me that in these six years nobody has taken my place in trying to carry on this battle. We have Velon, AIGCP, USA Cycling, Australia Cycling or other strong national federations, RCS and other WorldTour organizers, an independent Women's Commission – from these groups must somehow come the possibility to rebalance pro cycling. Its going to take someone special, who has the background and history, the skills, the courage – and mostly the fire and the passion – to really help lead this change.

When I say that I feel like little has changed, I collect my thoughts or ideas into five big buckets, five key areas where cycling just has to do better. First, I'm talking about the role and the visibility of the bicycle in a future and more sustainable world – all the big brands and companies out there that still don't know or understand anything about cycling, that could help us spread our message. Our lack of visibility. Second, I am thinking about the lack of a good, cohesive narrative for cycling, our poor storytelling about cycling's calendar and season. Third, I'm talking about how we can create a new financial model and greater financial sustainability in the sport. I'm also thinking about women's cycling – which is just as exciting and which should be just as popular as men's – why it is still relegated to the sidelines, and what the women can do to rejuvenate this sport. And finally, I am thinking about cycling's slow approach to exploiting and developing opportunities offered by the global digital transformation. But we have to look at cycling and focus on the opportunities – not just keep wringing our hands about the problems. I saw great opportunities six years ago when I was the Director of the Giro; I see even more opportunities today.

The visibility of the bicycle: Look for a moment at this young lady Greta, and what she has been able to do. Her protest is waking up a lot of young people around the world. And slowly, politics and world leaders are also becoming aware of her. She has fueled an unstoppable social movement because young people are interested in the future of the world, and a greener economy is the only one that will work. In addition to all the issues of climate, environment and nutrition that are at the heart of the problem, the issue of mobility and transportation is also very important. The movement is saying that more and more people are going to have to make sacrifices, we all have to learn to live with less, to give up some comfort and some luxury, to live in a more "natural" way.

In the future, I feel sure that our lives will be increasingly linked to the bicycle. Many cities in the world are developing cycle paths, and are pushing cars away. More and more people, especially young people, use the bicycle for their daily trips. I have seen a lot of data recently on the use of the bicycle in big cities that are impressive. There are articles all the time about this in the newspapers. Bicycles are growing rapidly and I think we are just at the beginning of a much larger and unstoppable transformation. No one, anywhere, today can ignore this coming Bike Economy. For example, here in Italy there is a rapidly growing Bike Economy movement led by Gianluca Santilli – a movement which is increasingly on the table in political and business circles. I understand this may not be happening as much yet in the U.S., but it is happening with vengeance all over Europe, and it will come to the States soon enough.

As more and more people become daily users of bicycles they will become more "in love" with their bicycle. What does this do for the sport? The transition from cycling as transportation to cycling as a healthy form of recreation, and then cycling as a sport – even to pro cycling as a passion – may not be obvious, but let me put it this way: certainly today the terrain is much more fertile than in the past. If more

people are riding bikes, more people will probably be interested in various forms of bicycle sports. And this trend will continue to grow.

Develop a season-long narrative: As tifosi watching the long cycling season, I have always felt that there are just two “appointments” that must not be missed – only two events that have international resonance and widespread media coverage – the Tour de France in July and the World Championships in September. Cycling is just totally different than most other sports – which have a season-long narrative that builds to some sort of climax or championship at the end of the season; cycling just has a bunch of events – some more important than others – that really aren’t related to each other, and then the season just dies with a whimper. Only the super enthusiasts really understand or watch all of these events. If we want pro cycling to grow, this is not good enough!

It seems obvious: if we want to grow pro cycling, we need to get many more people around the world interested and involved. When I was the Director of the Giro I worked every day trying to get more kids excited about cycling – on every continent, in every country. I asked myself – what can we do to engage a young boy in Beijing or a young girl in America – how can we make them more excited? That’s the big question. And when I say “engage” I mean that kids must know everything about the sport – know all the teams, all the riders, be anticipating the next race to cheer their on champions, like they can’t wait to see the next race. Like Italian kids are today about football, or like American kids are today about baseball.

If we want to involve kids, if we want to engage a larger audience, if we want to have a stable presence on the agenda of the general public, then it is essential to enrich the season. Two big events are not enough. We need to have more big events, and they need to be consecutive in some way – one needs to lead to the next, and they have to culminate in some sort of big event or championship at the end of the season – the big event that everyone is waiting for and watching for all year long.

Sure, this has been said before, but we really need to think about ways for how we can achieve that goal? Take a look at the calendar ideas that were presented in the [Rapha Roadmap](#); of course its new and different, some would say revolutionary, and yes, some of the old-timers will resist it – but something like that is what the sport really needs.

And then I see three other key things that we need to focus on. We need to create greater financial stability, certainty and sustainability in the sport, if we are going to be able to build a more exciting season and sequence of races. We need to expand the viability and equity in women’s cycling, and we need to expand the manner in which tifosi can engage in cycling through digital platforms. Let me talk about each of those issues.

Financial stability: Really, this is at the heart of cycling’s challenges. We don’t have a way to collect tickets, we don’t have the same way of generating revenue that most other sports do. We are always going to be pretty dependent upon the generosity of sponsors. But as we all know, only too painfully, sponsors come and go, and teams and organizers never know their future for sure. So, I say that we have to be more creative. We have to follow the money.

Let’s look at the “pie” – which we first discussed many years ago. Today in pro cycling the money that we do have is unfairly distributed among all parties. ASO and the UCI have the biggest slice of that pie, other race organizers have another small slice, and teams have the smallest slice. Yes, we will always be fighting over who gets which slice of that pie, but as I have always said, the most important thing is that we all have to work to create a bigger overall pie in the first place. It is for the benefit of all; why can’t we work harder together to accomplish it??

Just like in almost all other sports, if we want to create a stable and exciting sport and calendar, first we need to find a model in which the richest organizers help in some way to finance the poorest parties – a

model in which everyone works together to grow the whole movement. In the last few years, very little has changed. Instead of working together to grow the pie, the parties have continued to quarrel among themselves, each thinking only of their own interests – not of the fans and the common good.

The organizers must give the teams a slice of the revenues. (*Editors' Note: Acquarone famously tried to do just this with the Giro, striking a preliminary understanding with the teams to share some revenue, but he was cast out before he had a chance to implement it.*) Pro teams have to become more stable organizations – sports franchises with acquired and resaleable sporting rights, real businesses with real value.

Then we need a centralization process for the marketing rights, to sell all the races (or at least many of the races) together as one unit to media and top sponsors. And in order to do that, we have to simplify the top level calendar – so that we don't have constant overlaps covering five different continents. Without a coordination and centralization of rights, it will be difficult or impossible to enter into agreements with major market players such as Amazon and Google, or large TV networks or top potential sponsors.

Pro cycling needs a calendar that enhances the strongest teams. I imagine a season finale with a great final show race, with just the best teams participating, and finally crowning the season winner. The season must have clear objectives, and it must be easy to understand and follow, making it easier to engage a wider audience.

For example, this year the Quickstep Team just won the World ranking. I did a little research. Out of 100 cycling tifosi only 15 cycling enthusiasts knew who the winning team of the season was. And only 11 of them knew who the rider was who won the WT ranking. Outside of that small group of super-fans, no one knows about these year-end statistics and championships. We have to make these awards bigger. On the other hand, pretty much everyone knows that Liverpool (soccer) or Toronto (basketball) won the big trophy in their sports.

Of course I know this is easier said than done, and I know I'm not the first one to say all this, but if pro cycling wants to grow, it needs a financial model to support it. And I believe that the only way to do this is to somehow centralize revenues, and then redistribute those revenues for the betterment of the overall league. Top races need to share revenues with pro teams. Top races and teams need to find a financial redistribution model that rewards the results of the whole season. Rankings and winners are the basis of every competition, and gradually building competition towards the end of the season is the basis for a much more engaging narrative. We need a much more engaging season, with various peaks along the way, and a big finale with a final winner.

A couple weeks ago, I read the great news that Sagan will attend the Giro d'Italia next year. My former Giro colleagues were all celebrating. But in my eyes, this apparently good news begs a number of questions. Why hasn't Sagan ever attended the Giro before? If a three-time World Champion and seven-time green jersey winner at the TdF has never ridden the second most important race in the world, to me that means the engagement model is failing.

Pro cycling needs to switch from an overlapping model to what I would call the "one big season" model. The only way to do that is to create a financial redistribution model that rewards the results of the whole season – final rankings and final winners like in any other professional sport. The more concise and understandable the calendar of events, the more fans will take notice, and the more teams and athletes will earn. Teams must be interested in participating and winning every race because important financial revenues are linked to victories.

Another challenge about pro cycling is the unique "dualism" between the individual and the team. Today the prize money that goes to the winning riders. I believe that race organizers should no longer pay prize

money to individual riders; pro cycling is a team sport and individual riders are each just one part of that team. Instead, race organizers should pay funds into a central organization that would then pay the teams at the end of the season, based on their competitive results.

This dualism between individual sport and team sport also makes it more difficult to tell a compelling story about the season. For example, Sagan should not have declared that he will ride the Giro in 2020; it's the Bora team that will ride the Giro in May 2020. At the end of April we will know who the selected individual riders will actually be. Team managers will select the riders based on their capabilities at that time, and their state of physical and mental fitness – with the simple aim of winning the race. Team victory is very undervalued compared to individual victory.

A much stronger calendar of key events leading to a final champion is the only way to significantly increase the number of tifosi, and therefore the total revenues coming in – revenues that must be shared in the right way to grow the overall sport.

Women's cycling: This has to be another much more important pillar of the sport. All sports, as a mirror of changes going on in the rest the world, are increasingly interested in women. Women's sports should eventually, quickly, have the same rights, the same opportunities, the same levels of prize money, and so on. It is a journey that perhaps will take some time. However, many sports have accelerated women's participation rapidly; just look at soccer and tennis. In cycling this same type of acceleration must be provided with help from the UCI and the IOC.

One of my biggest regrets is that I never quite got the opportunity to do more to help promote and grow women's cycling. In 2013 we had developed a detailed plan and dossier to integrate women's cycling into all of the RCS WT races. The goal was to present it to the public at the end of 2013, and to make it operational starting in 2015. I remember that in September 2013 I was invited to the UCI Youth Conference in Florence, and in front of a thousand girls and boys, I stood up and promised to Marianne Vos that I would do everything in my power to enhance women's cycling. Unfortunately, ten days later I was suspended – and my hopes and promises were over. I am so sorry about that.

But the sport can still do this. The first step, and the simplest way to do this is to run combined events. From an organizational point of view, it is simple and doesn't need to be excessively expensive. The organizers must put together two parallel races, just at slightly different times – maybe a slightly shorter women's race with a different start but the same finish. This would allow the same video production, the same operations, all put on with the same race organization. This should be so easy, and once people were able to watch women on TV, many more fans would do so. Initially, there would be some extra costs, that UCI or IOC should cover (at least partially), but it would stretch enormous opportunities of engaging more tifosi, and therefore of also increasing revenues for the whole cycling movement. Of course, women's pro cycling would need the same kind of business model I just spoke about for men. The most important point is the centralization of revenues and distribution.

Digital opportunities: In Italy, 90% of the population is digitally connected. I don't have data from the rest of the world but I'm sure its not very different. That 90% of the population has a smartphone connected to the Internet, and we all spend more than 3 hours a day online.

Yes, we spend a large part of our lives online (and of course the percentage is much higher for young people) and on the smartphone. But pro cycling has a pretty weak performance or visibility on the smartphone – and therefore, pro cycling has a problem.

Everything is connected today. Once pro cycling creates a stronger product and narrative along the season, supporting both men and women, and engaging a larger audience, the sport will have a better opportunity to deal with Amazon, Google, Facebook, Apple, Samsung or Huawei.

Today there really isn't a B2C governing body for pro cycling. Velon is still a weak entity. The UCI

manages the political side of the sport. Nothing is really solely dedicated to the fans – with the aim of increasing their involvement. There's no website, no app, no OTT, nothing.

Worldwide, full coverage OTT channels are being created to promote other sports to larger and larger audiences – things like NBA League Pass or ATP Tennis TV are good examples. Maybe OTT investments are not currently within the reach of pro cycling (there's not yet enough audience, not enough money), but pro cycling doesn't even have a B2C website or mobile app. There is nothing official. There is only one UCI corporate website that puts out some interesting data and information. There is nothing dedicated to the fans! Among mobile apps, the only good product on the market is the PCS app. It's great. That's my reference point. But it's not official and it's dedicated to pro cycling around the world. Cycling needs a dedicated platform to cover that first level of fans.

And also among the digital opportunities is eSport. eSport is starting to attract million people and in cycling of course we have products like Zwift – new activities that are growing at an explosive rate. Zwift has developed an ecosystem that combines real sports with eSports. It is a unique reality and an incredible value. Ask yourself – would you prefer your kids playing video games on the couch or playing active video games while training on the bicycle? With a little imagination, we can foresee incredible opportunities for engagement to be generated by these types of platforms.

A digital evolution is needed. Users must have the opportunity to follow pro cycling easily, and at all times. Tifosi must be engaged with up-to-date rankings, stories, videos, audios, everything! Official channels must be created. eSport platforms can involve people in an even stronger way.

Digital is the most popular channel in the world. It is international and transformational. If the interest of the people increases, the mass media are obliged to follow; as it becomes easier to watch events, this will create even further interest, and so it creates a virtuous circle or upwards spiral that generates ever greater interest, brings greater interest from sponsors, and promotes stronger financing – which benefits all the stakeholders. Big investors go where people are, where the money is.

So, these are just some of my ideas. Like I said, I am very sad to have been away from the sport for several years now, and I know some of these ideas are probably old ones, or they are starting to happen. But not fast enough or completely enough. We have to move forward and change faster in this sport. The world has a great and growing appetite for all things sports and entertainment. Pro cycling must move quicker, and it must ensure that it captures its share of this expanding global audience and market.

Acquarone doubts that he will ever return to a role in cycling, but it is clear that he would love an opportunity to help again if he could, in somehow fixing the ills of the sport. He grows sentimental thinking about it; at the end of our discussions, he said, "All of these discussions and thoughts awaken old memories in me. We were about to change the rules of the game. In those early years, I thought I had so many years to complete the project, but in a few months it was all over. Completely. That's life, but it's sad." Perhaps Vaughters summarized it best in his book: "I can't help but wonder if, like Icarus, (Acquarone) had flown a bit too close to the sun. His idealism and vision was a bit too much for cycling's closed world. And so, he was removed from it." But Acquarone adds, "I just hope that my words might help to open a discussion among the key people, and maybe ignite a small spark that sets in motion a complicated gear – one that surpasses the obstacles of politics, and leads cycling towards a change that allows the whole movement to grow significantly."

By Steve Maxwell, November 20th, 2019.