

How Mike Plant Laid the Foundation for USA Cycling

Editors' Note: This three-part series examines the career and sporting insights of Mike Plant, former USA Cycling Chief, founder of Medalist Sports, and long-time UCI executive. In Part 1, we look at Plant's competitive and management career, and the role that he has played in both U.S. and international cycling, as well as other Olympic sports. In Part 2, we will take a look at his contributions to international sport and the race that almost was – the Grand Tour Triple Crown – as well as his path to becoming a Major League Baseball business executive. Then, in Part 3, we will delve more deeply into Plant's ideas and opinions about pro cycling today, what has promoted or constrained the sport's growth in the past, and his perspectives and recommendations about what cycling needs to do to modernize and become more sustainable in the future.

Perhaps more than any other single individual, an Atlanta resident and baseball executive named Mike Plant has shaped the professional cycling landscape that U.S. fans find so familiar today. Plant's contributions to the business of race organization shifted the marketing and staging strategies for event management across the global sport. In addition to creating Medalist Sports Inc. – the preeminent US race management company – he is also a former USA Cycling President, Board member and long-time executive of the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) and commission leader. And Plant wasn't only active in cycling; when his term expired as President of the board of U.S. Speedskating in June 2018, it marked the first time in 39 years that he was not actively guiding a national or Olympic-level sports National Governing Body (NGB) in an official capacity.

Plant is currently the President and CEO of Development for the Atlanta Braves baseball franchise, one of the most valuable and popular Major League Baseball franchises. His most recent high-profile project saw him lead the acquisition and development of the Braves' new multi-billion-dollar stadium and mixed-use real estate development, which will help to secure Atlanta's status as a sports and entertainment destination well into the future.

But it was his time in cycling that shaped his approach to sports business and management. It all started simply enough, and via another sport: speed skating. Plant was born in West Allis, Wisconsin, the middle of three children. He was introduced to most traditional U.S. team sports early in his life, but got hooked on speed skating by his older brother Tom at age 12.

“By 14, I'd decided to focus the vast majority of my energy and time on becoming one of the best,” Plant says.

West Allis and the surrounding Milwaukee-area communities was a hotbed for American speed skating. Plant lived barely a mile from Jim Ochowicz, Dan Jansen and many of the other prominent skaters and cyclists who emerged in the 1970s. As most speed skaters know, the sport often requires a lot of saddle time – and cycling was integral to Plant's 14 workouts per week training program. Plant developed into a talented athlete, sharpening his cycling fitness against contemporaries like Tom Schuler, Ochowicz, Danny van Haute, Greg LeMond, and Eric Heiden.

“I had to be on the bike anyways,” Plant says. “And what better way as a 14-year old to get stronger than to train and then eventually race against those guys!”

Many of Plant's early competitors had notable athletic careers before going on to management roles within pro cycling. This includes Ochowicz (numerous teams including Motorola, BMC, and currently CCC), Schuler (Saturn, and current Director of the Tour of America's Dairyland), and Van Haute (Jelly Belly). Despite his cycling successes, Plant is perhaps most remembered for his association with skating phenom Heiden. They were teammates, together with Plant's older brother, Tom, on the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic team, where Heiden won his then-record five gold medals. Although Plant didn't medal in

the games, his presence and personality led him into a different “champion” role – as an athlete representative representing U.S. Olympians to Congress, during the lead up to the 1980 Moscow Games boycott.

“I continued skating with the goal of making the ‘84 Olympic team,” Plant says. “I recall winning lots of tires, pumps, and derailleurs, and maybe a little money, too.”

Plant was becoming equally adept in the boardroom setting, and he became active and visible in the U.S. Olympic movement. Those experiences were his first in sports governance.

“I represented speed skating as the athlete rep on the USOC Athletes’ Advisory Council – the political body of the USOC board – which just happened to have 25% of the voting rights for USOC decisions,” he says.

But his first focus was Olympic glory. Like many U.S. skaters at the time, Plant traveled to northern Europe in the Fall to train on early ice.

“There weren’t any indoor facilities,” says Plant, “and we went to Inzell (then in West Germany) like all the big teams. Around Thanksgiving of ‘83 we headed to Berlin for various competitions. Most of our team all went home in early December but I decided to stay in Europe to train and race a little more right up until the Olympic Trials.”

And he adds, “That was a big mistake.”

Plant returned to the U.S. about a week before the ‘84 Olympic trials.

“I used to laugh when I heard people say they got so sick they couldn’t get out of bed to go to the bathroom,” he says. “Well, lo and behold, that’s what happened to me after I got home.”

Plant tried to skate the first day of the trials but marked his slowest 1,500 meters since before the ‘80 Games. “I was done,” he says of the letdown, “and I never skated another race.”

Prior to his unfortunate illness, most skating pundits had considered Plant to be a lock for the Sarajevo Games, and the outcome left a profound effect on him – not just reshaping his career path, but also completely changing his outlook on adversity.

“It ate at me privately for years, but I used it for motivation to overcome tough times in business,” Plant says. “I remember when we started the Tour of China. Just about everyone said there was no way to pull that off. When I was told ‘you can’t do that,’ it just motivated me even more. Missing the ‘84 team was not going to define who I was or what I accomplished in my sports career. I used the energy coming out of that disappointment to rally my China team and accomplish what at that time even ASO couldn’t achieve.”

Plant continued to redirect his disappointment into professional drive. Still working as the Olympic athletes’ representative, Plant drove many development programs, support services, and financial aid options for Olympians. By 1986 Plant was asked to move to Colorado Springs to become the executive director of U.S. Canoe and Kayak – essentially the first employee of a new NGB. He was beginning to get noticed as someone who both understood athletes and the sports business, and his early experience was starting to pay off.

1986 was a critical year for U.S. cycling, and for Plant’s career trajectory. Greg LeMond had just won the Tour de France, and the Colorado-based Coors Classic race had experienced a monumental edition –

essentially a physical and psychological rematch between LeMond and his equally legendary nemesis, Bernard Hinault. Plant had successfully ramped up the visibility and activities of U.S. Canoe and Kayak when the United States Cycling Federation, looking to elevate the profile of bike racing on U.S. soil, came knocking on his door.

Jerry Lace, then the executive director of the USCF, asked Plant to be his Associate Executive Director and oversee the athlete programs, elite teams, rider development, national championships among other executive responsibilities.

“I had known Jerry from 1985, when I was on the World University Games staff with him in Kobe (Japan),” Plant says. “I was one of the U.S. athlete reps at the time but ended up taking a very active role in the delegation with him – executing on site operations and facing the daily challenges of a big event.”

The U.S. professional racing scene was in an upward swing in the late 1980s. Established criteriums throughout the country were popular, while long-standing series like Superweek anchored the summer calendar. But the bigger international Coors Classic race was about to hit a wall. The popular 1987 edition had run all the way across Hawaii, California and Colorado. The event became saddled with new logistical difficulties, such as greater distances between stage cities. When the Coors Classic folded soon after the 1988 edition, Plant was already thinking about how to take bike racing in the U.S. to its next level. To do it right – in his view – it had to be done his way.

“We started in 1988 while I was still with the USCF. It was the perfect time to create a big international event,” says Plant.

Coors had solidified Colorado as U.S. cycling’s competitive Mecca during its run, but Plant’s idea was to refocus the sport toward the East coast’s larger urban markets and closer city centers. This didn’t just simplify the race production; it also opened up novel sponsorship approaches as well as larger and newer markets for the sport.

“We actually started out our ideas for a new race by talking to some Atlantic City casinos to anchor the sponsorship, but they just didn’t get the value proposition. [Donald] Trump did,” Plant says. “I took a leave of absence from the Federation to lead this new endeavor. We already had Trump’s commitment, so I took the opportunity to sit down with the partners which included Trump, NBC and Jefferson Pilot sports and I said, ‘look, I’m not going to work for you, I’m going to form a company to manage and produce this new race, and I’m going to be the managing partner responsible for making sure it all happens eight months from now.’”

And just like that, Medalist Sports Inc. was founded as a limited liability corporation, with Plant as the operating Partner, setting in motion the next great U.S. stage race. Many of the details of that huge effort were covered by The Outer Line with contributor and former Medalist pioneer Steve Brunner.

“That first year it was 24/7,” Plant says. “I returned from the Korea Olympics in early October (1988) and went right to Atlantic City. We started by buying pens and pencils, but pulled off a small miracle six and a half months later.”

The Tour de Trump attracted many of the biggest European professional and national amateur teams during its run. Although Trump discontinued sponsorship after two years, the DuPont corporation – Plant had shrewdly signed them to sponsor the young Russian amateur team in the first two editions – picked up title sponsorship in 1991.

“It took me six months to get DuPont on as major sponsor, and we were lucky that the Russian team did so well. But I’d spent all the money we made on the first two races and there was no way we’d have the

third year without that DuPont deal,” says Plant of the finances.

Greg LeMond wrote a memorable storybook final-day time trial finish for the 1992 Tour DuPont, winning on the National Mall in Washington DC to further elevate the status of the race internationally, and financially.

“I spent those first two years of the DuPont event catching back up financially, but after Greg won in ‘92, I didn’t owe anyone anything,” added Plant about the race’s success. “Up until that point, I took all of the financial risk. If I was going to continue, that had to change otherwise I was going to head back to Colorado Springs to take a role with the USOC in a leadership capacity. The day after Greg’s historic win, a front page article appeared in the Richmond newspaper that I was done. I wasn’t going to take all the risk anymore when my name wasn’t on the event. Over the next four days, I met with the DuPont team and we hammered out a 5-year guaranteed deal.”

With his race on a financially strong path, it was time to tackle long standing issues in the USCF.

“Jerry (Lace) was overwhelmed by 1993 coordinating multiple volunteer committees and all the USCF’s bureaucratic chaos,” says Plant. “He set a mandate to wipe out the bureaucracy, by reducing the size of the Board and improving the regional structure.”

Plant’s no-nonsense approach to business organization management and personnel management quickly got him, as he put it lightly in one of our interviews, “crosswise” with the other Board members.

According to Plant, Lace should be credited with the vision to change U.S. cycling as an organization. Lace had come to cycling from the U.S. Olympic Committee, and he understood that cycling had to become a professionally-staffed, executive board-driven organization to compete with other world cycling powers.

“I learned how to maneuver and pivot by cutting deals as the Olympic athlete advisory council member in 1980 (Plant eventually became its Chairman),” Plant says. “I learned to leverage compromises and tactics to achieve our objectives and win the other votes we needed. For example, we drove athlete support programs athlete health insurance, direct athlete payments and performance awards – which all still exist today.”

But the USCF was built as a volunteer organization, and Plant believed it was too slow in making important decisions, due to the presence of too many committees.

“It took two days just to decide the National Team jersey design,” he says.

Lace and Plant adopted the best practices other national governing bodies used to transform into top-down executive organizational structures.

“The Board makes strategic decisions, the president executes those decisions, and if it doesn’t get done, the president gets fired,” says Plant. “The important task for the Board is to monitor the finances, mission and strategy, but stay out of the weeds.”

Plant cites several key allies during the effort: Ochowicz, John Vande Velde, Lisa Voigt, and – despite many disagreements – Les Earnest.

“I said to everyone ‘here’s our path forward, here’s what we need to do,’ and they all stepped up,” says Plant of the re-org. “I recognized that good people are often stuck in incompetent organizational structures. You have to change the structure first to get the most out of everyone.”

But it was not without controversy, especially for long-standing USCF District officials and representatives.

Critics of Plant and the Board at that time note that the organization was rapidly, and not always transparently, transformed from grassroots and regionally-driven into a centrally-managed and donor-driven institution. Earnest – a noted contributor to modern computing science and a Stanford professor emeritus – was against diluting the importance of the District Representation and the weight of membership voting. In one clash between the two men, Plant decided that the national Technical Director role would be a better landing zone for suggestions on how to improve the organization and racing – shifting that responsibility away from regional volunteer reps to an assigned officer in Colorado Springs.

“Modern sporting bodies have to be staffed in a professional way, by professionals who are living in the organization and focused on the tasks of running an NGB 100 percent every day,” says Plant of his philosophy. “These have to be staff-driven organizations, not volunteer associations, if they are going to be successful.”

The Technical Director change essentially cancelled out the agendas of regional players in U.S. cycling politics at the time.

“Sure, it probably seemed Draconian at the time – it disenfranchised many members,” he says.

Earnest challenged this decision, and according to Plant, the two had a showdown in private.

“Les made great contributions, despite his nit-picking,” Plant says. “But when we took the meeting closed-door, Les said ‘I know I’m getting to you, and I’m winning.’ I told him, Les, you’re not even on my radar; I respect you but don’t for a second think you are getting to me, I have something a lot bigger in mind.”

The transformation headed by Lace and Plant laid the foundation for the USCF to modernize and compete with other cycling powerhouse nations. Rebranded as USA Cycling – it increased its budget and ability to create long-term sponsorship deals, and put a stronger corporate structure into place.

And with USA Cycling now on competitive international parity, Plant, as we will see in Part 2 of the story, turned his attention toward an even bigger prize: creating an international “Triple Crown” series for cycling that he believed could completely reshaped cycling’s landscape.

By Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, October 16th, 2019.