

How Rider Agents Influence Pro Cycling

Cycling fans may not be familiar with the name Giuseppe Acquadro, but the Italian super-agent may be one of the most powerful names in men's professional road cycling. He recently played a pivotal role in the significant rider exodus from Movistar to Ineos, and is even rumored to have had a significant say in the British team's Vuelta a España lineup last fall. And if widely published accounts are true, his influence underscores the power that a handful of agents have wielded to manipulate the market to maximize their revenue.

Spanish journalist Carlos Arribas [reported](#) that for years Acquadro acted as the main talent [broker](#) for Movistar Team Manager Eusebio Unzué. However, the relationship between the two fractured at the 2019 Giro d'Italia, when Acquadro publicly declared that Richard Carapaz, the Ecuadorian rider who would go on to win, wasn't satisfied with his current contract and was requesting a more rewarding move to Ineos. When Unzué refused the request to let his star rider out of his contract to ride for a rival team, Acquadro reportedly declared, "Unzué will suffer."

Unzué certainly has suffered since the high-profile falling out. Movistar has lost every Acquadro-repped rider since that declaration. He has extricated each of them from their contracts and sent every one of them on to bigger paydays – primarily at Team Ineos. Acquadro client Egan Bernal left Androni Giocattoli-Sidermec for Ineos in 2017, while another young star client, Sosa, signed for Ineos after signing and then breaking a contract that would have sent him to Trek-Segafredo.

Not only did Acquadro succeed in negotiating an exit for Carapaz, he also navigated Nairo Quintana's move to Arkea-Samsic, and pulled Andrey Amador [out of his contract](#) at Movistar with the plan to send him to Ineos as well. The status of Amador's contract is [unclear](#) and as of writing, he isn't listed on the roster pages of either the Movistar or Ineos team websites. But if he does ultimately join Ineos, he will become the third Acquadro client to break a contract with another team in order to move to the British outfit.

Acquadro's apparent meddling in Movistar's 2019 season doesn't stop there. Carapaz was slated to lead the team at the Vuelta a España, but withdrew at the last minute after he crashed in an unsanctioned Dutch Criterium. Normally, a pro cycling team would have control of the race schedule for riders on their team. And so Movistar was presumably confused about why their star rider was competing in a dangerous unsanctioned criterium the week before a grand tour, without their consent.

But according to an [El Pais piece](#), Acquadro claimed he knew Carapaz was going to ride the criterium but left the team in the dark. In the piece, Acquadro confirms that he purposely left Movistar in the dark about the race in violation of the contract, knowing Unzué would never allow it. "Of course I didn't tell Unzué that Carapaz was going to Holland," Acquadro said. "Why am I going to tell him anything if he says no to everything?"

Cynics questioned whether the subsequent injury was as severe as Carapaz claimed, whether Acquadro was simply flexing his muscles and holding the Ecuadorian out of the race to spite Unzué, or if he had struck some sort of deal with Ineos to reduce the chance of injury to their new young star. Curiously, Carapaz only finished two races in 2019 after his Giro d'Italia win.

Nor does Acquadro's power-play end there. Prior to last year's Vuelta a España, Kenny Elissonde was [substituted](#) in the Ineos lineup in favor of Acquadro client David de la Cruz. L'Equipe [reported](#) that Acquadro interfered on behalf of de la Cruz, allegedly to give his client a platform to advertise his services to other teams before the end of the season, and that he had the influence at Ineos to call in a favor. If that's the case, it's pretty shocking that one of the most detail-driven and technically precise teams in the peloton would select their grand tour roster according to the wishes of a rider agent.

While a handful of powerful agents like Acquadro may have outsized influence today, agents are a relatively recent development in professional cycling. In a past [VeloNews article](#), current CCC team manager Jim Ochowicz, who operated the 7-Eleven team in the 1980s, says only two riders on that squad had agents: Davis Phinney and Steve Bauer. Flash forward to the present day and it is rare to see any rider without some type of professional representation.

Like other trends in recent pro cycling, Lance Armstrong was an early leader in driving the sport out of a relative “stone age” in terms of agent representation, and into the more modern circumstances we see today. Armstrong’s agent from 1995 to 2012 was Bill Stapleton – a bona fide professional, a lawyer with an MBA, more in the mold of mainstream agents in other pro sports who perfect the art of building powerful networks and complex negotiating strategies to get the best deals for their clients.

Armstrong says he definitely benefited financially from this high-powered representation. “It was a plus, no doubt.” As a new generation of riders observed this and as more money flowed into the sport, a minor “arms race” of sorts occurred – and more and more riders began to recognize the importance of professional representation. But a key challenge for the sport revolves around that one word – “professional.”

Since 2012, the UCI has mandated that rider agents take an extremely simple exam and pay a registration fee with the sport’s governing body. However, this exam and registration isn’t required for lawyers authorized to practice in their country of domicile, nor does it apply to parents, brothers, sisters or spouses that may be appointed by the rider.

One former agent who has been in the sport for many years says that most cycling agents got to their positions because of political or family connections, not because they had great legal or marketing skills.

“Most cycling agents don’t really add much value. Most of them are just good at the ‘relationship piece’ – the schmoozing and telling the athlete what he wants to hear. Then they take their 10 percent and don’t do much to activate,” the agent told The Outer Line.

He said that in terms of skills and influence, agents in pro cycling pale in comparison to their counterparts in the big sports like the NBA and NFL.

“Most cycling agents can’t even leverage their athletes within the sport, let alone outside with sponsors and advertisers,” the agent said.

While the vast majority of rider agents are “boutique operators” with a few clients, there are a few power agents that are generally unknown to the vast majority of fans. A few of these, like Acquadro, wield extreme power over everything from which riders go where, right down to the line-up for various teams in grand tours. And the phenomenon of influential agents meddling in team business is by no means restricted to him.

Back in 2010, Bjarne Riis, then the General Manager of the SaxoBank team, [complained](#) that the agent for his up-and-coming rider Richie Porte, Andrew McQuaid (son of then-UCI President Pat McQuaid) was strong-arming him into releasing Porte from his contract.

Said Riis at the time, “It’s a huge problem in the sport, and this year it has gone berserk. The agents are running around and shopping with all sorts of teams, and it’s not just us who have these problems. It must stop now, it’s unacceptable. The agents bring ideas into the minds of young riders by putting figures in their minds that are completely unrealistic.”

Managers like Riis are entitled to vent when they feel like they are being squeezed by an unruly agent. On

the other hand, agents usually claim that they are only acting in the best interest of their clients. In many instances, this can turn into a delicate dance, where team managers are willing to indulge in certain disruptions if they can simultaneously stand to gain talent from another team by brokering backroom deals through these agents.

But this willingness (or necessity) for team managers to partner with agents begs the question: who are the agents really working for? Are they talent procurement vehicles for WorldTour teams? Is there an inherent conflict of interest in representing multiple riders with the same skill-sets?

Elite riders like Alberto Contador and Thibaut Pinot can afford the luxury of employing relatives or trusted friends as agents, but most up-and-coming or mid-level riders don't have the salaries to pay an agent a 10 percent cut of their contract value. But at the same time, such riders often feel the need to employ an industry insider to advertise their athletic capability, promote their marketing potential, and broker deals with professional teams.

Retired American cyclist Phil Gaimon touched on this topic in his autobiography, "Draft Animals," when he signed with McQuaid, whose firm is called Trinity Sports Management. "Andrew's father, Pat McQuaid, was the head of the UCI. For his son to represent riders sure seemed like a conflict of interest, but with some of the top cyclists in the world as Andrew's clients, I felt like a big shot when I signed on," Gaimon wrote.

But the relationship quickly soured when Gaimon believed that McQuaid used a spot on the Garmin-Sharp team (which, according to Gaimon, manager Jonathan Vaughters had promised to him) for another client instead – American climber Joe Dombrowski.

Gaimon wrote, "The apology should have come from Andrew McQuaid, who was also Joe's agent. While he was telling me that there was no news from Vaughters, McQuaid was negotiating a contract for another American climber to take one of the final spots – and that ladies and gentlemen, is a conflict of interest. If an agent has more than a few clients, he's deciding which teams to sell them to, so Andrew wasn't really working for anyone but himself."

When The Outer Line asked McQuaid for comment, he said that Dombrowski is simply a better rider and was always the clear choice to fill the single roster spot on Garmin-Sharp.

"Every conversation I had with JV I would have been trying to get his thoughts on Phil, he just had no news," McQuaid told The Outer Line. "The fact that I was also talking to Jonathan on Joe doesn't mean I wasn't talking about Phil. Ultimately it is up to Jonathan who he signs and he has a limited number of places. If I hadn't been pushing Joe another agent would have been. Jonathan went with Joe for one of the last spots, and speaking now let's call a spade a spade, Joe is twice the rider Phil was so I do not think anyone out there would question that decision, apart from Phil himself, unfortunately."

Despite this sentiment, Gaimon clearly felt that his agent, who in theory should have been working to secure the best possible contract for him, was actually working against his interests by promoting the economic interests of another asset in his portfolio – Dombrowski. In other words, McQuaid may have assumed that Dombrowski was the bigger name and stronger rider and that he would likely command a higher salary – in turn meaning that McQuaid's commission would also be higher. If an agent can set things up so that he is negotiating against himself, he can push the higher-priced athlete and collect a bigger commission, but if the price goes too high for the team, he can always offer the lower-priced athlete.

This example raises important and difficult questions about how and when, or even if, an agent should be representing similar athletes, and how an agent in this situation can truly act in good faith for both clients.

And unfortunately, it seems likely that these kinds of situations occur fairly frequently.

The Outer Line also spoke to Ken Sommer, the agent of current World Road Race Champion Mads Pedersen, about this potential conflict. Sommer said that his firm, Corso Sports Marketing, purposely limits its client portfolio and avoids representing too many riders with overlapping skill sets, to avoid exactly these types of situations. He says it can sometimes be impossible to negotiate in good faith with two separate clients for a single open spot – that only by refusing to represent too many similar clients of similar age, can he offer a better and more dependable service to the athlete.

“Our small client roll helps us to prevent conflicts of interest,” Sommer told The Outer Line. “If a team asks me for a young sprinter and I represent five, how can I decide who to put forward?”

Sommer says that to him and his agency, it is more about client relationships than making money.

“If I treat clients as a product, if I don’t get to know them well, it makes it difficult to negotiate on their behalf in the best possible way,” he said. “It is their life and their future we are negotiating, I couldn’t do that right if I was representing a guy I didn’t know.”

Sommer’s partner at Corso Sports Marketing, Joao Correia, added that while there are no regulations ordering an agent act as a fiduciary for their client, Corso’s client-first approach differentiates the agency, driving immense value for their riders, and ultimately growing the business.

This kind of client portfolio strategy is certainly in the best interests of the riders, but it can also mean that the agency is limiting its revenue potential by turning down the opportunity to represent “redundant” riders. While this may work for boutique agencies whose purpose is putting the athletes first, it may be tougher to justify for bigger agents or for corporate agencies like the Wasserman Group, whose aim is to build athlete representation on a global scale.

Andrew McQuaid echoed this view when discussing the economics of his larger and more diversified firm.

“If you wish to make a career out of being a rider agent, you cannot work solely with a rider of Phil Gaimon’s level,” McQuaid said. “He was never going to earn a high enough salary for an agent to also make any sort of living out of, that is just a fact. I am running a business, not a charity.”

According to McQuaid, a larger-scale agency doesn’t necessarily have to be a negative for clients; in fact, it can present them with increased networking and negotiating power.

“Phil also conveniently forgets about all the benefits of being represented by an agent like myself,” McQuaid said. “He knew I managed more riders than just him before he signed with Trinity Sports Management, but that because we were an established agency we would be in a position to get his name in front of all teams.”

Super agencies, by virtue of their large client portfolios, represent such a high percentage of the desired talent pool and hence can sometimes start to manipulate existing trade and compensation markets to their liking. This type of business model is great for agency executives and shareholders who benefit from the commissions, and for high-value clients who increase their earning power. However, it is debatable whether lower-level clients benefit much from this type of operation, or if they start to simply become minor bargaining chips – like Gaimon felt he was while a client of Andrew McQuaid’s.

Another model for would-be agents and power brokers is to emulate Gianni Savio. Savio, the longtime team manager of the Androni Giocattoli-Sidermec team, makes [sizable](#) fees by identifying and then signing young riders to long-term contracts with heavy buyout clauses.

He reportedly “sold” Egan Bernal to Team Ineos for €350,000; he also created a [bidding war](#) between Trek-Segafredo and Ineos (then Team Sky) for Iván Sosa. If such young talent is going to get poached by bigger teams, at least Savio gets some cash to keep his machine running. And, at least so far, this has worked out well for both Bernal and Sosa. However, once again, the lack of power or influence that riders have in this process means they can potentially be exploited by established agents/power brokers.

At the end of the day, if a young, up-and-coming rider is delivering big results, representation won't be an issue – the opportunities will come to them. But mid-level or domestique type of riders face a Catch-22 type decision: sign with a smaller, less-known or less-connected agent who will truly keep your interest in mind, or, sign with the big international agency which can open doors everywhere, but which may have clients with competing interests that subsume yours.

And teams must also be careful to take a balanced approach to dealing with agents. Aligning too closely with a few ambitious agents like Acquadro can be risky, as Movistar learned. They counted on Acquadro for talent identification and procurement for years, ceding him an immense amount of power and influence. But when the relationship soured, he took his power and his clients elsewhere – leaving Movistar weaker and a rival team stronger. Whether the UCI deems these behind-the-scenes power players as a problem or not, teams would be wise to lessen their reliance on them by building their own independent talent identification and scouting programs.

And finally, looking at this issue from the broader sport's perspective, if a small pool of influential agents can influence team rosters or even race outcomes, it's obviously not good for the competitive balance of the sport. While the freedom of labor movement is of paramount importance, agents forcing their clients out of contracts to spite particular team managers, to favor other ones, or simply to enrich themselves is clearly worrisome. With pro cycling facing its ever-present sponsorship and financial challenges and given the current budget and power imbalance between the various teams, smaller-budget teams need a way of locking down the services of a top rider. If teams with middle-tier budgets like Movistar and Trek-Segafredo are unable to hold onto promising riders under contract, the delicate competitive balance in the sport could continue to crumble. Allowing powerful agents to nullify or wiggle their riders out of such contracts is a perilous trend.

While there has been some discussion recently about the related idea of [salary caps](#) (a related topic which The Outer Line will explore in a future article) it is important that the UCI investigate this agent influence issue in more detail as well, ensuring that the sanctity and defensibility of one of the basic building blocks of the sport – rider contracts – are being sufficiently preserved and upheld.

By Spencer Martin and Steve Maxwell, February 5th, 2020.