

How to Fix Pro Cycling's Transfer Headaches

Pro cycling saw a flurry of notable riders pen contracts with new teams for the 2020 season when the UCI's transfer season officially opened on August 1st. Big names like Tom Dumoulin, Nairo Quintana, Vincenzo Nibali, Mikel Landa, Elia Viviani and Richard Carapaz will all ride in new colors.

These moves didn't make much of a splash with fans and the media when they were finally announced however, as nearly all of them had been rumored or had leaked out over the prior couple of months. And as usual, these moves have complicated the competitive teamwork situation within several squads for the rest of the year – as is typical for professional cycling's transfer circus.

Cycling is quite different than almost all other professional sports when it comes to the movement of athletes between teams. A key clause in the [UCI rules](#) states that teams are not allowed to recruit a rider from another team prior to the off-season transfer period of August 1st to December 31st.

However – and critically – this rule goes on to define “recruit” as “concluding a contract” with the new rider (*italics added*). This rather vague definition thus allows all sorts of rumors and innuendo to leak (at least somewhat legally) well before the August 1st timeframe.

The more consequential problem is that riders signing contracts with new teams after August 1st generally have to remain contracted to their existing teams – not just through the end of the road racing calendar (the end of October), but clear through the end of the year. This leads to all manner of potential internal competitive conflict, awkward administrative situations and teamwork jiu-jitsu for the rest of the season. It often creates a downright contentious situation that puts the individual rider as well as both his old and new teams into starkly uncomfortable positions. Perhaps most importantly, it can significantly detract from the sport's on-the-road product; teams can become unsettled, and racing strategies can become disrupted or downright bizarre.

A good current example of this is reflected by the Movistar team situation, where top stars Nairo Quintana, Mikel Landa and Richard Carapaz have all [announced](#) their departure at the conclusion of the season. Quintana and Carapaz were scheduled to race the Vuelta a España as co-leaders, along with Alejandro Valverde and Marc Soler (though Carapaz was pulled at the last minute with an apparent injury). Movistar's predicament goes beyond the obvious problem of “that's way too many leaders for one team.”

Not only will Quintana and Carapaz be racing against Movistar and against each other next year, both Soler and Valverde will be returning to the team. This leads to a complicated situation for team directors – should they prioritize the needs of their nominal leaders, either of whom could win the Vuelta and both of whom are set to leave? Or should they favor the interests of their second-tier stars who are set to stay with the team, but who don't have as much hope of overall victory?

Even worse, this situation may cause riders to be uncooperative with their own teammates. It was speculated this could have explained Movistar appearing to ride against the interests of Quintana during the recent Tour de France, and there certainly appears to be questionable cooperation between Quintana and Valverde during the current Vuelta. Soler's very public tantrum when he was ordered to wait and work for Quintana on the last climb of Stage 9 of the Vuelta last week was a perfect example of the tension these delayed team changes can present. (Fortunately, the notably temperamental Mikel Landa was not scheduled to race the Vuelta, or the problem would have likely been worse.)

And, it doesn't just create a problem for the old team; the new team may find itself in a difficult strategic position as well. Ineos, the new team of Carapaz, could have found itself in the awkward position of riding hard to defeat their future teammate. (Quintana's future team, Arkea-Samsic, was not invited to the

Vuelta.) The last-minute injury to Carapaz allowed Movistar to avoid some of these challenges, but this is still a good example of the potential conflicts.

While most riders understand the stakes and the competitive implications of changing teams, it is still easy to feel personally insulted when a rival former or future team puts them under pressure on the road. Richie Porte [described](#) Team Sky's attack to overtake him as race leader on the final stage of the 2017 Dauphine as personal – something he would struggle to forgive and forget. One could reasonably wonder if Porte had instead been signed to rejoin Sky at the conclusion of the season, would Sky have undertaken the same aggressive tactics to attack him? If not, it would have had an objectively negative effect on the quality of racing. If so, it could have damaged his relationship with his new team before he even arrived. From an external perspective, it's a lose-lose situation.

Although difficult to prove, there are probably regular examples of teams and riders subtly waging war or negotiating peace after signing contracts for the following year. While one could possibly argue that this kind of intrigue and internal soap opera may draw some fans in, these situations undermine the competitive integrity of the sport, devalue sponsor investments, and reduce fan engagement with the overall product.

And as mentioned, the August 1 rule itself is not even effectively enforced. Teams are often heavily rumored to be courting or reaching implicit understandings with riders well before the supposed deadline during the Tour de France, with potential impacts to the sport's marquee event. Tom Dumoulin's blockbuster transfer to the budding Jumbo-Visma super-team from his current Sunweb squad has been in the news since early [July](#), while Trek-Segafredo's lead sponsor actually [confirmed](#) the signing of Nibali in early June.

And the problems continue even after the close of the racing season. With riders contractually tied to their old teams through the end of December, they have historically had to show up at their new team presentations and sponsor events, as well as training camps, in their old team jerseys, and have been unable to train on their new bikes until January 1.

This framework of announcing transfers mid-season but only concluding transfers after the offseason, results in a peculiar mash-up which seems quite harmful for the sport. Other sports have either the drama of blockbuster mid-season trades, or the anticipation of off-season "free agency" and excitement about who will move where. Or they have both. Cycling has neither. Athlete "moves" happen both too early and too late – riders announce their new teams, but then proceed to stay put for another five months of intrigue and confusion. Information just dribbles out, making the whole process seem anticlimactic. The bottom-line is that the sport is robbed of what could otherwise be dramatic developments and exciting fan engagement opportunities.

So, what is the solution to these problems? While it's obviously difficult, if not impossible, to get consensus across all of cycling's various stakeholders on much of anything, it seems like a few simple changes in the transfer rules are kind of a no-brainer. The Outer Line reached out to a number of team managers and governance officials to discuss the pros and cons of the current situation, and to explore how things might be changed for the better.

There seems to be at least some consensus that the requirement for a rider to stay with his old team for the rest of the calendar year is archaic, and should be changed. Brian Cookson, former President of the UCI, concisely sums it up. "It makes no sense to have riders announce in August that they will be riding for a different team in five months time. It confuses the fans and encourages disloyalty, not to mention conspiracy theories and speculation about illicit tactics."

A first step could be altering standard contracts such that they concluded at the end of the season, rather

than the end of the calendar year. Cookson suggests that all rider contracts should start and finish on December 1st each year “avoiding the silly spectacle of riders at their new team’s training camp with their old team’s kit and bikes.”

Several team managers commented that they would like riders to be able to transfer to their new teams by more like November 1. “The season is over, why should they not switch then?” asked one manager. “Why should we have to get permission from the prior team for our new rider to join our team presentation? The rider needs time to train on his new bike!”

There seems to be very little reason not to make at least this minor change – other than cycling’s “that’s the way we’ve always done it” legacy.

Luca Guercilena, boss of the Trek-Segafredo team, points to a new rule (confirmed by Matthew Knight at the UCI) that some of these seemingly arbitrary requirements already have been relaxed somewhat by a recent rule change, but apparently only in a very slight way. Article 7 of UCI Rule 2.15.139 now allows transferred riders to take part in presentations and training camps with their new team, and to utilize the new equipment, but still dictate that the riders must use a “white-labelled” jersey and bike through the end of December. This is a small step in the right direction, say team managers, but it still seems a bit “too little, too late.”

The more fundamental question is: why shouldn’t transferred riders change teams immediately – as soon as they have signed a legal contract? At least up to some critical point in the season? That’s the way things work in most other sports. Interestingly, the UCI rules actually do make an allowance for a mid-season transfer window, but only from August 1 through August 15, and it is hardly ever used.

Says former team owner Bob Stapleton, now Chairman of USA Cycling, “At HighRoad, we actually did utilize that mid-season transfer window. The best example was probably Linus Gerdemann – he wanted more opportunities, Milram really wanted him, so we made a deal in mid-season. But it doesn’t happen much, because there’s just not a very big marketplace of athletes available.”

And it’s clearly not practical or easy for team managers to undertake any kind of extensive personnel changes mid-season. Stapleton continues, “First, all parties have to agree, and the team manager also has to figure out how to balance his talent and racing calendar. Matching a competitive roster to a complicated schedule is not that easy, and transferring riders around mid-season can make it more challenging.”

Adds Guercilena, “a mid-season window may be allowed, but only for a small number of athletes. You can’t completely change the entire structure of the team.”

Stapleton draws a contrast between cycling, and other sports, like baseball, where mid-season trades are more common. Cycling is a tight team sport – team cohesion and specific race preparation is perhaps more important in cycling than some other sports. “It’s not like baseball, which is more ‘plug-and-play’ if you’re a catcher, you’re a catcher. You get traded to a new team, you put on the new uniform and play catcher for them – you fulfill your individual role. It’s not quite that simple in cycling.”

The implementation of longer and perhaps more practically-placed and rigidly-enforced mid-season transfer windows (perhaps, for example, the time window between the Giro and the Tour dates), during which riders could transfer immediately, would allow teams to make substantive changes in the middle of the season. But there is less consensus around this concept.

Some team managers favor a more open or aggressive system. Jonathan Vaughters of Team EF Education First suggests having as many as two or three 2-week periods during the season when

transfers could happen, and happen immediately.

“We sign a rider on July 4th, he rides for us on July 5th; there would be a lot less drama that way,” though he adds that those transfer windows should be clear-cut and strictly enforced. In other sports, a mid-season blockbuster trade can attract a lot of fan attention – like the dramatic scenario of a hockey player performing for one team one night, only to be traded overnight and suiting up against his former team the next night. Why not in cycling?

Stapleton, with his current roles at USAC and the UCI, is careful not to promote one approach or another too heavily. But, he says, “We could just ‘go big’ and move to a system where there transfer window is open for much of the season, let’s say April through August, or something like that. If it’s early and the rider’s not happy, or the team’s not happy, then why not let them trade any time? It could certainly make the Grand Tours more exciting.”

Cookson is also receptive to creating a more robust mid-season transfer market, but expresses concern about opening the market prior to the Tour de France, citing the possibility of a team sitting back all year only to snap up in-form riders for the race. But given that both teams would have to agree to nullifying existing contracts, it seems unlikely that this would get out of hand. What rational team manager is going to want to give away his in-form top rider right before the Tour. Sponsors would be unwilling to tolerate that.

Other team managers worry about the effect of more frequent or earlier transfers, and how that might affect the sport’s complex team points ranking system. One team manager says “I support the idea that riders finish their season with their current team, because points for (year-end) team rankings are linked to individual riders.” Its true that certain teams have subtly tried to buy their way into a higher UCI points ranking in the past, but there is now a clause in the rules (Section 2.10.004) which says that points earned by a rider transferring during the season will stay with his original team.

Changes to the points system over the past few years mean that now teams are ranked according to the points they earned in the past, with whoever their riders were at that time – not based on the points of riders they might acquire for the future. This was a major step in the direction of greater equity, and put the brakes on teams simply buying points.

As Javier Barrio, Managing Director of AIGCP, the association of pro teams, succinctly puts it, “Now, you cannot buy points, you can only buy riders capable of scoring points for your team.” Teams may try to lure better riders to their team, but it doesn’t make too much difference whether they do it mid-season or after the season. And again, no team can outright “steal” a rider from another team mid-season; both teams have to agree.

The sport could try to take the opposite track. Instead of the current system of essentially allowing contract discussions and transfer news to dribble out across the whole racing season, cycling could try to tighten up its definition of “recruit,” restrict all rider transfers to the off-season and tamp down the rumor mill. By creating a specific time window where the teams and athletes would execute a rapid and manic game of musical chairs, cycling could attempt to create a “can’t miss” event in the off-season to captivate the attention of even the most casual spectator.

Other sports have been successful in creating this kind of lively off-season media engagement tool. Just look at the NBA’s free agency process. It has bloomed into such a media and fan frenzy that some observers are even [raising concerns](#) that hysteria around player movement and trade details have distracted attention away from the actual on-court product. While there are potential negative outcomes of this frenzy, the bottom line is that all the speculation around athlete trades helps to keep fans of the sport engaged and interested – and it happens during the offseason when there is nothing else going on. This

creates value for the league's media markets, by incentivizing additional coverage of the sport and broadening the visibility of the sport for new fans.

But this seems unlikely to occur in professional cycling. It would require a massive change in the whole system of transfers which would be difficult to implement and enforce.

Adds Cookson, "These days it is the agents who drive all of this, and they appear to be working on future deals pretty much all year round. Essentially, they are offering "their" riders to other teams, trying to get the best deals for them all the time. I can't see that changing." Plus, he continues, "It would be legally difficult to actually implement punishments in a free market scenario. Outside of sport, most professional people who are in salaried positions always keep an eye open for opportunities to advance their career (and salary). I could see the lawyers arguing that sport was no different, whatever the jurisdiction and whatever the governing body."

Despite the range of opinions here, we suggest that a few relatively simple changes be considered by the UCI, which could (a) quickly remove most of the competitive and administrative difficulties posed by the current system, and (b) provide a more coherent and potentially more exciting and engaging midseason and offseason transfer narrative:

- Open up a longer but well-defined and strictly enforced mid-season transfer window, perhaps during the month of June, whereby riders switch teams immediately – assuming both teams agree. (This midseason arrangement is never likely to become very widely used, nor will it have much of an impact on the points situation, because the "marketplace" of available riders will never be large. However, it might allow critical moves for unhappy riders or needy teams at certain times. It would typically comprise just a single rider and some financial considerations between the two participating teams.)
- Given the longer and more active mid-season transfer window, move the off-season window – along with the current associated regulations – to October 1 instead of August 1, so that teams can focus on the Vuelta and late-season races with fewer distractions.
- Crack down on and penalize teams, riders and agents that announce or hint at transfers prior to the transfer window. It will be impossible to completely eliminate the rumor mill, but fines or a restriction on transfer privileges for any offenders could go a long way towards discouraging this kind of behavior.
- And under any circumstances, change standard contract dates to end on November 1 instead of December 31, to avoid all the arbitrary nonsense after the end of the season. Surely no one can seriously argue against the logic of that change.

If harnessed correctly and in a timely manner, these simple changes could help mitigate the competitive disruption and operational aggravation in cycling's transfer market. More importantly, they could provide fans with clarity and a new engagement point that drives greater interest at the season's end. Says Cookson, "the UCI and its lawyers would have to ensure any changes were legally enforceable and practicable. But if it were all agreed this year, it could probably be put in place for 2021 or 2022."