

Inside the AIGCP's Challenge to the UCI

Just weeks after Velon [filed suit](#) against the UCI over its alleged anti-competitive business practices, and only three days after the Cycling Anti-Doping Foundation (CADF) [called into question](#) other recent [initiatives by the UCI](#), the association of men's professional cycling teams – better known by its French acronym AIGCP – circulated a [strongly-worded letter](#) to the UCI, voicing various concerns about its organizational, financial, and sporting obligations.

The AIGCP is attempting to force some serious and long overdue debate about fundamental problems in the sport, by raising a broad range of structural and economic matters in a very public letter. And while the letter proposes a stronger collaboration between the key stakeholders, like the previous Velon and CADF actions, it is symbolic of the problems dogging the whole sport – continuous in-fighting between various interest groups in the sport, which often seems to work against the ability of the sport to move in unison towards its agreed-upon and greater objectives.

Velon's and the AIGCP's complaints are related (Editors' Note: the AIGCP has several overlapping members with, and similar objectives to Velon) but the AIGCP letter focuses attention on three long-standing concerns in the sport. In summary:

- The UCI is not effectively performing its primary regulatory role: to govern the safety and enforce the “rules” of the sport.
- The teams are essentially shut out of the day-to-day procedural decision-making processes, as well as the longer-term strategic planning and setting of objectives for the sport.
- The UCI is stepping well beyond its defined regulatory role, to interfere with financial interests inside the sport, making decisions about the allocation of rights to race organizers and national federations, and in some cases competing directly in the market it is supposed to be regulating.

All these issues have been on the forefront for many years, so observers wondered why the AIGCP finally decided to challenge the UCI at this particular time. Mr. Javier Barrio, head of the AIGCP, told The Outer Line that the letter was the result of accumulating frustration on the part of the teams over the past couple of years.

But he says the UCI's reversal with respect to [on-board technology](#) proposals last February – where the UCI unilaterally revoked the teams' right to control on-bike equipment – was the single event that triggered the letter and the demand for better communication.

“Here was a blatant case of the UCI unilaterally taking away a right which we believe clearly belongs to the teams,” Barrio said. “We wrote and disputed that decision, and asked for a discussion. But we never heard anything back from the UCI.”

Barrio emphasized the decision to make this letter public was unanimously supported by the AIGCP's full membership (it represents every WorldTour and Pro Continental team except Astana). The AIGCP is a political association which meets two or three times a year; it is run by a seven-person Management Committee which is elected every two years.

Barrio declined to say which teams are the more active within the organization, but a quick review of social media and PR suggests that a handful of the stronger teams drive the agenda; the current president is Iwan Spekenbrink of Sunweb, while Richard Plugge of Jumbo-Visma and Alfonso Galilea of Movistar currently serve as the two vice presidents.

Let's examine each of the AIGCP's three main assertions in a bit more detail. First, most pundits in cycling agree that the UCI's regulatory role in the sport is an important one. But here, the AIGCP is

accusing the UCI of poorly managing its fundamental role of rules enforcement, race oversight, and safety.

Numerous accidents over the last decade have raised the stakes for rider safety, and despite chest-thumping from the riders' union and the public, not much has materialized to improve the situation, other than the recent weather protocol. Poor course design and inadequate safety barrier precautions continue to be a problem. Rules interpretation and enforcement – like the recent [disqualification of Nils Eekhoff](#) at the 2019 World Championships – continue to be contentious issues.

In its second major point, the teams call out the UCI for essentially shutting them out of the decision-making process. While the AIGCP has two of the 12 seats in the Professional Cycling Council (PCC), the UCI itself holds six seats, with the President holding the deciding vote in case of a tie.

And at a fundamental level, the most important authority in the sport rests in the UCI's Management Committee (MC), which is comprised solely of UCI executives and delegates; this is where the real power is wielded. As the AIGCP letter put it, this situation is essentially akin to “taxation without representation;” i.e., the UCI is demanding increasing costs, fees and financial guarantees from the teams, but allowing them little say in how the sport is actually run.

Finally, the AIGCP letter makes some pointed accusations about the UCI's participation – some would say interference – in the sport's commercial playing field. This is not part of its traditional charter, and so many observers have critiqued the UCI's attempts to manage the sport's economic landscape, given that it doesn't own any race organizations, teams, or broadcasting assets.

The AIGCP focuses its comments here on two key fronts: (1) the obligations, costs and wear-and-tear imposed on the WorldTour teams to race an excessively long schedule, now increasing even further; and (2) the control extended by the UCI over certain content licensing and monetization opportunities. With the UCI creating new racing series formats, and then trying to cut licensing deals to market those events, it's understandable that the teams – given their own commercial interests – might react negatively.

The UCI's attempts to influence rights allocation or event monetization in the very market it is supposed to regulate has represented a widely-perceived conflict of interest for many years. Indeed, some people within the sport have gone so far as to say there is no need at all for the UCI – that the pro road sport would be better off redefining its structural and economic model by simply regulating itself, just as other professional league and franchise sports do.

But it's not quite that simple, particularly given EU anti-competition laws. Notably, Barrio didn't go that far either; he conceded that the sport needs the role of the UCI.

“Obviously, we need a regulatory agency to referee the sport, to regulate it and to keep it safe – but not one who assumes control over rights allocation, who competes in the market,” Barrio said. However, he added, “We need a UCI, we don't necessarily need this UCI.”

According to Barrio, the real sore point for the teams stems from their inability to have much of a voice in the way the sport is run; he said that the UCI tends to make unilateral decisions – and often on very key issues.

“They can be very paternalistic – thinking they know what is good for us as teams, but often without really consulting us,” he said.

But at the same time, Barrio was careful to project a spirit of compromise and reasonableness.

“I want to make one thing clear. We (the AIGCP) are not sore losers,” he said. “We realize that of course

we are not going to win every battle in cycling; we know we may have a different perspective on some issues than other stakeholders. But what bothers us is that the game is rigged – we don't really have the right to fully participate, and we don't have the votes to ever win."

Barrio came across as a circumspect man, and he used guarded language in our interview. It's also clear that he felt strongly about the current imbalance. Barrio worked as an executive with the UCI during the administrations of Pat McQuaid and Brian Cookson, and thus has some insight about how the wheels turn inside the UCI.

"I would say that is one of my assets, in terms of running the AIGCP; I know how the UCI was, and I know how it is," he said.

When asked if the AIGCP's concerns have intensified over the last few years, Barrio implied that there have been some changes of direction during the regime of David Lappartient, vis-à-vis earlier administrations. "Yes, of course," he said.

But he refused to be drawn into any general controversy with the organization. Rather, he made it clear that his preference is to lay a stronger groundwork for cooperation and collaboration with the UCI, rather than going to war with it.

He said that the AIGCP decided to make this letter public in the hopes of incentivizing discussions with the UCI, and better informing other parties in cycling (like sponsors and fans) about how things actually work.

"There is no single or particular top priority here," Barrio said. "but I will say that just getting a good dialogue going would be the best way to start addressing these issues."

At the same time, it's clear that the AIGCP is not just going to sit idly by and hope that maybe the UCI will do something. Barrio hinted that the teams are prepared to take additional steps if constructive dialogue is not initiated, or their concerns are not formally addressed. When pressed about what such steps the teams might be willing to take to force the UCI's hand, Barrio was guarded.

"We have some ideas about that, and we do intend to make sure that our issues are finally addressed," he said. "I don't want to disclose what those responses or ideas are, or how far we would go, but let me just say we are prepared to take action."

As with the Velon lawsuit and CADF letter, there has so far been no formal reaction from the UCI. The Outer Line contacted the UCI for comment on this matter, but has not yet received any response. But there are some other perspectives from which to view this emerging and potential impasse between the UCI and other commercial parties in the sport. While discontent around the UCI's direction may be growing in certain circles, others suggest that the cycling community should give David Lappartient and his administration the benefit of the doubt, and a little more time and flexibility to implement some of the cornerstones of his "[Agenda 2022](#)" objectives.

Lappartient's Agenda 2022 outlines a number of components which would comprise a broad restructuring of men's pro cycling, and on page 58 it specifically addresses the aggregation of media rights and a digital transformation to distribute content globally.

This reflects one of the most frequently cited prerequisites for a sustainable business model – the need to consolidate the major assets in order to better distribute content and monetize key events, and maximize revenue potential. This change could build cycling into a stronger and more profitable sport, one that is better positioned to capitalize on consumer entertainment demand and maximize content distribution profitability.

ASO has always appeared resolutely unwilling to take on that consolidation challenge, preferring to protect its status quo influence over the sport. As suggested more than four years ago in our hypothetical [business plan](#) for an international league, we believe there is a strong opportunity for an outside financial consolidator to step in and play this role. But so far – for a variety of complex reasons – that party hasn't emerged.

At the end of the day, the scope of those proposed Agenda 2022 changes and the recent actions of the AIGCP and Velon simply reflect rapid convergence of the teams' commercial interests, the sport's continuing financial stagnation, and a lack of cooperation among all the parties. And in the absence of a formal plan from the AIGCP, or a broader business plan from Velon or ASO (or any other party for that matter), the UCI may see itself as the party best-suited to lead the way.

However, a more assertive commercial role in the sport for the UCI would certainly deviate from its original regulatory charter, and it would clearly require it to assemble significant new business, information technology, and sports entertainment marketing capabilities. And, since the UCI doesn't actually own any of the races or teams, any move to control content rights or restructure or create new racing series – without appropriate input from all of the sport's other stakeholders – will be perceived as a naked power grab. The teams, event organizers, and investors with actual capital at risk here are obviously going to want to have their say in any major changes and restructuring.

This battle over the sport's commercial future is driving all of these current grievances, positioning and politics inside cycling. All parties obviously want to see the sport thrive and grow, and each would understandably like to see this happen in a manner that most benefits their own specific interests. But cycling may never reach that greater goal if constant inter-party bickering continues to divert focus away from that bigger picture. Hopefully, the AIGCP's public letter will be viewed not so much as an airing of grievances, as a call to action: all the key shareholders – teams, organizers and the UCI – need to sit down together and find a better way to package cycling's various assets, deliver the sport to a global audience, and develop stronger future revenue streams.

The AIGCP has expressed a preference to work more collaboratively with the UCI. If all the parties can work together to find common ground, perhaps another major stand-off in the sport can be avoided. Many of these parties will be sitting around the same table at the annual WorldTour seminar coming up in mid-December, and depending on the mood by that time, it seems that either greater collaboration or some fireworks may be on the way. We can only hope it will be the former.

By Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, November 8th, 2019.