

Is It Time to Shake Up the Pro Cycling Calendar?

The success of pro cycling's 2021 calendar has demonstrated the sport's resilience in a season impacted by COVID-19 hot spots in the spring and the delta variant surge in late summer. Paris–Roubaix's shift to the fall—and the long-awaited (and overdue) debut of its women's edition—was a perfect example of how unfortunate circumstances can create new opportunities. But given underperforming viewership numbers across the sport it is worth asking: Are there other kinds of calendar shifts or rearrangements that could shake up cycling in a positive way?

The recently formed [Professional Triathletes Organization](#) (PTO) has provided an instructive example of how pro cycling can modernize its game. The PTO staged the [inaugural Collins Cup](#) challenge in Šamorín, Slovakia, on August 28, ushering in an endurance sport version of golf's Ryder Cup. This new annual event disrupts the traditional Ironman triathlon model and calendar; it pits American, European, and International teams against each other in a match-challenge format over several heats, with both men and women earning points toward an overall championship.

Team Europe earned the inaugural victory, but the real winners were professional triathletes everywhere and the sport of triathlon. The PTO invested several years in constructing the organizational model and event's master plan, with copious athlete input. The PTO secured worldwide broadcasting deals for the event, with up to 7.5 hours of coverage airing on BeIN Sports, Fox Sports, and Eurosport, as well as on-demand platforms like Discovery+. While there were inevitable kinks in the first edition, including inconsistent weather and reduced fan turnout due to COVID precautions, it [was verified to have reached 7 million viewers](#). This novel format has the potential to revolutionize triathlon globally.

According to PTO executive director Charles Adamo, the Collins Cup and its athlete-centric organization are just part of a natural evolution in professional sports—toward athletes taking an ownership role. “It used to be that the athlete was treated as a kind of hired help for the team, or the sporting event, and was compensated poorly as a result. Mature athlete associations changed all that. Professionals at some point have to have some incentive to act together and take a seat at the ownership table, to steer their sport and their careers as a stakeholder.”

According to Adamo, the PTO isn't like other sporting entities, in that it is an athletes' body first. While he steers a business-governing structure behind the scenes, the men and women athletes receive half of the profits while the investment group behind the organization receives the other half. “The hardest part for many of our athlete members is getting used to talking about the PTO in the first person—‘we’ do this, and ‘we’ do that—but it quickly settles in as a reminder that this is their future.”

Ironman is a licensed competition that markets to participants first, deriving much of its revenues from the event registrants, while the Collins Cup is an event created by the competitors to showcase head-to-head competition as sports entertainment—which is the draw for its events. That athlete-centered focus, rather than a focus on the race's brand, is changing how the athletes view themselves and has rapidly organized the top triathletes under the PTO umbrella.

There is nothing in pro cycling equivalent to this bold play by the PTO; not since the Tour de France was last run exclusively with national teams in 1961 has there been a mid-season challenge of a similar national format to the Collins Cup. The European Union championships are too localized, and regional events like the Pan American Games are too intermittent. We have also noted in the past that pro teams have become so internationalized—even the ones sponsored by nation-state entities like UAE, Bahrain, and Astana—that it would be difficult to stage these kinds of international challenges outside of the current world championships. And there has certainly never been an athlete-organized event within pro cycling.

But Adamo thinks there is an opportunity to create something new in cycling, a sport that is shackled by its history and traditions. “You have to think outside of the intrinsic sport,” says Adamo. “You have to create an event for true sports lovers.” Pro cycling’s world championships have inevitably been dulled in importance by the dominance of the Tour de France; in addition, the all-important context of nation vs. nation gets diluted when riders often seem to scorn national team allegiances in favor of their sponsors’ interests or to curry favor in a contract year. A mid-season challenge like the Collins Cup (competitively employing continental or national pride as a storytelling hook) could break the stagnant rut and create a new narrative direction for the sport.

American-style criterium racing is a dynamic and popular format that can be adopted as an event-ready platform. The short-lived [National Cycling League](#) in the U.S. in the early 1990s leveraged just such a model in a city vs. city competition; Justin Williams (L39ION of LA) [recently proposed](#) an updated version of that model. The NCL failed to survive the ups and downs of the terrestrial broadcast-centric, pre-internet niche cable television sports content era, but it could inform a new kind of nation vs. nation challenge. Current broadcast technology and partnerships on a PTO-Collins Cup scale could connect it to a modern sports entertainment audience.

Among the advantages of a criterium, match-style challenge is the ease of broadcasting the events, the inclusion of lower-tier professional riders, and the capability for staging mixed-gender heats. The Collins Cup has an intrigue-building format that would also fit: Top athletes are drafted to race the initial heats to ratchet up the excitement, but lower ranked athletes—or in this case, cycling’s unsung domestiques and support riders—would shoulder the closing criterium heats and potentially decide the championship outcome.

Other incentives could be built into a cycling version of the Collins Cup and they could shake up and improve the sport. For example, the rankings system that determines the number of athletes each country can send to the road worlds is a confusing aspect of pro cycling. Much of this is swayed by the UCI WorldTour calendar and its top-tier pros; traditionally dominant European nations, which have most of the WorldTour-registered riders, gobble up the UCI points to enjoy an advantageous monopoly.

What if at least some of the ranking was determined in a nation vs. nation criterium tournament over a few successive weekends, leading into a championship or cup event? This kind of “qualifier” model creates excitement and uncertainty in the FIFA World Cup, and a similar approach in pro cycling for the world championships (or, dare we suggest it, Olympics) could transform the importance of criteriums from a U.S. niche into a global must-see sports entertainment event. It would bring a new context for presenting cycling to a wider, non-cycling audience *and* layer in a strong incentive for the riders to excel.

Adamo does not see the PTO taking over triathlon, but rather sees it as a vehicle for the sport and its athletes to engage new fans and broaden the sport’s market. In cycling, any similar venture would only be successful if both teams and athletes align to work cooperatively with the UCI—and include innovations that might not otherwise be considered in cycling’s tradition-oriented, Europe-centric vision.

Adamo asks, “Could the top cycling teams run their own events in the sport, and would they commit their top athletes to a flagship event?” For example, what if the top 10 teams (in terms of investment dollars) banded together and funded a “pilot” event outside of the WorldTour? Although the PTO model works best with athletes aligned along continent vs. continent competitions, only the big teams in cycling have the resources for an immediate impact. Adds Adamo, “Like the Collins Cup, you’d need the biggest personalities in it to connect with existing fans.”

However, all of this is purely speculative, and there are other formats that could also be considered, but few could immediately wake up the sport in a similar way as Collins Cup in triathlon. For now, Adamo sees the Collins Cup as an exciting but evolving athlete-driven commodity. “In five years, we see this becoming

a mass-market, sports fan event,” said Adamo. Now that triathlon has broken the ice, what could spark the innovation for a cycling version of the Collins Cup? The weak link isn’t with potential organizers, or ASO’s dominant position and influence in the UCI’s power base, but rather the disorganized structure and marginalization of the athletes at the decision-making table.

It will take athletes to organize themselves to force race organizers and the UCI to shift direction; any venture would need buy-in from the top riders and, by extension, their teams. As Adamo explains, the PTO is a purpose-driven venture that dissolves the barriers between the athletes and the sport’s other stakeholders to realize economic strategies. In cycling, on the other hand, the riders are still essentially slaves to directives from their teams, race organizers, or the UCI.

Currently, the incumbent CPA riders’ association has shown no such stomach for innovation; and the emerging project, “The Riders Union” (TRU), is still finding its legs and its long-term platform. In contrast, female racers are largely aligned under The Cyclists’ Alliance (TCA) athlete association and are better positioned for a Collins Cup-type event. Assuming that the men’s and women’s athlete associations can come together in a common framework, a mid-year challenge along the lines of triathlon’s Collins Cup could be the perfect disruption to pro cycling’s stagnant economic and competitive model.

One thing that pro cyclists should certainly take note of is that the athlete-driven PTO has demonstrated a potential new business path; similar thinking or approaches could change the power structure in cycling as well. With invested and interlocked sponsor partners and a unified broadcasting strategy, triathlon stands to gain new ground and activate its economic potential on a scale the UCI has fallen short of in recent years. Similarly, there is an opportunity for change in pro cycling that could accelerate global interest and benefit every stakeholder and future competitor.

Written by [Joe Harris](#), November 24th, 2021