

Israel Start-up Nation Fields One of the Oldest Teams in Recent Memory

In a year where most pro cycling teams have been financially hard hit by the fallout from the COVID pandemic, Israel Start-Up Nation has emerged as the exception to the rule. Backed by Canadian-Israeli billionaire patron Sylvan Adams, Team ISN is now one of the sport's biggest spenders – likely second only to Ineos. The eagerness of the team to throw money at building a more visible team became apparent during the latter half of 2020, when [they outbid Ineos for the aging four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome](#) – with a reported massive five-year, €25 million contract. That blockbuster signing was complemented by the acquisition of several other veterans, including Daryl Impey, Mike Woods, and Sepp Vanmarcke. They will line up with the team's existing stars, including Dan Martin, Andre Greipel, and Alex Dowsett.

There is no doubt that this a formidable lineup, particularly for a team that is only six years old. Indeed, it is remarkable for a squad that is only just beginning their second season at the WorldTour-level, and is a testament to what money can buy you in pro cycling. However, as we have said before, money doesn't necessarily buy competitive success.

If we look a little bit closer at the roster, a major theme – and potential concern – quickly emerges: in current pro cycling terms, this team could almost be called ancient. The ages at the start of the racing season for these big-name pickups are 36 (Froome), 36 (Impey), 34 (Woods), and 32 (Vanmarcke). And it's not just these outliers. Star sprinter Greipel is 38-years-old and hasn't won a professional race since 2018. In fact, the team's average is 29.3 years, which ties it for the highest average age of any team since 2015. And not only that – the team will have 15 (or essentially half) of its riders over the age of 30 by the time this year's Tour de France starts. While it can be good to have a few elder statesmen on a team, in its effort to jump-start their visibility, Team ISN has made the risky decision to rely almost exclusively on riders over 30.

The Outer Line went back and compiled every WorldTour team's average age since 2015 and found that ISN is basically tied with two other teams for riders with the oldest average age. The other two were the 2019 Movistar Team, and 2019 Dimension Data – and the message from those two teams is not encouraging. That Movistar team began the rapid descent of the once-proud unit, finishing 7th in the PCS team rankings, just two seasons removed from taking the top place two years in a row. That team would go on to finish 18th the following year. The 2019 Dimension Data team finished 24th in PCS team rankings, compiling one of the weakest seasons ever seen by a WorldTour team – with a number of ProTeams ranking ahead of them.

Movistar's sudden descent should be a cautionary tale for teams banking on older stars. Riders' performances tend to ascend on an escalator but performance tends to decline through an elevator shaft. [Valverde was consistently one of the world's top riders](#) – if not the best – until one day he wasn't. Likewise, after Mark Cavendish's last professional win in Europe – a Tour de France stage back in 2016 – then seemingly overnight he struggled to win even the smallest races. These examples highlight the elevated risk associated with building around an older roster.

And even if publicity is a team's goal rather than actual wins, building around a team of aging stars isn't the easy fix most teams assume it will be. For example, the 2012 Los Angeles Lakers appeared to be a super-team for the ages, but the roster construction was fundamentally flawed from the beginning, and the aging core meant they failed to achieve any success on the court. As they struggled the franchise entered a dark period, while their intrastate rivals, the Golden State Warriors, sucked up all the available media attention with an exciting young team.

Potentially exacerbating this concern for ISN is the fact that dominant riders in the sport seem to be getting younger. We recently discussed this at length, demonstrating that not only are the [winners of the sport's biggest races are getting younger](#) and younger (the last two Tour de France winners, Egan Bernal and Tadej Pogacar were respectively 22 and 21) but also showing that younger racers are becoming more frequent and dominant across all events in the sport. And it's not only that, these [younger racers are actually getting faster](#). This suggests that as an individual team's nucleus of riders ages and slows, they will struggle to keep up with younger riders who are riding faster than the older riders did at their physical peak.

Money certainly helps, but there is other evidence that pure financial might isn't everything in cycling. The biases or the insights of decision-makers can matter more than a team's budget. For example, in the Team PCS final rankings from the 2020 season, the top four teams (Deceuninck-QuickStep, Jumbo-Visma, UAE-Team Emirates, and Sunweb) all have budgets that are almost certainly significantly lower than Ineos. Ineos had a [\\$61 million budget](#) for the most recently reported year, 2019, but finished in fifth place in 2020. Likewise, in our [examination of the sharp turnaround of the Jumbo-Visma team](#), manager Richard Plugge discussed how the team was able to build one of the best units in the sport with a relatively small budget. There will always be some unique circumstances for any given team in any given year – like the 2020 injuries of Bernal and Froome – but historical experience underlines the fact that money isn't everything.

Building a successful cycling team also takes an immense amount of research and objective analysis, and interaction with the individual athletes – how will they interact and support each other on and off the road, is the supporting cast the optimal one for the star rider, what is the balance between the individual rider's balance between physical stamina and psychological strength, and so on. Success also requires a healthy dose of good fortune and luck – riders staying healthy, riders avoiding freak accidents, your rider being two inches ahead of his competitor at the finish line of a monument rather than two inches behind, and so forth.

A mantra that repeated at the recent Israel Start-Up Nation team presentation was “age is only a state of mind,” and there certainly are always exceptions to the rule. Matthew Hayman won Paris-Roubaix when he was almost 38, Alejandro Valverde continued to either be or hover around the world's top-rated racer through his later 30s, and then there are seemingly ageless riders like [Davide Rebellin](#). Joe Montana and Peyton Manning, while experiencing performance drop-offs, both enjoyed notable success after they were shipped out from their original teams for basically being too old. And 43-year-old Tom Brady has just guided the Tampa Bay Bucs into the NFC Championship game. So, you clearly can't always want to bet against the old guy. However, as the Bucs example shows, surrounding an aging star with youth is often necessary to hedge the risk of taking on an older athlete.

Nevertheless, we would argue that the key to success in cycling over the long-term may well be the ability separate yourself from the past and make ruthless roster decisions – setting aside historical relationships, personal sentiments, or alternative objectives (like building media recognition) and focus in on the cold hard facts of current performance capabilities. As Team Deceuninck-QuickStep's Patrick Lefevere has shown, you never want to pay a rider for past results; it is to your advantage to let a rider leave too early and let them age on another's payroll. That same holds true in most other sports. So, given the fact that it must have one of the largest payrolls in the sport, it will be interesting to track what kind of season Team ISN has.