

It's Time to Rethink the Men's Under-23 Category

Mikkel Bjerg of Denmark won the [U23 time trial championships](#) for the third year in a row on Tuesday at the UCI World Championships in Yorkshire, England. This achievement is unparalleled in the espoirs ranks — no other male rider has even won consecutive titles in the category.

Bjerg appears to be on a trajectory to the sport's top, and recently signed a [multi-year deal](#) to race with UAE-Team Emirates. But assessing his strength against the world's other top riders between the ages of 18 and 22 is easier said than done.

After all, many of the best riders of Bjerg's generation decided to race in the elite individual time trial. Bjerg is just three months younger than Tadej Pogacar, who recently [finished third](#) at the Vuelta a España. Bjerg is older than 19-year-old Remco Evenepoel, who was the [runner-up](#) in the elite men's individual time trial world championships on Wednesday. Egan Bernal, just 22, became one of the youngest riders to ever win the Tour de France this July.

It would be unfair to devalue Bjerg's three-peat, but exceptionally strong recent performances by his peers does suggest that a deeper examination of the event may be merited. The U23 race is ostensibly geared to providing a global developmental framework for men's cycling. But when the winner of a U23 race is older than the runner-up in the elite event, it poses some hard questions. Does the sport need to rethink the U23 Worlds format, if much of the best talent development in the men's sport has already essentially being "privatized" by Pro Conti and WorldTour-level teams? Or, with so many prodigies emerging earlier on the WorldTour stage, is it time to just do away with the men's U23 format altogether?

A constant thread through the 2019 men's season has been the dominance of young riders. No one would argue Evenepoel, Pogacar, and Bernal aren't ready to lead WorldTour teams in key races. The previous script of slowly building into a high-level pro career is increasingly and routinely being tossed aside. Fewer of the most talented riders want to spend much time in lower level development (Continental and Pro Continental) teams. As this trend intensifies, it will increasingly pressure other star U23 riders to jump to the WorldTour sooner.

The successes of Evenepoel, Pogacar, and Bernal will also give other young riders more confidence in their decision paths: wait in the wings, or fly now. We wonder if Bjerg missed out on opportunities in 2019 that suited his talents and racing temperament. And given that he'd already proven his pedigree, we should ask if the traditional development path is holding riders like him back.

Of course, physical talent isn't the only quality of a successful WorldTour level rider; mental focus, psychological strength and a strong grasp of race strategy is also critical. Two years ago, young American star Brandon McNulty, then age 19 and fresh off of a gold medal winning ride in the Junior World Time Trial race, [opted to postpone](#) a jump to Europe in order to continue his development in a domestic team. This seemed entirely reasonable — sending a teenager into the meat grinder of European road racing, compete against the world's best week in and out seemed an absurd thing to do at the time.

But flash forward two years, and McNulty is only a year younger than the current Tour de France champion, a year older than a Vuelta a España podium finisher, and two years older than the World TT runner-up. While this is an astonishing landscape and mindset shift in a mere 24 months, with his additional experience and maturity McNulty was able to win the 2019 Giro di Sicilia in a measured fashion, demonstrating strong team leadership each day.

The U23 division is a great development tool for the vast majority of riders. However, with some of the biggest results in the sport recently coming from riders below the age of 23, it will become increasingly difficult to assume that U23 titles will necessarily translate to stardom at the professional level. While there

are still gems like McNulty who benefited from time to build experience and maturity, WorldTour teams are increasingly hoarding talented young riders for their private development programs.

If the trajectory of men's elite professional demographics continues to skew younger, the U23 category risks becoming more on a consolation prize – and will have to somehow redefine itself in order to stay relevant. One path forward to protect the reputation and intent of the U23 division would be to exclude U23 riders already riding for WorldTour teams. This would help to more clearly define the developmental status of U23, in contrast to the WorldTour's top professional designation. Another possible option to deal with this situation would be to simply reduce the “magic” age – maybe to 22 or 21?

Whether or not we are truly entering a new era of younger stars, the purpose and prestige of the men's U23 category will start to risk irrelevance if its best and brightest continue to compete and win at the Elite level. Bjerg's success in Yorkshire and its implications went mostly under the radar, but high-visibility rides by Bernal or Evenepoel are much bigger shots across the bow of the sport's competitive landscape.

There may continue to be some true prodigies, but most riders will continue to benefit from some period of expected development time – to adapt before stepping up to the next level. But the UCI should review and consider certain rules and competitive changes that might help the U23 events carve out a more relevant and protected niche. By ensuring that the category is properly set up for success as a development focal point for the national federations, it can continue to serve as a stepping stone for most of tomorrow's champions.

By Steve Maxwell, Spencer Martin, and Joe Harris September 30th, 2019.