

Medalist Sports: A Microcosm of U.S. Cycling

The most widely-recognized bike race production company in the U.S. today is Medalist Sports – and over the past twenty-plus years this company has been a key player in shaping the current landscape of pro racing in the United States. Medalist’s diverse historical portfolio over the years has included the Tour de Trump, Tour DuPont, the Tour de Georgia, Tours of Utah and Missouri, the U.S. Pro Challenge and its successor event, the Colorado Classic/Velorama, as well as the 2015 UCI Road World Championships in Richmond, Virginia. Medalist also developed the original business plan and produced the Tour of California from 2006 to 2015. Over almost three decades, the company has navigated the turbulent waters of changing venues, schedules, politics, sponsors and race owners, and despite hitting several setbacks, Medalist has continued to set the tone for U.S. pro racing.

Medalist’s long-term Managing Partners and current co-owners of the company, Jim Birrell and Chris Aronhalt, break down the company’s history into version 1.0 (Medalist Sports, Inc.) – the pre-1996 version when its original founder, Mike Plant, was at the helm, and version 2.0 (Medalist Sports LLC) – after the company’s official re-establishment in 2004. Each of these eras has been punctuated by unique challenges, risks and rewards. Medalist 1.0 was created in the late 1980s by Plant when the United States’ premier race up to that point – the Coors Classic in Colorado – was starting to wind down. Plant – often referred to as “the most important man in U.S. cycling that you’ve never heard of” – and a core group of race management and support personnel learned their craft under the Coors Classic’s owner, [Michael Aisner](#) in Boulder, Colorado. By 1988, Plant and his cohorts were focused on a new vision – to create a new international stage race on the east coast.

Early U.S. Races: Much has been written about that first Medalist event, not entirely because of how it changed U.S. racing, but more so because its financial backer was the current President of the United States – Donald Trump. Now, almost thirty years after that inaugural Tour de Trump, Plant has also moved on, and is now a high-ranking business executive with influence across multiple sports. He is President of Development for the Atlanta Braves baseball team, the Chairman of the Board for U.S. Speed Skating Federation and, until recently, a member of the Management Committee of the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) – international cycling’s regulatory body. (Plant is himself a former world-class speed skater, and represented the U.S. at the 1980 Olympics). Plant formally disbanded Medalist in 1996, but has continued to be a strong influence within pro cycling for many years, and continues to consult to Medalist in an advisory role.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Outer Line, Birrell recalled how Plant first shared the idea – as the cliché goes, on the back of a napkin – for a major northeast U.S. stage race, with the people who he would eventually hire into Medalist Sports. No one had ever planned a race of that magnitude on the east coast, and even though Medalist would pull in some other key members of the Coors Classic team (including its long-time Technical Director, Don Hobbs), it all had to be done from scratch.

Securing the budget and the broadcast partnership with NBC may have been the easy part in hindsight. In the pre-internet era, big race planning could only be done with paper mail, telex (to communicate with the Eastern Bloc teams which had been invited to the race), landlines and fax for business communications; GPS technology was only available to the U.S. military. Furthermore, Birrell knew from his Coors experience not to rely on commercial maps, because small roads shown to be paved sometimes turned out to be dirt roads. He had to travel to each of the counties the planned race would pass through to get confirming local surveyor maps. He also had to acquire a second-hand aircraft altimeter to confirm the topographic profiles.

Looking back now, Birrell says, “It was an amazing experience trying to build that inaugural race, to discover the character and the diversity of all the different states. But overall, I just remember the exhaustion associated with pulling off a race that big for the first time, with double stages back-to-back;

finish one, then start another circuit later in the afternoon. We all basically worked a 24-7 schedule for the whole year... and tried to make sure we learned from our mistakes.”

The initial Tour de Trump finished with a splash in Atlantic City, and with characteristic swagger, Donald Trump stated, "I would like to make this the equivalent of the Tour de France." Although Sports Illustrated described the race as a "smashing success," Trump later withdrew his financial support and berated his executive staff over its losses, as documented by John R. O'Donnell in the book [Trumped!](#) "I never knew I was going to lose all this f**king money on this!" Trump exclaimed at the time. Trump pulled out, and the event would later be rebranded as the Tour DuPont – for its new sponsor – and lasted until 1996.

The Original Tour of China: Medalist took a major step forward during the Plant era in 1995 when it had the opportunity to put together the first major professional bike race in China – at a time when that country was on the cusp of emerging into a global economic superpower. The plan for this event was a start in Hong Kong – then still under British control – and the finish in Beijing. Grey Advertising put together the "pitch" package, and Plant helped position Medalist to produce it. Strange though it might seem for an endurance athletic event, British American Tobacco's Kent Cigarettes was the named the main sponsor of the event, and a deal was struck between China's government, Kent, and Medalist to put on the race.

This was an opportunity that put Medalist ahead of the rest of pro cycling – a chance to really open up the Asian market. Even though by now Medalist had the benefit of newly emerging technologies, organizing the Tour of China may have been even tougher than the first Tour de Trump. There were a few American contacts living in China to help with the translations and relationships, and Birrell, Aronhalt, and Steve Brunner (as well as other Medalist colleagues) were key to the development, planning and execution of the inaugural event. Email accounts were not very useful in China, and for communications. Medalist had to rely on thermal paper fax machines – receiving messages in Chinese, translating them locally in the U.S. at a languages school, and then sending the replies back to China.

Adding to the challenges, maps for planning the courses proved again to be inaccurate; Birrell had to zero out his odometer, drive the distances and note the details on paper. All of this was done with local taxis, and, says Birrell, "the cars were in terrible shape; many already had more than 300,000 kilometers of wear and tear on them, and several of them fell apart as they drove through the country." As recalled by several Medalist contributors – clearly without much relish – the staff had a heavily armed police escort watching them at all times, they were rarely able to leave their hotels, and they had to endure endless "exotic" meals, often prepared tableside with live animals.

At one point, the prologue in Hong Kong was in doubt. Brunner, a Medalist alumnus who later founded King of the Mountain (KOM) Sports, recalls that the operations staff did a course run-through at 9:00 PM the night before, but in the morning, one of the city's agencies had installed a heavy-duty chain link fence to block the starting road. "On the fly, our operations guy had to get a pair of bolt-cutters and cut open the fence. But then traffic started flowing out into the road, and there were no traffic police to shut it down. Our people were literally throwing themselves on the hoods of the oncoming cars to stop traffic!" Birrell says this event led to some quick improvisation by the race staff. "Mike called everyone together and completely flipped the script: all the stages were to be rearranged due to differences with government authorities. And somehow we got it done."

Hair-raising stories from these early years of Medalist are legendary. John Gatch, a long-time regular around U.S. cycling, was also an employee of Medalist in the early days, and has his share of vivid memories from the Tour DuPont and Tour of China as well. He recalls one instance of being wined and dined at a fancy lakeside restaurant somewhere in southern China, where his hosts had exclaimed about the great quality of the fish dishes – fresh out of the lake. "When you ordered fish," Gatch recalls, "you got the whole fish – eyes, tail, scales and all. But it was more familiar to us than a lot of the food we were eating, so Birrell and I both ordered up the fish." While waiting for the delicacies to arrive, Gatch went

upstairs to the men's room to relieve himself. Something seemed a little different, and as he stared into the strangely quiet toilet, he realized it was simply an open hole into the lake far below. He hurried back downstairs, "just in time to see Jimmy working on a big bite of fish in his chopsticks."

Brunner recalls, "Jimmy made something like 11 trips to China that year to work on the preparation – we kept a tally in the office, and for reference, I think Plant made 22 trips. Jim came back deathly sick and actually looking green after several of those trips, but somehow he survived to see the whole thing through."

Gatch also recalls an earlier event when the Tour DuPont was running outside of Lynchburg, Virginia. Some panicked volunteers called in to report that a cow had broken loose on to the road just a few miles ahead of the speeding peloton. A local cop patrolling the area overheard the radio call, cruised to the specified location, pulled out his pistol and shot the cow in the head. Then he solicited several roadside observers to assist him in dragging the cow off to the side of the road. "Fortunately, we were out of town before anyone ever heard from the farmer," says Gatch. The stories go on and on.

Just as Medalist 1.0 seemed headed for great success, the company abruptly came apart after the second Tour of China in 1996. Some disagreements over the finances of the business came to a head between Plant and his business partner, Billy Packer. This disagreement essentially disbanded Medalist 1.0 following the second version of the China event. There were several ensuing lawsuits, but the company eventually shut down. Plant forged ahead in other directions, to organize the Goodwill Games for Ted Turner, became Vice President of Turner Network Television Sports, and took a few key members of the Medalist team with him – Aronhalt, Birrell and Brunner. Whereas the Tour DuPont years helped shape and polish Medalist as a professional organization, the challenges and changing expectations which the company experienced during the Tour of China may have helped to break it apart.

More Recent U.S. Events: For several years, the key Medalist people dispersed and took on different assignments. Birrell went to work with Plant at Turner Sports, during which time he came up with a preliminary plan for a major seven-day Tour of California event – a plan which sat on the shelf for a few years. In 2003, Chris Aronhalt became the chief operating officer for the upcoming first Tour of Georgia, later bringing in Birrell and other members of the former Medalist team to handle the event production. Shortly thereafter, Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG – the eventual owner of the California race) expressed growing interest and asked how soon a California tour could take place. As a result, in July of 2004, Birrell and Aronhalt incorporated Medalist 2.0 – with these two major stage races as the initial assets in its portfolio.

The early Tour of Georgia races were highly successful, in part because of the participation of Lance Armstrong's U.S. Postal team. The event was a big boost for the visibility of domestic racing, as well as to Medalist's growing resume and successes in major race organization. Medalist designed the Georgia course like a microcosm of a European stage race; its calendar slot, Armstrong's presence, and the dominant U.S. Postal team's participation to prepare for the Tour de France all helped publicize and legitimize the race. For a few years, the race was able to attract a top level of competition, raising overall public interest to view the event – both in person and on television. Medalist 2.0 began to thrive.

The Tour de Georgia and the later Tour of Missouri, also managed by Medalist, only lasted a few years – Georgia's last version was in 2008, and Missouri only ran from 2007 through 2009. Both of these races were owned – and substantially financed – by established non-profit entities, supported by their respective states. Tourism has often been the underlying economic driver for big bike races (this is true even for the Tour de France) where public funding, matched by private sponsors, geared towards promoting tourism and economic development makes it all possible. Both races had measurably positive economic impacts on state tourism, but both eventually died – due to an unpredictable combination of political changes and subsequent sponsorship shortfalls. Once public funding dried up, the race production costs simply could

not be covered by the remaining sponsors.

According to several Medalist observers looking back today, the company's flagship Tour DuPont was really the last time that there was a top pro cycling event in the U.S. that achieved a truly self-sustaining and stable financial model. As Tim Miller, another Medalist alumnus and the CEO of the Richmond 2015 World Championships points out, since 1996 virtually all of the major U.S. stage races have either been tied to a wealthy private patron of some sort, or to (relatively unpredictable) public government funding. Very few stages races have been able to build the sort of momentum and financial return on investment that is required to build long-term private sponsorship value, and hence financially sustain the event.

Brunner shares Miller's perspective on DuPont, and offers the following observation of why some big races can succeed while others fail. "The initial sponsorship, usually from a sole source, like an individual or corporate patron, or a government economic development agency, should really only be about 60% or so of your total funding. The rest has to come from other sponsor sources and revenues, or you'll never balance the budget. This was a fundamental principle of Plant's philosophy which has stood the test of time; you have to work just as hard to sell an event as you do to organize it."

The Tour of California – owned by Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG) and financed by the major sponsor and pharmaceutical manufacturer Amgen – has turned out to be a more successful and long-lived event. Medalist staged the inaugural 8-stage event with AEG in 2006, and the event quickly built itself into the premier bike race in the United States, and eventually gained UCI WorldTour status in 2017. Originally held in February, the ToC eventually repositioned its schedule to warmer weather in mid-May. The race has consistently been able to attract many of the top international teams and individual riders and is now recognized as probably the most successful American bike race in history, even though it currently overlaps with the Giro d'Italia for attention. Medalist was a key part of the ToC's success, and likewise, the event was a major driver of Medalist's growth.

Concurrently, Medalist began to produce the U.S. Pro Challenge – another week-long stage race which launched in August, 2011. This popular event quickly grew to become the second most significant racing event in the States, also able to attract a number of top international teams and riders. That event's peak day may have come when Rory Sutherland won the stage atop Flagstaff Mountain during the 2012 edition, with tens of thousands of people in attendance near the finish line in cycling-mad Boulder.

But perhaps Medalist's most significant project was managing the logistics and production for the UCI Road World Championships held in Richmond, Virginia in September of 2015. This successful one-week-long series of events raised the visibility of bike racing in the U.S., and created a considerable amount of goodwill in the local region. It was also seen by many as a gateway to new investment in U.S. pro cycling and new events, but as often happens, the road ahead took a different direction.

Strains and Stresses: In a surprise move, after ten years of collaboration, Tour of California owner AEG abruptly cancelled the contract with Medalist after the 2015 edition. Then it turned around and hired Tour de France organizer ASO (which had previously been involved only in the TV production/distribution for the race) to take over the event management. Although AEG publicly commended Medalist's job, the unexpected development hit Medalist pretty hard. "There was no advance warning, and it was a hard pill to swallow," says Birrell. "I wrote the business plan in 2001, we staged the first race in 2006, and successfully managed the event for ten years. We definitely lost some sleep over it, but I guess that's just business." At the time, Aronhalt told VeloNews, "While disappointed to see the partnership end, Medalist Sports is immensely proud of its team and the 10 great years of partnerships, accomplishments and memories."

There has been much speculation over the last couple of years about AEG's decision to dump Medalist, and ASO's strategy or intent with the race going forward. Some observers believe that the costs of putting

on the race have simply outpaced the revenue potential of the event, leading to budget shortfalls; however, ASO is unlikely to be able to produce the race much more cheaply than Medalist did. Others believe that ASO was trying to execute an aggressive competitive strategy to expand new races in its portfolio which compete directly against Giro owner RCS Sports – drawing attention, racers, teams and sponsors away from its largest business rival. That strategy may be working, with the California race being elevated to WorldTour status, and becoming a viable alternative to the Giro. Whatever the true reasons for the change, Medalist was caught in the middle of this larger drama, and it was definitely a set-back for the company.

Birrell takes the high road here, declining to wade into this discussion; he simply says he believes that all the race owners should work together to build the value of the sport. “Philosophically, we should all be subscribing to the model of an Olympic sport. Instead of focusing on short-term objectives, we ought to all be working to build up the sport, not stepping all over each other along the way. That’s the only way we can increase the value of cycling as a spectator sport in the long term.”

Shortly after losing the California race, a second setback hit Medalist. The U.S. Pro Challenge race suspended its 2016 event, primarily due to a lack of sponsorship support. Hence, within just a few months, Medalist was faced with the abrupt loss of its two biggest projects. However, the company could not afford to dwell very long on these setbacks, and continued to forge ahead with a number of other less visible but still demanding events. Indeed, it staged over 15 events each in 2016 and 2017, including the Tour of Utah and the (recently cancelled) Tour of Alberta (Canada), as well as several high-profile charity rides. In addition, Medalist has continued to act as a consultant to other race organizations, such as the organizing committees for the world championships in both Bergen, Norway and Doha, Qatar, as well as the USOC and its para-cycling efforts. The firm has also worked with various governmental economic investment agencies on possible new events.

New Directions, and Constant Change: The U.S. Pro Challenge announced its suspension some six months after the successful Richmond world championships. But shortly afterwards, a new consortium of Denver businessmen led by sports retailer Ken Gart and Liberty media executive David Koff – in conjunction with the Colorado Governor’s office – announced the founding of a new company, RPM Events Group, to step into the empty slot left by the Pro Challenge. RPM Events Group signaled its intent to produce not only a new event to fill the calendar void of the Pro Challenge in Colorado, but also to produce a new race in the Richmond, VA area – to build upon the excitement and fan interest created by the earlier world championships. RPM retained former Medalist executive and Richmond organizer Tim Miller to help spearhead the efforts in Richmond, while simultaneously developing the successor to the Colorado Challenge in Denver.

Although the Richmond part of the project eventually fell through and Miller left the organization, the new “Colorado Classic” race came to life with a brand-new format and a new name: Velorama. Utilizing a hub and spoke racing format to reduce logistics and production costs, Medalist helped to shape the project and ultimately bring it to life. Concerts by two headliner bands, and a number of fan-friendly expo events were co-scheduled, in an attempt to bring in a larger and more diverse audience. The new plan and format was generally successful in the first year, though terrible weather marred one of key days of racing, rendering television coverage impossible. Both Medalist and RPM, via spokesman David Koff, are however very optimistic about the 2018 edition of the Classic, learning invaluable lessons from the inaugural race, and having now tweaked the race course and schedule of events accordingly.

A positive fan experience and strong local attendance are common threads of the Medalist race model and experience. As Birrell recently concluded, “Whatever happens to us in the future, it will always be nice to know that many pro racers first got interested or were inspired to compete after seeing events that we helped to produce.” Although the Coors Classic ended almost thirty years ago, Medalist has proven that U.S. races can still compete with, or even outshine some of Europe’s most iconic events.

However, at the same time, the bar for success, profitability and sustainability in U.S. races continues to rise due to increasing overall production costs. Alternative race production models are emerging as those production costs continue to rise. Some believe that the race owners themselves have a stronger incentive to manage costs, and can be more cost-effective in producing their own events; others believe that only by utilizing third-party and more highly specialized contractors like Medalist can race organizers effectively minimize costs and optimize outcomes. Different organizers continue to experiment with different plans and approaches to broaden their appeal, bring in more diverse audiences, and keep production costs manageable.

Looking back, Medalist Sports has been both a reflection of the vitality and changing directions of U.S. bike racing, as well as a bellwether for where it may be going in the future. The company has encountered many challenges and ups and downs along the way, but has consistently demonstrated the spirit and willingness to adapt and innovate as needed, in order to remain a key player in the success and development of U.S. cycling. Whatever the future holds, and regardless of what direction domestic racing takes going forward, it seems likely that Medalist will continue to be an important part of the story, and will undoubtedly continue to make its mark.

Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, March 11, 2018 (note: an edited version of this article first appeared on VeloNews.com on March 7, 2018.)