

## Mike Plant Interview (3): Q&A with Mike Plant on Lappartient, ASO, and Pro Cycling's Governance Challenges

*Editors' Note: In the first two installments of our [in-depth interview with Mike Plant](#), we examined his roots and history in the sport of pro cycling, as well as his involvement in various [other Olympic and professional sports](#). In this Q&A with Plant, we get his take on cycling's recent history, including some of the most contentious and controversial times in the sport's history – and what he sees as the future, and potential opportunities for the sport in the future.*

**The Outer Line: What do you feel has worked in the UCI's current business structure, and what hasn't? Can you provide some specific examples?**

**Mike Plant:** Well, first of all, international sports federations (IFs) are very complex organizations, they are not at all like the organizations and structures that you find in the professional sports world. Entities in pro sports are usually governed by the people who have put their personal money into them, the people who have the most interest in winning, the most passion. IFs are a little different in that regard. People don't have their own money invested, they may have been elected or posted there by more of a political process, and sometimes they don't even have that much of a passion for the sport.

Frankly, I sometimes asked myself if the guys across the table even knew that bicycles had two wheels. This problem goes all the way to the top — to the way the International Olympic Committee (IOC) itself is structured. In IFs, there may be plenty of really smart people, but often times they may not really understand the sport that well, how to make the sport better, or the key business fundamentals and challenges of the sport.

In my opinion, pro cycling shouldn't really be under the guidance of the UCI; really, it doesn't have any business being under the UCI. Recently, more than half of the pro teams had budgets that were bigger than the UCI's; the sport really ought to be organized under the professional league model. But, given the long history and legacy of the UCI and its predecessor organizations, what really are the alternatives? It's hard to change. In my experience, all the IF organizations are like that, cycling is not that different. But in an ideal world, the sport needs to be led by people who are more invested, who have more at stake, who are more knowledgeable. I know – that would be a huge change. But really, that's what needs to happen.

**TOL: What do you consider to be some of the UCI's biggest successes over the past ten years?**

**MP:** Well, maybe contrary to what some people may believe, I think the biggest success we had at the UCI was the way in which the organization eventually determined that doping was a threat to the sport, and how it tried, with pretty limited resources, to address and fix the problem. Yeah, I know, cycling still gets a bad rap in the public eye, but actually, pro cycling was really a leader in terms of recognizing the problem, and putting in place controls to manage it. I'm talking about the Biological Passport, and so on. I think back; a long time ago I said, we can focus all this money on testing, but we're never going to really solve this problem. The scientists working with the athletes are always going to be five steps ahead of the regulators, and it'll probably always be that way. I know the system's not perfect, but we've made some big steps in the right direction.

But having been involved in a lot of other sports at the top level, I can tell you that cycling is doing a better job at rooting out and controlling doping than are many sports. Baseball turned a blind eye to doping for awhile, although that was also a little different situation because of the influence that the player's union has in MLB – the athletes have a lot more power. However, baseball also adapted and instituted a much better system of testing and controls to eradicate doping from the sport.

You have to remember: this is a sport where money is involved. There are a lot of guys in this sport who don't know what they'd do if they weren't racing their bike. It's a way out for a lot of people, and there are no guarantees on a career if you can't find another team. All of those factors translate into quite a bit of economic pressure to perform and succeed. If doping helps you do that, it's always going to be an outside influencer that an athlete will consider if they don't trust that the system is effective, or if they believe that is their only chance to succeed. You're always going to be thinking about ways of pushing the envelope. It's a tough problem to solve, but I think cycling has done a pretty fair job, given the circumstances.

In terms of other successful efforts, I think the UCI tried pretty hard at creating new and innovative events like the World Cup circuits – maybe it didn't result in a lot of money, but they were good ideas. Or, for another example, I asked at my first meeting as the President of the Cyclocross commission, “What can we do to grow the sport of cyclocross?” And the UCI changed the TV platform – to a less Belgian centric system, so that it became more accessible to a broader audience.

### **TOL: How about failures?**

**MP:** Failures? I've got to tell you – that's just not the way I think. I try not to have that word in my brain. I try to look at problems more as “potential solutions.” But sure, there are obviously lots of things that we could have done better. I mean, look at how the pro teams are struggling financially. Look at the sport's continual, never-ending and almost total reliance on sponsors, who are always coming in and out of the sport. Look at Och (CCC team manager Jim Ochowicz) almost losing his team last year? His deal didn't get done until the last day. That's crazy – but yet, it seems to happen all the time. Sure, of course it's always going to be a sponsor-driven sport, but we need to figure out how to create sustainable revenue streams that provide continuity for the teams. Some of these team guys are having to run their operations on a shoestring. I've always been a big fan of trying to consolidate some of their assets together and reimagining the sport, but that requires cooperation from the 900-pound gorilla.

**TOL: The last 25 years have seen some pretty contentious times at the UCI. We've had some controversial leaders, and there have been some pretty ugly transfers of power. Given your seat at the table throughout this whole time, what are your general perceptions on the various regimes at the UCI over the last couple of decades?**

**MP:** Well first, I worked with Hein Verbruggen for many years. Hein did a lot of good things for the sport, even though he doesn't always get credit for them. People tend to remember the mistakes that people make, or people's weaknesses, rather than their strengths and the good things they did. Hein did a lot of good things for the organization, for the promotion and the visibility of pro cycling. By the way, he understood that by aggregating team and event assets, the sport had the ability to generate new revenue sources. He also understood the dangers of having one entity control the sport at the peril of everyone else.

**TOL: You were also on the Committee through the whole of Pat McQuaid's presidency, and you were pretty involved with the controversy around his re-election attempt in 2013.**

**MP:** Yeah, I also worked with Pat McQuaid for a long time. We've known each other for more than 25 years. In fact, Hein put us both on the UCI Management Committee (MC) on the very same day in 1997, in San Sebastian. Then, later on, Pat got elected to the President of the UCI. But long story short, I ended up having a lot of differences and conflicts with Pat. I don't think he really ended up serving the UCI very well. That time around his 2013 re-election attempt got pretty ugly, but I don't really want to get into all the details here. Maybe that's a topic for a separate discussion with you guys some other time.

**TOL: OK. How about Brian Cookson? How would you describe his tenure? What could he have**

**done differently – that might have resulted in a second term?**

**MP:** All in all, Brian did a hell of a job. OK, maybe at times he didn't come across as the most charismatic leader, but he meant well, his heart was in the right place, he tried very hard, and he created a level of professionalism that did not exist before. I think everybody knows that. He initiated compensation and audit committees that didn't even exist before. Yes, he had a small salary increase each year, but it was totally reasonable and under control – and approved by the compensation committee and subsequently the entire Management Committee.

Cookson increased the transparency of the organization, and he was very successful in building up the financial reserves of the organization. Whereas during Pat's tenure, the reserves of the organization were drained – with all the debacles that were uncovered in the CIRC report, using internal funds to get himself re-elected, etc. The stature of Brian stood out sometimes, like in Florence, when he finally just stood up and said, "enough is enough – let's just vote. Let the chips fall where they may." And he won by four votes. When Brian was the President, it wasn't just about him – it was about the organization. Whereas with Pat, it got to be – 'I'm the President and you're not, and we're going to do it my way.' Brian listened, he tried to build consensus. Pat quit listening – it was just going to be his way. When you stop listening, you stop learning.

*(Editors' Note: The Outer Line contacted Pat McQuaid for a response to Plant's comments. McQuaid said declined to comment. "I don't want to open up that can of worms which surrounded my election," he said. "I am satisfied that measures which I put in place during my tenure, in relation to the fight against doping, are now producing results and the sport today is in a much better place than that which I had to deal with.")*

And David (Lappartient) was always there in the background, trying to work on discrediting and removing Brian. Even that first night after the election, we were trying to celebrate Brian's victory, but there was David, already trying to advise Brian on who to keep, who to fire, commission chairs, etc. Almost immediately after Brian was elected, David was agitating for himself and against Brian. He was always trying to poison the water against Brian, and I guess if you look back, by and large he was successful.

**TOL: Where do you think the UCI is headed under Lappartient? Who do you think are the key players behind the scenes today?**

**MP:** Well, what has he really done so far to improve the sport? In retrospect, I think his plan all along was to get rid of Pat, let somebody else come in and do all the clean up and the dirty work, then get Brian out of there, and then take over. Lappartient started throwing bombs into the group immediately, with 5 or 6-page letters about how Brian was screwing up on this or that, or how he was failing the organization. Really pretty venomous letters, some of which were leaked to the media. Always harping on about how Brian wasn't doing enough to control mechanical doping, blah, blah blah. David would try to skewer Brian on something at virtually every meeting, he really worked hard to discredit him. He claimed that the relationship with IOC was going poorly under Brian, when in fact I knew from my sources at the IOC that the complete opposite was true. He was always over in the corner kibbutzing with somebody about something – scheming against Brian, trying to influence somebody. What does David want over the long-term? I don't know, really.

*(Editors' Note: When asked for comment in response to Plant's perspective, Mr. Lappartient told The Outer Line that, "I did not agree on certain directions taken by the UCI and I always said it. Experience has shown that we were a large majority to think so." But other management officials we talked to, who wished to remain off-the-record, made similar comments to Plant's.)*

**TOL: Earlier, you mentioned, "the 900-pound gorilla" in the room – which we took to mean ASO.**

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**Can you share your perspectives on ASO's current role in the sport, and how they are working to improve the sport or hold it back?**

**MP:** Most of the pro teams, when they're out shopping for dollars, the main thing they want is to get a starting spot in the Tour de France. The main question for a cycling team is – what do we have to do to get an invite to the Tour? ASO is the hammer in this sport, and they know they're the hammer. In the past, I had this conversation several times with Yann (LeMoenner, CEO of Amaury Sport Organisation). I would always say to him – “if you would just collaborate with everybody, you could drive more value in the marketplace – for you and for everybody.” From a TV and broadcasting point of view, there is great opportunity for more profit. And in all kinds of other areas.

But ASO just seems to be comfortable with where they are. They don't want to create another strong voice at the table. The teams are just beholden to them – and they want to keep it that way, they need that platform for financial success. They're just afraid of the whole concept that if they started to let more people in, and tried to make a bigger pie, that they somehow might lose control, or that they wouldn't be able to remain the dominant player.

I actually told the Velon guys that their hammer was to show up at the start of the Tour and not race – but it just won't ever work in cycling. I discussed that once with Andy Rihs, and he got it – he knew how much potential leverage the teams, or for that matter the athletes had, but it will probably never work out that way. You have to be prepared as an investor in a team to take a tough stand – in order to ultimately make your investment better. And there probably just aren't enough guys willing to take that risk. Some guys would agree and commit to this kind of action in public, but then they'd always hit me up in the backroom, saying they needed to be treated different, and so on.

**TOL: So, looking at the sport more broadly, what do you think are the biggest challenges and opportunities facing global pro cycling?**

**MP:** Well, to make real progress, I think we have to get all the stakeholders to the table – we have to put more of the assets and inventory into one bucket and then sort of consolidate everything. Until the sport does that, I don't think there is really a very good model for sustainability for either teams or events. The sport will just continue to be this sort of fragmented bunch of people all doing their own thing.

Not having gate revenues? We can't really change that. So we have to find a different path – different ways to make the sport more financially sustainable. I just think we need to consolidate assets, inventory, the riders – we need to get everything in one bucket, we need to develop one single place where you can go to find everything cycling. There are good examples of this in both American and European sports. If you don't develop that kind of exclusive scalable value, it's always going to be “catch as catch can,” and only the strong will survive. If we just maintain a sort of status quo – the sport will always be small, it will remain poorly-governed, it will always be on the economic edge where nobody knows if they'll be here next year or not. Look at cycling right now – there are at least two or three teams who may not make it until next year.

In other franchise-type leagues, there is much more certainty – even the weakest football or baseball teams know that they will still be there next year. Maybe some people in Europe don't like this idea, but I really think we have to look to a more professionally owned and operated league model for this sport to survive and grow. You guys talked a lot about these kinds of ideas in that recent Rapha Roadmap report.

**TOL: Can you comment on the leadership and direction of USAC today?**

**MP:** Not really. I'm just not that close to them. I went to Tour of Utah, and I went to Rob's (DeMartini, CEO of USA Cycling) house that night – first time I met him. I talk to Sean (Petty). Medalist guys are trying

to put on some new events. I know Bob (Stapleton, Chairman of USAC). But, to be honest, I had a bit of a falling out with those guys.

The USAC was supporting me for reelection to the UCI MC in 2017 at the same time Lappartient was elected, but they decided to pull my nomination a few days before the deadline. I got a call from Derek (Bouchard-Hall, previous CEO of USAC) a couple days before they were supposed to file some paperwork. He told me "USAC has decided not to support your nomination – Bob and I decided that it's time for a change." Well, first of all, the USA doesn't exactly have a seat of their own – it's "the Americas" and there are a whole bunch of other countries that have to vote too. Anyway, that kind of came out of the blue, but I told Derek – "fine, that actually simplifies my life a whole lot, so best of luck." And Stapleton ended up getting that seat; he sort of hitched his wagon to the Lappartient train. So in that regard its good that the US still has a rep on the Management Committee. How effective he is, I don't know. I know I interacted with the USAC staff, US event organizers and Pro teams frequently during my tenure so that I was always up to speed on protecting our interests.

I still just feel that Brian got a raw deal; he should have gotten a lot more votes. It was a cabal, and a bunch of guys were not playing it straight. Even guys who had agreed to vote for Brian, bailed out at the last minute. The night before the election, Brian thought he had it sewed up. I told him, Brian – these guys are all scheming against you. He was just naïve – he didn't believe people would do that. But, I'll have to hand it to David and his gang. They had a plan for a coup, and they pulled it off perfectly. My hat's off to them. Is it good for cycling? I'm not so sure.

At the end of the day, these federation positions just don't mean that much to me. It's not my identity in the world. If you can be a competent contributor to make the organization better, that should be the determining factor in any organization. As I said earlier, that's not the world of international sport organizations.

**TOL: Final question. Why do you think there aren't really any big break-out cycling stars from the US today? We have some good riders, but there doesn't seem to be anybody that looks like they're going to dominate the sport in the future. What is the U.S. not doing as well as we could, in order to produce more elite level bike racing stars? (Editors' Note: This discussion took place before the USA's successful showing in the U23 and Junior categories at the recent World Championships.)**

**MP:** Well, there are probably a lot of reasons for that. But the main one is – the pool is just so much smaller than it is in the other big cycling countries. To a certain extent, it's just about the law of big numbers, and the U.S. just doesn't have very big numbers. The sport is just not big enough or popular enough here – who do you blame for that?? I mean, look at skating. I'm not kidding – Korea has about 100 athletes with the talent of Apolo Ohno (former U.S. short-track speedskating gold medalist). We had maybe two or three Ohnos in skating. Right now, we don't really have any Apolo Ohnos in cycling. Cycling is just not enough mainstream here. I guess everybody is too busy playing Fortnite on their phones.

*By Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, October 31st, 2019.*