

Moral Dilemmas In Pro Cycling - The Big Picture

Several articles have recently appeared in the cycling media expressing outrage about the sport's apparent willingness to tolerate [unethical behavior](#), or to tacitly cozy up to various [shady players](#), [questionable companies](#) or [disreputable governments](#). The Outer Line touched on a similar concern in [a recent piece](#) concerning the Bahraini royal family's participation in the sport. It is certainly one of the primary roles and responsibilities of a free press to identify, root out and call to account parties or situations that may raise moral questions, or otherwise imply significant ethical challenges for the sport. That these situations can be objectively identified, covered, and questioned by the cycling media community is a good thing.

However, we must be careful not to unreasonably single-out or over-simplify such situations. While these recent articles and many others across the broader sports media have rightly focused attention on issues that demand more scrutiny from fans and from sport governance officials, the overall picture can sometimes be much different, bigger, or more nuanced than narrowly focused concerns or stories suggest. We should not focus our attention on only the few where many may be involved, or lose sight of the forest for the individual trees.

For example, consider the recent storm over several Middle Eastern countries which have gotten involved in hosting major races or increased their sponsorship of WorldTour cycling teams. The concerns regarding the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman as new players in pro cycling have sharpened as broad questions about their human rights records come into focus. People also criticized the awarding of the soccer World Cup to Qatar a few years ago. All this investment seemed to go relatively unnoticed for several years, but there have now been serious calls to boycott the teams and races due to widely publicized and well-documented human rights abuses. Chapeau to the members of the cycling media that are brave enough to raise these legitimate concerns.

But at the same time, we haven't really heard any loud or sustained concerns over the years about the growing role of China in the sport, another country in which there is virtually no free press, and which has severely curtailed the freedoms of many sectors of its population. There have been top-level races in China on-and-off [since 1995](#), and Chinese investors have made massive investments in international sports over the last several years, including such icons as the World Triathlon Corporation and European soccer clubs AC Milan and Manchester City. Announcements about [a new Chinese top-level team](#) seemed to provoke more excitement and interest than concern.

And what about Team Astana? It is a vehicle of the Kazakhstan state which, according to the watchdog organization, Human Rights Watch, "heavily restricts freedom of assembly, speech, and religion." That team has been a fixture in pro cycling for so long now that it hardly merits a mention, and has employed such wildly popular foreign riders as Alberto Contador and even the solidly red-white-and-blue Lance Armstrong in 2009.

These concerns don't stop with the middle eastern monarchies or former Soviet republics. What about Spain, one of cycling's dominant historical players, which was, last year, accused by Amnesty International of repeatedly violating basic human rights in Catalonia? Or what should we make of Italy, certainly one of cycling legacy hotbeds, where the government has launched a series of anti-immigrant policies, preventing migrant rescue ships from docking in Italian ports, leading to official inquiries from the U.N.? Few observers are calling for a boycott of the Vuelta or the Giro.

Depending on one's political perspective, the argument could be made that various other major cycling countries don't exactly have unblemished human rights records. Many observers have suggested that the United States is today committing a range of human rights violations, for example by [imprisoning a high percentage](#) of its young male African-American population. The United Nations Office of the High

Commissioner [recently accused](#) the U.S. of human rights violations in its treatment of child migrants at the southern border.

In the broader world of politics and business, there are many other examples of these moral dilemmas.

Saudi Arabia has been providing most of the western world with oil for decades, and it has recently become a major investor in [Uber](#), where it made the largest-ever single investment by a foreign government into a venture-backed startup. It has also apparently [accumulated enough power](#) in Silicon Valley to influence [editorial control of Netflix](#). It has just as repugnant a record on basic human rights as most of its neighboring Gulf State neighbors (see the recent Khashoggi affair, for example). But is anyone seriously calling for a boycott of those two wildly popular American companies?

And it's not just nation-states or governments that should be called to question when sports are used as a vehicle to influence public perception. It is also dangerous to draw too tight a moral line around corporate or individual involvement in sports sponsorship and ownership. Looking at mainstream American sports, for example, what about [Joe Rickett's comments](#) a few weeks ago, or the recent and sordid solicitation [charges against Robert Kraft](#)? Should fans boycott the Cubs or the Patriots just because their owners happen to exhibit racist, immoral or simply foolish behavior?

Our intention here is not to start an argument with New England Patriots fans or to get entangled in a debate about U.S. border policy.

The bigger point is that we believe that almost no country has a spotless historical record on historical human rights practices, and many corporate entities and individuals have less than perfect track records. Although there may be significant differences in cultural or legal perspectives, it can be a dangerous and slippery slope to focus attention in this regard on just a handful of the perceived worst offenders. Whether it is in sports or across broader society, it is often very difficult to determine where we should draw the line, when have we reached the tipping point. When is enough enough?

One approach is to take a hard-line neutral stance acknowledging that "no one is perfect" and simply leave these types of social or political considerations out of the equation entirely. However, ignoring these factors may not necessarily be the best approach either. In one extreme example, the International Olympic Committee awarded the 1936 Games to Berlin, just as Hitler and the Nazis were rising to power in Germany, helping to at least temporarily legitimize what later became one of the most deplorable periods in human history.

The growing body of knowledge about the [financial irregularities](#) and [human rights abuses](#) incurred during the lead-up, staging, and immediately after the 2016 Rio Olympics may one day overshadow the achievements of the athletes who competed at its Games.

It is often said (only somewhat hyperbolically) that if pro cycling removed everyone from the sport who had any participation or involvement in the dark doping era of the 1990s, there would be no one left. Perhaps analogously, if we start to get too strict in drawing lines about whom to support or who to allow into the sport based on human rights records or political considerations, there might be no place left to hold an event, or few sponsors left to support the teams. So we are once again left with a vague spectrum between right and wrong, questions about who should make those judgments, and the impossible task of determining where that red line should be.

In the end, we may just have to accept that — like in most other areas of business and commerce — there are probably some questionable parties that have bought their way into the sport. They need to be monitored, not only by the media but also by the governance bodies. The media needs to continue to shine a bright light on these issues, to make sure that unethical promoters or illegitimate regimes are not

allowed to operate with impunity. We are in no way making excuses for the parties that have recently been called out by the cycling media; we are only calling attention to the potential risks of double-standards, or of focusing public attention solely on a handful of the most recent or most blatant offenders. If we start to call for boycotts of just certain parties, things can get extremely messy and complicated.

And the question still remains: Who should be the all-powerful moral authority that makes the final call on these issues? It is not as simple as it looks. (We will dig into and try to better quantify these complex issues in the future, with a more detailed reported piece, including discussions with various human rights experts from around the sports world.)

By Steve Maxwell, with Spencer Martin and Joe Harris, February 27, 2019