

Nicola Cranmer on Losing Sho-Air, Hiring Kristin Armstrong, and the Olympic Chase

Team TWENTY20 owner/manager Nicola Cranmer was all about horses while growing up in southern England, but she always rode her bike to get to the stables. She ended up in northern California in her teens, staying with a friend who was working as an au pair.

While there, Cranmer met some mountain bikers, caught the cycling bug and began racing with them. After a few years of moving back and forth between the U.S. and the U.K. – including one deportation from the U.S. due to a speeding ticket while riding a bicycle – she eventually came back to the States, settled down, immersed herself into the cycling community, and eventually decided to start her own pro women’s team in 2004.

“I really didn’t know a thing about how to start or run a team,” says Cranmer. “I just decided that was what I wanted to do.”

She talked to friend and former Director Giana Roberge and was able to obtain a copy of the official team manual for Tom Schuler’s legacy Saturn team, and that book became her bible.

“We completely started from scratch. I studied that manual everyday, and then I tried to mimic their plans wherever I could,” she says. “It was a pretty grass-roots effort, I mean really grass-roots. We were literally raising money by holding local bake sales, and holding races at Hellyer Velodrome.”

But pan to the end of 2019, and Cranmer is facing her latest challenge – the search for a new title sponsor, as Sho-Air International has just indicated it can no longer sponsor the team in the upcoming Olympic year. This obviously puts a major dent in the team’s revenue base and plans for 2020 – Sho-Air represented about 70 percent of the team’s budget last year.

Cranmer expresses great gratitude for the years of support from Sho-Air, and she refuses to let this latest challenge get her down. She believes she can find new partners, and has various industry allies out beating the bushes for her, looking for new investors.

“There is a huge opportunity for someone to step, for relatively little money, and have the chance to work with a proven world champion and a number of other fantastic racers,” she says, “and I’m sure we’ll find someone that will be a great fit.”

Cranmer recalls the first time she lost her primary sponsor.

“I was a complete wreck, crying my heart out in the middle of a parking lot somewhere,” she says. “But, you learn how to deal with these sorts of adversity, and I truly believe that when the circumstances appear to be the most dire and desperate, you find out how to be a real fighter, and you figure out how to survive.”

One immediate step Cranmer plans to offset this challenge is to forego the team’s UCI registration status.

“It no longer does anything for us,” she says. “The only UCI World Tour race we entered last year was the Tour of California, and it’s gone now.”

That change alone represents a total dollar savings of \$36,000 that can go directly to operations.

“So the team will be doing more of a mixed-terrain schedule this year,” says Cranmer, “We actually

pioneered that kind of schedule, preceding the Rapha Roadmap findings and all the current activities at Team EF.”

The other big change for next year is much more positive, and Cranmer is excited to announce the return of Kristin Armstrong to the team as race director.

“Kristin will be great in helping to motivate the girls,” says Cranmer. “Her accomplishments and track record is unrivalled in the sport, and she also has a great style as a coach and mentor.”

Things are always changing in the world of domestic women’s cycling, and Team TWENTY20 is no exception. But Cranmer has successfully negotiated these challenges for more than 15 years. The Outer Line recently sat down with Cranmer for several hours and talked about the sport, current challenges and opportunities, and the strategies she has taken to run a successful long-term program.

TWENTY20’s Approach

Although Cranmer’s efforts started out small, she quickly developed an elite and junior program which evolved into a UCI track trade team, and finally into a pro road team. Cranmer operates TWENTY20 primarily as a road team, but with the help of new sponsors has expanded the program to include some mountain and gravel programs as well. The team’s budget has ranged between \$300,000 and \$500,000 a year over the past few years – depending on roster size, schedule, calendar scope and whether or not it was an Olympic year. While it doesn’t seem like a lot of money, that level of investment places Team TWENTY20 squarely as one of the top domestic pro women’s teams.

Cranmer continues to implement visionary programs like TWENTY20’s leadership in the [Zwift KISS Super League](#), where they emerged as the top professional team. Their eSports community development has resulted in the first eSports Gaming House in Tucson, AZ, expanding the cycling fan base worldwide. TWENTY20’s weekly community rides and racing adds to a program differentiated by wide latitude for the athletes to script their own season and calendar.

“Since our inception, we have worked with our athletes to sustain a training and racing schedule which also allows them to pursue their parallel education, career and family goals,” she says.

TWENTY20’s eSports focus has informed Cranmer’s vision about how Zwift and indoor cycling are changing the sport.

“Combining the excitement of gaming with racing, Zwift’s interactive platform enables cyclists to virtually ride and race with each other from any location around the world,” she says. “It can spotlight women athletes in ways that traditional women’s race coverage has neglected.”

Team TWENTY20 will introduce an eSports livestream Youtube channel in 2020 using the TWITCH gamer platform, which will help generate a new fan base.

“We also expect to see new partnership opportunities, as media impressions and fan base continue to explode in eSports,” she says, adding that “Zwift focused-training has also been really important for the team. It was a very powerful tool for Chloe during her concussion recovery and now for weekly training.”

Team TWENTY20’s multi-terrain focus predates the current popularity of these events, as evidenced by athletes like Larissa Connors – winner of Leadville, Belgium Waffle and Breck Epic. The team has also had a number of very successful track athletes.

“Balancing the training and race schedules of multi-disciplinary athletes is challenging but it has proven to be workable, and I think we can be a model for other women’s and men’s pro teams,” says Cranmer.

“We pride ourselves on catering to the multi-disciplinary athlete, and we have also worked hard to run both a strong development effort as well as a top level and highly competitive pro team.”

The team is also very proactive about the health and wellbeing of our athletes.

“As we head towards the Tokyo Olympics next year, we are rolling out a partnership with Wild Health for precision medical programs and interventions based on comprehensive testing and evaluation of hormones, genetics, blood, microbiome and sleep recovery,” she says.

Cranmer’s personal care and concern for her athletes seems to be borne out by the fact that a lot of her athletes stay in the program for many years. “We’re really the only professional U.S. team with a true development effort,” she says.

“And when you look at our model,” Cranmer continues, “we have brought up these juniors who have stayed with the program for a long time.”

For example, her current top star, recently crowned World Champion Chloe Dygert, started with the team when she was just 15 years old, and has stayed on for seven years.

“We want to create a system so that there can be a continued pathway for talented and committed high-school girls leaving NICA programs to ride at the next level while continuing their educations,” she says.

It’s an ongoing evaluation and if we see that our program isn’t the best fit as their career develops, we assist athletes to transition to other programs like those in Europe.

Cranmer says she’s also had a lot of women who have decided to go back to school rather than continuing as a bike racer – and she helps them work through those major sort of life decisions. Other athletes attempt to balance a racing career with a college degree, and Cranmer also works to help them accomplish that.

“In reality, I am often just as much of a ‘den mother’ as a team manager,” she says. “I try to help my athletes decide what choices in life are really best for them. Often, I get calls in the middle of the night with homework questions or boyfriend problems!”

Cranmer suggests that the ability to play this broader mentor role may at least partially explain why many of the more successful women’s teams are run and coached by women.

“In my experience, women coaching women allows us to fully understand and develop what women are capable of achieving as well as the physiology of women performance athletes. And having strong role models around for young women is also critical,” she says. That said, Cranmer alludes to several successful men’s coaches and program managers in women’s cycling.

“For example, I think Alex Kim at the DNA team has done a great job,” she says.

Finding riders

When asked how she evaluated or selects riders for her team, Cranmer says that she looks for not just natural talent or race results, but also for work ethic, personality traits, and perceived level of commitment. She likes to see a rider with grit, tenacity, persistence and a willingness to suffer.

“It’s hard to describe what you see in a young athlete, but sometimes you just know they are going to be successful,” says Cranmer. “I remember the first time I saw Chloe in a junior event. She hadn’t actually won her race, but the thing that impressed me most? I could just tell how much she really, really hated to

lose.”

But Cranmer hastens to add that her philosophy is not just focused on winning races.

“We don’t just go out and try to buy star riders who we think can win races, like some teams do. We prefer to mentor and develop our own talent, and interweave that with educational or academic opportunities,” she says. “What I really want to develop are good human success stories.”

Cranmer says that people aren’t really that interested in how many victories they have when the team goes to schools or does public events – they are more interested in the athlete’s story and how that athlete interacts with her community.

“That’s one of the great things about the whole emerging eSports trend,” Cranmer says. “Without the helmet and sunglasses, you can see the athlete’s face, personality and intensity, and it gives people have a more meaningful connection.”

Cranmer’s approach appears to be working, and at one time or another she has had many of the country’s top athletes riding on her team. Beyond current superstar Dygert, other riders that have been through the program, many of them starting as juniors, include Coryn Rivera, Jennifer Valente, Shayna Powless, Shelley Olds, Ruth Winder, Megan Guarnier, Mara Abbott and Lauren Tamayo. And perhaps most significantly, three-time Olympic gold medalist Kristin Armstrong has both been an athlete and a manager and coach for the team, and she remains active today.

Jumping to the next level

Cranmer doesn’t have much interest in trying to expand her team into a larger Women’s WorldTour team, or to build the capabilities of racing in Europe. TWENTY20 has raced in Europe and when it’s aligned with athlete goals, will likely add select events to the calendar after Tokyo.

“That’s a totally different environment, with a whole other set of issues and challenges,” says Cranmer. “The goals and the programs of European teams aren’t even comparable to ours.”

Nor is she involved with any of the nascent effort to unionize the women’s sport and some of the other issues that are often mentioned at the forefront of European women’s racing.

“I’m not saying they aren’t important issues,” she says, “but they just aren’t that relevant to our goals.”

A British men’s rider recently caused something of a stir by complaining about how “low” salaries (in the mid-six figure area) were insufficient for male riders to be able to afford to have their families travel with them throughout the year. That statement highlighted the vast inequities between men’s and women’s cycling – a rider with a salary perhaps twice TWENTY20’s current total budget, complaining that he is underpaid. Cranmer would like to be able to offer her athletes salaries more commensurate with the men.

“The only way we are going to get there is by attracting sponsors who share our commitment to equity,” she says. “That would be nice, but we also have to be realistic; it’s pretty clear that an immediate minimum wage policy would result in fewer teams and fewer spots for athletes. But pay equity is the ultimate goal for all teams and all athletes.”

The economic disparity between U.S. pro teams and World Tour teams are also significant. A typical budget for a World Tour women’s squad is probably several times than of TWENTY20.

“I’m confident that our ROI exceeds theirs – especially if we measure it in terms of results, World and Olympic medals, collegiate scholarships and balance and quality of life,” she says.

The success of Cranmer's model is underscored by the number of her top riders who have opted to stay with the team even after achieving stardom.

"I know it is a problem for a lot of the men's U.S. pro or Pro Conti teams; they find and develop a young star rider, and then before you know it, he's nabbed by one of the big WorldTour teams," she says. This has been a persistent problem for men's teams like Hagens-Berman and Rally. Cranmer welcomes progression and when an athlete wants to race in Europe she helps connect them to the right team.

Cranmer believes a new era of interest in domestic women's sports is dawning.

"Just look at the U.S. Women's World Cup Soccer phenomenon," she says. "I really think we are at or beyond a major tipping point. In every sport, we are experiencing a revolution in women's participation and visibility which will only increase with media, social and technology disruptions

The Challenges of sponsorship

Cranmer spends a good deal of her time and energy trying to negotiate the difficult challenges of sponsorship – compared to investment concerns in men's cycling, sponsorship challenges are multiplied many-fold in women's cycling. Exergy was her first big sponsor, starting in 2011, but it soon backed out due to financial problems. The team actually had to self-fund during 2013. Her sponsor of the last few years, Sho-Air International (a conference and events transportation and logistics provider) came in during the 2014 season.

"Scott Tedro [Sho-Air CEO] has a real passion for cycling, and mountain biking in particular, and that thrust him to the forefront of North American cycling," says Cranmer. "When Scott and I met, we had immediate synergy and recognized how closely aligned our visions were – and he has been a key part of the team ever since."

Each sponsor is unique, says Cranmer, and each requires customized activation. TWENTY20's social media impact and profile is the foundation to attract traditional and non-endemic sponsors. New races like the Colorado Classic can offer significant ROI for the teams and their sponsors, and can offer more traditional media impressions, which is key to some brands.

"It is really the story-telling which connects the fans, and the consumers to the athletes," she says. "That is where we really have to focus."

Evolution of the team

Cranmer cites a laundry list of key changes and trends which have shifted the direction and the ethos of women's cycling, based on her 15 years of perspective running successful teams and developing talent. She points first to the disintermediation of the media as a key factor – the impact of social media, live-streaming of events on Facebook, user platforms like Strava, and YouTube channels. All of these factors have dramatically changed the dynamic between pro athletes and fans, and have redirected attention to events outside of the traditional race calendar.

She also mentions that way that the USAC and UCI race calendar are being gradually displaced by growth of alternate races – eSports, Epic Ride Series, gravel and mountain bike races – which are redefining the landscape and opportunities, for both athletes and fans.

Finally, she points to commuters, environmentalists, e-bike riders, and outdoor adventurers, all of whom are gradually embracing the sport, expanding interest, commerce opportunities and participation levels, especially among women.

Asked who she thinks are the most influential people in women's cycling today, she offers a diverse list of

personalities including current and former riders like Dygert, Kate Courtney, Marianne Vos, Kristin Armstrong, Annemiek Van Vleuten, Alison Tetrack, Amy Charity, and Julia Violich, as well as race and team officials Lucy Diaz, Mary Wittenberg and Kristin Klein.

Future plans

The Olympics remain the big event and the key target for next year, and Cranmer plans to send Dygert and several other of her team members. And from a sponsorship point of view, there have been some recent rule changes which represent major opportunities for a new sponsor. The so-called Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter has just changed, allowing athletes to more fully acknowledge their private sponsors, and vice versa, creating huge new opportunities for global companies to sponsor top Olympic competitors – athletes who may otherwise be relatively anonymous.

“Can you imagine that?” asks Cranmer. “We already have one world champion on the team, guaranteed to participate in Tokyo, and possibly win multiple medals, and we have other riders who could be right up there too. A new sponsor could step in here, for almost nothing, and have the opportunity to support and benefit from the stories of all of these fantastic riders.”

Relative to almost all other sports and most other Olympic champions, cycling sponsorships – particularly women’s – represent a huge bargain.

“Our team and Olympians are a story that aligns with the mission of many global companies,” she says.

Traditional road cycling and the business model for professional teams have not changed significantly in the 15 years that Cranmer has been operating a team. However, she believes the rapid pace of change across cycling and its supporting media environment will result in new economic opportunities and great new storytelling opportunities in the future. The new focus on eSports, new types of both pro and mass participation events, new channels for distribution of the sport, and greater visibility and increasing platforms by which athletes can tell their stories, all represents strong opportunities for the future.

“Cycling has always been a challenging sport, and I suppose it always will be,” says Cranmer. “But for me, the benefits have always outweighed the costs. Being able to work with some amazing and talented young women, help them grow, and watching them transition into successful and happy young women makes it all worthwhile to me. I am more optimistic and enthusiastic than ever about cycling, and women’s cycling in particular.”

By Steve Maxwell, December 27th, 2019.