

Pro Cycling After COVID

Former UCI President Brian Cookson and Steve Maxwell take a look at what cycling in general, and pro cycling in particular, could look like after we emerge from the COVID era.

Over the course of the last several months, there has been a good deal of speculation, prognostication and tentative optimism about how the present COVID era may affect cycling over the longer-term future. As with almost all other aspects of society, it has become something of a cottage industry and regular armchair activity to predict the post-COVID future. [Much has been made](#) about the historical tendency of mass pandemics or other global catastrophes to alter the course of history. They have often led to transformative new technological or social innovations, or dramatic new ways of thinking and behaving. Indeed, the origins of [the bicycle itself](#) can be traced to just such an historical upheaval.

Some things are pretty clear; more people will be working from home more of the time, we're all going to be on Zoom calls a lot more often, and it's definitely not a good time to invest in commercial real estate or gym franchises. Healthy outdoor activities and exercise that people can do by themselves or with small groups – like cycling – are definitely on the rise. During the heart of the lockdown period earlier this year, people were buying bikes [at record rates](#), retailers were running out of inventory, dusty bikes coming out of the attic were flooding the repair shops, and the global [supply chain](#) sagged under increasing demand.

Many of these short-term disruptions will gradually prove to be longer-term trends. With concerns about public transportation, more people have become bike commuters, and many say they will continue this in the future – not just in the many already bike-friendly cities of Europe, but also increasingly in major American and Far Eastern cities. Major bike [infrastructure investments](#) and commitments are being made which could help sustain these trends in the future – promoting not only environmental causes but also improved human health through regular exercise. Overall, the bike industry is in a pretty good place at the moment, and many [new initiatives](#) are emerging to try to sustain this strength into the longer term future.

So what about professional bike racing? How is it likely to change as a result of COVID? This has also been the subject of numerous [discussions](#) over the past several months, with various [observers](#) weighing in on the potential impacts to the calendar, team and sponsorship structure, and future governance. There is not much consensus so far on just how the sport could be affected, though there is a universal hope that cycling can somehow emerge stronger after this difficult time period – that it may prompt some actions that should have been taken long ago.

The international SportsPro Media group recently took a detailed and interesting [look](#) at the possible long-term impact of COVID on global sport as a whole, breaking down the range of possible outcomes into five general categories:

1. **Restoration** – because they are tied to existing models and commitments, sports leagues and rights holders will gradually reassemble back into the old order.
2. **Reset** – the COVID shock will bring new organizations and actors to the fore, forcing a reexamination of how sport is run, creating different power structures and new ways of thinking.
3. **Retreat** – a global economic depression will create overwhelming financial challenges for sport, and the pause or decline in events and participation will decrease potential audiences.
4. **Realignment** – sport will stay on the same general path, but a shortfall in cash will give more power to new financial players like venture capital and sovereign wealth funds, bringing new alliances into play.
5. **Refresh** – new technologies and new ideas will change the format and delivery of live events, media consumption and sponsorship activation, and new fans will begin to emerge.

Using this framework as a rough guide, we take a look below at the trends which will characterize cycling, and how different long-term scenarios could play out.

Restoration – We are likely to return to something fairly closely resembling the old “world order” – discouraging though that may be to some who would like to see dramatic overhauls in the sport. If and when an effective vaccine is developed or the effects of herd immunity start to be realized – and given that the Tour de France was just staged and completed without too much disruption – a return to the general status quo seems likely in pro cycling.

Reset – Although we have [argued](#) for a long time that the sport should consider new business models, there doesn't seem to be much possibility of real change occurring in the near future. Outside of a few new [wealthy benefactors](#), there aren't really any new players in the sport. ASO remains the quasi-monopoly, controlling the way in which much of the sport is played. And ASO is still not inclined to allow any significant change in the power structure – or for that elusive growth of the overall pie. It would take the bankruptcy or [a sale of the company](#) to make that happen, and that seems unlikely at least for the foreseeable future. *ProCycling* magazine recently [named](#) Madame Marie-Odile Amaury as the most powerful person in the sport, although it's mostly the advisors around her that set the tone. There will only be a fundamental reset of professional cycling if and when the mindset and strategy of ASO changes, or when ownership or management of the company changes.

Retreat – Unfortunately, there is also a good possibility that we will see elements of a retreat or contraction of the sport over the next few years. The severity and longer-lasting economic impacts of the pandemic are still unfolding, but there is no doubt the global economy will take years to fully recover. This inevitable recession may resemble a sort of reverse square-root symbol – wherein there is a huge dip, followed by a fairly quick partial recovery, but with activities then stabilizing at a considerably lower level than before. This is the type of scenario that many industries are expecting, and cycling as well as broader international sport is likely to experience the same thing. In terms of specifics:

- We may see the loss of a few WorldTour teams. Team CCC has already lost [several key riders](#) and is struggling to find a new sponsor for next year, though team principal Jim Ochowicz has

pulled a rabbit from the hat before. Team NTT is also [on the hunt](#) for a new sponsor.

- Other teams are keeping a brave face on things, but as certain businesses like retail, tourism, and travel continue to slump, we may see other team [sponsors in trouble](#) by the end of the season.
- And there will likely be [more team closures](#) at the lower levels of the sport, where the teams typically operate on much smaller budgets.
- All of this will tend to lead to a buyer's market in terms of athletes, with fewer teams and fewer spots to fill, possibly accompanied by a declining trend in salaries. The best riders will tend, even more so than today, to go to the fewer teams with big budgets, and that could be a negative in terms of the sport's competitive landscape.
- There has been much speculation about a thinning out of the professional race calendar, with smaller or more regional events struggling to survive. Although there have so far been no major permanent race closures, that remains a possibility as long as sporting events and races face economic challenges and smaller audiences.
- We will likely experience a pullback in terms of the planned internationalization of pro cycling, as widescale or frequent international travel is curtailed, and as more teams form "pods" focused on specific competitive regions. This constraint seems likely even where important UCI points are at stake.
- Many of these trends were already in place or imminent before COVID-19, and the pandemic is simply working to strengthen or accelerate them.

Realignment – If some of cycling's current sponsors dry up, it may open the opportunity for others to step in. On the less desirable end of the spectrum, this may comprise [sovereign wealth funds](#) of quasi-democratic regimes or global corporations seeking to improve their image. There may be new mega-rich individuals with a love for the sport seeking a vanity project. On the positive end of the spectrum, there may be new sponsors seeking to leverage the potentially positive things coming out of the COVID era – more attention to personal health, increased focus on outdoor sports and fitness, and more focus on the bicycle itself as a means of commuting, outdoor exercise or as simple recreational pleasure. Cycling's much-maligned "fragile economic model" might turn out to be something of a [positive factor](#) in the coming years, in that it doesn't cost that much – relative to other sports – to obtain sponsor visibility. While cycling has always been a small and often struggling sport, it simply doesn't have as far to fall as many other sports, and when things improve, it probably won't take as long to recover.

Refresh – Finally, we will also likely see other more encouraging changes and a refreshing of the sport. For example:

- Eurosport is developing the Global Cycling Network (GCN) – to try to consolidate a stronger and broader package of [cycling television coverage](#). As a niche sport with a relatively small but enthusiastic fanbase, we are likely to see more [broadcast alternatives](#).
- One aspect of pro racing has already seen significant attention is the issue of [race safety](#) – with several bad crashes and poor road conditions focusing attention on this issue early in the shortened season.
- One distinct competitive advantage that cycling has over most other sports is the potential for realistic e-sport development, via platforms like Zwift and Rouvy. These are [competitive options](#) whose viability and realistic competitiveness were demonstrated and documented during the heart of the lockdown. Cyclists can actually compete from their basements and garages around the world in [top-level endurance events](#), in a way that almost no other sports can – certainly no team.

While it will never be the same as real riding outdoors – the potential here was underlined recently by Zwift's recent ability to attract a [huge new round of financing](#).

- The risks and worries around the pandemic have forced new health and fitness measures on all of us, cycling teams included. In short, while we have been busy protecting ourselves against the coronavirus, we have also been better protecting ourselves against other transmittable illnesses. And this is occurring across society, not just in cycling.
- Cycling is still very much a middle-class white male sport and pastime – and this clearly represents not only a gross social inequity, but also a threat to the long-term sustainability of the sport. The correction and diversification away from this trend will require pro-active work from cycling organizations at international, national and local levels. While there are signs that the general Black Lives Matter movement has begun to initiate change in some parts of the world, and there is [some encouragement](#) that the issue is beginning to get the attention in cycling. In another example, British Cycling has done some good work on this sort of thing in recent years (e.g., the [Breeze Initiative](#)) but more is needed. The COVID era and its accompanying social upheavals have raised the visibility of this issue.

The COVID era is certainly the most challenging situation that the sport of cycling has faced in generations. Its effects will be felt for years, if not decades to come. Combine the pandemic with some of the most reactionary and dangerous political situations seen in decades, the increasing power of a handful of global corporations, the hugely imbalanced distribution of wealth into the hands of fewer and fewer people, the growing concern about on-going racial discrimination, and the impending global climate crisis, and it is clear that society will be undergoing dramatic changes. Pro cycling will be one tiny niche of the world affected by the inevitable and transformative changes to come – and it will necessarily have to evolve and adapt. But, the human race has proven to be incredibly resilient and inventive, and out of each of history's darkest periods have come positive changes, ultimately resulting in forward progress and a better world.

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