

Pro Cycling Is Hiding in Plain Sight: Better Ways to Tell the Story

The [Giro d'Italia](#)'s mostly boring stage 3 painfully reminded fans of pro cycling's lackluster and unimaginative television format. Inspiring scenery of Budapest, the Danube, and medieval castles may generate new tourism, and some diehards may have tuned in for the intermediate sprints every hour or two. But by and large, until the last few minutes of the five-hour coverage, viewers were treated to three unknown Italians in a futile break – trying to snare marketing impressions for drone and hamburgers – interspersed with repetitive and monotonous shots of the peloton rolling along.

Televised bike racing has been static for the last 50 years – cameras on motorcycles and helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft signal relays, all converging in a single transmission feed with different commentators narrating the same action in different languages. There is no reason why drones couldn't be used starting today to enhance the coverage spread and better relay the signals at reduced costs; this is just one example of how the back-end technology has evolved while the storytelling techniques have stood still, causing many cycling broadcasts to feel two-dimensional in a world that has mostly moved on to three or more dimensions.

Mountain stages can create gripping drama as gaps open and close, and four or five hours of coverage can pass all too quickly. But long, flat stages inexcusably lull even the most dedicated fans to sleep. Wasted opportunities like this, particularly in grand tours, underscore cycling's desperate need to improve its race content and make the coverage more interesting if it will be relevant in a crowded sports/entertainment market and attract new and younger fans.

We have often [called for](#) cycling to try to build more of a season-long narrative, despite the fact that its major events fall in the middle of the calendar, and the lack of anticipation toward a season-ending climax or championship event. As the F1 "*Drive to Survive*" series has so [dramatically demonstrated](#), fans tend to get much more interested in a sport when they can develop a connection with the human athletes who write that competitive story. Personal narratives and a better understanding of the background, challenges, and accomplishments of the individual athletes can provoke great fan interest. Movistar's [The Least Expected Day](#) series, as well as several other recent team-produced documentaries, hint at a broader frontier for compelling behind-the-scenes pro cycling content.

Most fans, even fairly dedicated ones, might be familiar with only 10 to 20 percent of the individual riders in a grand tour, but there are numerous ways that the audience could be drawn into the compelling personal narratives and emotionally connect. One idea, often-mentioned, but never implemented, is to finally issue numbers to individual riders so that it is easier to recognize them in a crowded pack with helmets and sunglasses on.

Another approach could be borrowed from the NFL: during slow moments at the start of game coverage, players introduce themselves in taped segments with personal notes about their home towns and colleges, and the same could be done in cycling. Each cyclist saying a few words about their background and history – perhaps with a map showing the location of their hometown and some simple graphics summarizing their racing palmares, hobbies or interests, or other personal background that would be of interest to both the serious and casual fan. These kinds of personal and team introductions could be spread out over several flat stages of the race, encouraging fans to tune in on those days as well.

Announcers could also creatively mix the format on those long flat days to include discussions about the team sponsors, equipment, and family histories. Likewise, more frequent, insightfully targeted, and understandable interviews with a broad range of riders from *domestiques* to stars – talking about what happened yesterday or what to expect today – could add to the narrative. Such interviews today are often short and fluffy, or are not understandable due to background noise. Short bursts of identifiable, relatable

content can build affinity and personal connections, and keep viewers tuned in rather than wandering off to read the morning paper or glued to social media for two hours in the middle of a race.

Technical infrastructure and creative broadcast modalities could be rapidly implemented today to deliver enhanced, engaging content for today's demanding sports marketplace. Broadcasters need to comprehensively converge rider biometric data, on-bike camera feeds, and GPS positional information into a seamless visualization platform – even in hilly terrains, which F1 has already successfully demonstrated. The use of on-bike cameras is crucial and underused – Velon [tried this](#) in certain events, but it hasn't really taken off. Helmet or on-bike cameras with audio should be installed on more riders and producers could then switch to live feeds whenever it would help tell the story – during sprint lead-outs, inside a breakaway, after a crash, or crossing the finish line – all of which can tell a more interesting, insightful and powerful story.

Speed and power displays, which some broadcasters occasionally present today, don't convey much without an understandable context or layout, particularly for the uninformed viewer. An integrated F1 dashboard approach – a kind of power plant readout with color-zones showing levels of effort – or what ProCyclingStats currently offers, would be more illustrative. Transponders are small enough to be worn on a helmet, wrist, or jersey pocket mounted without creating discomfort or mechanical interference; ANGi and ICEdot helmets are examples of multidata microdevices that are already on the market.

More substantive interplay between race announcers and the team directors in their cars could better convey tactics, rather than the often unintentionally comical moments of a directeur sportif pounding on the steering wheel or shouting expletives at his riders. An even more interesting proposition would be to “hot mic” a few riders in each event to better put the fans into the action. This is strategically used in hockey, football, and baseball to capture pre-game banter, in-game exchanges – and sometimes the “down-and-dirty” trash-talking that can reveal interesting sports personalities.

While many riders maintain large personal social media presences, cycling has an absence of cinema/TV, music, fashion, and influencer celebrity channels in which storytelling and relationships can't connect to a worldwide crossover audience. When we think of a Premier League match, a Lakers home game, or a UFC fight, VIPs are ever-present in the audience, and many are interviewed in the broadcast streams to highlight their awareness and affinity for the sport. (There is even a crossover culture in sportswear, in which celebrities collaborate with brands to produce signature shoes and activewear.) The last time such a crossover celebrity was present and contributed in a small way to the fan engagement in cycling was the late Robin Williams' visits to the Tour de France in the early 2000s – almost a generation ago. The Tour de France in particular should leverage its status as one of the world's most famous sports events to attract and cater to celebs who will bring their community with them.

ASO is a latecomer to digital media awareness; until recently they saw themselves as simply a rights holder, and they still have not embraced contemporary storytelling. The Le Tour YouTube channel is anemic, their Tik Tok account only has 160,000 followers, and there is no official Tour de France podcast. Any big sports event or league needs to meet its fans where they are, not the other way around.

And of course, there is no way to provide a compelling television experience without well-informed, articulate, and entertaining announcers – something which again, cycling has sometimes struggled to find. The late Paul Sherwen spent countless hours researching the courses, landmarks, and riders – cultivating a personal rapport with many in the peloton during his life – to deliver what seemed like an effortless and non-stop narration that complemented Phil Liggett's play-by-play cadence. Imagine if they'd had access to some of the suggestions made here at their disposal to share bicycle racing with the world?

Announcing teams today still struggle to fill the airtime during long flat stages. The best announcers carefully steer through awkward silences, but mediocre announcers who lack the discipline and

improvisational skills can sometimes skew towards the cringe-worthy. A good example of how important this can be is Robbie McEwen's recent move to Eurosport; as an articulate and former top sprinter himself, his insights can bring the race to life; his slo-mo breakdown of Cavendish's win in stage 3, at the big screen with Adam Blythe, was a textbook example of how clear and expert analysis can lead to better fan understanding and increased first-time viewer interest.

Many of these innovations and approaches could be successfully applied in pro road racing. Some might be more compelling to different audiences than others. But it is ideas like these – and probably many others not discussed here – that could quickly transform long, boring transitional stages into compelling airtime. In such a hyper-competitive global sports and entertainment market, and given the sport's aging demographics and niche presence in that market, it certainly seems like pro cycling should be experimenting widely. Many of the innovations we've reviewed here are not only economical but could also be immediately evaluated with existing metrics – to trace viewer acquisition patterns and engagement. Now is a good time to shake things up – to attract and maintain younger fans, and to bridge cultural divides in order to bring in viewers of other sports and entertainment genres.

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