

Pro Riders Race Gravel at Dirty Kanza 200

Last fall the cycling company Rapha initiated an innovative and forward-thinking sponsorship model with the EF Education First team for the 2019 racing season. One of the team's first announcements was that they would [add a few non-traditional, non-UCI sanctioned grassroots events](#) such as the Dirty Kanza 200, Leadville Trail 100 and Three Peaks Cyclocross race to diversify their traditional racing calendar. This declaration shook up the traditional model of WorldTour racing, which rarely sees top-tier teams deviating from the standard UCI WorldTour calendar. And ever since, there has been an intensifying debate around what's right and what's potentially wrong about this new direction for pro cycling teams.

Alex Howes, Taylor Phinney, and Lachlan Morton lined up this past weekend to race the Dirty Kanza 200. This brutal 200-mile gravel event running through the flint hills of central Kansas marked a WorldTour road team's first foray into this uncharted ground. And, likely sensing a chance to plug their new gravel bike line and keep their riders involved, the Trek-Segafredo team also sent Kiel Reijnen and Peter Stetina to compete at the event. But before talking about what happened at the Dirty Kanza, let's examine and pros and cons of this new and alternative calendar approach.

There is no doubt that participation in non-traditional, non-sanctioned events by a UCI World Tour team will present some interesting new marketing upsides. Recreational cyclists will get a rare chance to meet, ride with and even compete against riders they watch in the world's biggest bike races. This type of fan engagement potential is unparalleled. It was largely this objective which drove the original Rapha initiatives, providing the team with wide-ranging new sources of grassroots support and the potential to connect into new marketing opportunities. American fans of the EF Education First or Trek-Segafredo teams are unlikely to travel at great expense to attend a UCI WorldTour race in Europe, but here is an opportunity for them see top racers close-up at their local gravel event.

The organizers of the events will also enjoy a likely larger audience, and the upside of new and powerful marketing opportunities. Robin Morton, a Principal in the events and race production company G4 Promotions, pointed out to The Outer Line that as traditional road racing events decline in the United States, alternative events like these can provide an important platform to connect with stateside fans and generate much-needed homegrown publicity.

"We need to do whatever we can to attract new sponsors and increase our fan base. Traditional road racing (events and licensing) is declining," says Morton. "If a sponsor wants their team to race more in the U.S., then racing Dirty Kanza (and other events of that type) may well be the way to go, since there are very few UCI races left," she adds. The model here might be compared to that enjoyed by the Ironman triathlon event, where "age groupers" are given the chance to race against the best in the world. This helps publicize the event, and it gives extra motivation to amateurs trying to race alongside their idols.

The alternative calendar also represents an interesting new opportunity from the riders' perspective. This was well illustrated by Peter Stetina's recent win at the non-sanctioned [Belgian Waffle Ride](#) in San Diego. A quick look at Stetina's Instagram profile shows a significant increase in social media engagement following his victory. Although his win may beg the question of what constitutes "importance" and "success" in professional cycling, for a rider like Stetina it is also a new opportunity to raise his marketing profile – and earning potential – by chasing wins at these kinds of non-traditional events.

And finally, sponsors may see upside in expanding the calendar and schedule as well. For example, EF's cycling computer/GPS sponsor Garmin is also a title sponsor of the Dirty Kanza, with clear cross-pollination opportunities. The bike sponsors of both of the participating WorldTour teams – Trek and Cannondale – have been making a big push to sell gravel bikes to consumers; this is an obvious way for them to get in front of new customers.

So, at least at first glance, this new and non-traditional calendar seems like it could be a big win-win-win – for the athletes, the organizers, the sponsors as well as the racing fan. However, as the events start to unfold, it appears that things may not be quite that simple, and that the teams must be careful to take a subtle and nuanced approach to these events.

The alternative perspective here is pro racers, many of whom are very well-paid, getting preferential treatment in a highly competitive entry system, and then showing up to compete against amateurs who forked over good money to enter the event. What if the pro racers dominate the podium? What will be the repercussions if they do poorly? What if a critical pro rider gets injured and is thus not available for the next WorldTour event? These are just a few of the many questions that the alternative schedule starts to raise.

Jonathan Vaughters of the EF Education First team told us that he was initially concerned about the optics of messing with a grassroots event, but that the team eventually warmed to the idea “due to the rules themselves putting most of the onus on the riders. We can’t offer more support on course than anyone else gets, for example, and the guys still have to race 11 hours, and we’re racing against some talented riders.”

Tour de France veteran and former team director Frankie Andreu told The Outer Line that he believes these alternative schedules could provide a great promotional opportunity for the teams, riders, and events, but that it could be a mistake to treat them as competitive events. “I think it’s great that pro teams send some riders to participate in fun rides. It gives a chance for fans to see big name riders, ride with big-name riders, and I believe helps build a connection from the teams to the grass-roots riders and events. The difference is that these rides/fondos/gravel/centuries are fun rides – not professional races. In that spirit, I believe the riders should be there for marketing, interaction, and not racing full gas.”

Andreu went on further to say, “I don’t agree that the pros should race and compete for a podium at the events. I don’t feel it’s very fair to the other participants. A paid professional cyclist should compete against other similar riders, and not against enthusiast or sport riders that carry full-time jobs and ride for fun or as a hobby.”

Whether or not the WorldTour riders could actually win the Dirty Kanza [became the focal point of an online discussion](#) after three WorldTour riders [said they intended to race to win](#) the 200-mile event. Howes, Stetina, and Reijnen all said they planned to compete for the victory; all three downplayed their actual chances of winning and acknowledged that the 200-mile gravel race presented challenges that were far different from a typical WorldTour road race.

Mountain biker Geoff Kabush said the WorldTour riders faced a challenge in navigating the dual goals of their mission at Dirty Kanza: win the race and also interact with fans and market themselves at a grassroots event.

“Dirty Kanza isn’t a WorldTour race, so it is a fine line from a PR perspective to approach these events the right way,” Kabush said. “Some people are better than others at reading the temperature of the room and engaging with people at the events. If you come to a more grassroots event like Dirty Kanza overconfident and with a win-at-all-costs attitude, it is not going to work out very well.”

At the same, Kabush also suggested that it may not actually be that easy for the WorldTour riders to win.

“I expect these guys to do well, but it not as straightforward as everyone thinks,” Kabush said. “There are a lot of talented riders out there that just didn’t choose to race on the road.”

Promoters of other traditional road racing events that spoke to The Outer Line voiced a concern that these

non-sanctioned events aren't a part of, and may undermine the overall infrastructure that allows sanctioned road events to be held. They suggested that these non-sanctioned events are essentially skimming some of the benefits – like appearances by top-level racers or teams – but not supporting the greater ecosystem. This could gradually undermine the success of sanctioned events.

Road race organizers voiced another concern: what the teams don't realize is that when they send riders to do a non-sanctioned event, some of the every-day amateurs at an open gravel event may suddenly be trying to race rather than just enjoying a day on the bike. And on the flip side, fans at the "mainstream" sanctioned races may not get to see the top pros – who often supercharge the racing and make it more exciting to watch. In other words, going too far in this direction could result in a kind of double-negative effect.

Despite these concerns about the health of the overall health of pro road racing in the U.S., the goal of a professional teams' sponsor is to maximize the exposure of the team and in turn, get the highest possible rate of return on their investments. This usually means performing as well as possible at the races with the greatest amount of viewership and fan interest. EF-Education First is in the unique position of having a clothing sponsor, Rapha, that creates and distributes its own content and has the goal of aligning its team events with consumer interests. Perhaps the best way to view these calendar developments is simply that EF and Rapha have a different set of objectives than most of the other WorldTour teams.

Also, WorldTour riders want to participate in the non-traditional races. Stetina told VeloNews that he personally pitched Trek-Segafredo on a 2019 racing schedule that included Dirty Kanza 200 and other gravel events, and not the other way around.

As EF and Trek – and maybe other teams – start to pursue these non-traditional schedules, it is worth remembering that this approach isn't totally new or novel. The Leadville Trail 100 was a regional and relatively niche endurance mountain bike race until Lance Armstrong used the race in 2008 to jump-start his highly publicized comeback. Armstrong was beaten that year by Dave Wiens, but would return the following year smash the course record en route to victory. Those performances captured the imagination of the casual cycling fan and thrust the event into the spotlight; the race has now expanded to multiple events across different sports and has become so popular it has been forced to implement a highly competitive lottery for entrants.

Joe Dombrowski continued the tradition of WorldTour road racers at Leadville by participating in and finishing second behind Todd Wells at the 2016 edition. This was an impressive result for a non-mountain biker. In retrospect, it was right in the sweet spot of not "spoiling" the event for the amateur competition, but also putting up a strong showing and respecting the event. It is noteworthy that this event took place only a week prior to the start of the Vuelta a Espana. One could speculate if Dombrowski's foray to the remote town of Leadville to participate in an off-beat event affected his strength or compromised his chances of winning a stage or finishing high up in the overall standings at the Vuelta.

In another example, Vincenzo Nibali of the Bahrain-Merida competed in and [won the 2017 Taiwan KOM Challenge](#). As one of the best riders in the world, this was a fitting result and respected the notoriously difficult event. A few days before this win, Nibali's Bahrain-Merida teammate Ivan Garcia Cortina won the Red Hook Criterium in Milan. Both of these events were mentioned as part of Rapha's initial alternative schedule (though the Red Hook Criterium series was later canceled).

These riders' participation in these events wasn't as highly publicized or marketed by Bahrain Merida. In addition, the timing of these races on the calendar makes it much easier to participate in than Dirty Kanza or Leadville Trail 100, both of which take place in the midst of the UCI WorldTour schedule.

But back to the Dirty Kanza. Stetina, Howes and Morton performed well, although they were bested for the

top spot by Colin Strickland, an environmental scientist from Austin. Unfortunately, the pro riders then preceded to ruffle feathers by not showing up to the podium presentation on Sunday morning – an important part of the community aspect in the Gravel scene. Due to travel conflicts with a variety of riders, the race held the men’s podium immediately after the race, however some fans online circulated an image of the empty men’s podium.

After battling flat tires all day, Taylor Phinney finished in 198th place, over four hours behind Strickland. It was a bit as if the script had been flipped on EF – as they were beaten by an inspiring underdog facing tough odds, a role they prefer to occupy.

There is no doubt that the participation of world-class UCI World Tour riders in these alternative events will raise the profile of both of the event and make the average rider or non-racing fan more interested in the participating riders. Saturday’s excursion to rural Kansas will be considered a success, considering EF and Trek’s sponsors got valuable publicity to plug event-specific technology and most of the riders performed well in an unfamiliar event.

VeloNews reporters were on the ground in Emporia, and said that the race management, fans, and participants overwhelmingly embraced the inclusion of WorldTour pros. The WorldTour riders signed autographs and snapped photos with fans throughout the race weekend.

But the excursion did cause some turbulence on social media. As the teams dissect what happened at Dirty Kanza, they will hopefully pull together plans to smooth over some of these online pitfalls at the next alternative event.

By Spener Martin and Steve Maxwell, June 4th, 2019.