

Q&A With Israel Start-Up Nation GM Kjell Carlstrom

Shortly after the pro racing calendar came to a halt in early March, The Outer Line started a detailed discussion with the WorldTour's newest team – Israel Start-Up Nation. The team was originally launched as the Israel Cycling Academy in 2014, by Israeli businessman Ron Baron, and pro cyclist Ran Margaliot. Sylvan Adams, an Israeli-Canadian entrepreneur and billionaire philanthropist, joined as a co-owner of the project in 2015 – soon becoming the major driver behind the team, and helping to bring the Giro d'Italia Grande Partenza to Israel in 2018. This was one of the largest sporting events in the history of Israel, and provided a platform for the team to enjoy greater international recognition. In 2019, the team took over the WorldTour license of Team Katusha-Alpecin, [brought in a number of top WorldTour riders](#), changed its name to Israel Start-Up Nation, and jumped to the top level of professional bike racing.

From his locked-down home in Finland, we talked in detail with General Manager Kjell Carlstrom, a three-time Finnish road champion, a former racer for WorldTour teams Sky, and Liquigas, and a team director at IAM Cycling before joining ISN. We also heard from team majority-owner Adams via email. Originally a property developer from Quebec, Adams has interests that extend well beyond cycling. He was also instrumental in the Israeli moonshot, in bringing Madonna to the 2019 Tel Aviv Eurovision contest, and recently recruiting Lionel Messi's Argentine team to Israel to play a friendly match against Uruguay. He describes himself as a "self-appointed Ambassador at large for Israel."

The Outer Line: First, tell us a little about your background and your path to becoming the general manager of the Israel Cycling Academy.

Kjell Carlstrom: Well, it's quite a long story. I've always had a passion for cycling, since the time I was a kid. My best friend's dad was one of the top cyclists in Finland, and we used to bike together all over the countryside. I was in my first race at age 13 – coming in second to last! But I set a goal for myself that by age 18 I wanted to be as good as my friends. Later, during my military service and university, I became more focused, and I won my first major race in Serbia in 1999. After some time with Finnish and Swedish clubs, I ended up on the Italian Amore & Vita squad for a couple years, then in 2005, I moved up to the WorldTour with Team Liquigas for five years. Then later, I joined Team Sky during their first year in 2010. That was a real shock me; Liquigas was more of a family type of culture, whereas Sky was much more corporate. But I learned a lot there.

Then I retired from racing in 2011; for awhile I thought I would do something else completely and I began to look for jobs outside of cycling in my trained field of informatics, as well as with other WorldTour teams. I was living in Switzerland, and was doing some VIP driving for both the Giro and the Tour, when I found out about a team project called IAM Cycling. The father of one of my old teammates, Michael Albasini, was involved with the team and I eventually got on there as a DS. But, as you know, the IAM team folded abruptly at the end of the 2016 season, so then I started to talk to other teams once again. Several people were asking me, "have you called the Israelis?" I didn't know anything about it, but finally I ended up talking with team principal Ran Margaliot, and then meeting with him in Girona. We struck up a good relationship, and shortly after I was hired as Sports Director.

TOL: Take us through the development and build-up of the team over the past three or four years? How did you make the transition from the continental level to the WorldTour in such a short period?

KC: When I joined the team in 2017 we had just 16 riders, and to be frank, most of them were either younger, up-and-coming riders, or older riders that were there to pass on the experience. We had just reached the Pro Conti level, and to [get into the grand tours](#) we knew we needed to have a stronger team, so we began to approach some other higher-level racers. The idea of getting into the Giro was already forming in 2016, before I got to the team, but then it turned into actually bringing the Giro to Israel. When Sylvan managed to pull that off, with the help of Ron and Ran, it was a huge plus for the team.

During that year (2018) I was the Sportive Manager, and we were already planning how we could get to the WorldTour.

In 2019, I became the General Manager, and our goal was to try to accumulate enough UCI points to become one of the top two ranked Pro Continental teams, because we thought that might earn us a wildcard invitation to some of the grand tours. Since we didn't have any big stars, our only choice to load up the points was to go with a really big team; we had 30 riders, and we raced more than any other team that year. And we almost succeeded.

But by then, as Sylvan was gaining more visibility in the sport, teams were coming to talk with him about merging or combining and so on. During 2019, we were talking with Katusha about a possible collaboration, but the discussions were always sort of on-and-off. Then, during the 2019 Giro, we started talking in more detail about our strategy and we realized that we needed some more important riders. Dan Martin got pretty interested, even before we knew that we could get to the WorldTour level. And we also succeeded in getting Hugo Hofstetter to commit; we had followed him because he had garnered the most points in the Europe tour. And of course, once we had the chance to acquire the WorldTour license, it became easier to convince some of the other guys to join the team – athletes like Andre Greipel.

We had already signed quite a few riders, both existing and new, and so when the Katusha deal was finalized late in the year, we had a very complicated task. We realized we couldn't take everybody from Katusha, because we needed to honor our own contracts. I had several very difficult weeks, talking with lots of riders and agents, registering for the new racing season, and so on. We ended up keeping seven Katusha riders. Some guys wanted to go to other teams, and in the end, all the Katusha guys eventually found a team.

TOL: How would you describe the cycling scene in Israel? How popular is road cycling, and is the sport visible or popular with the general public?

KC: From my point of view, the cycling scene in Israel is pretty small; in fact, it is somewhat comparable to cycling in Finland, where I am from. There is not a lot of cycling history or culture, and of course Israel is also a young country. Up until the moment the Giro d'Italia came to Israel in 2018, road cycling wasn't really very well-known to the general public, but things changed dramatically in the few months leading into the start of the Giro. And during those few days, the Giro was running in Israel, everyone got exposed to it. It was a good catalyst for getting many more people into the world of cycling.

Since then, the visibility of cycling has definitely improved, although I think it would take quite a bit of effort to kick it on up to the next level. The best scenario for Israeli cycling would be to have a major race in Israel that international riders could return to every year, so that all local teams and amateur cycling projects could get that annual injection of enthusiasm, and continue to grow. The visibility of our team has for sure grown in Israel, but there is still a lot more that we can do.

TOL: It must be a bit strange to jump to the WorldTeam level, and then see your season potentially canceled after only a handful of races? What kind of competitive targets did you have before the racing shut down?

KC: Yes, it is a bit strange, but of course this whole situation is unprecedented, and something that is very strange for the entire world. Everyone is touched by this in some way. We were targeting a lot of races with different riders, and our goal was to win at least one WorldTour race or stage. We succeeded in getting some victories early on, although not a WorldTour victory, so that goal is still remaining. The other thing we were hoping for was to continue with the same mentality we had before, and that is to be present and playing a role in affecting the outcome in all the races we attend. And I would say that we have done that in almost every race.

TOL: Team Sky has been notable for its use of new and different sports science techniques that weren't yet known in cycling, such as cooling down on trainers after races. Did you bring a similar ethos at ICA – trying new ideas, or using new sports science techniques?

KC: I do believe that we are doing things in a way that most teams are not. While I think we might have the smallest budget in the WorldTour, I dare say that we are not the “worst team.” There are a lot of parameters to look at when you evaluate the success of a team; it's not all about the money. There is the humanistic side of running a team, there is the performance part, and then of course there is also the business and media part of things. We are striving forward in all these areas, and yes, Sky taught me the importance of paying attention to details. We are not doing everything the conventional way; we are trying to think a little bit outside of the box and utilize all our resources in the best possible way. I try to engage many of our people in the process of building the team; I think that certainly is a strength, as it helps everyone become more committed and embedded in the team.

TOL: You are now the third WorldTour to form a relationship with a Formula 1 racing team (after the Ineos-Mercedes relationship, and the Bahrain-McLaren team). How do you think your recently-formed [relationship with the Williams Formula 1 racing team](#) will help your team?

KC: The idea is to share some technology and different organizational approaches. We'll see how much we can do about that with the current situation. At the moment, this whole relationship is a bit on hold, since Formula 1 racing is also stopped. But we'll see how things go; aerodynamics and precision engineering are very critical in both sports, and I think there will be a lot of technology interchange.

TOL: What has been your messaging to riders during the slowdown? Are they continuing to train as normal? How are you keeping the team fit and motivated during this slowdown?

KC: Well, the most critical message is that we have to continue working in a professional way during this difficult time. We have to take some advantage of this special situation, we can't stay passive. We have to continue to promote our partners and stay engaged with our fans. We have a number of fan engagement programs and events underway, and we also are involved in various healthcare-related charitable initiatives as a team. We have told the riders we are here for them if they need to talk or if they need any advice or anything else. We are not specifically telling our riders exactly what to do in terms of their training and activities, but we are indicating some of the things we would like them to be doing.

TOL: What are your thoughts on the latest UCI plans for a shortened season later in the year?

KC: Well, I think it is very important that the Tour will happen. But this is not going to be easy – borders may still be closed, the logistics will be very complicated, there will be many challenges, but we hope that it can happen. I am constantly thinking about specific measures that the sport can take to prepare now for a shortened season, and also afterward, so that we avoid spreading the virus, [and] also try to create some economic value.

And I think our riders will be able to handle it. We can handle three different racing programs at one time – maybe not day-in and day-out, but at least for some of the time. We are already doing that some of the time. There are a lot of logistics to think through in terms of travel arrangements, hotels, equipment, cars, and buses. But the logistics of people – that is more complicated.

TOL: If the racing season is severely curtailed or canceled this year, what do you think is the commitment level of key cycling sponsors? Will they be able to stick with their financial commitments through an extended lockdown?

KC: In some cases I think it will be very difficult for them to remain with the same commitment, as their

cash flow has dropped to almost zero. In some cases, sponsors might still be able to commit to what has been agreed on, but of course it is a concern if several major events are canceled, and if the whole season were to be canceled, it would be a disaster.

TOL: And in terms of your own situation, what do you think are Sylvan Adams' commitment level and "bigger-picture" goals in the funding of the team?

KC: From my point of view, he wants to see how far we can take this team from a sporting perspective. But he also wants to build and support broader Israeli cycling – helping Israeli riders to get to the next level and hopefully one day to victories across the world. And in the end, he likes to promote the home country as well as the team. And I think he also has a similar feeling for his other home country, Canada – and that is an additional reason why we'll always have some good Canadian riders on the team too.

TOL: We're also interested to learn more about the broader social or cultural objectives of the team. Your website talks quite a bit about the [diversity of the team](#), bridging gaps in society, the positive powers of sport, and so on. Maybe to start with, tell us about your support of the Israeli ambassadors of peace program.

(Editor's Note: Team owner Adams responded to us via email. He provided a detailed description of the team's cultural objectives, as well as a robust endorsement of the Israeli state. We summarize a few of his more cycling-related comments below.)

Sylvan Adams: We don't just support ambassadors of peace; each rider has been designated as an Ambassador for Peace by the [Peres Centre for Peace and Innovation](#), founded by former Israeli President and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Shimon Peres. This is an important role that we take seriously as we race around the world in the blue and white colors of the Israeli national flag. Sport is a force for good and a bridge between people and societies.

TOL: More specifically, how are you positioning or utilizing the team to promote diversity, or helping to promote the bigger issues of greater harmony in the Middle East?

SA: I want peace in our country and region, like most everyone else in Israel. And we do encourage diversity on the team. For example, we had a Muslim rider, Turkish National champion Ahmet Orken, who was the first from his country to race at that level. Unfortunately, politics intervened, as the Imam from his small village in Turkey visited his parents and strongly urged them to convince Ahmet not to ride for an Israeli team. Ahmet cried when he resigned, and his family suffered, as Ahmet was the principal wage earner in the family, with a very nice salary from our team. He has never found another professional team, and continues to ride in Turkey.

ISN also has a Continental team, which acts as a feeder for the WT squad, where we have a Muslim rider from Morocco, and a Druze (a sect of Islam) Israeli, as well as Jewish and Christian (including one from Ethiopia) riders. We would also love to recruit Palestinian riders, if they had the level, which will surely happen in the future. Sport is a bridge for friendships and peace.

TOL: Do you train or hold events anywhere in the Palestinian territories? Are there other initiatives that you could take as a pro cycling team, to help address that conflict?

SA: That would not be safe today, but the day that the Palestinians renounce terrorism and create safer conditions, we will reach out to them, as neighbors, to create joint cycling projects. But I am an optimist, and hope that the Palestinians will one day be able to engage in constructive partnerships with us. I believe that sport has the power to break down barriers, leading to new friendships and cooperation between people.

TOL: How do you respond to charges from certain circles of “sports-washing” in bringing the Giro d’Italia to Israel a couple of years ago?

SA: Let me respond with some examples and thoughts. Tel Aviv is a very diverse and tolerant city. For example, we host the largest Gay Pride parade in the region. But the boycott movement — I call them the haters — refers to this as “pink-washing.” When we engage in sport, they accuse us of “sport-washing.” I was a partner in Israel’s project to send a spaceship to the moon – only the fourth country in the world to achieve this feat; is this to be called “space-washing?” Is everything that Israel does some form of “washing?” The mobile phone was invented in Israel, but the haters don’t seem to mind using our technology – is this “tech-washing?” Sportwashing is a stupid allegation. I have a different name for it: sport.

TOL: From a more practical perspective, how are your relations with teams based in the Arab world, like UAE-Team Emirates and Bahrain-Merida? Do you have any issues traveling to these areas?

KC: I think we have a good relationship with all of the other teams in the cycling world. We don’t differentiate in any way between teams, regardless of what country they come from. And from what I have seen, the other teams all have a similar attitude. In terms of travel, there are a few hurdles to overcome, but in general everyone is trying to do their absolute best to minimize these problems or sentiments. Everything went fine when we traveled to the UAE Tour in February.

TOL: From a longer-term perspective, what other unique challenges and opportunities do you have as an Israeli-based team?

KC: Well, I’m not sure that any issues or processes are really related to the fact that the team is Israeli. It is really based more [on] the way we are managing the team rather than where we are from, that can be seen as an asset or a challenge. Since the beginning we have wanted to develop cycling in Israel, and to get Israeli cyclists to the next level. The team has also always had an Israeli identity, as it was founded by two Israeli men with a great vision. This identity means that we want to have the best Israeli riders on the team, but there are also a lot of other cultures and nations represented on this team, and I think that is a reflection of the way Israelis think. In my opinion, this is a great strength – as everyone adapts to our culture, they become better at understanding the ideas and needs of others.

By Steve Maxwell, April 22nd, 2020.