

Restarting the 2020 Racing Calendar — Many Questions, but a Few Emerging Answers

The Outer Line takes a look at how the remainder of the racing season could unfold. By making a few simple assumptions about potential restart dates, the remaining race schedule and current team parameters, some clear-cut if controversial conclusions can already be reached. There is no way the three grand tours can effectively be run in their entirety, many other races will either be lost or suffer from extremely thin fields and already stressed pro riders should get ready for extreme pressures to be placed on them. We have to hope that the UCI and key organizers are collectively evaluating all of these constantly changing factors, so that if and when racing continues, cycling can quickly and efficiently present a unified and equitable plan for the calendar.

There are a number of perplexing questions around how the remainder of the 2020 racing calendar could potentially play out – which races will still be held, how competing races will be scheduled, and exactly how those scheduling decisions are going to be made. There are various reports and rumors about how the remaining 2020 season could unfold, and these are changing every day; however, the simple facts of the matter are that no one really knows, and we're not going to know for a while.

Under any circumstances, a shortened season is going to place immense economic pressure upon those teams that are still here to race, in order to deliver some value to their flagging sponsors. In turn, this will place an extraordinary burden on the athletes, who may be forced to race at almost twice the normal intensity or frequency. Sure, everyone is very excited and eager to get back to some sort of racing, but there are a number of very critical questions that must first be addressed.

Prompt answers to these questions from cycling's governance bodies and key stakeholders are critical – to keep the situation from degenerating into a “free-for-all,” with no unified coordination and planning. Otherwise, we fear that the situation could devolve into confusion and disarray, recriminations, and an internal battle that could have a very negative impact on the teams and riders, as well as on the image and reputation of the sport.

We have highlighted the key questions, and underline why it is crucial that those questions be resolved in a unified and collective manner. Then we take our own rough cut at how things could unfold, based upon different possible restart dates.

1. By far the most important question is how will the sport act in a collective manner to allocate the available racing dates, and ensure that some semblance of a unified and equitable calendar can still be implemented? No matter when we start racing again and which events are still held, the calendar is going to have to be compressed into a much shorter time frame. (As we discuss below, the World Tour schedule had 143 days of originally scheduled events that have not yet been run.) How is the sport going to redesign that calendar in a logical and equitable manner?
2. How many of the WorldTeams will survive the current lockdown? Beyond the cutbacks, lay-offs and general belt-tightening that has already occurred, there are serious questions about the longer-term viability of some teams. How will that affect the size of the peloton, the staging of key events and teams' abilities to adapt to a compressed schedule?
3. In the event that some WorldTeams collapse, will surviving ProTeams be allowed to step up and participate at more World Tour events, or will the size of the peloton be decreased? (The UCI Europe Tour still has some 500 days of originally scheduled events.)
4. What will happen to events that were already scheduled for specific dates in the later summer or fall? Will their original timetable be preserved, or will they risk being pushed aside by bigger organizers desperate for dates to race?
5. To what extent would a revamped calendar allow multiple races to run on the same days? Not only

are there far fewer days into which to try to cram the original calendar, but teams and riders are still going to need travel and rest days. If the peloton has shrunk, or if lower-tier teams step up, will all the races be able to secure competitive fields?

6. Will the world championships still be held in the original format and on the original dates? That is an entire week out of what could be a very short season. Could the Worlds be shortened to just a few days, or how will they be prioritized vis-à-vis other critical races which may need to occur during the same timeframe. It's the same old question about the UCI's dual role in the sport – as the regulator and decision-maker during this critical time in the sport, how will the UCI justify using several of the small number of available days to promote its own commercial event?
7. Who will [ensure that the athletes' rights are protected](#)? Given the above assumptions, and the teams' necessity to provide sponsor visibility, riders may be pressed into racing an unusually large number of events in a short timeframe. How will the racers be protected from over-exertion? Would the UCI consider lowering the number of riders from each team for the major events? Will the teams make their own decisions, or will the UCI issue guidelines to protect the athletes?

These are just a few of the critical questions, ones that no one can really answer now. But by making a few simple assumptions, we can at least roughly begin to simulate how the season and the calendar may turn out – and it yields some interesting and worrying conclusions that don't seem to be on the radar much yet.

Keep in mind that the brief analysis below is hypothetical – we made some key assumptions that could certainly be varied – but it is based upon reasonable estimates, and it serves to illustrate some of the challenges ahead.

1. First, we assumed three different possible season re-start dates. We also assumed that season would have to end by the 15th of November, primarily for weather reasons.
 1. Season restarts on July 15 – allowing a total of 123 days available for the rest of the calendar. At the moment, given the outlook of public health officials around the world, all of the travel and logistics that would be prerequisite to getting the sport fully operating again, as well as France's recent ban on gatherings until mid-July, this seems like the most optimistic scenario possible.
 2. Season restarts on August 15 – meaning that 92 total days would remain for the season. At the moment, this timeframe seems more likely.
 3. Season restarts on September 15 – with 61 days remaining.
2. The above represents the total number of days, but of course it's not going to be possible to race every single day. Racing occurs in different places around the globe, teams and equipment must be moved and athletes cannot race every day. Travel time and rest days will necessarily decrease that number days by some percentage – even if all teams were essentially fielding two different squads the entire time. For these reasons, we estimated that the number of days that would actually and feasibly be available to actually race would have to be cut by at least 20 percent. This reduces the race day estimates above to 98, 74, and 49 days respectively. (We haven't even tried to get into all the related logistical complexities that will attend any restart of racing – international travel restrictions, hotel and airline availability, food and restaurant access and so on. There are a multitude of other questions here, beyond the simple calendar.)
3. We then looked at all of the remaining 143 days of previously scheduled WorldTour events which have not yet been run, and subjectively divided them into “high,” “medium” and “low” significance, as shown in Table 1. (This is obviously a very subjective process, and opinions could vary widely, but somehow the sport will have to collectively make exactly these decisions.)
 1. “High” significance races included all three grand tours, the monuments and Strade Bianche, and comprise 69 days of racing. (It is important to note that all but one of these races are owned by either ASO or RCS.)
 2. “Medium” significance races totaled 25 days of racing. (Note that some of these races, like

Tour de Romandie and Tour de Suisse have already been formally canceled.)

3. “Low” significance races totaled another 49 days of racing.

4. Each WorldTeam has about 26 racers. Most of the race events require seven or eight riders from each team. Normally, on average, riders would race for about 65 or 70 days a year, spread over a roughly 270-day calendar; in other words, racing about 25 percent of the time during the season. This is an average figure; some top athletes may only race 30 or 40 days a year, meaning that many others need to be racing 90 or 100 days each season.

Under these rough assumptions, several key conclusions can be reached:

1. It doesn't seem like there is an effective way, despite [recent reports](#), that all three grand tours can be run in their entirety. Even under the most optimistic scenario – that the season started up again in mid-July, which itself is looking increasingly unlikely – it would be folly to try to run all three 3-week tours in three months. Riders have a hard time preparing to participate in more than one grand tour in a normal year – when they are scheduled at least a couple of months apart. In order to fit into even the most optimistic shortened season scenario above, the three races would have to be scheduled practically on top of each other. The competitive quality of the events and the level of riders they will be able to attract would suffer considerably. It seems clear to us that the sport's leaders should already be planning for how to cancel, shorten or combine the three grand tours.
2. Under even the most optimistic of circumstances – it is now unlikely that any of the races listed here as “low” significance will be able to occur, at least with attendance of the WorldTeams. In other words, all the third-tier races (the Catalunyas, Binck Banks, Canadian races and the like) should already assume that they are not going to run under normal circumstances this year, even though some may have originally been scheduled late in the year. If they do run, they will likely be running on the same day that much more prominent events are likely also to be running, and they will be fielding start lists from lower-level professional tiers. They will likely receive less attention as a result.
3. If the season cannot start until the later date of August 15, Column 4 of Table 2 below shows that there are essentially no non-overlapping days available for any “medium” or “low” significance races. Under this start date, only some version of the grand tours and the monuments would fit into the available space. Any other races would have to be run on concurrent days with lower-level teams and riders.
4. Perhaps the most important conclusion here is that riders should get ready to be under intense pressure, even at the same time as they are potentially [suffering salary reductions](#), team cutbacks and training difficulties. In order to satisfy their weakening sponsors, teams are going to be under intense pressure to generate as much visibility as they can under a shortened calendar – and that pressure will quickly trickle down to the athletes.

Season	Actual	Days Left After	Days Left After	Avg. Riders	Total	Riders/	Availability	Effective	Race Days	Percent
Start Date	Racing Days	69 "Hi" Races	25 "Med" Races	Per Event	Rider-Days	Team	Factor*	# Riders	Per Rider	Racing Days
15-Jul	98	29	4	7.5	735	26	60%	16	47	48%
15-Aug	74	5	-20	7.5	555	26	60%	16	36	48%
15-Sep	49	-20	-45	7.5	368	26	60%	16	24	48%

We present a hypothetical but very worrying implication for the athletes. If we assume that each event, on average, needs 7.5 riders from each team, then we can calculate the number of “rider-days” that would be required of a team in total. WorldTeams usually have about 26 riders on staff (or at least they did prior to the onset of the virus).

We created an “availability” adjustment to take into account various qualitative factors:

- (1) some athletes may be injured or unhealthy, or some may have contracted the virus;
- (2) not all racers

are capable of doing each type of race, and (3) certain racers, Chris Froome for example, are only going to race certain key events for a lesser number of days. Given these assumptions, we can crudely calculate the number of “effectively available” riders, and then estimate the number of days that each “average” athlete would be expected to race. This set of reasonable assumptions which suggest that the average athlete will actually be racing almost half of the total available days – almost twice the normal rate. Some would be racing less, but depending upon the nature of the event and timing, many would probably be pressed to race even more days than that.

The critical question here is, will the athletes – particularly given the training and fitness constraints that many of them may be under right up until the time the season restarts – have the fitness levels and endurance to perform at this extreme level of frequency and intensity? How many athletes will become fatigued or injured from over-activity? Will they be able to give their full effort, particularly given salary cuts and all the other psychological and physical challenges they have experienced attendant to the virus? And, if the athletes are severely over-worked, how much will it diminish the quality of the racing for the fans?

As we said, we recognize that there will be [extreme economic pressure](#) to meet these targets and to squeeze in as many race days as possible, since teams will be desperate to provide sponsors with some measure of visibility. But we would strongly recommend that officials consider the potential deleterious longer-term effects on both the athletes and the image of the sport, before they try to cram too much into a short season. The sport could end up shooting itself in the foot.

This is only a simple and subjective analysis, but it raises some very pertinent questions, and it yields conclusions that seem rather inescapable. Hopefully, a much more sophisticated version of this simulation is available to cycling’s decision-makers, and will be updated on a daily basis as more information becomes available. (We have focused on the men’s World Tour situation here, but the same questions apply to the lower-tier divisions and to all of women’s cycling.) We just have to hope that the UCI and key organizers are collectively evaluating all of these factors and options, so that if and when racing is allowed to continue, pro cycling can quickly and efficiently present some sort of unified and equitable plan for how to proceed.

The Outer Line reached out last week to UCI President David Lappartient regarding these challenges, but we have not yet received a response. However, Sean Petty, one of the 12 members of the UCI’s Road Commission and the only one from North America, told The Outer Line, on Tuesday, that the UCI is evaluating all of these matters on an on-going basis. “These are all issues and challenges that are changing on a daily basis, and the UCI is actively monitoring developments and coordinating discussions with all stakeholders regarding how the season could potentially be resumed.” Petty further suggested that “Now is the time this sport really needs to come together, and act in a spirit of unity and cooperation, to try to address the concerns of all stakeholders as best we can at a very difficult time. There are a lot of uncertainties here; we don’t know when it’s going to be safe enough for fans to be able to stand shoulder to shoulder again on the side of the road to watch pro cycling, but we do know that we must act in a collective and equitable way to ensure the future of the sport, not just in 2020, but in 2021 and beyond.”

By Steve Maxwell and Spencer Martin, April 14th, 2020.