Seeking to Understand USA Cycling's Olympic Selection Process

The U.S. Olympic cycling team for the Tokyo Olympics has just been announced by USA Cycling. Chloé Dygert, Ruth Winder, Leah Thomas, Amber Neben, and Coryn Rivera have been selected for the women's road events, while Lawson Craddock and Brandon McNulty will ride the men's road race and time trial. Dygert was the only automatic qualifier under the guidelines; the rest were discretionary choices.

Not unexpectedly, Olympic selections often lead to personal heartbreak and sadness due to the nature of the process itself. Questions are already arising as to whether this team will provide the best chance of capturing elusive Olympic medals — assuming the Games go ahead at all. And, as one vocal member of the Twitterati has pointed out, there will always be Monday morning quarterbacks commenting from the sidelines. Although USAC does have a specific set of selection criteria from which the team is chosen, the process is not devoid of controversy. The 2016 selection process was contentious and ultimately litigious, with various athletes challenging USAC's decisions through arbitration.

How we got here

To better understand the situation, some background and context are helpful. The inclusion of professional cyclists in the Olympics is a relatively recent phenomenon, starting in 1996. So, the selection criteria can be ascribed to two distinct eras: 1992 and prior Olympics and 1996 and beyond. In the amateurs-only era, the final Olympic team was decided Olympic trials, a one-day event, or a short series of races. Inga Thompson confirmed her spot for the Barcelona Games by winning the '92 Olympic trials race in Altoona, Pennsylvania, while the little-known Timm Peddie gained his spot by winning the men's event — and going to the Olympics with national team members Lance Armstrong and Bob Mionske. Whatever might be considered its flaws today, the old method of a rider gaining an automatic berth in the trials gave unheralded riders a chance at Olympic glory.

Men in the 1996 professional-era-selection pool were typically battle-tested in grand tours and the classics. The women were selected for their performances in international stage races like the Tour Féminin and Idaho Women's Challenge. The notion of riders returning from Europe to compete in Olympic trials no longer made sense. Instead, riders could be evaluated on their recent performance in many different races. Over time, the process took on a more qualitative or subjective character — although the track team was still subject to results in Olympic trials. For road racing, there was only one guarantee: men would automatically qualify in '96 if they were among the top 15 worldwide in the UCI individual points ranking.

Today's selection process is defined by the "long team" concept — a preliminary list of top U.S. men and women riders who must attend certain USA Cycling training camps, compete in certain defined races and essentially race against each other for spots on the team. To qualify as an automatic selection a rider must finish in the top three at the world road race or time trial championships the prior year. But few recent U.S. riders — particularly on the men's side — have ranked anywhere near this high at road worlds.

Beyond any "automatic" selection, USAC can choose those competitors that it judges to have the greatest chance of winning medals. An independent nine-strong selection committee assists USAC officials in this process; but there's little information available about this group, who is included, how they are selected, how closely they watch or analyze the sport or how the final selections are made — despite this committee essentially being gatekeepers to perhaps the biggest race most riders will ever compete in.

Ambiguities in the process have set the stage for potential controversy. For example, a high-performance rider might be below peak at the time of selection but could still offer the best hope for a medal. Some

riders may have conflicting schedules or may simply not be interested in participating in the Olympics. And other qualitative considerations — team strategies, recent injuries, racing fatigue — may potentially factor into an individual's ability to medal. The selection process must attempt to somehow account for all these factors.

What did we learn from 2016?

Making the process more discretionary has led to accusations of bias and favoritism. Most notably, the decision in 2016 by Jim Miller (currently USAC's chief of sport performance) to select his personally coached rider, Kristin Armstrong, precipitated lengthy and complicated arbitration processes. Rivera, Neben, and Carmen Small took USAC to arbitration to challenge the selection process, even though Armstrong went on to win the Olympic time trial gold medal.

USAC's Olympic arbitration process is quite different from what most people think of as arbitration processes — and this is where its team-member selections can go sideways. Elsewhere, when there's a contract dispute between two parties (or between a cyclist and his team) and the two sides go to arbitration, an independent arbiter weighs the case against actual laws and determines a fair outcome, and a neutral judge evaluates the case before handing down a legally binding decision.

But in the USAC's arbitration agreement, if a rider (who feels that she or he is qualified) is not selected for whatever reason, the arbiter must first validate that each rider selected for the event meets the minimum defined USAC standards, and that USAC applied its rules fairly in making discretionary decisions. Since the rider challenging for a spot on the team is essentially trying to bump an incumbent, every rider on the team for that event also becomes party to the arbitration and must present their qualifications to the arbiter. And they have to do so at their own cost.

In the 2016 women's arbitration, the "long team" riders (Evelyn Stevens, Megan Guarnier, Lauren Stephens, Mara Abbott, Tayler Wiles, Shelly Olds, and Armstrong) all became party to the arbitration action and had to respond to the hearing. If the arbiter had found that the selection criteria were skewed or improperly developed from the start, every spot on the team could have been reset. The arbiter could have decided that the then-current U.S. time trial champion Small and runner-up Neben held precedent in terms of recent performances over Armstrong, the defending Olympic TT champ, who had only recently returned to competition.

However, the arbiter ruled that USAC's application of its discretion was valid. But discretionary criteria are just that—at the discretion of the owner of the rules. Therefore, so long as the selected rider meets some metrics in that discretionary process, the arbiter will likely rule that the selection decision was valid. In 2016, Armstrong and Stevens went to Rio, while Small and Neben stayed at home.

Defining transparency

USA Cycling insists that the selection criteria and process are clear-cut. USAC president and CEO Rob DeMartini told The Outer Line by email that the "USAC selection process is very clear, has been published for three years, [is] overseen by nine independent people and aimed at sending the best team to Tokyo." However, only one of the road candidates was automatic under the guidelines; the rest were chosen under the "discretionary selection" procedure—three pages of qualitative criteria that leave the door open for interpretation or challenges — that are summarized in sub-section 2.1: "Due to the nature of the sport of cycling, whereby tactics or happenstance often dictate results, and the competitive structure of Olympic cycling, whereby selection of athletes to one event can be related to the selection of another event, USA Cycling has determined that the use of discretionary selection is essential to maximize Team USA's medal chances overall. While it has established automatic criteria by which athletes, through

extraordinary achievement, have demonstrated very clear evidence of high potential for winning an Olympic medal, USA Cycling will use a discretionary selection process to select all athletes who have not qualified automatically."

The question marks in this year's selections are evident. Although Dygert was "automatic" under the guidelines, she is still recovering from a devastating injury at last year's worlds and has yet to race this year. And the potential for controversy was high even before the announcements were made when the third highest-ranked U.S. rider in the UCI rankings, Kristen Faulkner, wasn't included on the original long team. Also controversial are the non-selections of second-ranked Lauren Stephens (who netted top 10s at this year's Ghent-Wevelgem and last year's worlds TT) and Tayler Wiles (who won a UCI WorldTour race in 2019 and is regarded as the top support rider on the Trek-Segafredo team). Regarding the selection process, Wiles told *VeloNews* in May, "Part of the criteria is athletes that enhance team performance. While you must be medal capable as well, they also have to look at riders who can maximize the team performance and enhance the medal capabilities of the entire team. I think I check both of those boxes." On her Instagram page Wiles wrote last week: "I am incredibly heartbroken and disappointed to not be selected…. Realizing that a childhood dream…will not be coming true is not an easy thing to process."

Instead of Wiles, Stephens, or Faulkner, the selection group chose 46-year-old Neben (who hasn't raced so far in 2021) and Rivera (who has only raced sparingly in the last 24 months and hasn't won a WorldTour race in close to three years). While Neben won the world TT title five years ago and finished sixth at last year's worlds, these two picks appear to ignore the more recent successes of the others. Although, as we have discussed in detail before, the UCI rankings are not perfect, they are still one of the best indicators of current form and performance.

As for the U.S. men, only two riders could be selected because of this country's low position in the UCI nations rankings. This fact almost guaranteed a bottleneck. The currently top-ranked Sepp Kuss, who holds considerably more UCI points than the next nearest American rider, opted out of the Olympics to focus on the Tour de France and Vuelta a España. But two of the nation's best young riders, Quinn Simmons and Matteo Jorgenson, currently the second- and sixth-ranked Americans, didn't even make the Olympic long list. Meanwhile, other long-listed riders like Alex Howes and Lawson Craddock have not racked up a single UCI point during the 2021 season. Nonetheless, Craddock was selected, despite there being 33 American riders currently ranked higher in the current UCI standings. The other choice, McNulty, clinched his spot with multiple top-five stage results in all the WorldTour races he has contested this year.

Craddock is perhaps better known to the public than some of the other contending American riders — primarily due to his gutsy last-place finish at the 2018 Tour de France despite sustaining serious injuries in a stage 1 crash. Men like Kuss, Joey Rosskopf, Neilson Powless, Simmons, and Jorgenson have all come very close to major results at races on difficult courses this season. Craddock has garnered only two top-10 finishes in the last two years. In short, some of this year's choices would seem to suggest that USAC's selection process puts too much emphasis on legacy results or name recognition rather than recent performances.

Alternatives for the future

In a media roundtable discussion on May 28, Miller and Jeff Pierce (USAC's director of athletics, for road and track) presented an expanded view of the procedures and team announcements. Both focused on the objectivity of the qualifications and stressed that discretionary selective procedures would only be invoked as a final filter if the comparisons were too close or there were potential personality clashes. But, despite their emphasis on the neutrality or objectivity of the new process, USAC's discretionary selections are a tough sell. (Before the media conference, in an attempt to better understand how the process works, The

Outer Line made several requests to Miller and Pierce about these subjective criteria, but all our requests were declined.)

It seems likely that arbitration challenges, and not the qualifications, could become the new norm, and this would be detrimental to USAC's Olympic ambitions. Successful teams are built upon the cohesion of talented athletes and the support of their coaches; teams that come together at the last minute, or suffer from legal wrangling or mistrust, can be doomed to mediocrity.

For these reasons, we believe that USAC should look at an overhaul of the Olympic selection process: build greater objective transparency for the athletes or double-down on more subjective and non-negotiable evaluations. Either approach would likely be better than the ambiguity of a model that blends the two. The old-style Olympic trials had their shortcomings but at least the results were clear; perhaps an expanded or multi-event type of trials could be designed. Also, selection processes in other cycling countries could be evaluated — European federations often appoint a national team manager who works directly with the athletes and makes the final team selections. There are many different approaches, and we hope that after Tokyo USA Cycling will take a renewed look at all the alternatives.

Written by Steve Maxwell, Joe Harris & Spencer Martin, June 16th, 2021