

A Leader of American Cycling: Talking with Team Rally's Jonas Carney

Editors' Note: Jonas Carney is one of the most successful, if least widely-known, team managers in professional cycling, having been the leader of the growing and highly successful Circuit Sport-owned U.S. pro team since its inception in 2006. During that time, Carney, and his team Managing Director, Charles Aaron, has identified, nurtured and developed a number of top WorldTour team riders, and has created a unique team focus and management model which many other teams would like to emulate. As he details below, Carney considers Rally Cycling a business first, and a cycling team second. As a very successful motivator of young talent, Carney's focus has always been on creating a strong team ethic and culture; well-rounded and happy riders go faster, he says.

Since we profiled the team in 2014, Rally has spawned a number of top-level talents. It jumped from the U.S. circuit to the Pro Continental level after the 2017 season, and has enjoyed a successful first year campaign at that level. Over the last few years, the team has notched overall victories in the Tour of Utah, the Tour of Alberta, has won stages in races like the Amgen Tour of California, the Arctic Race of Norway and finished first in the USA Cycling Pro Road Tour (PRT). The team has gradually worked its way up the hierarchy of the pro cycling ladder, and Carney and Aaron make no secret of the fact that they would like to graduate on to the WorldTour level soon.

Carney himself was an eight-time Junior National Champion and won numerous national titles on the track. He represented the United States at the 2000 Sydney Olympics as an accomplished professional racer for several different U.S. teams through the 1990s and into the early 2000s. However, he may be even more successful as a team manager than he was as a racer.

In this interview, we talk about Carney's background and accomplishments as a bike racer, the origins of the Rally team, and what is different about the team's sporting and business model – what makes the team tick. We also explore Carney's perspectives on the broader challenges the sport faces today, his perspectives on cycling's doping era, how the sport has changed since he was racing and his recommendations for young racers today.

The Outer Line: So Jonas, tell us, how did you originally get into cycling?

Jonas Carney: I started cycling at very young age because of my parents. They got into cycling in the Detroit area in the 1970s. My brother and I started on baby-seats on the back of our parents' bikes, and when we were big enough they put us on the back of tandems. My father became a huge fan of the sport and started us racing as early as USAC (USCF at the time) would allow – which at that time was eight years old! We were members of the Wolverine Sports Club in Michigan. My folks moved to New Jersey in 1979, and like in Michigan there was great racing scene for kids there. My father was doing some masters' racing, and my brother and I were racing every weekend on the road, as well as at the velodrome in Trexlertown, PA. We raced there on Tuesday nights, and once we were old enough we raced race with the pros on Friday nights. Looking back, we were lucky to be junior racers during that period. The sport was thriving and we could spend Tuesdays and Fridays at T-town and our weekends racing all the great road events in the region. The Tour of Somerville was our hometown race.

TOL: You were pretty successful as a young racer?

JC: I won a bunch of Junior National Championships, and came in 4th and 5th at Junior World Championships in the points race. I also won two criterium national championships as an "amateur" (this was before they created the U23 category and when the Olympics were still amateur only).

TOL: And what about your professional career?

JC: I was on several of the main U.S. teams during the 1990s, including Subaru Montgomery, Coors Light, and Saturn for a couple of years each. I also raced for the Shaklee, Prime Alliance, and Jelly Belly before I decided to retire after the 2004 season. Most of my professional career was focused on the US domestic scene, criteriums, and track racing. I won two USPRO Criterium Championships in 1997 and 2004, and I also won a bunch of national titles on the track – in the Madison, the Kilometer, the Points Race, the Team Sprint and the Team Pursuit. A real highlight was participating in the Olympics in Sydney in 2000.

TOL: What coaches or other mentors had the biggest impact or influence on you as a person?

JC: My father was by far my biggest influence. When I was a kid, he was my coach. He did everything he could to help me succeed. Remember, this is back before the internet. My dad read every article and absorbed everything he could from anyone who would talk to him to help my brother and I become the best racers we could be. He's the reason I had success in the sport and why I am still working in it today. We were very fortunate to have parents that were so unbelievably supportive. As far as formal coaches go, Mike Walden (Wolverine Sports Club) was a huge influence early on. John Eustice coached me as a junior while I raced for a team run by Glenn and Robin Morton. They are all still good friends to this day. Lenny Preheim, who ran the TOGA Racing Team out of New York City was a close friend of our family. He gave me advice and an enormous amount of his time when I was struggling. Eddy B. was also a big influence when I was 19-20 years old. At the time I didn't appreciate it, but in hindsight I should have listened to him more. Other people who made a big impression on me were some of my teammates – Todd Gogulski, Steve Hegg, Roy Knickman, Leonard Harvey Nitz, and Jim Copeland. Those guys all took an interest and looked out for me when I was a young racer.

TOL: So what did you do after you retired?

JC: In 2005 I took a year off to travel the world and just have some fun. I didn't work much, aside from a little coaching and some home renovation projects for friends. I didn't really have a plan. At the end of 2005, that's when Kurt Stockton and Robin Zellner from the Kodak Gallery-Sierra Nevada Cycling Team called. I wasn't sure if I would enjoy directing, but I decided to give it a shot.

TOL: When did you connect with Charles Aaron, and the original Rally team?

JC: I worked during 2006 with that Kodak team, but I had already had some discussions with Charles. In 2005 Charles had been asking around at USPRO Criterium, for folks that might be interested in helping him set up a new team. Jonny Sundt and Alex Candelario put me in touch with Charles, and shortly after, I made a trip to Minneapolis to meet him in person. We hit it off, but the team would not be ready to launch for another year. At the end of 2006, Charles was ready to launch the team – and so I moved over to work with him. I flew to Baltimore to meet the sponsor, John Kelly, signed a contract and started hiring riders that day. The team would be called Kelly Benefit Strategies. And here we are 12 years later!

(Team Rally and Carney have been credited with consistently fielding a competitive and successful U.S. pro circuit team since their early years. Carney has been particularly successful in identifying and nurturing young talent early on. Numerous young riders have “graduated” through Carney’s program and gone on to considerable success with bigger and better-financed teams at the WorldTour level. Names that come to mind include Ben King, Carter Jones, Chad Haga, Sepp Kuss, David Veilleux, and recent phenom Mike Woods. In contrast to other top pro teams that cast themselves as nominally American – such as Trek, BMC and EF – Rally has religiously stuck to a plan of hiring only riders from North America.)

TOL: Let's talk a little about the Rally team now and how you run things – how are you structured, how do you go about finding your riders, and so on?

JC: Charles and I have been together since the beginning, which was October 2006. Of the rest of the key players on our management team, Jake Erker originally started as a racer on our team in 2009. When he retired, he directed with me for a couple years and then became our general manager; he's now been with us for 10 years. Eric Wohlberg started directing with us in 2011, so he's been with us for 7 years. Pat McCarty started co-directing our women's team in 2014. In 2015 he was the sole director on the women's side, and in 2016 he moved to the men's team full time. 2019 will be Pat's 6th year with our program. Zach Bell raced for our team in 2009 and 2010. He started directing the women's team when Pat moved to the men's program in 2016. 2019 will be his 4th year as our women's director and his 6th year total with the organization.

TOL: Give us some background on some of the most successful or important riders that you have identified or "discovered," developed, coached and mentored. How were they similar, how were they different?

JC: We have had some amazing people come through our program. It's been fun to watch some of them go on to be successful in Europe. Every rider is different. Some of them were with us for a brief period and with others maybe we were able to have a bigger impact.

Guys like Ben King and David Veilleux came to us at 19 - 20 years old. They started young and had all the talent necessary. With these super talented young riders, it can be a tough balance as there is so much pressure on them – their own internal pressure as competitors, but also pressure from bigger teams, agents, and so on. Ben struggled early in his European career, but he has persevered and is now reaching new levels. It was incredible to see him win two stages at the Vuelta this year. David took it a bit slower in the beginning, then had some nice results when he moved to France to race with (what is now) Direct Energy.

Chad Haga was a completely different story. He only started racing full time after he had completed his education. He was posting some nice results in N. America and we recognized that they had a lot of upside. As expected, he made a big jump once he could focus on racing full time with a solid race program and a team behind him.

Recommendations for new riders come from a lot of different sources. Mike Woods was first brought to my attention by Svein Tuft. They did the Tour de Beauce together with the National Team and Svein called me after the race to highly recommend Mike. Mike was a bit older and came from a running background. He was a huge talent, but needed time to develop the skills needed to succeed in cycling. He was making progress, but just never had a solid race program that suited his talents. After he joined our team he just sort of went through the roof.

Sepp is another guy who was a little older by the time he joined us. He transitioned from mountain biking and immediately started popping results on uphill finishes. Like Mike, he had the motor but needed time to develop his road skills. Things went pretty quickly for Sepp because he had already developed excellent bike handling skills as a mountain biker.

TOL: What are the key attributes or skills that you look in trying to identify possible future professional-level riders ?

JC: The first thing we look for are guys who can fit into our group. Not everyone is a good fit, even if they can win races. Maybe this is a little different approach than some teams have, but a rider's ability to mesh with our existing group is paramount to us. And we look for natural team players who will sacrifice for others without being asked.

Obviously, we also look for guys who are complete bike racers. Power files are great, but we need riders

who can go around corners, fight to be at the front when necessary, have an understanding of race tactics, be supportive teammates, and guys who naturally have a good feel for how a race will unfold.

At the same time as we're keeping our eyes open for new talent, we pursue guys like Danny Pate and Svein Tuft to bring WorldTour experience and leadership skills to the team – veterans who are specifically there to mentor our younger riders. We also look very closely at specific roles on the team that need to be filled – where were we weak last year, what holes are our departing riders leaving, and who can help to build a positive culture within the team. For us, it's not just about hiring the 16 fastest guys we can afford. It's about a bunch of different component parts, and its about building a team.

TOL: What are the key things that you think you do differently – as compared to other coaches and trainers – to get the most from your riders?

JC: The most important thing we do is create a positive environment for our athletes. If guys genuinely like their teammates and staff, feel like they are treated fairly by the management, and feel like they are a part of something bigger, they tend to be happier and more productive. Happy bike racers tend to go fast. Maybe that sounds a bit corny, but it's true. The culture of the team and camaraderie amongst the riders is of the utmost importance to us. When the guys get along and genuinely like their teammates, they give a lot more when it's time to sacrifice. That kind of energy in the team is contagious and once you get it started, it sort of snowballs.

TOL: Do you have a challenge with the bigger teams “poaching” or luring away your best riders? How do you deal with that?

JC: Yeah, I think that's just the nature of the beast. As a smaller domestic Continental team and now a Pro Conti team, we just have to accept the fact that if we find and develop a very talented kid, he is probably going to want to jump to the next level at some point. And the more successful you are, the bigger of a problem its going to be. That's just where we are, and so we have to design our business model around that fact of life. Some of these kids are just destined for bigger things or a bigger stage that we cannot offer them at the moment. We will always support riders having the chance to excel on a higher level, even though it may hurt our program in the short-term. Charles and I hope that one day soon we will be able to offer young riders the chance to ride in the world's biggest races – on our team!

TOL: From a more general sense, how would you describe your management style – assertive, participatory, demanding, supportive, etc.?

JC: It's changed over the years, especially since the team is so much bigger now, and my role has evolved over the years. In the beginning I did almost everything, and there wasn't a lot of help. As a result, I had a tighter connection with the riders and staff, and my style was probably more supportive and participatory. In some cases perhaps I was too close to some of the guys. That can make things difficult when you need to hold someone accountable or let someone go at the end of the year. It was a double-edged sword for sure. Some athletes really thrive in that kind of supportive environment, but others need a more structured environment and a different kind of relationship with their director.

Now I'm not as close with the guys. It's gotten too big for me to have those relationships with so many of the riders and staff. I do miss the contact with the riders – the instant gratification of being in the trenches, and the occasional opportunity to see how you are really positively impacting a kid's life. But in order to grow, we needed to bring in people with more experience and different perspectives. It has sometimes been a challenging transition for me, but I have to trust our other directors to build relationships in their own way and manage in their own style.

Each of our directors is different. I appreciate how they approach the job and what they bring to the table.

Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, including myself. The goal is to recognize everyone's strengths and try to utilize them in the best way possible. Nowadays my style is still very participatory, especially with our directors, but I suppose I've also become more assertive in my old age.

(Carney's riders underline his focus on team-building, and speak highly of the experiences they had on the team. Chad Haga, now a key deputy for Sunweb's Tom Dumoulin, says, "Jonas strikes the perfect balance of 'one of the guys' and director, which fosters an environment in which riders perform out of their own drive and not out of fear. He genuinely wants to see his riders succeed, and knows that part of that comes from having the right team chemistry, which factors into the riders he scouts." Mike Woods, who exploded on to the scene this year with a victory on Stage 17 of this year's Vuelta (for Team EF) says, "What I like most about Jonas is that he is an honest, fair and just an all-round good dude. He really cares about creating an environment where his riders are leaders not just in races, but also off the bike it is amazing, as you are coming up in the sport, to ride for a team where you are explicitly told to be a good human being first, and a good bike rider after." Sepp Kuss of Team Lotto-Jumbo and winner of the 2018 Tour of Utah says, "I enjoyed riding for Jonas because he was the kind of 'boss' that you could really just be yourself around, have a beer with, talk about normal life he picked a cohesive, fun group of riders and prioritized having a good feeling in the group rather than just a bunch of individuals. I think that aspect really helped my development because you learn how to be part of a team and get the most out of each other." Ben King, now racing for Dimension Data, says, "I enjoyed the team environment that Jonas created. I appreciated that he valued individuals for their character off the bike and that translated to teamwork and success. He got the most out of his riders by his style of leadership and 'work' was always fun.")

TOL: Give us some more detail about the key differences, in your opinion, between the business model and approach that Rally employs, vis-à-vis other teams at your level?

JC: There are a couple of key items that we always try to focus on. We've always looked at this as a business, not just a bike racing team. Obviously we do everything we can to win bike races, but the most important thing is that we represent our sponsors with honesty and integrity, try to do what is right for them, and give them a great return on their investment. Because we don't have a big patron behind us to write checks if we over-run our budget – we have to be financially profitable.

And second, from the beginning we've always had a long-term vision. We've concentrated on building that culture within the team and the camaraderie amongst the guys. The team is a constant work in progress. Every year we have to learn from our mistakes and make the necessary changes to continue improving. Ultimately we've tried to build a program that riders want to be a part of. A lot of teams simply hire the best guys on paper that they can afford. That might work in the short term, but I do not think it's a good long term plan. Star riders come and go. We've set out to build a program that can withstand those changes and continue to have success year after year. To do that we need an environment where new recruits excel.

Not to be too repetitive, but I really do think we have thrived because Charles looks at this as a business, not a bike team. He is a marketer and he is very good at building partnerships and bringing value to our partners. We are constantly building towards that vision for the future, and investing in the business. We don't let ourselves take shortcuts, and we always stick to our values.

TOL: How has the parallel women's team strengthened or diversified the men's racing team? Discuss the pros and cons of having both men's and women's teams under the same entity.

JC: Well, first of all, I wouldn't say there are any cons to having a women's team, aside from it being just one more activity to manage. Sometimes the men will be racing on two continents at the same time that the women are racing. Once in a while we struggle to juggle the vehicles, staff, and equipment during

these periods, but it's never a big deal because we have an excellent staff that can solve those problems.

On the positive side. Having a women's team has helped our team reach a larger audience. This strengthens our business and our program and that helps the men as well as the women. It has always been our goal to encourage people to lead healthier and more active lives. By having a women's team, that message is reaching a broader audience. We want to see women's cycling grow. What better way than to lead by example and support a women's professional team.

(Team owner and managing director, Aaron echoes the same business and team-oriented values, and credits Carney with much of the success of the team. "From day one, he's the person who has built this team – and it's always been a team, not as a collection of individuals. We set out that objective at the very beginning, and Jonas has met or exceeded it every single year," says Aaron. He goes on to emphasize the significance of the purely North American focus of the team, and he believes that regional focus will pay off more and more as the team grows in the future. "Some other teams call themselves American, but what do they have – just a few American riders? We have 100% North American riders, and we intend to stay that way." One of the fundamental challenges in attracting more fans to pro cycling is the lack of many truly regionally-focused teams, and Aaron hopes he can take a truly North American team all the way to the WorldTour, and build a greater American following for pro racing in the process. "Sure, we have a lot of naysayers," he says, "but hey, we're still here, I think we're doing things right, we're winning races, and we've got an unbelievable group of leaders." He adds, "Maybe I'm a bit biased, but I don't believe there is anybody has had as big an impact on American bike racing over the last decade as Jonas has. Working on an American team with 100% North American athletes, no one has done a better job, or produced more success or more top athletes.")

TOL: What would you say are the main challenges that you face in the sport today, versus when you first started coaching – greater financial pressures, more demanding sponsors, changes in the doping/anti-doping situation, changing rider attitudes, closer media scrutiny, etc.?

JC: On the sporting side, many of the challenges we face today are about the same as they've always been. The biggest challenge we face in North America, like all the other teams, is the shortage of sponsorship dollars, for both teams and for races. While we have been fortunate and our team is doing well, the sport in general is in rough shape – and that's bad for everyone, including us. Over the last ten years, as the economy has grown, we continue to lose teams and events – and that's concerning.

One big difference I'd point to is the way social media has exploded in cycling, like it has in all industries, since I was racing. It's where people get their news and it's where our partners reach a worldwide audience. It's where many athletes build their own brands, and create their own sporting personalities. Social media has changed the sport; the team has to have marketing, public relations, and graphic design professionals to keep us relevant and competitive.

TOL: What are the other specific challenges faced by a mid-level Pro Conti team like yourselves, versus the challenges faced by the bigger budget international teams?

JC: There are challenges at every level. Most of the same challenges that we had as a Continental team, we still have. We used to lose some of our best guys to Pro-Conti teams. Now we face the problem of losing our best guys to WT teams. It's hard to build a team when your best riders are constantly being poached. But we've built a program where riders thrive and we've continued to have success despite losing many of our best athletes. The key for us is building that foundation, keeping the core of the team together, and fostering that positive culture. That helps us to retain our current guys, and attract recruits that will thrive on our team.

The biggest challenges we face are the ones that everyone is talking about – the general uncertainty of

the structure and economic sustainability of the sport. We want to race the biggest races in the World and we want to be a WorldTour team someday. Once you reach the WorldTour you are guaranteed to race all the biggest races, but as a Professional Continental team, nothing is guaranteed. We're carefully studying how to reach the next level, but then the target always seems to moving too. It can be frustrating – we are just starting to digest the most recent info from the UCI and try to figure out how to proceed.

TOL: What it will take, besides more money and bigger sponsors, for Rally to get to the WorldTour level?

JC: Aside from money, it really comes down to infrastructure and time. It's not easy for an American team to make it in Europe and you can't do it overnight. It's a pretty big project to transition from American racing to European racing all while running a team. Starting from scratch in January we've made some great progress. We now have our own 7,000 square foot warehouse in Spain, we have four full time employees living in Europe, our European fleet of vehicles is expanding this winter, and we will soon be setting up housing for our North American staff and riders. These are all investments we are making now with the vision of racing at the highest level in a couple of years. It takes time to organize all of these things.

TOL: Let's switch gears and talk a little bit more about how things were during your racing career. Particularly within the U.S. sport, you always had a reputation of being a strong advocate of clean racing.

JC: That's a long story. Unfortunately the prime of my career was in the 1990s and sure, I was faced with the same decisions as most guys my age.

I had a lot of success as a junior and the first couple years as a senior. Everything was on track. But I wasn't a very mature kid, and that kind of early success and expectation didn't really help my career. Things started going wrong for me and I started having a lot of injuries and illnesses. Some of it was normal stuff that most athletes deal with, but much of it was my fault because I was reckless and didn't take care of myself.

By the time I sorted out my health issues, it was the mid-nineties and EPO use had become widespread. It didn't take long before I was convinced I couldn't make it in Europe without EPO. I felt as though I had to start doping or give up the dreams I'd had since I was eight years old. So yeah, I seriously considered doping during that period, but ultimately decided against it. It just wasn't for me and I didn't want to take any risks with my health. We were all just young kids in a tough situation, being forced to make very difficult decisions. Different people made different decisions. A lot of those guys are not bad dudes and some of them I still consider friends.

I thought that my best option was to race domestically, try to be the fastest field sprinter in the U.S., and try to make the Olympic team on the track. I never again did the volume or made the sacrifices necessary to compete in longer and more difficult road and stage races. I trained for the 1-kilometer time trial on the track and to be a pure field sprinter on the U.S. domestic scene. It wasn't very glamorous and I didn't make a ton of money, but I also didn't have to make all the sacrifices that the guys in Europe were making. I had a lot of fun.

TOL: Did it hurt your racing career? Do you feel like you were cheated out of possible greater success?

JC: This is tough to talk about. It's a complicated subject and my feelings have changed quite a bit over the years. I would never say that I would have won this race or that race. The fact is that I may not have been durable enough to make it in Europe or I may have continued having health issues racing at that level. That being said, staying clean during that period meant that you got cheated on a regular basis – even if you were just racing in the U.S. I absolutely felt cheated by guys doing EPO to win criteriums and NRC races. There was a time when I was bitter and angry, but I eventually realized it was a huge waste of

energy. Now I'm just happy with my decisions and with the way things turned out for me.

TOL: You are still kind of recognized and held up as a symbol of clean racing. Is this ever a problem or disadvantage for you today?

JC: Yeah. I have learned that speaking out about this can make me a target. I don't need enemies in this sport who may treat my riders or my team unfairly because they were offended by something I said. So I've found that it's just better to focus on what I can control. I may not have a lot of influence in this sport, but I always want to make the right decisions for my riders and my team. That's the best way for me to have a positive impact.

TOL: Let me ask you a slightly different question, the one that everybody asks these days. Do you believe the peloton is cleaner today than it was while you were racing?

JC: The peloton is absolutely cleaner today. There is still a lot of work to do, but from my perspective, the sport has made tremendous progress. What really confirms this for me is seeing what guys like Mike Woods and Ben King have been able to accomplish. I know those guys, and there is no way they are doping – and look what they've done! It's great to see this generation of guys have the opportunity to race clean at the highest level and make a good living. I'm a little jealous. It would have been nice to be born about 15 years later.

TOL: Any final advice for young riders looking to enter the professional ranks today?

JC: Don't think about the money when you're young. Focus on finding the best program. Find a team with a positive environment that can provide you with the best race program and try to surround yourself with people who are supportive. Race as much as you can and don't pigeon-hole yourself at a young age. The skills you learn racing track, cyclocross, mountain bikes, or criteriums can all help you succeed someday at the top level in Europe. Become an all around great bike racer. Have fun while you are young because someday it's going to be really hard and feel more like a job. And for God's sake, spend less time looking at your power meter!

Steve Maxwell, The Outer Line, November 28, 2018