

Team Ineos faces leadership question after Bernal's Tour victory

The performance of Team Ineos at this year's Tour de France has already been scrutinized and dissected countless times in the media over the past few weeks – before, during and after the race. And after things finally wrapped up last Sunday, there stood Egan Bernal and Geraint Thomas on the top two steps of the podium just as many expected, netting the same 1 – 2 result the team achieved in 2012 with Wiggins and Froome. Clearly, winning seven of the last eight editions of the world's preeminent bike race with four different racers is an extraordinary achievement, and it neatly encapsulates the team's dominance over the sport during the past decade. But the paper results from this year's Tour also mask some serious concerns and emerging cracks in the team's edifice, and beg some questions about their direction and leadership in the future.

Even though [they ended up winning](#)—and grabbing the top two steps on the podium—the team was clearly not nearly as dominant this year. In past years, Ineos (Sky) has usually been strong enough to suffocate the race, typically putting their train on the front of the peloton and effectively controlling the pace. That didn't happen as much this year, even though the team was essentially the same one that they sent to the race last year. During this year's race, the team's bench – which once appeared to be very deep – sometimes looked almost empty. Wout Poels, Michal Kwiatkowski, and Gianni Moscon – all riders considered potentially able to be leaders of their own teams – did not rip up the climbs and dominate as they have in the past. Given the [team's massive budget](#) relative to the competition and this apparent drop off in performance, one has to wonder whether there might be some more fundamental cracks developing in the previously impenetrable Ineos fortress.

The only change in the Ineos roster this year was Dylan van Baarle in for the injured Chris Froome. The supporting staff was essentially the same. So what happened? We have three questions to consider:

Did the team miss the personality or galvanizing force of Froome, of being driven and motivated to work together for a proven winner? Answer: That seems unlikely, as the team already had a proven and very popular winner in Thomas to work for, as well as the wildly talented Bernal – touted by many to be the likely winner before the race ever started. The team definitely had a purpose to work towards.

Is the supporting cast aging and getting a little bit worn out, after years of dominating the peloton? Answer: This also seems unlikely; Castroviejo and Poels are both in their early 30s, Rowe (tossed from the race after Stage 17) and Kwiatkowski are 29, while Moscon is 25.

Is it maybe just becoming harder and harder for team boss and cheerleader Dave Brailsford to effectively manage and motivate the top-heavy and massive amount of talent on his team? Answer: Hard to say, but there must be at least some element of this in the equation, and it's likely to become a bigger challenge in the future.

Ineos has spent heavily on riders like Kwiatkowski, originally signed as super-domestiques and potential stars in their own right. Not only have some of these riders failed to spread their own wings, they sometimes appeared to be having difficulties even performing basic pace-setting duties during the last three weeks. Ineos reportedly has both Kwiatkowski and Moscon under pricey contracts through the 2020 season, and both could prove to be rather expensive deadweight if they don't improve on the performances turned in this year.

And the team has apparently already gone one step further, signing upstart 2019 Giro d'Italia winner Richard Carapaz. And why wouldn't they? The team's financial wealth allows them to offer higher salaries than any other team in the sport, including attractive gimmicks like the 'victory clause' that helped them to grab Bernal from a much smaller and financially weaker team.

Geraint Thomas just said that he thought he could win another Tour de France in the years ahead. And four-time winner Chris Froome is most certainly aiming to win a record-tying fifth title as he recovers from his crash at the Critérium du Dauphiné. But as Froome and Thomas move into the latter half of their thirties, their likelihood of continued Tour dominance starts to decline fairly rapidly (Froome would be the oldest post-war Tour winner and Thomas the second oldest if either won in 2020).

And on the other side of the coin, Bernal's precocious win at age 22 doesn't necessarily mean that the team's future success is guaranteed either. While most observers are predicting great future success for Bernal, these things are never assured. Young winners of the past like Jan Ullrich (23) and Laurent Fignon (22) failed to live up to massive expectations (Fignon successfully defended his first title the following year but that would be his only other victory, while Ullrich was never able to match his success). Bernal's biggest obstacle, like his greatest strength, will likely prove to be his own Ineos team. Other young prodigies like Ivan Sosa (21) and Pavel Sivakov (22) clearly have great potential, but are still unproven and developing talents.

The cold reality is this: when Chris Froome returns, this single team will feature all three of the most recent winners of the Tour de France, and four out of the five most recent Grand Tour winners. As such, there seems to be a growing possibility that the team is simply becoming too top-heavy.

And what could that lead to? We have several things to consider:

The team might become subject to more infighting, which could seriously undermine the level of talent (for a case study on this, see: Movistar, 2019). Indeed, this would already be a serious problem for the team, if it weren't for the fact that both Froome and Thomas are unusually humble and sportsmanlike in defeat, and appear to genuinely support the team objectives rather than just their own individual aspirations. Furthermore, given this number of top stars, it also implies that there will be greater pressure on the team's highly-paid super-domestiques, to deliver support – in smaller numbers – for those top stars. Cycling is still a team sport, and top stars still need their helpers.

The team's abundance of riches will almost certainly start to backfire at some point. For example, next year Ineos will almost certainly have to decide that the best course of action is to leave one or two former Grand Tour winners at home. A former winner of the Tour left off the squad would likely be pretty upset. And what message would this send to other star riders who were considering joining the team? This will present Brailsford with a vexing problem, and despite the team-oriented style of his current star racers, it may become increasingly difficult to prevent rifts within the team.

Money talks, and some riders may be willing to give away the chance of leading a team or chasing individual glory in return for a top salary and more of a team support role (see: Kwiatkowski). But as it becomes more crowded at the top of Ineos, it seems likely that some top riders will opt to join or lead other teams, even if it means doing so at a lower salary. At some point, the roster hits critical mass and the team simply cannot absorb more star riders. This may start to be more of a challenge for Brailsford.

And the future challenges to fortress Ineos are not just coming from within. For the first time in years, Ineos is facing genuine threats from other consolidating and strengthening teams. Their seemingly weaker performance this year meant that the team was occasionally out-gunned by squads like Jumbo-Visma and Movistar – both of whom operate at on a much smaller budget than Ineos. Indeed, Jumbo-Visma appears set to challenge Ineos's super-team position next year, bringing on a legitimate GC contender [in the form of Tom Dumoulin](#) for the 2020 season. This complements their current embarrassment of riches which includes Primož Roglič, Stephen Kruijswijk, Wout van Aert, Tony Martin, Robert Gesink, and Dylan Groenewegen. During the Tour, Jumbo showed that they are one of the world's strongest teams, if maybe still lacking a dominant leader. The addition of Dumoulin will solve that problem and imply a growing and serious threat to Ineos's supremacy in the years ahead.

This should set up a more interesting dynamic in future Grand Tours – as Ineos continues to sport a strong team but perhaps ceases being the truly dominant force that it has been. With a continuing and wide imbalance in budgets, there is always the possibility that Ineos will respond to this competition by simply signing more top riders. But as the “critical mass effect” mentioned above increasingly comes into play, it will tend to act as a natural brake on the consolidation of talent at one team – and hence will be good for the overall sport.

Moreover, that “leveling of the playing field” effect will be reinforced by the fact that some teams seem to be figuring out how to assemble super-teams at a considerably lower cost. [According to ProCycling magazine](#), the Jumbo squad’s budget ranked 17th out of the 18 WorldTour teams last year. Perhaps they enjoyed a bigger budget this year, but they are still clearly far below the Ineos spending level. This begs another question (which we will examine in a future article): has Ineos overpaid for their stars and for strong domestique services, or have teams like Jumbo just been shrewder or luckier in their spending?

Underneath all these issues is the question of whether or not a team salary cap needs to be instituted in the sport. Ineos victories in seven out of the last eight editions of the Tour highlights the gulf in quality provided by their budget, and the team may continue buying the next up-and-coming stars to keep this streak alive. But, as we’ve shown, the flip side is that their larger budget could eventually be a limiter – that they will inevitably hit a tipping point where there simply isn’t room for all the highly accomplished riders on their roster to get a chance to shine on the biggest stage.

As they head into the 2020 season Team Ineos will have to focus on avoiding the situation that seemed to plague Team Movistar in the recent Tour, and that has often hamstrung other super-teams in the past. Some previous teams have had to figure out how to balance and manage two Grand Tour winners (or potential winners) on the same team, but none have ever tried to integrate four recent Grand Tour winners into one smoothly-functioning squad. We’ve learned not to underestimate Dave Brailsford, but he’ll definitely have his work cut out for him.

By Spener Martin and Steve Maxwell, August 1st, 2019.