

# Team Movistar Documentary on Netflix Is What Pro Cycling Needs

The new six-part series “The Least Expected Day” featuring Team Movistar’s controversial 2019 season was released on Netflix just a short time ago. And it is just the kind of compelling behind-the-scenes, human interest sports story which pro cycling badly needs – and the type of content which could lure new fans into the sport. The three-hour documentary, produced by the team’s parent company – Spanish telephone company Telefonica – provides unprecedented and up-close access into the team’s bus, race meetings, hotels and dining rooms. It brings a human face to the team, and presents an honest perspective on the interpersonal relationships, challenges and competitive conflicts which make the sport both intriguing for hard-core fans, but also sometimes difficult-to-follow for less familiar spectators.

For years, observers have insisted that cycling could make far more effective use of television and video formats to get behind the scenes and tell the really interesting personal stories and subplots going on behind the standard race coverage — and this documentary is a good example of that. In 2014, we wrote in VeloNews, “As many observers have pointed out, even in the Tour de France, clearly the most popular and widely watched cycling event in the world, much of the coverage can be pretty boring. Many people, and particularly younger fans, just stream the last three minutes of the race on their phones, totally bypassing the first several hours of coverage.”

In that article, former Coors Classic race director Michael Aisner underlined the need to emphasize the more dramatic and attractive elements of the sport, citing an event in the 1985 Tour de France. “... Greg LeMond was ready to attack and win a stage, but his coaches instructed him to wait for Bernard Hinault, who later went on to win the race. At the end of the dramatic Pyrenees stage, LeMond was caught on television, weeping with rage and frustration at his coaches’ orders. ‘That’s the kind of drama and human story that fans love. This sport is saturated with enticing moments that we too often leave unseen.’”

The Movistar documentary manages to capture exactly these sorts enticing sorts of moments, the highs and the lows, the anecdotes and personal stories that bring a much more human side to the sport — and it creates a far more interesting story about the sport than today’s typical TV fare of crank-by-crank coverage of long, flat stages with rote references to 13th-century castles in the French countryside.

It has become something of a cottage industry to question or ridicule Movistar for its internal frictions and conflicts, and its sometimes ambiguous race strategies (one Twitter cynic recently wrote “Team Movistar, practicing social distancing before it became cool”). But the team is, in fact, the longest-lasting organization in the sport, and unquestionably one of it’s most successful – with over 900 victories since its formation in 1980. From its early days as the Miguel Indurain-powered Banesto Team, through various name and sponsorship changes like Illes-Balear – when current team leader Alejandro Valverde joined the squad in 2005 – and later, Caisse d’Epargne, the team has been a dominant force. Joining forces with the Movistar brand in 2011, the team has continued to add to its palmares with star rider Nairo Quintana, always under the steadying hand of long-time General Manager Eusebio Unzué.

The documentary starts with the staff laying out the general race plan for 2019. Plans quickly go awry when Valverde – the newly crowned [world champion](#) – crashes a few days before the early season classic Liege-Bastogne-Liege. But the bulk of the film focuses on the three grand tours and the difficult challenges of trying to balance the team’s three GC leaders: the elder statesman-like Valverde, considered by many to be the top rider of his generation; the stoic Nairo Quintana (previous winner of both the Giro and the Vuelta); and the often mercurial Mikel Landa.

(Spoiler alert: Cycling fans will be generally aware of how Movistar’s season unfolded, but if the

uninitiated want to maintain the suspense, they may want to skip the next couple of paragraphs.)

In the Giro, the lesser-known Richard Carapaz cleverly takes advantage of the confusion to grab overall victory – the first grand tour for his home country of Ecuador — when designated team leader Landa falters. There are detailed interviews with Carapaz, as well as with his parents and teachers back in the Andean village where he grew up; what kind of a child he was, how he picked his first bike out of the trash and so on. Carapaz’s story is some of the most compelling footage in the film, and he comes across as humble and likable — even though he later (and admittedly) bolts to Team Ineos for more money, with the dubious intervention of rider agent Guiseppe Acquadro.

At the Tour, things only get more complicated, with apparent discord and day-by-day switching back and forth between proposed co-leaders Quintana and Landa — and how they, and the rest of the team, dealt with a situation which became progressively more complex. The internal friction continues later at the Vuelta, climaxing with the shameful incident of Marc Soler disregarding management direction and waving off the team car, with furious team directors screaming at the “f\*\*king kid.”

All of these soap operas and quarrels have been well-recorded, replayed and discussed in the cycling media, but what is new and interesting here is to hear about them through the lens of the individual riders and managers — how the events came to pass, what the individuals involved were thinking at the time, what the original plans had been, and how all the members of team adapted to changing circumstances. We hear from all of the key riders in detailed personal interviews. In the process, the situation emerges as more complex and nuanced than the cycling media was presenting at the time.

Quintana comes across as tortured and conflicted, committed to doing the right thing for the team but often unhappy with his own individual role. But for people who believe Quintana is a remote or stony automaton, his articulate, heartfelt and teary farewell to the team later in the film casts him a much different light. Landa also comes across as a more thoughtful and less self-absorbed figure than he has been characterized by the media, well-respected by his teammates for his efforts, but admitting at one point, “I don’t always think things through.” Valverde clearly emerges as the shrewd leader and elder statesman of the team, trying to help maintain harmony on the team, while openly bemoaning the psychological weight of the rainbow jersey on his back. Both the riders and staff openly discuss their strategic mistakes — like the ill-timed acceleration on Stage 19 of the Vuelta — and bristle at what they believe to be the under-informed biases of the fans and media.

All of this makes for captivating viewing. Yes, there were serious strains and conflicts within this team — “it was complicated,” says Landa at one point – but there wasn’t outright hostility. This inside perspective shows that all of them were genuinely making a good faith effort to cooperate and moderate those conflicts as best they could under the circumstances. At one point during the Tour, the three leaders tape a video message of unity for the fans – and while they are teasing and joking with each other, it’s clearly an uneasy situation. It’s very interesting to understand this unspoken tension from the perspective of the key riders, their domestiques and the staff. And regardless of all the perceived tension and conflict, its worth noting that the team did garner a grand tour victory, second place at another, and all three grand tour team victories — a banner year for most any other team.

Although it must have been somewhat unnatural and off-putting for both the riders and staff to constantly have a camera in the room, most of the film does not seem too contrived. To me, there appeared to be very little play-acting, and the personal interviews came across as genuine and heartfelt, even when delving into the most sensitive or controversial moments of the season.

The only scenes that seem a bit contrived or over-the-top are the silly (and frankly somewhat dangerous) tantrums thrown by a couple of the race car directors — yelling at the riders, screaming non-stop profanities through their radios, slamming the roof and smashing the steering wheel, WHILE DRIVING. One could

question why the directors always feel obliged to yell “go, go, go” dozens of times into their microphones, as if that is somehow helpful or motivating to the rider up ahead — It’s no wonder that riders frequently somehow “lose” their ear-pieces.

From a technical perspective, the film is very professionally produced, and it has a subtle but pleasant soundtrack. By and large, the camera-man seems to have been invisible; only in a couple of minor instances did any participants play directly to the camera. And I didn’t find the English subtitles to be too distracting.

It would be interesting to find out (1) how much this production cost, and (2) if and how it disrupted the normal process and operation of the team. Why? Because I think every pro team should hire a Telefonica to produce this kind of unfiltered documentary film that illustrates the team, warts and all — not simply a glossy piece of advertisement with any controversy edited out.

Imagine how differently you would view pro cycling if you had this kind of behind-the-scenes and personal insight into each of the teams, all the key racers, directors and other characters around the sport. I would watch every one of them, maybe twice, because this kind of coverage provides the context, flavor and intensity that always seems to be missing from standard bike racing coverage.

In my view, this is the kind of television content that pro cycling is in dire need of. This type of content can make cycling so much richer, more vibrant and more animated. And it’s not only of interest to hardcore fans, but it can also be accessible or even compelling to casual fans or non-fans. It could help attract new followers to the sport, because it’s not just a story about bike racing; it’s a story about human beings and their struggles, their dreams, their goals and their failures. I recommended it to a few friends who aren’t bike racing fans, or who don’t really understand the sport, and they also found it to be gripping and informative viewing. “Now I understand why you’re always watching bike racing,” said one.

After the 2019 season, Team Movistar pretty much revamped itself. Quintana headed to ProTeam Arkea-Samsic and was off to a phenomenal start in the early season – one can only wonder how the lockdown will affect what looked like a rebirth for him. Landa went off to Bahrain-McLaren, finally free to be the undisputed team leader, and came in third at the 2020 Ruta del Sol. Enric Mas (who does not appear in the film) and Soler (whose maturity and demeanor is cast into doubt in the film) are billed as the team’s GC leaders, but neither has yet had a chance to demonstrate their readiness for that role. And who knows what surprises “the old man” Valverde may still be able to pull out of the hat? But after seeing “The Least Expected Day” it’s going to be a lot more fun to watch. Once we get back to racing...

*By Steve Maxwell, April 7th, 2020.*