

# The Impact of Coronavirus on Classics Season

*Given that the rapid spread of COVID-19 has already killed thousands of people and is threatening to become a global pandemic with possibly severe public health and economic implications, it may seem a bit blinkered or insensitive to talk about the virus's impact on pro cycling. But it is the job of the cycling media to cover the competitive and economic aspects of the sport. Below, we take a look at some of the possible repercussions for the rest of the season, and how cycling's leaders can make the best decisions under the circumstances.*

The pro cycling season has already seen a successful Tour Down Under, some smaller but longstanding Spanish races and the newer middle eastern events. But when Omloop Het Nieuwsblad and Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne took place over the weekend of March 1, that signaled the true kick-off of the “real” road racing season for traditional fans of the sport. These back-to-back races have traditionally been a good benchmark, giving us a first look at the spring classics contenders — to see who is on-form, who is out of shape and who might be a little fit a little too early.

Jasper Stuyven of Trek-Segafredo got into a breakaway move with 70 kilometers to go, and then out-sprinted Deceuninck-Quickstep's Yves Lampaert to take a close win at Omloop Het Nieuwsblad. The next day, Lampaert's young teammate Kasper Asgreen held off a storming peloton to solo in for a very impressive victory at Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne. These two victories were the biggest wins of their careers for both riders. Now, just ten days later, these two races are taking on a much greater significance — and its possible that Stuyven and Asgreen may end up as the kings of the 2020 spring classics season.

Following the controversial mid-event discontinuation of the UAE Tour and subsequent quarantine of pro cycling teams and journalists of much of the overall race contingent, we have seen the postponement of much of the Italian spring schedule, due to the rapid spread of the coronavirus in Northern Italy. Saturday came and went without the running of Strade Bianche. And this past weekend's Giro d'Italia tune-up – Tirreno-Adriatico — was called off. The first monument of 2020, Milano-Sanremo, was postponed to an unspecified date. Paris-Nice started as planned on Sunday, even though its route is just as close to the Milan-area hotbed of the virus as were the other cancelled Italian races. French officials have since [banned large gatherings](#) at the start and finish.

As April draws closer, the northern classics of E3 BinckBank Classic, Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix are still slated to run as scheduled, but could be in jeopardy of cancellation or postponement if COVID-19 continues to spread throughout Europe. Most public health officials believe that this will in fact occur, and so more cancellations seem likely. Race cancellations/postponements like these are not totally without precedent, but past disruptions to major races like Flanders and Roubaix have been exclusively limited to the World Wars. This year, it seems that there is a very real possibility that we may have already witnessed most or all of the springs classics campaign. If other spring races are called off or scheduled for a later date, this would send severe ripples through the racing world – and Omloop Het Nieuwsblad and Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne would retroactively increase in importance.

In one example of how teams are reacting on the spur of the moment, Wout van Aert's Jumbo-Visma team apparently sensed this crumbling of the calendar coming, and moved his season opener up, including him in their Omloop Het Nieuwsblad lineup at the last second. Granted, the team might have been able to parlay an early success into bigger wins later in the spring, but the winners of these two early races have rarely been able to win either Flanders or Roubaix.

While a blunted spring season would increase the value of Stuyven's and Asgreen's victories, older stars like Philippe Gilbert and Greg van Avermaet would lose a precious chance to bag legacy-cementing monument victories. Gilbert looked to be on very strong form on opening weekend, and as has been well-documented elsewhere, was certainly looking to peak for Milano-Sanremo, the only monument missing on

his palmares. With the postponement, he has potentially lost a golden opportunity to become just the fourth rider of all-time to win all five monuments. On the other hand, others point out that Gilbert's form has often peaked later in the year.

There were also a few other riders, outside of the most visible stars at Omloop Het Nieuwsblad and Kuurne-Brussels-Kuurne, signaling an intent to rack up a serious result this spring. Heinrich Haussler turned back the clock about 10 years, and looked very strong at both opening weekend races. His opportunity for a late-career flourish at Strade Bianche and Milano-Sanremo is now derailed, with Flanders, and Roubaix also in jeopardy.

And there are major team consequences to be considered with these schedule woes. Entire teams like Deceuninck–Quick-Step (DQS) are essentially built around the spring racing calendar, and they will likely take a massive win count and media exposure hit with these spring race reductions. While Deceuninck will most likely be fine and is usually able to salvage wins wherever bike racing is occurring, less talented squads like Sunweb and Lotto-Soudal could struggle. Sunweb has pivoted to the classics with the departure of Tom Dumoulin and Lotto is heavily leveraged with John Degenkolb and Philippe Gilbert. On the flip side, the team did pick up an impressive and unexpected third place with Soren Kragh Anderson at Omloop.

And the team dynamics will be even more fraught with complications. To date, citing health concerns for their riders, several teams have already unilaterally pulled out of upcoming races that have not (yet) been cancelled. This raises a number of perplexing competitive and governance questions and concerns. Will or should the UCI punish WorldTour teams for being no-shows to major WorldTour events at a time like this? How will event organizers respond to smaller or less competitive fields? And how will the individual team handle the loss of potential UCI points and podiums, from a competitive perspective? For some lower-end teams, dropping out of races could impact their team points totals, possibly even jeopardizing their WorldTour status at some point in the future. And we haven't even mentioned the potential impact on sponsors, and how that might affect future decision-making.

In addition to all these lost opportunities and results, the sport's biggest races are potentially on a collision course in terms of rescheduling dates. In most cases, the language around these race disruptions so far has been "postponement" rather than outright "cancellation." But there has been no public disclosure of potential reschedule dates, and likely there won't be until there is greater clarity on a potential timeline for de-escalation of the virus. But as each day goes by, and with greater spread of the virus, the window of possible dates narrows. Presumably, the rescheduled races would not be allowed conflict with grand tours and the world championships (assuming that those major events take place.)

If this general scenario unfolded, it is unclear how disputes between major race organizers like RCS (Giro d'Italia) and ASO (Tour de France) would be resolved? Would the UCI be put in the unenviable position of mediating this dispute between the sport's two power players? A further consideration is that while a late-season, rapid-fire succession of Italian classics could sound appealing to fans, it is unclear how this would sit with riders, and if their form and motivation could be sustained late into the season. Could riders truly be expected to "re-peak" for races several months after they initially prepared for them? And these races could conceivably be taking place not that far from the start of the 2021 season, when riders are expected to show up in near peak fitness.

At this point, there are a lot of questions, and we can only wildly speculate on an endless number of possible scenarios. Furthermore, we are unlikely to gain much clarity in the near-term on how this will all play out through the rest of the year. As fans, we might like to see racing carry on in as close to a normal format as possible. But pro cycling teams, events and regulators are being forced to make very consequential decisions with very little information; as fans, we need to cut them some slack, and give them the benefit of the doubt at a time like this. How can a team manager be expected to weigh the

(unknown) potential health impact to his riders today, versus the potential loss of a few racing points that might impact his team two years from now?

All facets of our society and economy are facing the same requirement right now, of making critical decisions while the future is largely unknown. In its own small way, pro cycling has exactly the same challenge. Decision-making under uncertainty is a subject that has been studied for decades by psychologists and economists, and while this is obviously not the place to review that vast volume of work, there are a few simple lessons to consider. One framework for minimizing biases and mistakes that might be useful for cycling's decision-makers to remember derives from the seminal early 1970s work of the Nobel Prize-winning Israeli [cognitive psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman](#). They argued that we often use mental shortcuts or "rules of thumb" – what they called "heuristics" – to make decisions under uncertainty, because we don't have the time, resources, or information to make fully-informed decisions.

Tversky and Kahneman categorized these rules of thumb – which often result in errors and cognitive biases – into three general categories:

1. Representativeness – where we tend to make decisions based more on our existing mental stereotypes of what we intuitively think could happen, rather than actual and easily-obtainable statistical likelihood;
2. Availability – where we tend to heavily bias our judgments based upon information which we have more recently acquired, information which is more "available" rather than information that may be the most relevant – "if we can recall something, it must be important;" and,
3. Anchoring – where we tend to rely too heavily on an initial piece of information when making decisions, and then adjust up or down – for example, the initial price thrown out when negotiating the price of a used car.

These human cognitive tendencies are elegantly summarized by Tversky and Kahneman, and are worth studying to avoid bias and errors when making decisions under conditions of great uncertainty.

Right now, it looks like Flanders classic, and ASO, will go full steam ahead to run their early April monuments without interruption. If they succeed, and if the Tour de France and Giro able to go ahead as scheduled, then perhaps we will see a semi-normal schedule through the spring and summer, with an October smack full of Italian single-day classics. But if the situation in Europe fails to improve over the next few weeks – as most public health officials have suggested – and more and more races are forced to cancel or "postpone," it's becoming more conceivable every day that we may have already seen the highlights of the spring classics campaign, and that the entire 2020 racing season will forever have an asterisk next to it.

*By Spencer Martin and Steve Maxwell, March 11th, 2020.*