

The 'Relegation Watch:' Behind the Headlines

Since the end of last year and certainly during the early part of this year's pro cycling season, there has been a flurry of [interest](#) and [attention](#) paid to the UCI's upcoming system of "relegation/promotion," named after the common European football league practice. At the end of this year, the top 18 teams – ranked in terms of the most cumulative UCI points over the previous three years (2020 through 2022) – will have the opportunity to apply for a selective three-year WorldTour (WT) license, thus ensuring themselves of participation in all the sport's biggest races from 2023 through 2025. The UCI's rationale behind this new process was to provide some measure of economic protection and help increase the value of the top-performing teams. In some ways, the process is a tentative and short-term experiment with the attributes of a franchise or league type of sport – each team that gets a license next year has ensured their future for at least three years.

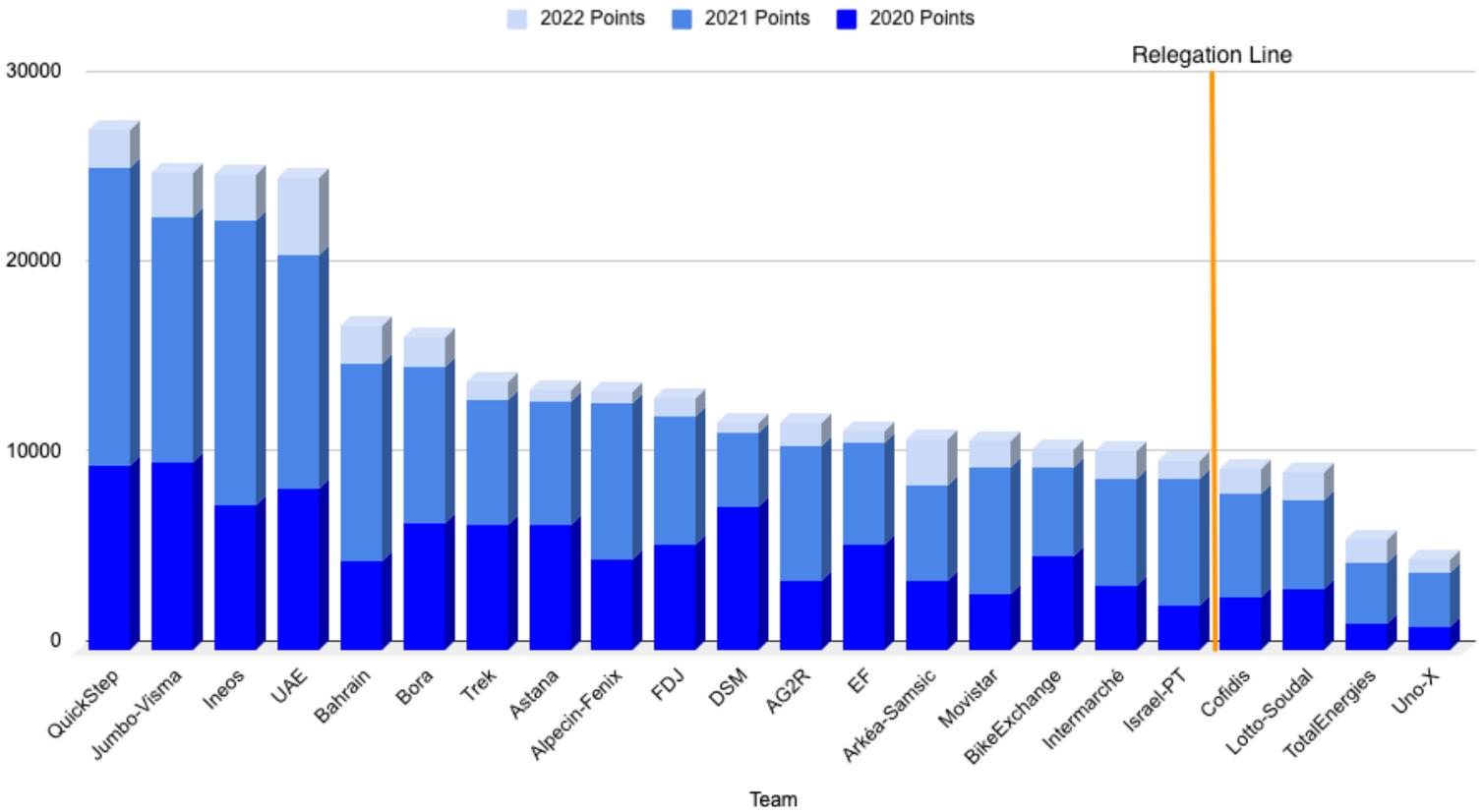
There has been a lot of media attention paid to this incipient race to qualify for the WT license, and the different race tactics that teams may employ to make sure that they are one of these top 18 teams at the end of the 2022 season. The UCI points system is complicated, and early on there was considerable confusion about how the "promotion/relegation" systems would work. Some team managers believed that points could be bought in the form of hiring new riders, though it is now clear that while riders can be "bought," the points they earn remain with the team whose jersey they were wearing at the time. While that confusion is cleared up, the individual races to avoid relegation and to garner obligatory wildcards invites in 2023 are being watched carefully – and are still subject to confusion. One venerable cycling observer, The Inner Ring, has even established a [weekly "relegation watch."](#) Some teams already seem to be racing with adjusted strategies (like placing three racers in the top ten, rather than going for the win) in order to make sure they accumulate points. The teams variously thought to potentially be "on the cusp" of potential downgrading include Cofidis and Lotto-Soudal for sure, Israel-Premier Tech and BikeExchange maybe, and Intermarche, Arkea-Samsic, and Movistar, possibly.

But a close reading of the UCI's often-changing and labyrinthine regulations suggests that all this flurry of attention may be a little overdone. A careful reading of UCI regulation 2.1.007 *bis* states pretty clearly which teams will be invited to which events in 2023 and beyond. For the grand tours and one-day WT stage races, the 18 WT teams and the top two ProTeams will be invited; for other one-day WT races, the top 18 WT teams plus the top *three* ProTeams will be invited. The critical and often overlooked point to understand here is that the top two (or three) ProTeams who will be invited to 2023 WT races will be based upon their 2022 points total only – not the three-year cumulative total. The same method will be employed for 2024 and 2025 mandatory wild cards.

It is perhaps easiest to just think about the whole situation in terms of two different "points races" that we will be watching during the rest of 2022: the first – based upon bolstering the three-year cumulative points ranking, to determine which 18 teams will qualify to apply for a WT license next year; and the second – based upon 2022 points rankings, to determine which ProTeams will get mandatory invites to the WT races in 2023.

In terms of the former, there is currently a huge gap between the #20 team (Lotto) and the #21 team (Total Energies). It seems virtually impossible that any team currently sitting below #20 in the rankings to qualify for the WT ranking next year; some group of 18 out of these top 20 teams will represent the WorldTour starting in 2023.

Relegation/Promotion Standings as of March 15th



However, because the mandatory 2023 wild card invitations will be based upon only 2022 results, it is feasible that one or more of the teams below #20 (such as Total Energies or Uno-X) could conceivably score more points in 2022 than the teams that may be relegated from above. This outcome is judged to be somewhat unlikely, primarily due to the fact that the teams below #20 are not afforded as many opportunities to race in enough top events to outgun the WT and PT teams ranked well above them.

Current 2022 UCI Point Team Rankings

Rank	Team	Class	Points
1	UAE Team Emirates	WT	4051
2	INEOS Grenadiers	WT	2496
3	Team Arkéa Samsic	PT	2383
4	Jumbo-Visma	WT	2367
5	Quick-Step Alpha Vinyl Team	WT	2022
6	Bahrain - Victorious	WT	2019
7	BORA - hansgrohe	WT	1526
8	Intermarché - Wanty - Gobert Matériaux	WT	1509
9	Lotto Soudal	WT	1502
10	Movistar Team	WT	1459
11	Cofidis	WT	1310
12	AG2R Citroën Team	WT	1249
13	TotalEnergies	PT	1179
14	Trek - Segafredo	WT	985
15	Groupama - FDJ	WT	978
16	Team BikeExchange - Jayco	WT	941
17	Israel - Premier Tech	WT	917
18	Uno-X Pro Cycling Team	PT	696
19	Astana Qazaqstan Team	WT	663
20	EF Education-EasyPost	WT	614
21	Alpecin-Fenix	PT	609
22	Team DSM	WT	555

If any team has a chance to do this, it is likely to be Team Total Energies, since the presence of Peter Sagan on the team will secure wildcard invitations to nearly any race the team wishes to attend. They are off to a good start so far this season (sitting 13th even without any contribution yet from Sagan) but at the same time, they lack any real chance of promotion to the WT at the end of the year. This means – at least at this early point in the season – that they are fairly likely to occupy one of the two automatic invitation spots in 2023. Two of the teams ranked above them will be relegated, and it's likely that one of those teams would be lower-ranking as a ProTeam (based on 2022 points) than TotalEnergies. Hence, that former WT team could lose out on grand tour invites (though it might still get automatic invitations to major one-day races). If that team turns out to be Cofidis, they will most likely find themselves in the Tour de France anyway as one of the optional wild cards, since they are a mainstay French team. However, if that slot should end up being occupied by a non-European team like Israel-Premier Tech or BikeExchange, they could end up getting locked out of most of the major races. Such a circumstance could even lead to the demise of their programs, as non-core nation ProTeams have found it nearly impossible to secure optional wildcard invitations to the major races.

But upon stepping back and taking a closer look, other factors may come into play in both “races.” The contest for the WT license might not be quite as tight as suggested, for at least two reasons. First, it is quite possible that one or more of the teams currently in the top 18 points ranking will not even be in existence in 2023. For example, Astana has been in the news recently for not being able to pay its rider salaries, and the team has been engulfed in various other management controversies over the last couple of years in particular. It is not hard to imagine that they could fold at the end of this year. And without mentioning names, there seem to be at least one or two other teams that could either fold or willingly drop down in the ProTeam level. History shows that, on average, one WorldTour disbands about every year.

This would mean that there are more spots available, and make all the current fuss over relegation less relevant.

The second question to analyze here is whether all of the top 18 teams will necessarily *want* to apply for the WT license. The key example here is Alpecin-Fenix, a ProTeam that is currently ranked 9th – i.e., a second-tier team that has outperformed more than half of the elite-level teams over the last two-plus years. A key advantage that the UCI has conferred upon the top two ProTeams is that while they are invited to all of the WT races, they don't actually have to attend. ProTeams are all invited to all the races, and they *do* have to attend.

This rule conveys several subtle advantages on these select top ProTeams. Most importantly, they can achieve similar levels of visibility and value for their sponsors by being at all the key races, but they can do so at significantly lower costs as a WT team. (Besides lower licensing fees and various other administrative costs, the fact that they don't have to travel and compete in every single WorldTour race allows substantial cost savings.) Furthermore, the fact that they don't have to attend every single race or field multiple teams at the same time for overlapping events (like Paris-Nice and Tirreno-Adriatico this past week) also conveys a strictly sporting advantage. The flexibility to pick and choose events allows their riders more rest without always having to dash to and fro on airplanes to make sure a team is lining up at every event. This less hectic environment and flexibility may ultimately allow the team to be competitively stronger for its key events. In short, there are some pretty key advantages to being one of those top two ProTeams.

Almost all media observers have suggested that any team with the opportunity to apply for a WorldTour license should and will definitely do so – because it locks them into the WorldTour for three years. At first glance, this seems pretty logical. But we believe it may be a more subtle question for certain team managers. If you've been racing well enough for over two years to rank above more than half of the WT teams, *and* you have the flexibility to manage your team in a more sustainable way, the likelihood of dropping down more than ten places in the ranking is fairly remote. Sure, Alpecin has locked up one of the top stars in the sport in Mathieu van der Poel, but it has built a strong supporting cast as well, so it's not as if the team is totally dependent on one racer. There would have to be a significant collapse for Alpecin to drop all the way down below the top two ProTeams in terms of points. So, it would not be an irrational decision for a team manager to decide *not* to undertake the costs and the physical punishment of a WT license. Indeed, outside of the simple "status" of being a WT team, it's not inconceivable that an *existing* WT team might also decide to drop down due to these advantages. As [the Inner Ring blog says](#), "It's like buying a second class ticket but being upgraded to first-class every time they travel."

There is no doubt that being guaranteed WT status for three years represents good value and carries a certain status with it. Hopefully, those teams will be able to convert that 3-year guarantee into stronger sponsor relationships, greater financial value as a team, and a more sustainable future. But what is the actual viable planning horizon for a pro cycling team anyway – two or three years? Teams and sponsors change, riders move around or get injured, plus there is no guarantee that the UCI won't make further tweaks to the system – spawning new and different approaches for survival. Taking a bet on receiving two and possibly even three seasons of full WT race invites at a lower cost is a gamble that Alpecin-Fenix and other teams might well take. One could even imagine a scenario in which two or more teams colluded to take advantage of this mandatory ProTeam invite rule. And, significantly, if the number of WT teams shrinks, the number of mandatory wild card invites goes up, ensuring that nearly every top-level second-division team will be invited to any race in which they would want to compete.

The UCI is reluctant to discuss this potential unintended outcome – because it implicitly undercuts the value of a WT license if certain teams find it competitively and/or economically more attractive to remain at the ProTeam level while mostly competing at the WT level. The other broader policy consideration here, which has gone largely unnoticed, is that this system tends to lock the status quo into place. In part, that's

what it was intended to do. But these guarantees to the top two or three ProTeams also work to tamp down the aspirations of all the other ProTeams trying to work their way up. If you never get invites and never get to participate in the bigger races, there is no way to earn enough points to move up; you are essentially locked into the lower level. And, just as in other franchise sports, even the weakest – and perhaps now undeserving – WT teams are guaranteed their spot at every start line for three years. (Consider the following thought experiment here: what if Team Uno-X or Human Powered Health (formerly Rally) were allowed to race every event which Team DSM will be racing this year? Which team might garner the most points?)

A system that would be more logical and could oxygenate the market for team performance would be for the UCI to spread these WT racing opportunities around to a wider set of ProTeams, to make the second tier playing field a bit more level and to encourage new blood and new teams to come into the sport. Right now, it is almost impossible to break into the top-level – short of merging with an existing WT team (as Israel – Premier Tech did with Katusha) or buying the license of a defunct WT team (as Intermarche did with CCC). A potential way out of close loop system would be to stop allowing race organizers to give out Wildcard invitations at their own destruction without any sporting criteria since this current system ensures that to be invited to any of the sport's grand tours, ProTeams outside the top two ranking slots have to be based in the host's country.

In sum, our view is that while it will be interesting to watch the relegation race this year, the window for any change for 2023 is narrow. With 20 teams currently competing for 18 WT slots, it is very possible that two current WT teams will be on the outside looking in next season (Cofidis and Lotto are currently on the outside looking in according to rankings), but with the top two ProTeam getting automatic invitations to every major WT race, their relegation will only trigger a noticeable difference should they also finish below Team TotalEnergies for 2022 points. While such a relegation could trigger embarrassment for some high-profile owners (the patron owners of Israel– Premier Tech and BikeExchange come to mind), without a current WorldTour team also finishing outside the top two ProTeams in the rankings, the same teams will still be racing at most of the same events in 2023.

This all means that while nearly all eyes will be on the race for relegation and the fight for the cumulative top 18 slots, the real race for those in danger of relegation is to finish ahead of either TotalEnergies and/or the other relegated squad. This somewhat confusing and anti-climatic setup lacks the intrigue and tidiness of a “race for the WorldTour,” but still holds the potential to deliver a currently high-profile team into obscurity depending on how the rest of the season plays out.

By: Steve Maxwell and Spencer Martin, March 17th, 2022