

The UCI's New 2020 Calendar Has Too Many Risks

The UCI's new calendar plan, released on April 15th, was a strong [boost of hope](#) for cycling fans – and unquestionably provided a shot in the arm for teams, riders and sponsors. Any glimmer of hope for resuming some kind of season is welcome news, and everyone would certainly welcome a responsibly managed return to racing as soon as the public health situation allows it. And certainly, all stakeholders would agree that the sport desperately needs at least the Tour de France – the event that powers the entire sport – to take place if at all possible.

However, there are also considerable risks inherent in the rough plan that the UCI cobbled together earlier this week. Most of the potential risks were already addressed in a [previous article](#), written a day before the UCI announced its latest plans. Although specific dates were proposed for the Tour de France, the rest of the calendar is still somewhat vague and indefinite – and it will undoubtedly change again, probably in the next few days or weeks as more information becomes available. But let's examine the current UCI proposal in a bit more detail.

First, we have to acknowledge the obvious at the outset – nobody can know how the course of this pandemic may play out, and when social gatherings and sporting events will actually be allowed to phase back in. So far, the consensus of public health officials seems to be that this period of lockdown could extend longer rather than shorter, and that mass gatherings may generally have to be delayed until a vaccine is available – a period that may be measured in years rather than months. Hence – although it is very disheartening to say this – it is certainly conceivable that there will be no pro cycling the rest of the year, and all of this current discussion, debate and controversy about the calendar may be moot.

Second, we understand and sympathize with the immense economic pressures and necessity for the sport to try to recover as much of its season as possible. As we have [pointed out many times](#), it is critical that pro cycling gets as much exposure as possible to maintain the ever fragile and critical relationship with sponsors. This commercial necessity is behind the organizers' – and the UCI's – push to quickly piece together some sort of season. And it is a huge boost to the riders and the teams if a specific date can be targeted for training, logistical and motivational purposes. If this proposal could be pulled off, it would be huge for riders, teams, athletes – everybody.

But on the other side of the coin, the potential risks of a highly compressed season must also be equitably balanced into this difficult equation – the health of the riders, the status of hosting countries' international travel restrictions, the competitive quality of the racing, and simply the sheer logistics of managing a compressed season. We worry that the UCI's current plan leans too far towards the economic side of this delicate balance – that it tries to force-fit too many events into a compressed season, that it favors quantity over quality, and this could end hurting both the quality and image of pro cycling. However, we also realize that this plan will almost certainly be revised backward again over the coming weeks, as people comprehend the enormity of what is proposed here. Below is a listing of specific concerns:

1. (Actually 15 days later than we assumed in our earlier optimistic calendar scenario.) So, in terms of all the problems and constraints that we discussed earlier, this scenario increases those problems by compressing the season by an additional 15 days.
2. The ASO announcement referred to the necessity for riders to have some time to train on the road before the Tour actually begins. But given France's restrictions through mid-July and the lingering effects of the virus in most other countries, it is still very uncertain just how much time riders will have to seriously train on the road before the end of August. Country by country outdoor restrictions vary widely. And there are questions regarding how freely athletes, or anyone, will be able to travel between hard-hit countries by that time.
3. Christian Prudhomme [acknowledged](#) some of the differences that would characterize these Tour dates – it is no longer the height of the French vacation season, the children are back in school,

the roadside crowds would likely be down, and the emblematic sunflowers will long since be dead. The weather will certainly be cooler, which could be a distinct advantage to the riders. None of this means that the Tour can't still be an exciting race, but it will certainly be different.

4. It will take time to absorb all the sheer logistical challenges of managing a team through this sort of compressed season. As we discussed, this will almost certainly imply that most teams are continuously racing on at least two fronts (possibly three) simultaneously; what will be the challenges of travel, transportation, lodging and food, in a world that has been totally shut down for months? Will all the riders and staff be able to get to the race, will there be someplace to stay, and something to eat?
5. From a public health perspective, running any kind of event during this timeframe could still present [unacceptable risks according to many experts](#). And to protect the concerns of the broader public, will it be feasible to test all the riders and staff on an on-going basis, to ensure that an individual team or the peloton is not the source of a new regional outbreak of the virus. This could not only derail the resumption of the sport, but could run the risk of infecting. If a larger outbreak resulted from the peloton moving around these countries, this would basically be the Festina scandal times 1,000. The sport could be vilified, not to mention the potential liability.
6. And what about television coverage? Will all of these rescheduled and tightly compressed races be guaranteed television time – given the fact that all other sports will be scrambling to reopen and attract fans at the same time? In its normal July timeframe, the Tour doesn't really have to compete against many other European sports, and hence has traditionally enjoyed extensive TV coverage. According to [The Sports Consultancy's](#) Angus Buchanan, there are at least 15 major sporting events that have already been rescheduled for September and October. He asks "How will this extraordinary increase in the number of events in this congested calendar compete for more limited budgets from broadcasters, sponsors and the ticket-buying public? Will the supply chain, from event production, catering and logistics to marketing and promotions, be able to serve this number of events in such a short period?" The Tour will certainly be facing much tougher competition from other sports, all trying to resume their activities at the same time.
7. Although no specific dates have been suggested yet, it would appear that the Giro will almost certainly have to run through the end of October. This is already the source of an [emerging controversy](#) and almost certain power struggle. What impact could the weather have on the event? Ski races are more common by that time in the Italian mountains than bike races. Mountain-top finishes may all have to be re-planned, and so on. This could substantially change the nature of the racing.
8. And there is a wealth of purely scheduling and dateline questions. For example:
 1. If the World Championships begin on the same day as the Tour ends, how many top riders could we actually expect to attend the Worlds? Most riders and teams will be laser-focused on the Tour. Riders that don't get chosen for the Tour will be focused on the Giro or Vuelta. Sponsorship visibility concerns will ensure this. It seems unavoidable that the worlds will see a very depleted field.
 2. As the organizer of the World Championships, the UCI, will benefit financially from the event running on its original 8-day timeline, regardless of the competitive quality of the event. And while it is understandable that the UCI needs to preserve its key source of income, if the overall calendar has to be further squeezed, the UCI will need to compress its event as well. Otherwise, it will appear to be putting its own commercial interests ahead of the sport.
 3. If a 3-week Giro and a 3-week Vuelta were stacked on top of each other, and started right after the Worlds – say Sept. 27 – Oct. 18 and Oct. 25 – Nov. 15 respectively – that is nine solid weeks of grand tour racing over a total period of just 10 or 11 weeks. What teams will possibly be able to sustain that kind of pace and schedule? As we pointed out, it is very challenging for a rider to participate in two consecutive grand tours even when they are two months apart! This is a recipe for either seriously over-worked and fatigued riders and team staff, or for very depleted competitive fields. Most likely, both effects will result.

4. And in addition to these back-to-back-to-back grand tours, five major one-day monuments will somehow be squeezed into the same timeframe? This starts to stretch the imagination. Would a monument be run at the same time that a grand tour was underway? How would teams and riders decide which events to attend, or which riders to send where? The UCI's proposed timeframe makes this confusion seem almost inevitable.
9. Riders and teams will understandably want to focus on the Tour, and under this schedule, it might well be able to run somewhat as normal. But after Tour is over, it seems unavoidable that the remaining events will be constrained to one extent or another. We've already seen riders like Romain Bardet, who were originally targeting the overall at the Giro d'Italia, announce a [shift in their plans](#) to race the Tour de France instead. This, of course, is exactly what the ASO wants, and while it would be a good thing for the sport to have a successful Tour, it raises serious questions about the remaining calendar.
10. Teams will have to send second-tier riders and possibly much weaker fields to the later races, out of necessity. Perhaps Tour riders could partially recover in time to participate in the rescheduled Vuelta, but again even that intervening time period will be about a month under any circumstances. The picture that emerges here is one of declining race quality – and that could dilute the interest level of fans and television broadcasters.
11. And longer-term questions and impacts must be raised as well. If the season runs into late November, how will it impact riders' fitness, rest time, and training programs prior to the 2021 season? Could attempting to compress so much into the end of this year disrupt next year's calendar as well?

We fervently hope that some portion of the 2020 pro cycling calendar can still be successfully rescued and implemented. It is critical for all parties – athletes, teams, sponsors and fans – that sport resume as soon and as fully as possible. At this point in time, with the uncertainties that exist today, we can only hope that there will be some window of time which permits at least some sort of shortened season.

But after stepping back and examining this latest proposal, it seems to us that the UCI should focus more on quality than quantity – that it should focus more on running a smaller number of more successful races, rather than trying to stuff too many of the original events into a drastically shortened season. If we do end up with some sort of available time window, and depending upon how long it's open, perhaps a better hypothetical plan would be to run just the Tour – or better, some sort of negotiated combination of the three grand tours – and maybe a couple of monuments, and then calling it a day. This could well end up being the most we can hope for. If pro cycling tries to cram too many events into a compressed time horizon, the sport risks shooting itself in the foot.

By Steve Maxwell and Spencer Martin, April 17th, 2020.