

The World Championships: An Opportunity to Change U.S. Cycling

This fall, the United States will play host to a top-level international sporting event which has not occurred on U.S. soil in almost thirty years. The Road Cycling World Championships are coming to Richmond, Virginia, bringing more than a thousand of the world's best cyclists from over 75 countries, to compete across 12 men's and women's events. Richmond has played a major role in American cycling before, and was a centerpiece of the Tours de Trump and DuPont, back in the 1990s. Now, the city has a new opportunity to showcase cycling and change the course of the sport in the U.S. With its strong event organizing team – led by veteran U.S. promoter Tim Miller – this edition may redefine how World Championships are staged in the future.

The “Worlds” have long been one of the crown jewels of global cycling. They represent one of the most important career aspirations for any rider, and in fact, simply being invited to participate as one of your country's team members is seen as a great honor in itself. In this respect, the Worlds are also a key competitive goal of national cycling federations, with talent development programs largely geared to producing riders of the quality to represent, and possibly medal at these events.

The modern event has its roots in 1900, when rival amateur bicycling confederations in France, Italy, Holland, Britain, Belgium, and several other European and British Crown countries split over the definition of athletic "amateurism." In this melee, the dominant French delegation broke away, formed new alliances with other national federations, and formed what would later become the Union Cycliste International (UCI) in order to unify the sport and hold its own championship events. The Worlds have continued under the ownership and management of the UCI since that time.

Up until 1995, the events were staged in August following the Tour de France. The Tour benefited from being the “destination” race for top talent, as well as a training period for top riders seeking to hone their form ahead of the Worlds. Riders who came out of the Tour de France in great form were often able to be the major protagonists in the Worlds, with stars like Eddy Merckx and Greg LeMond coming off of Tour wins to take World Championship gold medals. This August date also provided a more meaningful window in which riders could “showcase” the rainbow bands of the World Champion, while the season was still in full flight.

The significance of the World Championships has been somewhat tarnished in the modern era – and not simply because of the proliferation of doping revelations in recent years. When the UCI began to spread out the calendar in the 1990s in an initial attempt to create a global cycling series, moving August's Worlds and April's Vuelta a Espana to the end of the year may have inadvertently helped raise the importance of the Tour de France. The lack of meaningful, globally important professional men's road cycling events right after the third week of July, all the way up to the start of the Vuelta in the last week of August, made the Tour *the* cycling event of the high summer.

Stuck squarely at the end of September and even early October at times – the Worlds are an incredibly hard event for the professionals, in a season which begins in January and doesn't really wind down until the Giro di Lombardia in mid-October. This has somewhat diminished the Worlds to the point that many of the summer's top riders, including Tour de France winners, often excuse themselves from selection to their national teams altogether. Another effect has been that some top men's riders have made *starting* the Vuelta a means of fine-tuning their form before the Worlds, and hence many of them *abandon* the Vuelta early so as not to over-cook before their real target – the World Championships.

The World Championships have continued to evolve in other directions as well. More countries now have the opportunity to send riders to the Worlds, and unlike the crowded men's regular-season calendar, women professionals consider the World Championships to be one of, if not the most important race of the year. Another of the Worlds' most important contributions has been to help globalize cycling: from Canada and Venezuela in the 1970s, to the U.S. in 1986, Japan and Colombia in the 1990s, and Australia in the 2000s. The Worlds have become the UCI's greatest tool for opening up new relationships, highlighting the cycling culture of host-nations, and exposing new generations of fans to an exciting sport.

Despite the importance of the World Championships to athletes, national federations, sponsors, and the image of the sport itself, the UCI has traditionally not been as effective as it might have been at producing the event. In fact, the race has more often than not left its promoting partners and staging location in debt. In perhaps the most serious example to date, the 2014 World's in Ponferrada, Spain, left that municipality between six and nine million Euros in debt. The Richmond 2015 event is working to step up and provide a more profitable and widely marketed event, in the process providing ideas and approaches that the UCI can utilize and apply in more successfully promoting and producing the World Championships in the future.

The Outer Line recently spoke with Richmond 2015's COO Tim Miller. Miller has many ideas for how to improve and strengthen the Worlds, and he believes this is the perfect moment to put more entrepreneurial thinking and precise execution into play – to help pro cycling move forward in a variety of ways. Miller is a familiar face in U.S. cycling and race promotion, starting over 25 years ago with the original formation of Medalist Sports, when it was the owner of the Tour DuPont (originally the Tour de Trump).

TOL: How was the idea originally formulated for Richmond to bid for hosting the world championships? Was this driven by a handful of cycling enthusiasts, by local businesses, or other patrons?

The idea came to life as a result of conversations that took place at the World Championships in 2009 between UCI and USA Cycling officials, when it became clear that the UCI wanted a U.S. city to bid on the Championships. David Kalman and Darach McQuaid (brother of former UCI President Pat McQuaid – *editors*) and I began talking about the possibilities. I had been trying to get a big event back to Richmond because I had successfully run several races here since the conclusion of the Tour DuPont in 1996, and I felt that there was a desire to see something big happen in the U.S. We invested six months of preparation and pitched this idea to Richmond's Mayor and his staff; by December of 2010, we had his support and made the

formal announcement of the intent to bid. We were then retained by the city to put the package together. Soon after that, I realized that we didn't have the right team to make it happen at that time. Unfortunately, Darach's presence created a conflict of interest that we felt could jeopardize the bid and so we made the decision to reorganize the team. We created the non-profit entity that would become Richmond 2015, Inc., which ultimately submitted the bid and became the Organizing Committee for the event. We began to build out the Board of Directors for the organization and garner additional key supporters, including many business leaders and the Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

TOL: What is the UCI selection process like? How long did it take?

The UCI provided an outline of what they were looking for, and what questions needed to be answered in the bid: course details, the budget, the marketing plan, sponsorship strategy, TV production... all the really important details for staging a high profile professional race. Two representatives from the UCI came for a visit in May of 2011 as part of the review process, and we drove the courses and showed them the general venues. The process started in earnest in January 2011 and we submitted the bid at the end of August that same year.

Our competitors for 2015 were the city of Quebec and the country of Oman. 2015 had already been designated as an "out of Europe" year – a strategy that the UCI put in place to try and really globalize the sport, and so the Worlds *had* to be outside of Europe this year. Richmond is the second iteration of this policy, and Australia (Geelong, 2010) was the first. Quebec dropped out of the bidding process in March of 2011, while Oman actually withdrew their bid on the morning of the bid announcement. To me, this was surprising since Oman presumably would have had no problem with the money needed to pull it off. In any event, I think our preparation and bid was incredibly strong.

TOL: What key attributes allowed Richmond to be eventually selected for the honor?

Richmond has some key advantages for staging an event of this significance. Our major downtown convention center will serve as the event headquarters. This is really the first time to my knowledge that the Worlds will have a facility adjacent to the racing venues that's big enough to house everything in one place – accreditation, press corps, our organizing team, and the UCI's delegation, the UCI Congress, a major "fan-fest" expo area, *everything*. Second, it's easy to get to Richmond, comparatively speaking— Ponferrada was ridiculously difficult to get to, and offered very poor lodging alternatives. We're easy to reach from Europe with the Dulles International (airport) connection just 90 miles away, and a lot of the U.S. east coast population is within a six to eight-hour drive from us. Richmond also has a fairly rich cycling history, with the original Tours of America, Trump and DuPont, all having had key stages in the city. And I'll go out on a limb here, but I think the weather here during the fall is a lot better than in Oman!

TOL: What was the chronology of your sponsorship development? Did you get sponsors on board early, pre-award, or has that mostly come after Richmond was awarded the event? Who are the key sponsors, locally or nationally?

We only really started with sponsorship efforts once we had won the bid. We had talked with

and gotten support from many corporations and political leaders during the process, including the city of Richmond, the Commonwealth of Virginia and a collection of business leaders, but we didn't really get to work on traditional sponsorships until everything was official. We generally took the strategy of starting locally and building it out from there. Four locally-based but international companies initially pledged their support, and from there we sort of branched out, and went more national in our pitch, which continues to this day. We really have a good list of partners right now, starting with Dominion Resources (Virginia Power's parent company), Altria (Philip Morris' parent company), Genworth, MeadWestVaco (consumer packaging manufacturer), CarMax, and Anthem Healthcare to name a few. The support we have received from the local business community has been overwhelming and humbling. The national companies have taken more time. We are getting there, but it takes a long time to get these major national companies to sign on the dotted line. I don't know whether people are still somewhat reluctant to invest in cycling, or whether it is just sort of a sales cycle issue, but it takes time.

TOL: What is your "pitch" to sponsors and advertisers – what do you propose to offer them here that perhaps they can't get by sponsoring other events?

First and foremost, that this is not just a bike race – and that's the first message we try to convey to people. From there, it depends on whether or not they are a local company and what their objectives are. For example, we are viewing this as a huge opportunity to create transformational change in Richmond, which may resonate with a Richmond-based company, but perhaps not with someone that is headquartered in New York. Richmond can become a more cycling friendly city – something we're already starting to see happen, and even employees are being encouraged by area companies to bike to work. And the Worlds created a kind of deadline for Richmond to get other things done – bike projects, trails, share programs, beautification projects, and so forth that have to get done in order to showcase the city. From a regional perspective, being involved in this effort is great publicity. Another factor that has helped is a message of "sustainability" – cycling is a green sport, and this is a green event.

Obviously, the other factor is that the numbers themselves are strong, and that is what a national company is looking for. We can safely estimate 450,000 spectators coming to see the events over the duration of the championships. The broadcast commitment will reach a global TV audience of 100 to 300 million people. And really, this is a once in a generation opportunity – the event hasn't been in the U.S. for almost thirty years. This is actually one of five sports world championships happening on U.S. soil in 2015, and for companies which are considering sponsorship opportunities at the Olympic level, the opportunity to participate with us can be a great extension.

TOL: How are you differentiating the sponsorships between men's and women's events?

First of all, we see the two events as being on par – in terms of promotion, air time, and so on. In many places in the world, women's racing is more popular than men's. Women are equally as motivated as the men are to win a World Championship; it's really the only place in world cycling where the publicity profile of men's and women's racing is truly equivalent. We have been trying to sell specific sponsorships around specific events, and we have met with many

women's oriented brands to share this opportunity; however, we haven't tied down a major sponsor yet that is specific to the women.

TOL: What specific things do you think this event can do to build visibility and excitement, and inject some excitement into US cycling?

Television is an important component. Universal Sports and NBC are committing a lot of broadcasting space for us, with several hours of live coverage every day. Universal Sports is really taking it to another level, having a broadcast desk on site and contributing a lot of additional promotional muscle.

We are also working very closely with the principals at USA Cycling and with Team USA to build momentum. We want to try to create "characters" and name recognition for the U.S. athletes. Compare us for a moment to NASCAR – they have created personalities, and fans know their car numbers, sponsors, and personal stories. Cycling needs this kind of fan connection as well. We're trying to take a few athletes and turn them into more recognizable personalities for a broader audience. TeJay (Van Garderen), (Andrew) Talansky, and Taylor (Phinney), and the women as well – for example, take Evie Stevens, former Wall Street banker-turned bike racer, that's a great story to share. And there are others. We want to introduce some new cycling personalities to the world. We think we have an opportunity to connect new people with the sport, and get them engaged in cycling.

TOL: Do you view this event as an opportunity to grow cycling in the U.S. – is this a critical objective for you, or are you more focused on just the event?

Like I said before, it is much more than a bike race and we hope that hosting the Worlds in the U.S. will inspire more people to get out there and ride! Who knows what can happen from there? We have a youth education and outreach program – we'll be having events at schools throughout the region and use this to hopefully inspire more kids to ride bikes. I'm not sure that this has been done at any of the World Championships in the past. I think the sport has a huge opportunity to connect with new athletes through school systems and youth programs. That kind of outreach just makes talent development so much easier, because you can really connect with kids at an impressionable age and grow a life-long love of the sport. I hope that many top racers of the future will be from the east coast after this event, and that they will have gotten interested in cycling after watching the Richmond World's when they were kids.

TOL: How has the UCI been to work with?

They're pretty good to work with, although we do butt heads occasionally. (Brian) Cookson has the best interests of the sport at heart – but I think things are more complicated behind the scenes than most of the public realizes. Remember, we bid on and were awarded the race before he became the UCI president, and things are changing pretty dramatically at the UCI. For the first three years of our relationship, I gave them a quarterly report on our progress, but once Ponferrada was finished they started to focus a lot more on Richmond. We're now communicating almost daily, on the phone or by email, working with the staff that oversees their championships. Aside from meeting their standards for staging the event – things which we

committed to when we made our bid – we've had a fair amount of cooperation from them to make this event special.

TOL: How big is the staff (paid and volunteer) needed to pull off this event? Has it been fairly easy to attract volunteer contributors?

We have a full time staff of seven people. Medalist Sports is our event operations partner for the event. They have the experience from running events like the Tour of California and the USA Pro Challenge and are an integral part of our Richmond team. We also retained an advertising agency and creative agency to help us develop and execute the marketing and branding strategy. And we have a lot of volunteer committees to help coordinate with outside agencies, for things like transportation, ancillary events, entertainment and working with municipalities.

In terms of actual people, we have a board of directors of 35 people that meets regularly and reviews our progress and provides direction. We also have a steering committee that gets a little more hands-on at the tactical level. There are three local organizing committees – the city of Richmond, Henrico County and Hanover County– for things like ancillary events, volunteer acquisition, police support and so on. We have great volunteer commitment from all sides. I think we've done a good job getting our message out to the communities and the local folks realize that people across the world will be seeing their home town as a backdrop for one of the year's most important races.

TOL: Can you provide some additional “flavor” as to how much work it is to put on a bike race – global vs national, road vs track or cross, and so forth?

In hindsight, when we started, we really underestimated the necessary staff size. Our organization chart might look big now, but it really takes a lot of human resources to successfully run a race like this! This event has really taken a lot of commitment, more so than other races I've organized in my career. There's simply no comparing the size, scale, and importance of organizing a World Championships. There are so many tiny details that go into this and so many people, beyond the staff, that have to be involved. The municipalities and all of their agencies, the consultants and vendors, the strategic partners, the sponsors, the media, the volunteers... I am often asked if this is a full-time job. I usually can't answer that question without laughing!

TOL: What happens after September 27th, when the last race is in the books?

I can tell you I'm focusing all my energy on September 19th right now. We have to run a world-class event first, and then we can all take a breath when we're done. If it all goes well, then hopefully that will lead to other opportunities for all of us, whether in the cycling world or not. I think we're doing a pretty good job of putting all the pieces in place to prepare for this moment in the spotlight. We're approaching a lot of things differently – everything from our partnership programs, our coordination with USA Cycling, and regional cooperation between municipalities.

When we took this on, we knew it would be about more than just a bike race; it's a huge

opportunity for the region and the entire state. And it's a huge opportunity to set the stage for bigger and better pro cycling events in the U.S. I think once the UCI sees how we've really made the most of this opportunity they'll be able to incorporate more of our planning into future World Championships. I'm just proud to be a part of all of this, and I'm sure that if everything goes to plan it will lead to good things for the future of cycling in this country.

As Miller points out, there are many challenges to staging bike races as high-profile as the World Championships, but the potential rewards of doing so are also considerable. In the past, different host cities have had widely different economic outcomes; some host cities have had the necessary range of tools and incentives to fully capitalize on the opportunity, whereas perhaps others have not. Richmond 2015's holistic view of the process and the event itself may provide a model for future World Championship promoters, and the UCI with a more informed blueprint for success. Richmond will be the center of global bicycle racing for one week this coming September, and in the process can position itself to become a key center for U.S. cycling on the east coast well into the future. More importantly for the business of pro cycling, Richmond 2015 may bring its region a windfall of positive economic activity – resulting in renewed interest in bike racing, investment in new events and new teams, and incentives for change. This has the potential to shape the domestic sport for years to come.

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Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, May 4, 2015