

The ‘Youth Movement’ — Real or Imaginary?

The rapid emergence of younger race champions has been hotly debated in pro cycling over the last few years – some even announcing an impending “takeover” of the men’s pro peloton by suddenly dominant young talent. But is this a momentary blip – represented by just a handful of phenomenal new superstars – or is it a longer-term trend in the sport? An analysis of race statistics over the last few years hints towards the latter.

While many in pro cycling point to the rivalry between [Mathieu van der Poel](#) and [Wout Van Aert](#) as the catalyst, their early successes came via cyclocross. Pro road cycling’s youth movement actually started gathering steam five years ago and has virtually exploded since the emergence of Egan Bernal in 2017. It gained momentum in 2019 when 20-year-old [Tadej Pogacar](#) won the final Tour of California, and when Bernal claimed the Tour de France’s podium later that summer, at only 22 years of age. Younger talents weren’t just being developed by top teams; rather, the talent had already arrived on the world stage.

And the trend has visibly accelerated during this COVID-compressed season. Pogacar, at the ripe old age of 21, won the sport’s biggest event just weeks ago, while 22-year-old Sunweb rider Marc Hirschi quickly became a household name. The 22-year-old Portuguese rider João Almeida held the Giro pink jersey for almost two weeks before “senior citizens” Jai Hindley (aged 24) and Tao Geoghegan Hart (25) overtook him and battled for the win. Filippo Ganna of Team Ineos, also 24 years of age, dominated the world time trial championship and claimed four stage wins in the recent Giro.

And before his season was ended by crash injuries, 20-year-old emerging Belgian star Remco Evenepoel seemed headed for major victories this year as well. Many other young riders turned in notable performances this year, including Sergio Higuita, grabbing third place in Paris-Nice; Dani Martínez winning the Dauphiné and taking a stage at the Tour; and the young Russians Aleksandr Vlasov and Pavel Sivakov turning in consistent performances.

For years, the conventional wisdom around the sport was that young riders needed to mature and ripen during their early twenties, that they somehow needed to marinate in the culture of bike racing, and master the strategic and tactical complexities of the sport. To challenge this age-old hypothesis, we dug into the available [race statistics available from ProCyclingStats](#), to see what the data actually tell us. (We utilized ProCyclingStats for this analysis since its [points system](#) is generally considered to be more comprehensive and consistent than the UCI system. In addition, the website allows fairly easy sorting and filtering, which the UCI system does not.)

By reviewing historical PCS racing points for individual riders, and by defining “young racers” as those aged 24 and under, we were able to piece together some interesting — if somewhat tentative — conclusions. These historical data, summarized in the two tables below, indicate that the shift towards giving more leash to young riders began to occur around 2015.

Historically, there were no “young” riders among the 100 most highly-ranked riders – i.e., those who accumulated the most PCS racing points during the season. Promising young riders have always participated in the sport of course, but generally, they were either racing at the Under-23 level (see discussion below) or if they were on WorldTeams or ProTeams, they were playing stagiaire or domestique roles where they didn’t garner the level of racing points necessary to move into the upper levels of the rankings.

As shown in Table 1, the prodigious young talent Egan Bernal, while still riding for Androni Giocattoli–Sidermec, first broke through this ceiling and into the top-ranked 100 riders in 2017, ending up with 645 points, and a PCS ranking of #70 out of 100. During the following two years, as he developed at

Team Sky, Bernal jumped all the way to Number 5 in the points ranking after winning the Tour in

Table One

2019.

At the same time, other precocious young riders were carving similar trajectories. Table 1 also shows that by 2018 a total of five young riders had cracked the top 100, with this figure growing to eight and 15 in the following two years. And of course this year, Pogacar jumped all the way to the number one ranking in the world – at the moment – following his performances at the UAE Tour, Liège-Bastogne-Liège, and finally, victory at the Tour, before cooling his jets for the year. (Note that the actual numbers for the current year 2020 cannot be compared on an apples-to-apples basis to earlier years, since this season's calendar was abridged, and is not yet quite finished as of this analysis.)

Anyone ranking in the top 100 belongs in the very top and elite group of professional cyclists. But to get a better sense of the underlying trends, we need to dig deeper than just the top 100. The ability of a rider to generate a significant number of PCS points during the season can also be a good indicator of talent and potential, even if a rider is not be ranked among the top 100.

So we looked at the number of young riders who were able to generate at least 100 PCS points during a season. As shown in Table 2, this figure has also been exploding. Once again, prior to 2015, it was essentially unheard of for a young rider – 24 or younger – to generate anything in the region of 100 PCS points. In 2015, just one rider was able to accomplish that – Mads Pedersen, who later became the 2019 world champion. By 2016, seven more young riders joined him in achieving at least 100 PCS points. This metric then exploded to more than one hundred riders in 2019. And the trend has continued during this COVID-shortened season (but again note that 2020 figures are not directly comparable due to the

Table Two

And this youth effect goes quite a bit further. As shown in Table 2, It's not just young riders who are getting long in the tooth that have achieved success. Even younger riders are impacting the rankings. In 2019, there were 54 riders under 23 who garnered at least 100 points, 30 riders that were 22 or under, and indeed, nine riders achieved this level who were actually 21 or younger.

It has been theorized that 2020's COVID-condensed schedule has helped young riders, due to their anecdotally higher adoption of stationary training formats like Zwift for putting in long off-season hours, and their ability to recover during a smaller time window than older riders like [Valverde](#), [Pinot](#), and [Sagan](#). However, all of the data above suggests that we are seeing a new, and longer-term trend here. This is not just a short-term blip on the radar due to a handful of spectacular young talents – it is much broader than that. Teams, managers, coaches, and directors seem increasingly open to the idea that at least some younger riders have both the physical and the psychological chops to compete at the very highest level of the sport.

One of the reasons for the proliferation of young riders at the top-end of WorldTour racing is the [decline of the U23 category](#). Until the recent past, nearly all great up-and-coming junior riders would be shuffled off to the U23 ranks to matriculate – whether or not they actually needed further development. And the U23 path can be useful for the majority of riders – specifically those who just need more runway to be able to compete at the top-level.

However, even the best U23 programs aren't really professional, and the racing schedules can be scattershot and high-volume. Sending a Tadej Pogacar or Egan Bernal to race multiple times per week in amateur road races wouldn't help their development; indeed, it could blunt their natural abilities by subjecting them to too much racing wear and tear, and could potentially keep them out of the events where they would have an opportunity to shine. Additionally, the U23 ranks would likely put such riders on a path where they wouldn't be able to get to a leadership position on a WorldTour team until they were 25 or 26 – if they were lucky. And if they had to move up via a ProTeam before getting to the WorldTour, they could be close to 30 years old before being able to command a leadership position at the top level.

While there does seem to be evidence for a longer-term trend towards acceptance of young athletes in pro cycling, there is one caveat that should be mentioned. As we have noted elsewhere, one or two good years does not make a career. Egan Bernal, for example, was widely heralded as the second coming of the Messiah throughout the last off-season and enjoyed widespread cover boy media coverage following his meteoric rise and victory in the Tour last year. But Bernal appeared to wilt under pressure this year, losing more than seven minutes to the leaders of the Tour in stage 15, later dropping out of the race, and cut his season short right afterward with injury. On the other hand, Pogacar built upon a fantastic year in 2019 by having even a better one in 2020. And while the list of other hot, young talents certainly proliferated during this strange pro cycling season, most will need a solid 2021 to confirm their true arrival.

In sum, the youth movement has to be considered a good thing for the sport. It may help to overturn another example of hidebound tradition and close-mindedness in cycling – decades of conventional “wisdom” that bike racers needed to be in at least their mid-twenties before they could truly be mentally and psychologically prepared for elite-level success. And many, or perhaps most young riders may still need their early twenties to learn and develop, and to reach their full capacity.

So, perhaps we need to observe developments for a few more years before declaring this to be a sea change in pro cycling. But as more young riders are able to move up more quickly, it opens up more opportunities for all future racers. And having ten or twelve years to look at as a possible competitive career lifespan, rather than six or eight years, definitely expands the competitive and economic opportunities for all racers.

Written by Spencer Martin and Steve Maxwell, October 28th, 2020.

