

# The UCI Election: Time to Cast the Votes

In about a week, the national federations comprising the Union Cycliste International (UCI) will vote in Bergen, Norway to elect their next President. Incumbent Brian Cookson, now completing his first term as President, faces off against David Lappartient – the former President of the French Cycling Federation (FFC), the current President of the European Cycling Union (UEC), and also a Vice President of the UCI itself.

In this article, we evaluate each candidate's record – based upon their stated positions on the key issues, historical statements to the press and public, as well as comments and recommendations from interviews which we conducted with each candidate over the past two weeks. In the final section, we recommend and endorse the candidate who we believe is best-suited to guide the UCI and shape the next four years of global cycling.

[Brian Cookson](#) has been credited for his calming influence and for stabilizing the UCI following the turmoil of the Armstrong era. He has worked consistently to improve the transparency and accountability of the UCI. And he has helped to restore cycling's image within the International Olympic Committee; cycling is now (in terms of medal events) the third largest Olympic sport – a vital rebound for the sport's health.

During Cookson's reign, the UCI has signed various new multi-country television contracts for airing its Track World Cups and various UCI World Championship events, significantly enhancing its TV and other sponsorship revenues. Financially, he has doubled the UCI's investment in its various continental and national federation activities, and achieved a targeted 20m CHF in cash reserves well ahead of schedule. There has been an expansion of new UCI Cycling Centers, to help develop talent. Cookson has also helped to invest in and promote programs like the "Cycling for All" initiative – which are geared to increasing broader public participation in cycling for health, urban renewal, traffic reduction and pure fun.

Cookson can also claim to have made significant progress in cycling's endless fight against doping. The UCI now spends more than 5M CHF annually on its anti-doping programs, and it has beefed up its independent drug-testing framework through the Cycling Anti-Doping Foundation (CADF), the LADS system, and its Tribunal review process to hear individual cases. The UCI's Therapeutic Use Exemption regulations now exceed the WADA-mandated standard requirements. Programs like the Biological Passport, initiated under his predecessor Pat McQuaid, have been strengthened to the point that cycling now has one of the most rigorous anti-doping protocols of any sport. Even though there will always be cynicism towards exceptional performances and the effectiveness of anti-doping in general, cycling's progress and leadership in anti-doping is something of which the sport can be justifiably proud.

Cookson cites one of his original objectives – the Cycling Independent Reform Commission (CIRC) – as a cornerstone achievement, noting that it was conducted independently, on time and under budget. But three years after its results were made public many still feel that the CIRC findings amounted to little more than a public acknowledgement of well-known problems. As [we said](#) at the time, the CIRC process was in fact a step forward, but it missed a key opportunity to make many more specific and all-encompassing recommendations which could by now have led to more significant reforms.

Cookson has the politician's tendency toward generic claims – sweeping statements such as "pride and credibility has been restored to cycling" or "we are now proud to be a well-respected international federation." While generally accurate, his comments often fall short on specifics. And many of cycling's leaders worry that the sport needs a more charismatic and assertive person at the helm – one who can portray more forceful leadership, one who doesn't dilute or delay decisions by relying on consensus decisions, and one who gets more things done in a more decisive and timely manner. However, in the final analysis, it is clear that Brian Cookson is genuinely dedicated to the promotion of cycling. He has worked hard to try to improve the status of the sport, and has restored some of the integrity and public trust that

pro cycling had lost.

[David Lappartient](#) has been a key player in European cycling circles for over ten years. He has led various lower-level governing bodies, in addition to playing an important role within the UCI, currently chairing the critical Professional Cycling Council (PCC). Lappartient's platform consists of comparatively safe and predictable objectives: solidarity with the national federations, making cycling the "sport of the 21<sup>st</sup> century," developing an ambitious vision, ensuring the credibility of the sport, and the like. All great objectives for the sport but, similar to criticisms of Cookson, a bit short on the details.

Lappartient is credited with expanding the strength of French professional racing successes as well as amateur racing participation during his leadership tenure. He reformed the FFC's governance, established a new headquarters for the organization and built a new velodrome near Paris. He also greatly enhanced the role and visibility of the UEC over the last few years, most notably the prestige of its championship races and its associated white jersey.

Beyond that, it is hard to gauge how extensively or dramatically Lappartient might move to change pro cycling. On many key issues which affect global cycling, Lappartient has voted to confirm Cookson's policies. And his substantially positive record of improvements to the FFC doesn't necessarily translate to a global platform, because cycling is not as culturally ingrained everywhere else as it is in France.

In responding to questions about how he would approach the challenges of leading the UCI, Lappartient differentiates himself not so much by direct policy changes, as by *how* he would implement those policies in a different manner than Cookson. He says he would make the organization even more transparent than Cookson has. Regarding anti-doping, Lappartient criticizes the CIRC as not leading to material changes despite its high cost; instead, he champions the establishment of a mandatory medical surveillance program independent from the team-run medical programs, and he would prohibit corticosteroids and Tramadol in cycling. "Nothing prevents the UCI from implementing those rules," said Lappartient, "while simultaneously working with WADA to include those substances on the list of illegal products."

One rift between Lappartient and Cookson has been the topic of detecting motorized bicycles. The UCI recently implemented a system which has been widely criticized for its technical blind spots, and the technical staff has been accused of tipping-off potential perpetrators prior to searches. Lappartient favors more definitive and precise detection tools, and a testing protocol that would act as a stronger deterrent to the practice of motorized doping in the future.

Lappartient's historical experience and generally positive relationship with ASO, the most powerful race organizer, may be one of his key strengths. The UCI has often been at odds with ASO since the early 1990s, and this has flared dramatically in recent years, as both McQuaid and Cookson sought to implement reforms which could have diluted ASO's dominance over pro cycling. Whereas Cookson has often been rebuffed by ASO, Lappartient points out that he successfully built a respectful relationship with them while rehabilitating the FFC. Lappartient's close relationship with ASO, as we point out below, could be a double-edged sword, but he has proved himself to be an astute politician, a strong communicator, and a capable leader in cycling.

**Our Take:** We should first remember that trying to head up a loosely organized international confederation like the UCI can be like herding cats. The UCI President has only limited power to command or even influence immediate change – it's not exactly like being a corporate CEO where everyone falls into line. It can often be a thankless job – one which requires cajoling, arm-twisting and compromising between many parties competing for their own national, personal or economic interests. Furthermore, given ASO's power and influence, trying to manage and regulate the sport of cycling can sometimes be like fighting a bully with one hand tied behind your back.

It is always easier for a challenger to throw stones, to attack the record of the incumbent, and to claim superior ideals, capabilities and judgment when they haven't yet had to actually make any tough decisions. (Think Donald Trump.) However, it is difficult for Lappartient to be too critical of Cookson and the current UCI, since he is already an important part of its governance structure. And his platform reflects that – he speaks a lot more about how the UCI could perform better, rather than directly criticizing the way things are done now.

Lappartient seems more willing to go out on a limb to propose faster change. In a direct shot at Cookson's perceived leadership weaknesses and his over-reliance on his Director-General, Martin Gibbs, Lappartient's number one objective is "vision" – "strengthening the authority of the UCI with a President ensuring a real and effective leadership." One of Lappartient's other key differences is his stronger and less-adversarial relationship with ASO. While he claims he is independent and neutral to ASO's business, much of his experience has been in organizations at least loosely allied with ASO. And one thing this sport clearly does *not* need is an even more dominant influence or level of control by ASO.

Both candidates present themselves as champions for women's cycling, and each offers a similarly-themed vision for the sport's future. Both had a role in relaunching the Women's WorldTour and see the need to develop more races of higher quality, and each would add some kind of multi-stage event like the Tour de France to showcase the best of women's cycling to a global audience. While Cookson has promoted and hired several women into prominent roles since taking office, Lappartient said in his interview with us, "I think that women should get more involved in the governance of our sport based on qualification as for any man, and not just because we need to fill in quotas." Neither candidate seems to have demonstrated a complete understanding of the economics of women's professional sports, or the concept of building a women's sport as its own enterprise, rather than blindly using a men's sport as its template.

**Conclusion:** This is not an election about wildly different personalities or extreme differences in outlook and objectives. Both men have been credited with many sporting and leadership successes, and both obviously care deeply about cycling. Cookson's platform speaks more to unfinished business that he proposed in his 2013 Manifesto, while Lappartient seeks to co-opt ownership of some of the same general objectives and then stamp his style of authority on them. Whereas Cookson will likely continue his slow march of consensus and incremental change, Lappartient proposes a more aggressive but largely untested mandate to institute more rapid and broader changes.

In this age of increasingly influential social media, it's easy to oversimplify the "change vs. status quo" sentiment and flood Twitter with calls for "anybody but Cookson." Fortunately, this election isn't likely to be swayed by the posts or grossly distorted viral slogans of cycling's internet trolls – the votes will be cast by the hopefully more informed national federation delegates. Likewise, this is not an election where polemics about "the lesser of two evils" are appropriate; the path that will be taken by either man is likely to be quite similar.

Cookson has posed the question, "are we better off now than four years ago?" – and the answer from most people is a half-hearted "yes." He *has* stabilized the sport, he *has* made grudging progress in certain key areas, and he *has* created a cooperative atmosphere within the UCI to make further progress possible. For those reasons, we are endorsing Brian Cookson, and recommending that the 45 delegates cast their vote to give him the chance to complete his mission and fulfill more of his original promises. The future will still be there for Mr. Lappartient. In the meantime, he should focus on continued collaboration with Cookson, as well as differentiating his own objectives and agenda – focusing not just on the "what" but also on the "how" – to better demonstrate his global cycling leadership capabilities.

Pro cycling is just one small part of a huge and growing global sporting economy, and other sports and entertainment choices are gradually eating into its audience appeal and economic opportunities.

Regardless of who is elected next week, the sport must maintain a focus on the “long view” for growth and success of competitive cycling of all types, rather than shorter-term federation politics or the economic interests of just a few stakeholders. From that broader perspective, this election also highlights the need for the UCI and its individual federations to continue identifying and developing highly qualified, business-savvy and politically sophisticated leadership talent. The future of our sport depends on it.

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*Steve Maxwell and Joe Harris, **The Outer Line**, September 12, 2017*