

Voting For The CPA's Survival

The upcoming road cycling World Championships this week in Austria will be a battleground for medals, the hallowed rainbow jersey, and possibly the future direction of the sport. But there is also a looming battle on tap in Innsbruck for control of the professional men's riders' association – the CPA. As we have [reported before](#), the CPA has struggled over the last few years to affirm its identity and future role as an athletes' rights and advocacy body. The success the CPA has had over the years in establishing a minimum wage and establishing a “solidarity fund” to support retiring pros, has been tempered by continuing issues with race course safety, increasing rider dissatisfaction with the organization's overall agenda, and its financial solvency.

It was this growing concern with the CPA's leadership this season that caused two prominent member-nations in the CPA, the Netherlands and Belgium, to withdraw from the organization altogether. Yet it may be the CPA's financial situation that will become the critical issue for this election, and for its immediate future prospects. The stakes in Austria have now changed as former British pro David Millar has announced his candidacy to challenge incumbent President Gianni Bugno for leadership of the CPA.

The Challenges Of The Election

Millar has received a wave of support from riders, but the situation is complicated because of several contentious aspects of this election. These controversies have been [discussed thoroughly](#) through the cycling press and on social media, and so only a brief overview is warranted here.

The problematic mechanics of the voting have been brought to light, particularly the timing, and the riders' ability to attend the vote in person. The riders don't elect the CPA President by a count of individual votes. Rather, the CPA's current rules stipulate that its President is elected by the national association-member voting blocs, whose relative weightings are determined by the number of riders in each nation's national association. Riders represented by one of those (currently six) blocs are not allowed to cast their own vote independently; riders who are not represented by a national association can cast votes, but only if they are physically present during the election meeting.

Many riders, particularly in the ProContinental ranks, simply don't have the means to vote specifically because they were not selected for their national teams and cannot afford the Innsbruck trip on their own. This has led to the most visible dissent of the election, as a growing number of these riders, primarily from newer national association bodies and those who lack a national association, do not support Bugno's current CPA administration and have taken to Twitter and other forums to express their frustration with the system.

This unrest also inspired a recent rider petition – widely subscribed to – to eliminate the national bloc voting altogether. But without the shift to one rider/one vote, or the possibility of remote or electronic voting, Bugno is all but assured of reelection given that the majority of votes are controlled by the traditional European cycling powers of Italy, France, and Spain.

The Candidates

Millar's and Bugno's platforms are not dissimilar in proposed content, but the two differ greatly in approach. Both men would like to build unity among the global membership and tackle a similar set of problems: improved safety, increased wages and prize pools, a more meaningful role in anti-doping, and a stronger voice at the negotiation table when it comes time to share profits.

When we asked him why he chose to run, Millar pointed out that he has been “an athlete representative at WADA, national anti-doping organizations and Olympic committees. I felt a deep responsibility to help change things when I was given the opportunity to come back into the sport, after my ban for doping. I want to make a healthier, more secure environment for this and the next generation of pro cyclists.”

Millar says that he does not want to see the CPA break up or fall apart, contrary to the way some parties have portrayed it in the public eye. He has previously worked with the CPA and the peloton in the 2015 UCI working group which developed and adopted the extreme weather protocol. “I believe in the mission of the CPA and I believe it can be successful,” Millar said. “Now is the right time (for my candidacy) because I have enough distance to have learned things about how the sport works at a governance level, but not so long that I've lost touch with the peloton.”

Whereas Millar seems more inclined to listen directly to the riders' current concerns, Bugno (when reached via email) maintains a stance more faithful to the CPA's 20-year old charter and the national association structure. In Bugno's view, the existing structure works, is the one which is already recognized, and is partially underwritten by the UCI. While Millar has focused in on Bugno's unwillingness to adapt the CPA to the times, Bugno believes Millar is too inexperienced for the job.

Bugno says that he offered the Vice Presidency to Millar in 2017, but that Millar was non-committal and too focused on his new cycling brand to accept the role. More to the point, Bugno says, “The way in which Millar proposed his candidacy to me was something like this: ‘I have the support of many riders and if you take part, it will be very serious for the CPA in terms of image. I will fight a media campaign against you and against the CPA.’ So I decided to run and face all this, especially to oppose the power groups and the economic interests of some private companies like Cycling Service (*Editors' Note: a company which handles prize money collection, which is run by John van den Akker, the organizer of the Dutch national association*) who are pulling the strings to discredit the CPA and my work.”

Millar has a different recollection of the events, but adds an important detail. It was widely reported that Bugno met with, and was asked by, UCI President David Lappartient to run again although Bugno denies this was the case. “David Chassot (CPA Secretary) called me in February 2018 and said Gianni decided to have a third term. At that time, I was offered the Vice Presidency in order to learn the ropes.” says Millar. “I said I didn't agree that the President of the CPA should be selected by the President of the UCI and that I had the intention to run against him.”

The role of the UCI in this whole process has been somewhat in the background. As confirmed by the CPA, the UCI provided legal advice to the CPA, dated September 15th, concerning an interpretation of the CPA's own by-laws and voting procedures, which was then shared by the CPA on its website to its members. Whether this activity represents a formal conflict of interest for either party is subject to debate, but it certainly seems at least questionable that the UCI decided to get involved in the process at all.

The Wildcard

Regardless of the political maneuvering and name-calling, economics may be the wildcard which energizes the riders around a common cause during and after the vote. Both the Belgian and Dutch rider associations cited financial mismanagement as key criteria for losing trust in the CPA's leadership and mission, citing a lack of confidence in the CPA's plan to centralize prize money collection – which as Bugno points out, could represent a conflict of interest for Dutch representative van den Akker. However, the key issue driving the riders' votes in these countries was the lack of transparency with communications to the members, in particular regarding the finances of the general fund ledger and insolvency of the solidarity fund which was set up to support retiring riders.

The details of the CPA's financial practices have not really come to light, but a few details are leaking out. According to several sources, and as stated by CPA representative and press officer Laura Mora in a [September 18th podcast](#), the CPA has not effectively managed its accounts, and the solidarity fund lacks the reserves to pay out to all the retiring riders. As a result of a lack of financial planning and lax accounts collections by the CPA from race organizers (the percentage of prize money stipulated as the CPA's funding source), it has become clear that the CPA had “loaned” money ([56:52](#)) from its general fund (which includes an annual stipend from the UCI) directly into the solidarity fund to keep it afloat.

This practice of loaning money from the general fund to the solidarity fund may be more pervasive than just a one-time budget shortfall. As early as 2015, financial notes provided to *The Outer Line* by the CPA during our [first article](#) about the organization indicated that its accounts might not have distinct or accurate ledgers, and overall reserves could be questionable. And in 2017, in our [in-depth analysis](#) of the CPA, we concluded that its accounting may require a formal and independent audit in order to truly understand how the money is being managed, and who exactly is managing it on behalf of the riders. No one seems to know the answers that the riders are now demanding.

The Riders Waking Up For Change

Whereas the UCI, the teams, and (most notably) the race organizers have each played an active hand in shaping the economic and competitive landscape of the sport, the CPA has not had the same level of influence on behalf of the 1000 plus riders it represents. The sport has been largely shaped outside of the riders' control, and the riders are becoming more aware of the reality that proposed UCI reforms to reduce the size of the men's WorldTour may put the CPA in additional financial difficulties.

At risk in the reforms are guaranteed entry spots for teams in the highly coveted Grand Tours, and concerns that a reduction from 18 to 15 teams – and a new system of promotion/relegation – could have a ripple effect and destabilize the sponsorship commitments upon which all teams rely for survival. This has of course energized the AIGCP men's pro teams association, which will try to fend off the maneuver or at least modify the implementation.

But the riders know the stakes are higher for the CPA. Reducing the men's WorldTour by three teams leaves approximately 75 riders out of contract, and it is expected that some of these riders will drop to the ProConti level – but not all. Many will choose retirement, and the remainder will displace and re-balance talent across the WorldTour and ProConti level teams, leading to further retirements. Most of these riders will be eligible for a solidarity fund award of €12,500, and with up to 60 riders already projected by CPA insiders to be retiring after next season, and possibly up to 60 more being forced out by reforms, the CPA could face significant shortfalls.

The CPA has made a strong counterpoint to its critics by asking why the riders are demanding so many changes this late in the process despite having many opportunities to do so in earlier CPA meetings, and highlights the CPA charter as its mandate for action. But that seems to be the point of the riders' collective dissent: the leadership of a modern sporting union would have driven such changes years ago to keep the athlete body it represents in step with its negotiating and business partners. This generation of riders has watched successive CPA leadership teams come and go, and while the AIGCP, the UCI, and the race organizers have each evolved and modernized with globalization, the CPA has more or less remained unchanged since it first formed.

The Parting Shot

Ultimately, this election is about the future of the riders as an important and increasingly powerful voice in the sport. Broad dissatisfaction within the ranks at this point almost guarantees that – in order to survive – the CPA's charter needs substantial revision. When both candidates were asked for their priorities if elected, Millar remained focused on key economic and membership issues which could drive unity and improvements in the long-term careers of the riders, and sustainability of the sport overall.

Bugno, laid out his various objectives, but also offered some strong words for his detractors. "After all that is happening these days I would work to renew the association in these ways: remove conflicts of interest and demand more ethical behavior by all members of the CPA (because these conflicts of interests by our Dutch representative and its economic interests in managing prize money are what began breaking apart the CPA, by discrediting our association to the riders); to update the CPA's statute and voting arrangements; to create new national associations around the world in synergy with the UCI and national federations of each country; and to expel ("espulsione") people who have discredited the work of the CPA

for personal purposes.”

Bugno’s intent or his actual ability to banish those who have raised dissent inside the CPA remains to be seen. However, by making this a priority, and with the potential to set a retaliatory example against dissenting voices inside an Olympic sport, Millar – and all the riders and advocates who have stood with him – may have a target on their backs.

Wrap Up

As we have [discussed previously](#), no major sport has achieved real growth and economic stability until the athletes have – by one means or another – garnered a strong vote at the governance table. When the CPA chooses its next leader, it must balance an internal agenda with the need to drive structural change in the sport’s overall economics. The CPA also needs to staff its resources differently as a professional organization to actively play a more influential role in investment and growth in the sport.

Whichever direction the CPA chooses next, its constituent member-nations and riders should all remember that a sport does not choose its athletes’ union; rather, the athletes come together as a unified voting body and negotiate their rights with the sport. This is how other global sports have achieved success, and it is a fundamental issue which will be a critical aspect of men’s pro cycling in the future.

Joe Harris and Steve Maxwell, The Outer Line, September 24, 2018

Note: Joe Harris has provided business and organizational advice to The Cyclist’s Alliance – a separate and new rider’s union organized in 2017 to help support the interests of professional women riders, and which is beginning to receive increasing interest and inquiries from various male riders as well.