

What the New Riders Union Should Do to Succeed

The Riders Union is a movement that has emerged at a pivotal time for men's pro cycling. Long-standing frustrations with the existing CPA boiled over after multiple and serious peloton complaints during this COVID-shortened season. By focusing a few key principles of sports governance and building professional management into its plans, this new effort could finally succeed – in convincing the peloton to collectively step up and demand a real seat at the table of pro cycling.

Over the last year, there has been a [new movement brewing](#), trying once again to create a stronger voice in the sport for the riders. [Formally introduced](#) earlier this month, The Riders Union is now in the process of establishing an organizational and business footprint while completing a broader outreach to the men's pro peloton. Led by former AIGCP head Luuc Eisenga and retired Dutch racer Stef Clement, it is focused around a simple “one rider, one vote” premise, and thus far claims to have the support of about 350 riders – a good percentage of the peloton. In many ways, this could be a fortuitous time to initiate such an effort.

The current rider's organization, the CPA – the Cyclistes Professionnels Associés – [has long been criticized](#) as being hapless and incompetent, and [failing to adequately represent](#) the riders' interests. Two national associations have already [withdrawn from](#) the CPA, citing dissatisfaction with the organization's progress. The CPA has also increasingly been criticized as [being too cozy](#) with the UCI. (In an obvious conflict of interest – and a strange case of the fox actually funding the henhouse – the UCI actually provides financial support to the organization.) The CPA is composed of a number of national associations; riders do not actually have an individual vote. Furthermore, many countries with active riders are not represented at the CPA at all.

This season, several specific incidents have again brought rider concerns to the forefront of the sport. Riders staged two impromptu delays during the Giro this year, one regarding [official scoring procedures](#) on Stage 11, and another concerning [safety conditions](#) on Stage 19. Safety protests were likewise staged at the [Tour of Luxembourg](#) and [other key races](#), and especially at the [Tour of Poland](#) – the effects of which are still [reverberating](#) across the sport today.

In September, [the waters were further muddied](#) when UCI President David Lappartient alluded vaguely to “fake news” and a global conspiracy to weaken the CPA, indicating that the UCI would never recognize another rider association. The CPA's *piece de resistance* was last week's unfortunate announcement that it would be financially unable to make its required 2019 [retiring rider payments](#) – which it then disingenuously and inaccurately attributed to the COVID crisis.

Given this backdrop, it certainly seems like the time is ripe to try a different approach. But there are myriad challenges facing any attempt to organize the men's peloton. As we have pointed out in the past, pro cyclists come from a wide variety of economic situations and cultural backgrounds, they speak many different languages, and they have widely differing financial expectations.

A critical factor that has impeded union progress is pro cycling's competitive culture. Most individual athletes are obsessed with self-development and performance, and are laser-focused on racing at the highest possible level, to earn a contract for the following season and extend their economic security for another year. Younger riders who might really benefit from a union usually don't have the influence or funds to contribute to a union, while the older, more successful, and more influential riders may already be economically secure and not care as much.

Those challenges notwithstanding, it would not be difficult for a new union effort to improve upon the current situation – by focusing on a few simple principles of professional management and organizational

transparency. The Outer Line previously conducted a detailed review and external [audit of the CPA's effectiveness and performance](#), which assessed the performance of the CPA *vis-à-vis* its own internal 26 (at the time) by-law articles. The study also conducted a broader review, evaluating the CPA's performance as measured in terms of four key [sports governance guidelines](#): (1) transparency, (2) democratic processes, (3) checks and balances, and (4) solidarity.

That report also discussed the CPA's oversight and maintenance of the Joint Agreement (JA) with the AIGCP teams association. This agreement establishes the rights and obligations of the riders, including minimum salaries, maximum required racing days, and other critical athlete rights. The JA is the first tentative step towards negotiating a true collective bargaining agreement (CBA) in the sport and is supposed to be renegotiated every other year. The other critical program overseen by the CPA is the so-called "Solidarity Fund," the financial endowment (of unknown size) created to pay retirement benefits to qualified retiring pro riders – the same program which was just announced to be in default.

This earlier study found the CPA sorely lacking in terms of organizational transparency, public reporting, general adherence to principles of good governance, the maintenance of sound business and financial management, and independent oversight. (See two summary tables, highlighting the findings from that analysis below.)

Significantly – and encouragingly for any new rider organization effort – many of the areas needing improvement are relatively easy to upgrade. That [Outer Line report](#) suggested several recommendations, which could be useful as guidelines for the current unionization effort:

- *Put in place a dedicated and experienced executive management team.* An effective representation effort requires more than just retired bike racers; it demands trained financial, legal, and sporting personnel. There are a number of [athlete organizations](#) that could advise and assist in the development of those sorts of skills and experience. The new union (according to organizational and rider information materials obtained by The Outer Line) has already committed to hiring top management with extensive sports governance experience.
- *Build a more transparent and responsive organization.* The new riders union, in its preliminary by-laws and rider presentation, claims to have already laid out specific plans for regular reporting and meetings, budgeting and planning procedures, distribution of minutes from those meetings, and, notably, electronic voting for all riders regardless of location. (The CPA, only last week, committed to trying to [establish electronic voting by 2022](#) – clearly under pressure from the new movement.)
- *Investigate and develop new and independent sources of funding.* Any organization that can truly fight for the riders' interests should be independently funded by rider membership, perhaps along with economic partnerships and better enforcement of current stakeholder agreements. There is no way an athlete association can truly promote its own interests if it is dependent on UCI funding – as the CPA is today.

The new union is proposing fees of €50 per month per rider, with higher-ranked riders paying a bit more and Pro Team riders paying a bit less. While this may seem like a lot to some riders, especially since it is not yet clear what services the new union will provide, it is in fact only 1.5 percent of the current *minimum* WT salary. This is less than most other professional unions charge their athletes, and given that most riders are earning well above the minimum, it seems like a manageable fee. Of course, the individual riders will have to make that decision for themselves, as they better understand the services to be provided by the new union.

The other main source of CPA funding today comes from a percentage of the prize money distributed at the events by the race organizers. The CPA has historically complained, with justification, that not all organizers recognize this responsibility or pay those required amounts on a timely basis – and that this is the reason for their financial problems. If this arrangement is to continue, the new union should negotiate

an early agreement with the UCI to ensure that any organizers failing to make those prize money contributions risk losing their UCI race status.

- *Collect more regular and timely data, to ensure an accurate understanding of key rider concerns.* The new union is proposing to establish a riders council with one representative from each professional team (up to a total of 40 members). This council would then appoint a supervisory board of five individuals, which would appoint a CEO and determine the appropriate level of supporting staff. The riders council will have monthly virtual meetings, the supervisory board will meet quarterly, and there will be two general assemblies of the entire membership each year. All information and meeting minutes will be shared on an interactive platform available to all members.
- *Develop a more formal strategic and tactical planning process.* The new union should develop an annual planning process that responds specifically to the current concerns or objectives of the riders as reported by the new riders council. The union should identify the two or three most current and critical objectives annually and focus on achieving success in those areas. The new union has pledged to provide a financial plan and budget for the next year to its supervisory board in the third quarter of the year, which would be refined and then sent to the membership for voting approval.
- *Build stronger and more influential relationships with the other key stakeholders in the sport –* particularly the existing national unions, the AIGCP, and the individual teams. The professional teams themselves might also see some benefits from the creation of a stronger riders union. All too often in pro cycling, the riders and teams seem to find themselves on one side of an issue, versus either the race organizers or the UCI on the other side. The new union should make a strong proposal to the individual teams, and to the AIGCP, to provide moral (and perhaps some initial financial) support to help get the organization established.
- *Find a way to better represent the full range of pro riders –* not just the top-level WT riders. As mentioned above, the new union intends to create a riders council which will include equal representation from all of the World Teams and the Pro Teams. This could eventually be extended to other pro cycling disciplines.

Despite these initial steps in the right direction, the biggest challenges for the new rider union will revolve around (1) building the initial membership support, and (2) obtaining the initial funding to get the effort off the ground.

As has been reiterated many times, nothing will ever happen on any new union effort until the [riders collectively support it](#). But unfortunately, there is still an unspoken fear of standing up and speaking out. Riders are genuinely concerned they will be blackballed or replaced if they challenge the status quo in cycling's entrenched leadership. However, this time that tide may be turning, as the new union has claimed [active support](#) from a number of marquee names. If a handful of top riders publicly committed, the floodgates may open. That "numbers game" must be the most urgent focus of the new union. Given current circumstances, if The Riders Union can get the commitment process started, it will quickly gather momentum.

If and when the organization gets up and going, and its value hopefully becomes clear to the riders, the proposed system of rider fees should be able to support on-going activities. In its rider materials, the organization indicates that if it can register 200 riders by the end of 2020, this would provide sufficient funds for the organization to get started. Longer-term, the union would like to have at least 500 members paying the monthly €50, in order to sustain an operating budget of €300,000. In the meantime, however, the organization should investigate supplemental short-term funding from other sources.

In summary, a stronger riders union could [bring substantial progress](#) on the major challenges the riders face today – more stable employment, safer racing conditions, and a more secure post-retirement future. From the broader perspective – as has already been [demonstrated in other pro sports](#) – a stronger riders

union will also ultimately help to build a more equitable, robust, and sustainable sport of professional cycling.

The CPA's Performance Against Its Own By-Laws

#	CPA By-Law Article	Criticality	Status
1	Definition of the Organization	Low	Conforming
2	Goals of the Organization	High	Not Fully Conforming
3	Member Admission Criteria	High	Not Fully Conforming
4	Member Admission Process	Medium	Seemingly Conforming
5	Exclusion of Members	Low	Conforming
6	Resignation of Members	Low	Conforming
7	Annual Fees/ "Social Contribution"	Medium	Uncertain
8	Disclaimer of Individual Members	Low	Conforming
9	Definition of General Assembly	Medium	Conforming
10	Purpose of General Meeting (GM)	High	Uncertain
11	Validity/Procedures of G.M.	Medium	Conforming
12	Extraordinary Assembly (EA)	Low	Seemingly Conforming
13	Convening an E.A.	Low	Conforming
14	Meeting Minutes	Low	Seemingly Conforming
15	Steering Committee (SC)	Medium	Conforming
16	SC Powers	Medium	Seemingly Conforming
17	Convening the SC	Low	Conforming
18	Make-Up and Powers of the SC	Low	Conforming
19	CPA Commissions/Working Groups	Medium	Uncertain
20	Meeting Minutes for SC	Low	Seemingly Conforming
21	Signatures	Low	Seemingly Conforming
22	President	Low	Conforming
23	Sources of Financing, Calendar	High	Seemingly Conforming
24	Financial Control	High	Not Fully Conforming
25	Communications	High	Seemingly Conforming
26	Entry into Force	Low	Conforming
Color Code:			
	Apparently Non-Conforming Area - needs further clarification or background		
	Uncertain Level of Conformance - needs further clarification or background		
	Fully or Mostly Conforming		

Table 1. Summary of the subjective assessment of both the criticality of individual by-law articles, as well as The Outer Line's estimate of how well the CPA was conforming to those guidelines.

The CPA's Performance Against Sports Governance Guidelines*

#	Individual Objective	Criticality	Status
1) Transparency:			
	Publish statutes, by-laws, org charts, etc.	Medium	Partially Conforming
	Publishes agenda and minutes of website	Medium	Non-Conforming
	Publishes executive decisions	High	Non-Conforming
	Gives media access to meetings	High	Non-Conforming
	Publishes information about members	Medium	Non-Conforming
	Publishes executive contact details	Medium	Conforming
	Publishes annual report on website	High	Non-Conforming
	Publishes externally audited financials	High	Non-Conforming
	Publishes executive compensation	Medium	Partially Conforming
2) Democratic Processes:			
	Election of President and governance	High	Conforming
	Secret ballot election process	Medium	Conforming
	Opportunity to Present Manifesto	High	Conforming
	Defined quorum in governance	High	Conforming
	Term limits for leadership	Medium	Non-Conforming
	General Assembly meets once a year	High	Conforming
	Governing body meets regularly	High	Conforming
	Gender equity amongst leadership	Medium	Seemingly Conforming
	Opportunity for athlete participation	High	Partially Conforming
3) Checks and Balances:			
	Internal Audit Organization	High	Non-Conforming
	Organization is externally audited	High	Non-Conforming
	Integrated internal control systems	Medium	Non-Conforming
	Ethics code for all officials	High	Non-Conforming
	Conflict-of-interest rules	High	Non-Conforming
	Independent ethics committee	High	Non-Conforming
	Internal means for contesting decisions	Medium	Non-Conforming
4) Solidarity:			
	Allocates resources for grass-roots activity	Medium	Non-Conforming
	Educational/social services to members	High	Partially Conforming
	Financial support to attend meetings	Low	Conforming
	Clear anti-discrimination policies	High	Non-Conforming
Color Code:			
	Apparently Non-Conforming Area - needs further clarification or background		
	Uncertain Level of Conformance - needs further clarification or background		
	Fully or Mostly Conforming		

*adapted from the *Sports Governance Observer*, 2015

Table 2. Summary of the performance of the CPA against the four key sports governance criteria (and sub-criteria) as established by the Sports Governance Observer report of 2015.

Written by Steve Maxwell, November 25th, 2020.

This article first appeared on Velonews