

What's Next at USA Cycling? A Talk With Brendan Quirk

Long-time cycling industry executive [Brendan Quirk was recently named chairman of USA Cycling](#), replacing Bob Stapleton, who stepped down after seven years in that capacity.

Quirk is well known in cycling circles as the co-founder and CEO of Competitive Cyclist, one of the industry's earliest and most successful e-commerce businesses, which was eventually sold to Backcountry. He later became president of Rapha North America and served as interim CEO of U.S. bike manufacturer Allied Cycles. Most recently, he has been the cycling director for the Runway Group, an initiative geared to driving economic growth and quality of life initiatives in northwest Arkansas. (The latter three organizations are backed by the Walton family, owners of Walmart.)

Quirk began his involvement with USA Cycling as a novice racer in 1986. His competitive career stretched from the 1988 national junior road championship to the 2009 masters national road championship, with "loads of Cat. 3 racing in between, and a bit of crit, 'cross and gravel racing here and there." He joined the USAC board in late 2018 in a non-voting advisory capacity and fully joined the board as an at-large director and vice-chair in late 2019.

Quirk's wealth of industry experience is a boon to USAC at a time when the organization has been struggling. Membership fees, a major source of the federation's revenue, have been declining for years, and the lack of racing during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused additional revenue shortfalls. Many in the cycling community have criticized USA Cycling for not being transparent enough in some of its processes and decision-making and for exhibiting too much of a cozy relationship with its major donors. Furthermore, the rise of gravel racing and non-USAC sanctioned events like Unbound Gravel and SBT GRVL represent an additional challenge to the organization, since they allow enthusiasts to race without interacting with USAC.

[The Outer Line](#) recently interviewed Quirk about his assessment of the current industry situation, ongoing and future opportunities and challenges, and his plans and objectives for the organization. (*Disclosure: In 2017, when Quirk was the president of Rapha North America, The Outer Line collaborated with him and his staff on the research, analysis, and writing of the [Rapha Roadmap](#) report.*)

The Outer Line: Congratulations on your new posting — you seem to have your work cut out for you! We were a little surprised to hear that Bob [Stapleton] was stepping down from both this post and from his position on the UCI management committee. Was this unexpected?

Brendan Quirk: Not at all. Bob served on the USA Cycling board probably longer than anyone in the history of the organization. His contributions—to USA Cycling, but also to the cause of American involvement in the global sport—have been monumental and unmatched. It was a carefully planned transition, and I still talk to him frequently as I'm getting my bearings as chairman.

TOL: Do you plan on taking a hands-on, day-to-day operational role, or will you leave most of that up to [CEO] Rob DeMartini and his staff?

BQ: Rob is a fabulous CEO, and he's managed the organization through the greatest challenge it's ever faced—the lack of racing and revenue during COVID. He was the CEO of New Balance for 12 years, and success in that sort of environment is only possible if you place obsessive focus on the things that matter most; we have a sharp framework for focusing our investments and for measuring outcomes. We're fortunate to have Rob in charge; he knows how to maximize teamwork, and my goal is to support him, his vision, and the USA Cycling staff. My primary role as chairman is clear, which is to get the highest and best engagement with the board itself.

TOL: What do you see as the main challenges or problems facing USAC today?

BQ: I view it in three buckets: relevancy, revenue, and results. “Relevancy” means understanding how we can positively engage a cycling market that’s evolving like wildfire. The greatest growth sectors are in areas where we’ve done almost no investment: eBikes and gravel. These have been amazing catalysts for participation and industry growth. We need to determine how we can add unique, productive value here. Relevancy also means driving harder on the diversity front. Casting a wide net of inclusion to grow the sport is unquestionably the right thing to do from a moral standpoint. And from a Team USA perspective, it’s also about the math: The more kids you attract to your talent development pipeline, the more champions you’ll help create.

Alongside the rest of the cycling industry, we need to make the sport resonate in underserved communities, and we must bring down the barriers to access. Nothing but good comes from being successful in that.

“Revenue” is another challenge. The economic reality of our funding model makes it critical for us to innovate in the ways we search for talent, and in maximizing the opportunity to raise money through the USA Cycling Foundation. Selling racing licenses isn’t a terribly tantalizing business plan. Like any enterprise, we must evolve with the times and find new forms of value to go to market with. We need to do more for our current membership, and we need to build a strong brand proposition that resonates with a far greater number of U.S. cyclists.

And in terms of “results,” it’s as simple as can be: Olympic medals and rainbow jerseys. It’s critical that we identify our best riders, support them at a higher level than ever before, and give them every opportunity to win. When Americans win, more people jump into the sport. We need to get that flywheel going in a big way.

TOL: What are your biggest priorities to help grow cycling in the U.S.?

BQ: Connecting with youth is a top priority, and we have a lot going on there. Most importantly, effective March 2020, USA Cycling made all youth memberships free of charge. This was an investment in the ballpark of \$300,000 per year to reduce the barriers to youth racing.

Both in 2020 and 2021 we subsidized race and ride insurance by more than \$1 million to create more favorable economics to encourage more events to happen. When there are more events closer to home, more kids can participate.

Beyond this, we’re making a local impact with our Let’s Ride camps, we unveiled our National High School Mountain Bike festival, we became a fiscal supporter of the amazing work going on at NICA [the National Interscholastic Cycling Association], and we continue to operate a super-accessible junior national championship program.

We have limited capacity for focus and limited funds to invest. We need to carefully balance which programs we execute on our own versus the ones we provide direct financial support to in the broader community.

TOL: Will you pursue new cycling industry or novel partnerships to help financially support USAC initiatives?

BQ: We’re already doing this. As we prove to the industry we can deliver real value in partnerships, we’ll have the right to make more ambitious asks for more innovative ideas. Without a doubt, this is a priority.

TOL: What lessons from your business career will be most valuable for your tenure as USAC's chairperson?

BQ: Interesting question...a few things come to mind. First, be obsessed with your customer — and once you've earned one, hold on to them tight and love them dearly. Understand that many customers lapse, so finding new ones is always a priority.

Innovation is an absolute must; the business model of five years ago is always stale.

The most impactful brands are the ones that connect with their customers' passion. Merely being transactional in the outdoor industry is a losing proposition. Real relationships are founded on shared passion.

TOL: What is and what will be the level of involvement of the Walton family and foundation in USAC and in American cycling going forward?

BQ: The Walton family has passionate beliefs about creating cycling access and relevant programming for families in northwest Arkansas. This translates into incredible support for NICA, People for Bikes, and a number of locally-based non-profits who introduce the magic of cycling to kids and underserved populations.

What's clear to me is that the Walton family is accelerating the scale and the pace of these investments. As much as the region's cycling has changed in the last few years, the transformation will be that much more dramatic in only a few years' time. Being an Arkansan and being a cyclist, it's incredible to behold.

The Outer Line went on to ask Quirk to comment on some of the more visible recent controversies in which USA Cycling has been involved: questions about the [Olympic team selection process](#), the recent [USA Crits incident](#), and the [controversy around the world cyclocross championships](#) coming to Arkansas next year. We also asked him if he felt his new role would have any conflicts of interest with his prior employer.

Quirk didn't think there was any negative PR impact on USAC from the above controversies. He pointed to the arbitration system codified into the Olympic selection process and emphasized that it is a transparent process. "Transparency is what matters, and the existence of arbitration creates a framework to affirm that our selections exactly followed our criteria."

In terms of the USA Crits situation, Quirk said that the SafeSport process worked exactly as it should. "In September 2021, USA Cycling received allegations which we immediately reported to the U.S. Center for SafeSport. Within days, the center advised USA Cycling of its decision to temporarily suspend the named individual. Upon receiving the center's notice, USA Cycling immediately suspended this individual's membership and followed our protocol for notifying those parties with a need to know to effectuate the suspension, including local associations and USA Crits."

With respect to the controversy that arose earlier this year regarding [CEO DeMartini's comments about the Arkansas transgender legislation](#) and upcoming cycling events in that state, Quirk pointed to a number of initiatives that USAC and various Walton family interests have undertaken to try to promote the participation of transgender athletes. "There's an old business adage that I like quite a lot," he said. "You get one point for talking, and nine points for doing. The USAC approach since the spring (on this topic) has been exactly that: doing and leading."

And in terms of any potential conflicts with his prior roles in the industry, Quirk said this: "The Walton family has been focused from the outset in creating maximum opportunity for everyone — regardless of

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background or means — to positively transform their lives through cycling. This is wholly and entirely aligned with USA Cycling’s mission to drive grassroots cycling.”

Written by Steve Maxwell, November 1st, 2021