

Handout Mentality – UCI – MIA Part 1

Before commencing this month's rant, I would like to make it clear that the initials in the title refer to the Union Cycliste Internationale and Missing In Action. The University of California at Irvine and the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area are not this month's targets.

Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) is a professional cycling union that oversees competitive cycling events in the international community. It is the world governing body for jurisdiction in the sport of cycling. The UCI is headquartered in Aigle, Switzerland. The English translation is the International Cycling Union.

The UCI issues racing licenses to riders and enforces disciplinary rules, such as in matters of doping. The UCI also manages the classification of races and the points ranking system in various cycling disciplines including mountain biking, road and track cycling, for both men and women, amateur and professional. It also oversees the World Championships – in which different countries compete instead of trade teams – in various disciplines and in different categories. The winners of these races have the right to wear a special rainbow jersey for the following year, and have the right to wear the same rainbow pattern on their jersey collar and cuffs for the remainder of their careers.

That definition comes from the internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia which further informs us that the UCI was founded April 14, 1900 in Paris by the national cycling organisations of Belgium, the United States, France, Italy, and Switzerland. In 1965, under the pressure of the IOC (the Olympics was then very much an amateur event), the UCI created two subsidiary bodies, the International Amateur Cycling Federation (FIAC) and the International Professional Cycling Federation (FICP). The UCI assumed a role coordinating both bodies. In 1992, the UCI reunified the FIAC and FICP, and merged them back into the UCI. The combined organisation then relocated to Lausanne, close to the IOC.

The proximity of the IOC and UCI probably saved a lot of postage and phone bills because 1992 was when professional cycling came into the Olympics. In 2000 the UCI relocated to Aigle, 50kms down the road from Lausanne, in the picture postcard country between Lake Geneva and the mountains. I've been there and you'd be hard put to find a better place to work. Work, let me get to the point, is the four letter word at the heart of the UCI's current dilemma. I'm sure in many ways the UCI works very well, it's functionaries buzzing around the world in their chesnut blazers, blowing their whistles to start races and keeping a eagle eye on potential rule benders.

It is in the macro sense of work that the UCI is in a hole that is now deep enough to make its current President, Pat McQuaid an irrelevance. McQuaid had to contrive an invitation to this year's Tour de France - the organizers didn't want him around. Fact is the UCI doesn't work at the moment. The problem can be expressed fairly simply. The 2007 Tour de France, the biggest cycling event on earth has come and gone but we don't know who won the 2006 race. Not only that. Between the spring of 2006 and now, the winners of other Tours and gold medallists at the last two Olympics have been thrown into doubt. The source of the problem is doping, revealed through a rash of positive tests, police investigations and most recently, public confessions. It is now beyond argument that the pro peloton was dope riddled in the 90s. The UCI in its mission statement and other online messages emphasizes its anti-doping stance; in fact it claims to have been a world leader in combating the problem for the last 40 years.

40 years from now takes you back almost exactly to the moment in time when Tom Simpson expired on Mont Ventoux from dehydration compounded by the use of amphetamines and cognac. Then (as now) my reliable inside source Blind Freddie would have told you how much drugs were a part of professional cycling, so the 40 years of world leadership claim effectively amounts to an admission that the UCI did nothing until its hand was forced by a death. But it is really the last 15 years, from the moment the UCI got into bed with the IOC in Lausanne that the problems have multiplied. This may be expressed by the recipe for disaster – UCI + IOC + EPO. The wonder drug, undetectable throughout the 90s became popular in the peloton just as international cycling opened itself up to greater public scrutiny. Now that was certainly not the fault of the UCI, it was an accident of timing, which happened to co-incide with the arrival of a new President at the UCI – Hein Verbruggen succeeded Luis Puig.

Last year Verbruggen handed over the Presidency to Pat McQuaid but he's still a Vice President and some say still the power behind the throne. The problem times have all been under his stewardship - the 1996 Tour was a joke, the 1998 Tour, featuring the Festina Affair was nearly the last. Lance Armstrong appeared in 1999 as the miracle cancer survivor and Tour saviour but a month after his record 7th win in 2005, the French sports newspaper L'Equipe accused him of EPO use, tying samples from the 1999 race to coded numbers issued by the UCI. Verbruggen ended up in a shouting match with outspoken World Anti Drug Agency boss Dick Pound over the Armstrong affair but the recent revelations and confessions have left Pound smelling the sweeter of the two. It might be worth a mention that Pound is by profession a lawyer and still practicing while Verbruggen is a former salesman.

While EPO and other drug abuse was building the speed of the peloton, the UCI was building its brand image. The world champion rainbow jerseys were redesigned to incorporate the UCI emblem. The UCI launched its World Cup track races. Crowds were thin but there was TV coverage to sell. After dabbling around with a World Cup Series on the road, Verbruggen launched the Pro Tour in 2005. This was to be a league of 20 licensed teams guaranteed entry to the top events, including the Tours of France, Italy and Spain. The problem was the UCI was the referee, not the promoter of these events – Verbruggen was selling something he didn't have - and a cartel of promoters has now knocked the UCI back over one team, Unibet. Unibet will fold at the end of this year. The 40 year anti doping campaign claim has nil credibility - now the Pro Tour looks very shaky. Where is the UCI?

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On 2nd September 2007 the arbitration committee dealing with the Floyd Landis case announced a timetable that would lead to a decision being made at the end of the month. This does not finalise the case since both parties are free to take their case to the Court of Arbitration in Sport. The case, when finally resolved, decides if Landis, who is said to have tested to synthetic testosterone on Stage 17 of the 2006 Tour, which he won, gets to keep the title.

Whatever the arguments for the welfare of the sport and the rights of the riders, and there are hundreds of tub thumpers sounding off on internet forums, the race down to the wire has become the race down to the why are we waiting. A few days ago there was a very close finish to the women's 100m at the world athletics championships in Osaka. The crowd and the competitors had to wait many minutes before the judges could declare the winner. But it is hard to think that the crowd would have been prepared to leave the stadium still wondering who won. Yet that is what is happening in cycling.

The fact of a positive drug test deciding a race means the race is not really over now until blood or urine samples have been tested, which given that testing is not done on the spot but in a lab several hours distant means there is a two day delay for the equivalent of horse racing's declaration of "correct weight." This is only when the competitor accepts the result of the first test, If he or she does not accept the first result and the 'B' sample has to be tested, there is further delay. If that too tests positive the competitor can appeal. At this moment the real farce begins.

The case is then handed over to the National Federation of the rider concerned and different countries have different ways of dealing with cases. Some National Federations, the Italian being the most obvious example, are seen to be reluctant to pursue riders who are members of their national teams. (Italy's top two riders Alessandro Pettachi and Danilo Di Luca are currently involved with drug cases). So the Italian Olympic Association CONI has taken on the role of prosecutor. The correspondence must be voluminous and the cases drag on.

In America there is an Association of Arbitrators which was formed to hear sports cases and those involving drugs are prosecuted by the US Anti Drugs body. In theory this is all very wonderful but in the most celebrated case so far, that of Floyd Landis, proceedings turned into an OJ Simpson style drama. Added to the usual theatrics of American courts was a side issue where Landis' business manager tried to blackmail the USDA star witness and three time Tour de France winner Greg Lemond.

Whatever the result, once the hearing has been convened and dealt with in the rider's homeland (or adopted country), the matter can then be appealed to the Court of Arbitration in Sport, adding yet another layer of legal indecision to the process. All this may be justified in the name of getting to the truth of the matter and protecting the innocent and so on. The punch line is that while the UCI system is costly and long winded, the cartel of major race promoters, ASO, RCS and Unipublic dispenses justice without tests or hearings. If a rider is under suspicion, they simply do not invite him to their events. This effectively makes nonsense of the UCI processes.

This year, the leader and almost certain winner of the Tour de France, Michael Rasmussen was summarily dismissed from his team, Rabobank and consequently put out of the event for lying about his whereabouts prior to the race. Rasmussen had already received his last warning on missed out of competition drug tests from both the UCI and the Danish Federation. The power of the Tour organizer ASO in influencing Rabobank's decision is hard to gauge but surely somewhere it crossed the minds of team managers. As Rasmussen packed his bags and snuck out of his hotel by the back door, ASO boss Christian Prudhomme let fly at the UCI for not informing him of the Dane's transgressions. Rasmussen was already wearing the yellow jersey when the Danish Federation announced he would not be considered for the national team at this year's world championships, a fact which excited Prudhomme no end. UCI President Pat McQuaid, who was already enjoying three weeks of munching on poo pie after being distinctly non-invited to the Tour by ASO, got another face full.

The UCI will never get on top of the drugs problem by itself. At the moment, external forces mostly in the shape of sponsorship providers, are supplying the muscle to control drugs in professional cycling. Police, as in the Festina Affair and Operation Puerto are supplying the investigative powers. It's true that the UCI testing has caught a number of riders and it's also true that this year, when testing was increased, there have been some interesting variations in performance by certain riders. But this, like the UCI's claim of fighting drug abuse for 40 years – as I said in Part 1, follow that claim back exactly 40 years and you land on the day Tom Simpson expired on Mont. Ventoux with amphetamines in his system – points to another fallen hero. Which riders have not fulfilled the promise shown in previous years? Top of the list – Alejandro Valverde, the reigning Protour Champion.

I emphasise that I have not said that Valverde has broken any rules. What I can say is that a report of an interview with UCI Anti-Doping Manager Ann Gripper in cyclingnews.com on August 1st 2007 attributed to her the sentiment that "Several big name riders have performed erratically." Since that interview, the organizers of the World Championships in Stuttgart, obviously taking a leaf out of ASO's book, have told Valverde he was not welcome and on August 30th the UCI banned him from the Worlds and opened disciplinary proceedings against him on suspicion he was involved in the Operation Puerto affair.

In creating the Protour championship the UCI has set up a competition which resembles the way World Championships are awarded in other sports such as Formula 1 or Moto GP. You might wonder if it is meant to rival the conventional conferring of the World Championship on the winner of a single road race, especially since the Protour leader's jersey takes precedence over the rainbow jersey. Now the UCI is belatedly prosecuting it's own poster child -the champion of it's failing wonder competition. The irony must be excruciating.