

Handout Mentality – Teams Who Race Between A Rock And A Hard Place

Meet Michael Ball. No – not Michael Ball the singer, the nice looking baritone who sang Marius in the Dream Cast of Les Miserables, not Michael Ball the appropriately named English Premier League footballer and no, not Michael Ball the Bishop of Truro. This Michael Ball is the boss of Rock & Republic, an American fashion house, famous at the moment for designer jeans – Victoria Beckham once designed them (VB Rocks) and her husband David used to wear them. The “Rock” in Rock & Republic stands for rock and roll and Rock and Republic is all about attitude, “tood” as they say. Great stuff to have when you’re draping stick insects in denim and sending them down the catwalk. Problem is, and that’s where he fits into this story, Michael Ball also has an entry level pro bike team – Rock Racing.

Rock Racing has “tood” to spare. It’s boys rock up, yes with the music thumping away, in team colors of an SS style death’s head in day-glo green, (available to the world via the net at fashion designer prices) and Michael’s team director car is a Cadillac Escalade. The team hired David Clinger, presumably because he is the only pro racing with a full facial tattoo and hired and fired Frankie Andreu as team manager. This year, it took on three riders that other teams had let go through their association with the Spanish doctor Fuentes, the man at the center of the Operation Puerto scandal – Tyler Hamilton, Oscar Sevilla and Santiago Botero. Michael Ball was a successful track and criterium rider at the highest level in the US, so there’s no doubt he knows what he’s doing. The US scene does have three lesser tours but the main business is criteriums, so why is Rock taking on three riders who are climber/time triallists? Ball says he is giving the trio a second chance to resurrect their careers. Others might think he was hiring notoriety. To cap off the publicity, Ball caught “Super Mario” Cipollini at a Las Vegas disco after Interbike and talked him into the team. The Lion King is 41, but apparently still fit, presumably from all the disco and après disco workouts.

But when the now star studded team rocked up to the Tour of California, the formal opening of the US season, Tour organizers AEG Sports declared Hamilton, Sevilla and Botero persona non grata because they are still under investigation now that the Operation Puerto case has been re-opened. Significantly AEG did this with the full backing of the rest of the peloton. Michael was sorely miffed but milked the situation for publicity, quickly running up “crucifixion” jerseys for his banned trio to wear as they clocked up some training miles in California. With the resurrection of Cipollini bringing an unexpected third place in the first bunch sprint of the Tour, Rock Racing was a gift from heaven for the scribes and Michael Ball got as much publicity in America as his namesake did in Britain for replacing the retiring Michael Parkinson on Sunday radio.

This predictable, almost silly affair has temporarily overshadowed a parallel denial of entry of a much bigger team, Astana, into the world’s biggest bike race the Tour de France, announced by the Tour’s organizers ASO just a few days earlier. This one is no publicity stunt. ASO, the Amaury Sports Organisation, which includes the sports daily L’Equipe, not only runs the cream of French pro races besides the Tour, but also manages to act with its Italian and Spanish counterparts RCS and Unipublic to dictate terms to the world governing body, the UCI. Last year, ASO kept the ProTour team Unibet out of its races resulting in the team’s demise at the end of the season. Astana is a Kazakhstan registered and funded team, named after its capital city. It was built on the run when the country’s favourite bike rider Alexander Vinoukourov was prevented from starting the 2006 Tour because too many of his then team Liberty-Seguros were named in the original Operation Puerto documents. Astana started the 2007 Tour but were asked to leave after Vinoukourov himself tested positive after winning the first time trial. It was not the first or last Astana positive of the year and it would be fair to say that by the end of 2007 the Astana name was on the nose in the new climate of drug free bike racing. But the Kazakh money was still there and it effectively transferred to the old Discovery Channel team that was about to disperse through lack of sponsorship. Astana 2008 has spent a fortune off-season, reputedly almost half a million euros on internal drug testing programs, to persuade the world that it is Astana 2007 in name only.

Unfortunately for the new team, Discovery Channel itself was also not especially beloved of the Amaury Sports Organisation. Johann Bryneel’s team provided the winner of seven consecutive Tours with Lance Armstrong and had Alberto Contador on top of the podium last year and Levi Leipheimer third. In between Armstrong and Contador, a former member of Bryneel’s team, Floyd Landis stood on the top of the Paris podium. (He was subsequently relieved of his victory). ASO is overtly suspicious of Bryneel and Armstrong. It has already kept Contador out of its big race once, in 2006, when he was named in the first Operation Puerto papers as a member of the Liberty-Seguros team connected with Dr Fuentes. Banning Astana seems to have been done with the overwhelming approval of the French public, though not the world at large. UCI President Pat McQuaid is fuming and talking up legal action. This time last year he fumed and threatened over Unibet and drew a line in the sand at ASO’s first race of the year, Paris-Nice. The arm wrestle was called off and Paris-Nice was won by Alberto Contador, McQuaid fumed on, but by year’s end Unibet was no more. Paris-Nice 2008 starts on 9th March and Astana and Contador are not invited. As they say in America, its just like déjà vu happening all over again. Rock and roll.