

Handout Mentality – UCI vs ASO and 108 years of history

Just about the time of this year's Bendigo Madison, a contest of a different nature was being played out on the other side of the world. Paris-Nice, the traditional "Race to the Sun," (from wintry Paris to the French Riviera) is the traditional season opener for European Pros, even if it is now preceded by stage races in warmer climatic zones. But this year there was another contest going on. The race organizer, Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO) had taken on the world controlling body, Union Cyclist Internationale, (UCI) to declare who it would and would not invite to its race. Excluded was the Kazakh team Astana, which contained last year's winner, Alberto Contador. Astana and Contador were also declared non-invitees to ASO's big promotion, the Tour de France, a race Contador also won last year. The reason given by ASO was the harm done to its big Tour by Astana in 2007 with two of its stars, Alexandre Vinokourov and Andrei Kashekin returning positive dope samples during the race.

The ASO may well be within its rights to say who does and does not line up in its events, irrespective of any other issues, but the battle with the UCI is really over a competition called the Pro-Tour. The idea of the Pro-Tour is that a number of the world's best teams are licenced by the UCI (for a mere 3,000,000 euros p.a.) and are thereby guaranteed entry to the world's biggest races. The Pro-Tour was the baby of the UCI's immediate past President Hein Verbruggen and its subsequent problems have been very much to do with Verbruggen selling something he didn't actually own. ASO and its fellow Italian and Spanish tour promoters RCS and Unipublic have steadily undermined the Pro-Tour to the extent that this year's Paris-Nice was run without UCI officials, and the current UCI President Pat McQuaid has been reduced to mouthing apparently empty threats from the sidelines.

The chatter in the cycling press, much of it from America has been predominantly critical of ASO's stand for not accepting the dictates of the world controlling body. A quick glance of ASO's credentials however suggests it's never going to roll over without a serious fight. Amaury Sport Organisation is a very French business, despite its English name. The group is the sports promotion arm of EPA, Editions Phillippe Amaury, France's biggest newspaper publisher. Besides the Tour de France and Paris-Nice, ASO owns Paris-Roubaix, Liege-Bastonne-Liege, The Tour of Qatar, the Criterium Internationale, the Fleche Wallone, the Tour de l'Avenir, Paris-Tours, the Tour of Picardie and the Classique des Alpes. Quite a portfolio, but wait, there's more. It also runs the Paris-Dakar rally, (currently diverted to South America) the Paris Marathon and the French Golf Open. Its boss is former French Tennis Open director Patrice Clerc and its Tour manager Christian Prudhomme.

ASO's parent organization, Editions Phillippe Amaury is no stranger to strife. Phillippe himself, who died just two years ago, took over a newspaper group from his father Emilien but he didn't exactly inherit it. His father left the business to Phillippe's sister Francine, and the siblings battled in the courts for six years before Francine emerged with the magazines and Phillippe with the newspapers. The jewel in the crown was the sports daily L'Equipe, now France's biggest selling paper. L'Equipe covers all sports, and has a spin-off magazine and TV channel. With L'Equipe came the Tour de France and that's another story.

At the turn of the century, France was polarized by the Dreyfus case. An army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, who was Jewish and from the disputed Alsace region on the German frontier, was accused of giving military secrets to the Germans. Some prominent Frenchmen, including the writer Emile Zola, claimed Dreyfus had been railroaded but the establishment, especially the military-industrial part of it wanted Dreyfus to be seen as guilty. At that time the leading sports paper and race promoter was Le Velo, edited by Pierre Giffard who also wrote for Le Petit Journal. After Giffard had written a pro-Dreyfus article for the Journal, Count De Dion and other leading industrialists decided to withdraw their advertising from Le Velo and set up a rival paper, Le-Auto-Velo in 1900. Giffard, financially crippled, had one last win when he took L'Auto-Velo to court and forced his rival to drop "Velo" from its name. L'Auto, under the leadership of a former legal clerk and cyclist, Henri Desgrange, imitated Le Velo's race promotions by running its own Bordeaux-Paris event some eight weeks after the original.

Then the 26 year old chief cycling reporter for L'Auto, George Lefevre, suggested to Desgrange that the paper start a race around France – cities were crying out to be associated with bike races – and the Tour de France was born in 1903. It tripled the circulation of L'Auto while it was in progress -rising to half a million copies at its peak. Later, in 1919, when he decided on a distinctive jersey to mark the leading rider for the roadside crowds, Desgrange chose the color his paper was printed on – yellow. During the Second World War L'Auto became associated with the occupying Germans and post war had to be reborn as L'Equipe. At the same time Emilien Amaury, who had printed all sorts of things for the Resistance, was building his publishing empire starting with Parisien Libere. In 1965 he bought L'Equipe. (In 1965 the Tour de France was nowhere near the international sporting spectacle it is today and Emilien probably got a bargain). It is said that his son Phillippe had to fight for every cent he earned and there were lots of those because he was once France's richest man. Is it likely his family and his managers will be making any presents to the blazers at the UCI? You wouldn't think so.