

Handout Mentality – It's that time of year again

As professional cycling approaches the high point of season 2008 with the Dauphiné Libéré and the Tour de Suisse leading up to the Tour de France, the war in world cycling shows no sign of abating. The Amaury Sports Organisation (ASO), organizers of THE Tour, who are currently dictating terms to the alleged world governing body, the Union Cycliste Internationale, have shoved another round into the breach by buying a half share in Unipublic, organizers of the Tour of Spain, the third of the big three national tours.

The UCI have retaliated by threatening to bring the World Championships forward to August, thereby cutting the rider appeal of the Vuelta, the Spanish Tour, as a training race for the Worlds. (When the Vuelta first switched from early Spring to Autumn, the Worlds was pushed back too so that both could live side by side). The UCI has also suspended the French Cycling Federation for enabling first Paris-Nice and then the upcoming Tour de France to take place without UCI sanction and officials. Quite what this will achieve remains to be seen since the ban effectively only bars French delegates from UCI committees – French cyclists are unaffected and can ride wherever they like.

ASO, with the French Federation and the French Government firmly on side, calmly flexed its muscles this week and swatted Belgian mega star Tom Boonen out of the forthcoming Tour de France. Boonen, who tested positive for cocaine prior to the Tour of Belgium has not broken any UCI rule because cocaine use out of competition is not technically a sports doping offence. Had things been left to the UCI, Boonen would have been allowed to defend his green jersey as last year's points winner. But ASO will no longer tolerate a whiff of scandal around the Tour so our Tom has been uninvited. His team, Quick-Step-Innergetic, is apparently still welcome.

Astana is a team currently not invited to the 2008 Tour, courtesy of last year's misdemeanours, and it may well have delivered something of a slap in the face to ASO by rolling up to the Giro D'Italia at one week's notice and supplying the winner in Alberto Contador. Contador won last year's Tour de France as a member of the old Discovery Channel team. In addition Astana had Levi Leipheimer and, for a while, Andreas Klöden also in contention for the Maglia Rosa jersey. While Team Director Johan Bryneel made the most of his success, others have mentioned that Contador didn't win a stage, the Giro's course was a bit Mickey Mouse (Contador needed a 34/30 for the mountain time trial) and the opposition was not so strong. Riccardo Riccò from Saunier-Duval, better known to himself than the rest of the world came second while the not entirely famous Marzio Bruseghin from Lampre just squeaked in for third.

Bryneel provided some very relevant comment on the crisis of control within the sport - "I am no longer keeping the discussions going [with the ASO]" he said. "I've put a lot of energy into it but I don't want to put my health on the line. In France, they have lost all reasonableness, the UCI has become a powerless body and the teams don't dare oppose the Tour organizers." Given that right now there's two hundred plus pro cyclists who very definitely want to start the Tour de France on July 5th and millions who've booked their summer holidays to watch them, opposition to the party host ASO is likely to remain muted. Expect UCI boss Pat McQuaid to do some foot stamping and chip spitting but without the flair and conviction of the aforementioned Riccardo Riccò, who is known affectionately as "The Cobra."

Hopefully the Tour will provide a distraction from the more serious issue of world dominance in the organization of bike racing. Even more hopefully we might see a winner from the lucky country. Australia actually has two serious contenders in Cadel Evans (Silence-Lotto) and Michael Rogers (Team High Road), although there is a big question mark over the form of the latter who is returning to racing after a lengthy break suffering from Epstein-Barr virus. The favourite would have to be Caisse-D'Epagne's Alejandro Valverde who has all the credentials of a Tour champion except the ability to race for three weeks without having a bad day. Valverde is currently leading the Dauphiné Libéré, regarded as the best available form guide for the big one.

With a fair number of riders who were once considered Tour contenders temporarily or permanently sidelined, the place to keep an eye on would be left field. Lance Armstrong came from there in 1999 and most years have thrown up a surprise, even if some have later proved to be not all they seemed. Cyclingnews.com described one revelation of the Dauphiné as "part of a new generation of riders that provide a fresh image in the face of the doping scandals" – this was post Festina affair. The rider was Alexander Vinokourov, the raison d'être of Astana, who did more than his fair share to enlarge the present conflict between ASO and the UCI.

Perhaps we should put cynical thoughts aside and set up for some late nights gliding over the spectacular sights of La Belle France, guided by the mind numbing stream of chateaux stats from the ever reliable Paul Sherwin and accompanied by the cheery voice of cycling Phil Liggett. I'm hoping that SBS will provide the coverage – my research on that question has failed to confirm that it will all be there on free to air. Surely with a potential Australian winner