

## **Handout Mentality – UCI’s Gamble Not Paying Off**

From the outside it all appears to be going very well indeed – almost a vintage season of Spring Classics with great finishes in Milan-San Remo, the Tour of Flanders, Fleche-Wallone – Aussie Stuey O’Grady romping away to win Paris-Roubaix in style. New colors, new heroes, warm spring weather and professional cycling is looking good again. Even Paul Sherwin sounds less boring.

But it’s a bit like the smooth surface of a pond. Beneath the shiny top there’s all sorts of things going on in the muddy depths and every now and again a bubble breaks on the surface to remind us that the waters are still contaminated. This week’s bubble was called Floyd Landis. Remember Floyd? He won Le Tour last year with a miracle day which was later said to have co-incided with a miracle dose of testosterone. It seems from further testing of his urine samples, Floyd had other miracle doses during the race. Floyd says, and I agree with him, that since the samples tested were the ‘B’ ones, and they’re supposed to be destroyed if the ‘A’s come up negative, which they did, that the evidence was improperly acquired and should not be publicized as they were this week.

Another bubble of sulphurous gas rising to the surface is the latest twist in the wrangle between the Union Cycliste Internationale and the three main race promoters, the Amaury Sports Organisation, RCS Sport and Unipublic over the participation on the team Unibet.com in Pro-Tour events run by those bodies – principally the three big tours and some of the best of the one day classics. It looked like the matter was coming to a head at Paris-Nice, but a last minute compromise let that race go forward without solving the main bone of contention.

A few years ago, the UCI, an amalgamation of the old amateur and professional governing bodies of the sport, led by the adventurous Hein Verbruggen, replaced the World Cup, a competition based on points awarded in selected classics and tours, (the successor to the old Super-Prestige Pernod) with the Pro-Tour, a UCI branded competition which charged licence fees to 18 elite teams picked by the Union. Having been granted the licence, teams were guaranteed automatic entry to all Pro Tour events. The problem seems to be that the UCI had sold a right they did not own. The organization may have been conceded the powers to establish rules for cycling competition, appoint referees, recognize affiliate bodies around the world and conduct world championships in various disciplines, but the Tour de France, Giro D’Italia, Vuelta, Milan San Remo, Paris-Nice, Leige-Bastonne-Liege and other classics remained firmly under the control of the businesses that have morphed out of the groups that created the events many many years ago.

The catalyst for the present confrontation has been the granting of a Pro-Tour licence to the Swedish registered team Unibet.com, advertising an online gambling site where you can bet on sports and poker. Whatever the morality of gambling, it seems most countries have settled on the idea that if your money is wasted on a government run or government seriously taxed bookie, it’s OK, otherwise it’s illegal. As this affects professional cycling, Robbie McEwan, Cadel Evans and Henk Vogel’s Predictor-Lotto team is OK, Brad McGhee’s FDJ team is OK, the Tour Green Jersey sponsor PMU is OK, but Unibet is not, putting Baden Cooke and Matt Wilson’s career’s in limbo. There are big fines in France for race promoters who allow Unibet to race in their team jerseys, but apparently no penalty if they race in their protest shirt, a white one with a big question mark on it, or if they race in Canyon, their bike supplier’s colors. The legal sanctions do not apply in Italy or Spain so that cannot be used as a reason for not granting Unibet a start in the Giro or Vuelta. The silly thing about all this is last year, when Unibet were not a Pro-Tour team, there seemed to be no problem with them wearing the team jersey.

In the legal arm wrestling so far, the race promoters are winning, and Unibet is now suing the UCI, (which it doesn’t believe is to blame for the situation), for selling it something it cannot use. But even if Unibet’s case is miraculously resolved overnight, there is another bone of contention waiting to replace it. The race promoters, led by Christophe Prudhomme of ASO, with the trump card of the Tour De France very much in his hand, will simply move on to banning individual riders, such as Discovery Channel’s Ivan Basso, who have uncleared clouds hanging over them from the Operacion Puerto affair in Madrid. Legally it is easier for a race organizer not to invite a team, than for the UCI to slap a ban on a rider – look how long the Landis case has dragged on so far – so the promoters will always call the tune. From this distance, the Pro-Tour has always looked like an unwarranted UCI take-over so all this resistance should have been well and truly expected

As for Baden Cooke, Matt Wilson and their team mates, they’re not getting top quality race training while they’re shunted off to lesser events or just putting in the miles at home, so unless there’s a solution soon, the team seems doomed to failure under it’s present name. I’ve got more ideas on this subject, which were never going to fit on a single sheet of A4 so I’ll leave them ‘till next month. I don’t expect any resolution by then. In fact I’d even have a bet on that.

