



# INSIDE TRACK

WCL PHOTOS BY BRIAN HODES  
WORDS BY MATTHEW BAILEY



It may be the off-season, but there's plenty of action behind the scenes of global track cycling in 2016. The UK's Revolution Series joins forces with the WorldTour's Velon; the World Cycling League is launched in the US; and the Six Day London looks beyond the Smoke. Conquista investigates.



There are a lot of well-known challenges in organising, televising and, perhaps above all, making money from, bicycle road races.

For one thing, although the roads are closed, the roadside remains open to the public. So it's hard to sell tickets. And even if you could sell tickets, it's hard to see who would buy them – spectators rarely witness more than a few seconds of action as the peloton flashes by.

The fleeting presence of the race in the consciousness of observers creates another commercial challenge: how do you use the event as a platform to sell or market products to its audience? Sponsors of races, up to and including the Tour de France, are reduced to driving the route, honking their horns and hurling samples at the punters as they pass. It is safe to say that more sophisticated ways of “targeting” potential customers are available elsewhere.

It would be easy to dismiss the issues with cycling's live audience, for the simple reason that the sport looks made for television. And the scenery and the spectacle are certainly impressive. But bicycle races pass through parts of the world that present logistical and technical challenges the size of, well, the Alps. And of course there is no static or permanent broadcast infrastructure – cameras, microphones, commentary positions and so on – of the kind that makes other sports easy to televise. The result is pictures shot from handheld cameras transported by motorcycles or helicopters, relayed by aeroplanes to satellites, at great expense. The complete lack of pictures of the women's race at this year's Tour de Yorkshire due to a faulty plane is testimony to the complexity and uncertainty involved.

But the costs and risks involved in delivering these hard-won pictures are not the real problem. The real problem is that the pictures just aren't very valuable.

In the recently published study *The Economics of Professional Road Cycling*, Daam van Reeth estimates the total amount paid for the TV rights of all major cycle races for an entire calendar year at just €75m.

It goes without saying that this is pitiful when compared to the amounts paid for, say, the rights to the UK's Barclays Premier League (which in 2015 contracted for a total of £5.1bn for the next three seasons) or the NFL (an eight-season deal for a mind-boggling \$39.6bn was agreed in 2013).

But even seen in the impecunious context of professional road cycling, €75m is a very modest amount for an entire year's rights. According to Luca

Rabbigiani, writing in the same volume as van Reeth, in 2014 the average budget of the eighteen WorldTour teams was €14.5m. These teams have long complained that, unlike participants in other sports, they receive no share of cycling's TV revenues, since these are usually paid exclusively to race organisers. But after the organisers' costs (including TV production and distribution expenses, and, it should be noted, prizes and appearance money already paid to the teams) the amount left to go around would be less than transformative – even if the organisers were willing to share it, which they usually aren't.

So, in the absence of revenues from tickets and TV rights, teams have little choice but to sell to sponsors the few things they own – most notably, the rights to give the team its name and appearance. Regular changes of sponsor (and so of name and appearance) have historically made it very difficult for a professional road racing team to create its own enduring, independent identity, and so to build a base of supporters to which they can sell team-branded merchandise – or anything else, for that matter. Paradoxically, this reliance on a few transient big-name sponsors, and consequent lack of an enduring identity through time, makes it harder for teams to attract new sponsors.

The difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that, while teams often have a nationality – Lotto-Soudal are Belgian, Team Sky are British, Orica-Greenedge Australian, and so on – they have no physical home, no true geographical identity, and so cannot exploit local loyalties, in the way that teams in other sports do.



MARK DRABON, MADISON SPORTS GROUP © SIX DAY LONDON

Hence the permanent economic crisis of road cycling. But track cycling doesn't have any of these disadvantages. Velodromes have seats, door and are of modest dimensions compared to say, France. This keeps the spectators and the racers dry, comfortable and – most importantly – in one easily surveyable place.

So you can sell tickets, you can broadcast events using no more than a handful of easily manageable cameras and you can house commentators on-site – giving you everything you need for that big-match atmosphere.

The live racing creates great excitement, and since it all effectively happens around the edges of the "field of play", it is always close to the spectators. The action, venue and riders look spectacular on television: all modernist curves, sleek lines,

minimalist equipment and muscular, insect-like riders.

What's more, sponsors can be given a permanent physical presence on-site, and so can market their products and services to attendees other than in projectile form.

Velodromes also have the advantage of possessing fixed physical locations, while varying in all sorts of other ways: they have different lengths, different surfaces, differently angled banking, accommodate a different number of spectators, and so on. So each has a place and character of its own, facilitating development of geographical team identities, local loyalties – and so, of merchandising opportunities.

Little wonder, then, that track cycling was once among the world's biggest spectator sports. "Six day"



JAMES POPE, FACE PARTNERSHIP © REVOLUTION SERIES

events, covered at length in Issue 9, transformed velodromes into beer halls and discotheques, and drew huge audiences in the US and (later) on the Continent, to see elite riders from road and track go head-to-head, night after night.

Six day racing continues in Europe, though it is not what it was. It has vanished altogether from the US. But it has been given a tremendous boost by the arrival on the scene of Madison Sports Group, who last year launched the very successful Six Day London, incorporating a DJ and a light show along with spectacular and varied racing. Madison have since added the Berliner Sechstagerrennen to their portfolio of events, and are in no doubt about the potential of the format.

MSG CEO Mark Drabon says the future is promising.

"Six day racing is attractive to sponsors because we hit a sweet spot between sport and entertainment – something very well suited to the London audience. What the sport needed perhaps was a slightly updated approach. We have a great history, but a really exciting future. We're still new kids on the block but the conversations we're having suggest we're on the right lines. Likewise, I think we step-changed the track cycling hospitality model at our event in London, and will continue to build on that."

But, as Darbon's reference to being "new kids on the block" suggests, the renaissance in the fortunes of UK track cycling began long before Six Day London got off the ground. James Pope is CEO of Face Partnership, the creators and owners of the UK's Revolution Series, which has been running since 2003.



“Revolution was born at a meeting between us, Dave Brailsford, who was then head of British Cycling, and John Walsh, who ran the National Cycling Centre in Manchester”, says Pope. “In those days track cycling was in a poor state, with very few participants and no spectators. At the meeting we were presented with a two-part challenge: firstly, we had to provide competitive events for British Cycling’s track cyclists, and secondly, we had to put bums on velodrome seats”.

It is no exaggeration to say that British Cycling in its modern form was born in the velodrome. To secure funding from the newly created National Lottery, Performance Director Peter Keen needed to promise (plausibly), and then deliver, results, in the shape of international medals. For this purpose, track cycling had a number of advantages over road cycling, of which two in particular stand out.



Firstly, with its hundreds of participants, team tactics, road furniture, and logistical & linguistic challenges, not to mention allegations of drug use and dark deals to buy and sell races, organising a team to go road racing on the Continent was just too unpredictable, and too hard to plan for, especially for beginners like British Cycling.

Track cycling, by contrast, is highly quantifiable, and so controllable. This goes double if you stick to racing against the clock, rather than head-to-head with other cyclists - explaining Keen's early focus on individual pursuit, team pursuit, team sprint and time trialling, and British Cycling's notorious mantra of "numbers, numbers, numbers".



But the relevant “numbers” weren’t just cadence and power output. The second reason for focusing on the track was simple: it offered a lot more Olympic and World Championship medals than the road. And, given the rules for Lottery funding, medals meant money.

But recent developments have created significant challenges for track cycling’s organisers, especially in the UK.

Firstly, no matter the rational arguments for focusing on the track, the emotional and financial pull of the road remains overwhelming. And in supporting Dave Brailsford’s efforts to establish a leading road team, British Cycling appears to have created a cuckoo for its own nest.

With its marginal gains, high technology, advanced training methods, peloton-pummelling strategies and shared personnel, Team Sky has demonstrated that British Cycling’s ethos can transfer to the road. More importantly, it is clear that the riders can transfer too, including such stars of the pro peloton as Geraint Thomas, Pete Kennaugh and Ben Swift.

The second (and closely related) issue derives from the decision of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and therefore British Cycling itself, largely to drop endurance events from its track programme in favour of sprint disciplines (the only event for endurance specialists at Rio 2016 will be the team pursuit). Hence, says Pope, “Ed Clancy is probably the only one left focusing solely on track endurance events. And he is a unique athlete. Nowadays, young riders like Owain Doull come through the track system but are then offered contracts by road teams, and they see the road as a more attractive career than the track.”

So riders are drawn away from the track by the call of the road, and pushed away from it by the IOC’s scheduling decisions. What is to be done?

The approach of the all-new World Cycling League (WCL), which completed its inaugural event at the VELO Sports Center in Los Angeles in March 2016, is to take road and Olympics out of the equation entirely.

WCL uses a unique format and extensive innovation to address what CEO (and two-time Olympian), David Chauner, sees as the reasons for track cycling’s marginal status.

“The basic problem with traditional track cycling is that it doesn’t offer something for people to follow. You must have an element of continuity over time in order to engage fans and build an audience. So, for example, continental six day racing makes for a fantastic show and spectacle, and everyone who attends loves the beer and the party. But, well, some people like pro wrestling too. And that’s fine, but a sport needs to build a coherent, consistent story if it is going to really capture public interest and grow its follower base. Six day racing is all about individual, unconnected events. There’s no continuity.”

So how do you build that story?

“Here in the US, fans need something exciting and comprehensible to get them interested, but with depth and complexity to keep them hooked. And that really means five things.

“Firstly, they need statistics. Fans love to see and compare how teams and individual stars are performing over the course of a match, a season or a career.





"Secondly, you need a simple, clear way of scoring that keeps up with the action, which people can follow in real time. That means you need to choose your events accordingly. Long-standing cycling fans generally love the madison, for example, but it can be baffling for newcomers. Also, the WCL only has head-to-head racing – no racing against the clock. And in our 'TeamTrak' system, in all races, the first five riders over the line get 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 points respectively. In the longer races there are also points for winning intermediate sprints and lapping the field. That's it. Plus, it's really important that the score is constantly updated in real time, so everyone can follow the action as it happens.





“Thirdly, you need a recognisable, repeatable format. A baseball game has nine innings. An NFL game has four quarters. But track racing formats usually vary from meeting to meeting. By contrast, each WCL meeting will comprise three sessions, each including the same twelve events every time, so spectators know the structure of what’s coming. And we’re planning a season of eight meetings on consecutive weekends from January until March 2017.



© REVOLUTION SERIES

"Fourthly, there has to be some strategic variety. So while the designated riders for the events in the first half of the show are fixed, teams can chop and change in the second half. For example, each team has one male and one female designated sprinter, who ride the 500m, 1000m and keirin events. But if a team wants to put a sprinter into an endurance race in the second half, so he or she can grab some points from intermediate sprints, they can. That's what happened in the final race of our inaugural event: the Pennsylvania Lightning got Kwesi Browne to chase intermediate sprints and a lap for five points, but the Connecticut Nor'Easters asked Matt Rotherham to survive until the final sprint at the finish and try for the overall win. And the crowd loved it."

"Finally, and most importantly, you need a league format, with teams that people can identify with and follow. WCL has teams of seven, with four men

and three women. That mixed element is unusual and important, by the way, as it makes our format very appealing to US fans. And for us, 'teams' can't mean the European road teams, because those names don't mean anything to our target audience - plus the teams' sponsors, and names, and appearance, change all the time anyway."

"What works in the US is geographical loyalty. So for the first meet we had six teams: four based on US states, plus the Mexico Heat and the Dublin Thunder."

James Pope expresses some scepticism. "I'm not sure the geographical approach would work over here in Europe. And I speak from experience. At one point we tried to create city-based teams for the Revolution Series: I remember numerous meetings where we brainstormed names for them, the Manchester Rollers, that sort of thing. But it didn't work, because the



© SIX DAY LONDON

spectators couldn't connect with it. They found it artificial and forced."

"We took the opposite approach to the World Cycling League and decided to involve the trade teams from road cycling, because that's what our audience can relate to. It's true that in the past road teams frequently changed names as they found different sponsors. But these days there is a lot more stability and continuity in road racing teams than there used to be. A number of the teams now have long-standing relationships with deeply committed and substantial backers. And increasingly, the same teams also have strong regional or national DNA - look at Orica-Greenedge in Australia, BMC in Switzerland, Katusha in Russia, and so on. Most importantly, the teams themselves are aware that it is imperative for them to build a supporter base if they are going to attract and retain sponsors. They are working very

hard to build and keep their identities." Pope admits that the Team Sky route to the road and the disappearance of Olympic endurance medals made it harder for Revolution to bring well-known riders and their teams back to the track. But they still have plenty to offer.

"Part of it is giving riders a chance to train, compete and stay sharp during the winter," says Pope, "And this year of course riders like Mark Cavendish and Elia Viviani are looking for Olympic preparation, which helps. Some riders, like Pete Kennaugh, simply love the track and always want to come back. But the winter break seems to shrink every year. So we have to find other compelling reasons for the teams to come to the track, and to Revolution."

On this approach, road and track cycling are interdependent. In a striking echo of Chauner's comments on track cycling, Pope says road cycling must build a narrative.





© SIX DAY LONDON

“The sport needs a form of competition people want to follow. So the season needs to be more coherent. In the era of Eddy Merckx all the top riders rode all the major events, but these days individual riders specialise. Some riders will focus on a single event – not just stage races like the Tour or the Giro, but a single day event like one of the Spring Classics. So the sort of narrative we are looking for cannot be based on individual riders – it has to be based on the teams, who bring in their individual stars for particular events or moments.”

Seen in this light, the attraction of track cycling to the teams is clear.

“Firstly, there is the possibility of new revenue sources through team merchandise sales. Secondly, there is exposure for the sponsors, in the velodrome and on TV. But most importantly, we offer teams the opportunity to engage with the fans, and sustain the narrative, through the winter months.”

Pope’s approach certainly seems to be working. In recent years, the series has been based around the “Revolution Elite Championship”. Certain pro teams would send two riders to each round in the series to compete in a variety of races and the team with the best results across the winter were crowned champions. The 2015-16 series was won by Team Wiggins.

But in 2016-17 this approach will be extended and the commitment of the series to the teams deepened in a dramatic way. Revolution has inked a deal with Velon, the entity that is owned by and represents eleven WorldTour teams. Eight of those teams will compete, over three consecutive weekends, in the “Revolution Champions League”. They will be joined

by four other teams, who will qualify from domestic track leagues. Again, Pope sounds intriguingly like Chauner when he describes the aims of the series as “providing more entertaining racing for cycling fans, and a better narrative to the track season.”

This focus on series, seasons, leagues and “narratives”, common to Revolution and WCL, is something completely new to track cycling. As Chauner points out, historically, each major six-day meeting was effectively a free-standing annual event. It appears that the Madison Group will respect this history, even now that it organises more than one ‘Six’. CEO Mark Darbon says, “Whilst we want to modernise the sport, we also want to respect key traditions, so our events are going to be slightly different depending on where we go – in Berlin, for example, they love the ‘Stayer’ races, whereas in London we can’t have them.”

But Darbon is by no means dismissive of the WCL and Revolution approach.

“Any event that can build the profile of track cycling is fine by us, and there’s a lot to be said for building a story across several events that fans can follow. Our events will be different, but we’d like to see track cycling take off again in the States”.

But is Revolution right to build its series around the existing trade teams? Perhaps the city-based-teams approach favoured by WCL and rejected by Revolution just needs more time. After all, even the sports clubs with the deepest roots in their local communities – Barcelona & Liverpool football clubs, the Green Bay Packers – must have needed some time to build up a local following. So why not persevere?



Pope sighs. "Well... there is another issue. All the riders have signed contracts with their teams committing them to wear only the team's kit sponsor's clothing. The only exception is when they ride for the national team. So, whoever you get to make the city teams' kit, it's bound to create conflicts for at least some of the riders. It was the same story a few years ago when the UK athletics authorities tried to create city teams for their events: they just couldn't resolve the contractual issues."

Chauner has an answer to that. "Of course that is a problem... if you hire riders who have signed team contracts. But that only really applies to the established stars of road cycling. Our view is that, with the greatest of respect, the World Cycling League doesn't need those stars. There are lots of great riders out there who may never ride the Tour or make it to the Olympics, but can still put on a great show. And of course the pure track riders often have no competing commitments. Our first meeting featured some very high-calibre athletes like Kwesi Browne, Missy Erickson, Nate Koch and Matt Rotherham from the UK, and none of them had that problem."

"Plus, for us, the whole idea is that fans should identify primarily with the teams rather than individuals. So at WCL, the riders sign a contract with us as organisers, then we allocate them to the teams – which we own. And since we source all sponsorship centrally, we can allocate sponsors to teams too."

"We also provide all the kit, which comes from a single provider. That means we entirely control the appearance of races. And that's more important than you might think. In road racing you often see different teams wearing very similar kit, so it is hard to

tell them apart – then when it rains they all put on black jackets covering their numbers anyway, so you have no idea what's going on. WCL teams are dressed in primary colours so spectators can easily tell them apart."

It might be noted that there are other risks in focusing on individual riders. Rumour has it that last year's Six Day London was structured to accommodate the diary of a single superstar of road cycling, Mark Cavendish. According to the story, the event was announced on 1 July, which suited Cav, but meant the attention of cycling's media was directed to Utrecht, for the imminent start of the Tour. And the Six Day London itself began on 18 October, again purportedly to suit Cav, but this meant it overlapped with the final day of the UEC European Track Championships. So a quarter of the field could not compete in London on the first day – effectively, and embarrassingly, turning the London Six Day into, of all things, a five-day event.

And Cav? After all that, he didn't even ride. The organisers had committed to him before he could commit to them and his team, Omega Pharma-Quickstep, refused to allow it.

Nonetheless, star names always have the potential to boost any sporting event's profile and WCL appears to need something more if it is to find a permanent niche in the US's extremely well-served sports market. Anyone who has seen footage of the inaugural event will have noticed the rows and rows of empty seats in the stands.

When the subject is raised, Chauner holds his hands up, but does not attribute the low attendance figures to a shortage of big-name riders.



"Candidly, we were disappointed about the turn-out in the velodrome, at least for the first two of the three sessions. That's largely because we just didn't do our homework with local media, TV stations and so on. And also we suffered because, as it was the first event, we didn't have anything to show anyone beyond footage of track cycling generally. We couldn't show people the complete concept."

Having cameras at March's first meeting means this particular gap has been plugged, but in general it's probably fair to say that, however promising, the spectator appeal of the WCL isn't proven yet.

Despite their differences, however, Chauner and Pope agree on a number of things besides the potential of a league structure. Both agree that the racing has to be, in Pope's words, "fast, exciting and non-stop: you really have to condense the action, to deliver constant racing."

In particular, both despair at the way the UCI repeatedly interrupts the action at World Cups and World Championships, while a blazered worthy presents yet another jersey, medal and bouquet, giving the whole affair the air of a school sports day. "We have one presentation," says Chauner, "for the winning team, at the end of the event. That's plenty."

For similar reasons of minimising unnecessary faffing about at track centre, WCL restricts all riders of each gender to a single gear ratio for all events: one ratio for the men, one for the women, and that's it. There is a half-time break of fifteen minutes, again reminiscent of field sports, and a couple of minutes between races for ad breaks and TV interviews, but

otherwise the races just keep coming.

There is more common ground over the potential of technology. From the start, WCL has featured cameras and transponders on every bike. Likewise Six Day London's CEO, Mark Drabon, says, "We were especially pleased with how we integrated technology into the event experience last year. We had on-bike cameras, which were used very effectively, and we collected speed, heart rate and cadence data from the riders. We hadn't seen this done at an international track event before and it is something we will build on for the future – ultimately it is all about enhancing the experience for the fans in the venue and at home.

"If cycling events want to compete with other sports then we have to collectively up our game. Technology is something that can help us do this – and let's not forget track cycling is a hugely strategic, exciting and fast-moving sport. If technology can augment any sport, it should be ours!"

Revolution has also used cameras, but with a twist: Pope says "we found that the footage really came alive when we added microphones. Until then we had no idea just how much chat there was between the riders and how much it adds."

Pope is also open to the use of information such as rider power and cadence data, though, he warns, "it has to be seen in context: it has to be explained in a user-friendly format," and he is cautious on what this might look like. On the other hand, he does point out that Velon have partnered with Tour de Suisse owners InfrontRingier to produce and distribute rider data in future road events, and that "the velodrome is a great place for testing technology".



In addition, he lets a new idea slip. "360-degree cameras have great potential. Imagine being able to watch on your iPad, and see different views from within the peloton as you move it around."

But the differences still outweigh the overlaps. Revolution and WCL both sensibly design an evening's racing with a balance of sprint and endurance events – partly for the sake of the spectacle, but also to give riders of each kind time to recover between races. But Revolution extends the variety, and the rest time for the pros, by also featuring the Hoy Future Stars – 15 and 16-year old riders hoping to become the stars of tomorrow. This is one idea WCL will not be borrowing.

Chauner says, "I understand why they have the Future Stars, but to our audience that would be like interrupting a Major League Baseball game to have a couple of innings of Little League." And anyone who has been to a round of the Revolution Series may have noticed the bars getting a little busier when the Future Stars take to the track.

Another key difference lies in the format. Where WCL offers a fixed evening's schedule of racing exclusively between teams in direct competition, Revolution deliberately retains some flexibility around a basic core of race types. This means Revolution can accommodate special events – such as when two presenters of children's TV show Blue Peter went head to head at this year's final round in January. More significantly, at the same event, a special team pursuit race was arranged between Team GB and Team Wiggins, essentially so that Mark Cavendish could get some practice – because his hoped-for selection for the omnium in Rio would mean he had to form part of the team pursuit squad. But including these other events arguably reduces the intensity of the competition. As Chauner says, "in WCL, every team is in every race".

Clearly, the most fundamental difference between WCL and Revolution lies in their view of the importance to their event of the road. To WCL it is irrelevant: to Revolution, essential. In this respect, Revolution (despite its name) is siding with tradition while WCL is challenging the status quo. Nonetheless, each of these approaches amply illustrates, and exploits, track cycling's strengths. The success of Six Day London further shows that traditional track racing, once given a makeover, can still appeal to a sophisticated, modern audience. WCL adds lessons learned from other sports, with the goal of building a new and independent narrative. And through the Revolution Series, and especially the new Champions League, the major European teams are using track's strengths to mitigate the perennial commercial challenges of the road.





As track cycling's elite prepare for the Rio Olympics, it's hard not to be reminded of an old joke Brazilians tell about their country's perennially underexploited potential. Brazil, they say, is the country of tomorrow: and it always will be. For a long time, something similar seemed to be true of track cycling. For all its promise, it never seemed able to outgrow its niche.

The new approaches we are beginning to see are unproven, and much about them remains uncertain. Which, if any of them, will work in the longer term? Is there room for several competing formats? How will they influence, and be influenced by, UCI events and the Olympics? But amid all the questions, one thing is clear – with all this fresh energy and with these new ideas, in 2016, track cycling feels very now.









*This article is taken from the summer 2016 issue of Conquista - The Cycling Quarterly.*

**CONQUISTA IS A GLOBAL, QUARTERLY CYCLING MAGAZINE, MERGING STYLE, PASSION & EMOTION WITH THOUGHTFUL, INTELLIGENT COMMENT.**

Visit [conquista.cc](http://conquista.cc)

**Conquista**  
The Cycling Quarterly

