

## **ALL CHANGE IN PROFESSIONAL ROAD CYCLING**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Professional road cycling has a long history. Many of today's most famous events can be traced to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century – e.g. Liège-Bastogne-Liège, 1894; Tour de France, 1903; Giro d'Italia, 1907. Change and professional road cycling are not words that have commonly been used together. Given this, the establishment in 2005 of the UCI (International Cycling Union) Pro Tour is a highly significant development in the sport. Based on models common in American professional sports, the Pro Tour has created a closed system of 20 licensed teams, obligated to contest 27 Pro Tour races per season (Morrow and Idle, 2007).

Despite the fact that the original concept of change was widely supported by various stakeholders involved in cycling (including the major race organisers), its subsequent creation has been controversial with widespread evidence of stakeholder conflict. The central conflict has been between the UCI and the organisers of the three-week stage races or Grand Tours - the Tour, the Giro and the Vuelta a España. The presence within cycling of stakeholders like the Amaury Sports Organization (ASO) (organisers of the Tour de France) – a powerful organisation which enjoys wealth, celebrity, status and global influence on a scale that few other sporting bodies enjoy - is one feature which differentiates the structure of professional cycling from other sports. Until now obtaining a place in the Tour or one of the other major tours had been fundamental to the sporting and financial viability of cycling teams.

### **METHODS**

This paper concentrates on a sport rather than a specific sports organisation. Its focus is on a single, planned change (the establishment of the UCI Pro Tour) and the research examines the process by which the change in the dominant logic of the organisational field of the sport was effected (O'Brien and Slack, 2003). The change process is explained in a contextual manner, considering the role of environment, structure and people in shaping and responding to that process (Pettigrew, 1987). The method adopted uses semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in professional cycling, complemented by a review of UCI minutes and records. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the UCI (President, Pro Tour Manager, Press Officer), ASO (Chief Executive of the Tour de France), RCS (Director of Organisation of the Giro), the Administrative Director of a UCI Pro Tour Cycling teams, the Professional Cyclists' Association and with editorial staff of cycling magazines. Interviews were held between May 2006 and January 2007 with several of the interviews being conducted in French or Italian.

### **RESULTS**

While the planned change was supported initially by most stakeholders in professional cycling, the dynamics of change and changing in terms of environment, structure and people quickly resulted in conflict. The reliance on stakeholder dialogue to manage change was not sufficient to resolve its contested dimensions. The evidence shows that some stakeholders demonstrated a lack of mutual trust, at times adopting entrenched positions with a view to defending their power and authority within the sport. Moreover there is evidence of new coalitions being built as a way of challenging long-standing, powerful interests (Benson, 1975).

## **DISCUSSION**

The pressures faced by professional cycling, essentially a desire to modernise in order to retain its attractiveness particularly to media companies, are similar to those faced by other sports. Two main factors distinguish cycling from other professional sports: first, the historical and social structure of cycling and its events (Morrow and Idle, 2007; Desbordes, 2006); and second, the presence of a global sporting organisation (GSO), the UCI, which from a political economy perspective is untypical in its role and nature (Forster and Pope, 2004). From a political perspective (Slack and Parent, 2006), given the skewed distribution of power within professional cycling and the diverse goals of its stakeholders, it was predictable that change would be difficult and contested and that stakeholders would act or be seen to act in their own self-interest. Where power and authority are threatened as a result of potential change, it is unsurprising that there may be resistance even where such change could be beneficial to the sport as a whole (Patti, 1974).

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