

Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI)
To: Mr. David Lappartient, UCI President,
Mrs. Amina Lanaya, General Director
Mr. Julien Chovelon, Road Cycling Manager

Cc: UNIO

Only send by email

Subject : Recommendations on how to improve Women Continental Teams.

23 October 2023

The Cyclists' Alliance (TCA), the independent union representing the voices of female professional cyclists, were encouraged to see the UCI press release on 2 August regarding steps for the further professionalization of women's cycling.

Over recent years, TCA has gained considerable understanding of the major challenges facing our shared aim of professionalization in women's cycling. In our expert view, one of the key areas for change is the current state of continental teams (CTs)—which, in turn, might prove useful in ensuring the success of the new Women's ProTeam division.

We write today to share four key recommendations for Continental Teams that we believe could significantly improve the present and future state of women's professional cycling. We have sent a copy of this letter to UNIO as well, and believe that it is in all of our shared interests to meet soon (TCA, UCI, and UNIO) to further discuss this topic and our recommendations.

TCA's four recommendations for Continental Teams are as follows:

1. Improve compliance with existing UCI regulations
2. Require minimum financial standards for any prospective or current CTs
3. Set minimum standards regarding the professionalism of a CT's organization
4. Standardize rider employment classifications

In the following pages, we set out the underlying rationale for our recommendations in detail.

We look forward to a dialogue with you on this topic and to working and cooperating on this matter now and in the future.

Overview

The opportunity to move from a club team to a Continental Team (CT) should be a step up for a rider in their professional athletic career, with reliable team support and resources to match the heightened training and performance expectations at the CT level. We know from riders' experiences that they are enthusiastic and ambitious to make the move up to CT status with the goal of further developing into better riders. New CT riders begin with passion for the sport and the dream to become a rider on a Women's World Tour Team (WWT), but many of them ultimately abandon the sport entirely due to bad experiences at the CT level.

The reality is that despite spending years building the skill, fitness, and mental toughness necessary to reach the highest level of the sport, many riders never level up to the Women's WorldTour because CT teams are often not as professional as they intend (or in some cases, allege) to be. Hard data and anecdotal evidence collected from riders shows WWT teams are significantly more successful than CT teams in creating a sustainable, healthy, and productive working environment for their riders.

We believe this is largely due to the more concrete and clear framework laid out by the UCI regulations for WWT teams; in comparison, the regulations for CT teams are significantly less comprehensive, leaving room for sub-optimal working conditions to become the norm. In part, this may be attributed to the fact that issuance of licenses (and prior verification of requirements for them) and other regulations is decentralized and vested in national federations rather than under UCI standards.

Centralized UCI regulations with more clear-cut standards for CT teams would lead to fewer cases involving abuse, safety concerns, and breach of contract. Moreover, stronger regulations safeguarding the wellbeing of CT riders would lead to fewer instances of riders abandoning the sport due to negative experiences, creating a stronger pipeline for the sport with more riders successfully rising to the WWT level.

Professionalizing the Sport

We understand the UCI seeks to professionalize the sport of cycling by establishing WWT and CT (and soon, the Women's ProTeam) divisions. The universal benchmarks of any profession—whether medical, legal, financial, governmental, athletic, or otherwise—are fair compensation, rigorous and consistent training, and formal qualifications. The WWT teams are currently the most successful in realizing this goal of professionalization.

The WWT teams have the benefit of extensive and clearly defined best practices in the UCI regulations that act as guardrails to protect all stakeholders involved, but at the women's CT level, the regulations do not set forth the same level of detail regarding minimum working conditions or minimum salaries—let alone what benefits and insurances CT teams must provide their riders. The decentralized nature of the current CT regulations combined with reliance on the national federations to clarify and enforce the rules creates too many opportunities for riders to fall through the cracks and be exposed to unsafe practices, unfair treatment, or undue financial hardship.

We suggest that the UCI regulations be updated with the goal of fully recognizing and protecting CT riders as professionals. Professional cyclists at the CT level should have confidence that under centralized UCI regulations, they have the benefit of qualified and competent staff, full rights as an employee, a financially secure team with a budget plan, ample and safe training opportunities and equipment, opportunities to race and develop, and at the very least, fair compensation for the costs they incur while engaged in their profession.

Rider Experiences within Continental Teams

Over the years, we as a union have talked a lot with both CT and WWT riders about the day-to-day operations of their teams at both levels. In addition, The Cyclists' Alliance conducts an annual survey in which riders are asked, among other things, about their experiences in and with their teams. Years of data collection has given us a great deal of insight into what makes CTs successful.

We cannot ignore that in many cases, CT managers are not delivering what they promise. When budget or staffing constraints become problems, the riders are the first to suffer.

The feedback and files we've collected show that many CTs work with insufficient or incompetent staff: Riders are not supervised; there is no performance management; there are little to no development opportunities; there is no proper season planning and sometimes even no race calendar; all of which puts many riders in a constant state of limbo.

It also appears that CTs often have insufficient or no budget—both in terms of financial planning and the actual funds to properly support a continental team. All too often, we hear that teams: Have not taken out any insurances; do not reimburse riders for expenses incurred to race; supply bikes that don't fit properly, bikes that are broken, and in the worst cases, bikes that are unsafe to ride; and do not provide adequate sponsor-correct kit or cold-weather gear, yet still expect the riders to always appear in sponsor-correct kit regardless of conditions.

Frequently team houses are made available, which is, in theory, a generous provision of the team. At the same time, we see the downside to this. Riders come from all continents, do not have adequate salary to rent an apartment and are often led to believe they can rely on a team house. They arrive in many ways dependent on the promised team house for safety and security, but all too often, teams over-promise and under-deliver when it comes to these team houses.

We have riders reporting houses being filled with 10 riders while only having 5 beds. This results in riders sleeping in kitchens or garages with no privacy and questionable living conditions. This leads to instability and in extreme cases threats of eviction, which puts still more pressure on vulnerable or younger riders. These riders often have nowhere else to go.

TCA Recommendations

1. Improve compliance with existing UCI regulations

The UCI has centrally established a set of rules for the good practice of continental teams. The national federations issue the CT licenses and do the initial checks of each CT against the rules set by the UCI. However, this initial check does not appear to act as enough due diligence or enough of a gatekeeper—we often see and hear from riders that the rules are bent or simply ignored. A prime example of this (with bad outcomes for the riders) is the ZAAF case, in which the basic financial conditions were not met. We hear similar experiences from riders on other CTs; financial problems, but also riders without a written contract, or a contract that is mistranslated and/or in a language the riders don't understand, teams (and thus riders) that are uninsured.

We suggest that the issuance of CT licenses and the control of the necessary requirements for this should be organized centrally, as it is done at WorldTour level.

There are legions of national federations. The data suggests that not every national federation is able to do a proper check on the UCI requirements for setting up a continental team. Moreover, the multiplicity of national federations also leads to a myriad of interpretations—interpretations that are not in all cases consistent with the intent of the formal UCI regulations.

We understand that the UCI may not have the immediate resources allocated for a central check on CT licenses. It is critical to note, however, that we see overwhelming evidence that the national federations often lack such resources as well. It seems obvious and necessary to come up with new solutions—hiring an external auditor, for example.

2. Require minimum financial standards for any prospective or current CTs

A team that is financially stable is able to set up and run the organization in a healthy, sustainable way. In our perspective this means that there is enough budget to get a license, hire competent

and educated staff, and pay for races (including travel, accommodations, food and drinks). Financial stability also requires a team to be able to afford to pay costs for the riders, purchase insurances, and have financial reserves set aside for emergency/unforeseen situations.

What we hear from the riders is that salary is often not their main demand. It is more important to them that the team is well organized, conducts itself professionally, has a good race calendar with clear opportunities for rider development, sets forth clear expectations and agreements about the plan for the season, works to ensure training schedules and selected races are in line with that plan, and promotes a safe and respectful working environment with open communication.

The budgets of Continental teams are often far too small. The result of a team without a financially sound budget is a scattered organization in which the requirements cited in the previous paragraph are not met. Underfunded budgets often also lead to riders being forced to pay for their own expenses. We understand that CTs operate with smaller budgets and that riders may have to pay something as they rise through the ranks to pursue their ambitions. At the same time, we believe that travel and accommodation costs related to a race should be borne by teams. There are examples of riders who had to bear these expenses themselves—at times in excess of EUR 10,000. Better financial planning on the part of the CTs combined with centralized oversight and minimum thresholds for team budgets would solve many of these challenges.

We recommend that, at minimum, riders receive full financial compensation for the costs that they incur related to racing. Professional cycling for a CT is not just a hobby. If it were, many riders would simply continue to ride at the club level.

To race at the CT level, riders must take substantial time off of work and in many cases quit their jobs, sacrificing steady incomes for training hours and spending time away from home to race in hopes of a result. Given those significant investments of time and energy in the sport and the

sacrifices they require, it is not equitable if the riders must also bear additional costs related to those efforts—travel expenses, bike repairs, etc.—that are really the responsibility of the team.

3. Set minimum standards regarding the professionalism of a CT's organization

We would like to see criteria in the CT regulations that provide fundamental rights for riders and guiding principles for teams to ensure respect, protection, qualified and/or competent staff and management, sustainable development, and a safe work environment on and off the bike. The WWT regulations are already successful at articulating these rights and principles.

In order to be licensed, WWTs must meet the cumulative criteria mentioned in 2.13.035: administrative, financial, ethical and organizational. The organizational criteria are further elaborated in 2.1.3.019 quarter. We understand that the financial situation of CTs tends to be more limited, however, it is in the best interest of riders and stakeholders that CTs be held to the same organizational criteria as WWTs.

Many of the organizational criteria for WWTs mirror particularly problematic areas for CTs. Holding CTs to similar licensing criteria as WWTs—for example, requiring certified coaches and performance managers/directors, and preparation and recovery via training plans that are aligned with the race calendar—presents a straightforward solution to some of the most common issues arising at the CT level.

4. Standardize rider employment classifications

UCI Road Regulations chapter XIII UCI Women's Worldtour divides riders between "employed" and "self-employed" riders, with separate rider and team obligations for each of the two classifications (for example, self-employed riders must take out their own insurances).

Chapter XVII Continental Teams, the parallel regulation for Women's CT riders, does not follow the same structure as chapter XIII. Rather than classifying riders as either employed or self-employed, CT riders are classified as either "professional" or "non-professional" riders. The CTs

have in both instances the obligations to take out insurances. This discrepancy is odd in comparison to the WWT regulations, and raises potentially problematic legal issues when dealing with the various employment laws that control depending on rider citizenship and where teams are based. A less ambiguous division would, in our view, solve this inconsistency—classify all riders at all levels, whether WWT, CT, or the planned ProTour level, as either employed/self-employed.

Conclusions

Women's cycling has made great strides as a profession over the past year, with the most visible and successful steps toward professionalization visible at the WWT level. We applaud this growth and at the same time, we cannot ignore the sharp contrast between the professionalization at the WWT level compared to the lack thereof at the CT level. Now more than ever—especially with the announcement of the introduction of a Women's ProTour tier to the UCI team infrastructure—is the time to deepen your commitment to professionalizing women's cycling at all UCI-governed levels.

We hope that you will take these recommendations on board, and in the spirit in which they are intended—to improve our sport, to protect riders, and to ensure procedures that work well for all stakeholders. We look forward to starting a dialogue with you on this report and to working and cooperating on this matter now and in the future.

With best regards,

Jeff Raymond

Director The Cyclists' Alliance