

Going Green



Bike racing sends out the wrong message when it comes to environmental impact. How the sport is waking up to a more sustainable world

As stage 7 of the 2018 Tour de France passes through Alençon, a different kind of race is being run 40 miles south. Along the A81 motorway, team staff, officials and the media make their way on the *hors course*, the official diversion designed to get you from the start to the finish of any given stage without tripping over the race route itself. At a service station near Le Mans, parking is at a premium for anyone wanting a late lunch.

It is during pit stops like these, where team buses queue for diesel and hungry journalists like me contemplate the limited range of pre-packed soft baguettes, that the vast impact of this race really hits home. Anyone lining the route or watching at home gets a sense of the lengthy convoy of vehicles which surrounds the peloton, but that is only a fraction of the huge number that follows every stage – hundreds of lorries, vans and cars clocking up thousands of kilometres every day in pursuit of a bike race.

I hit the road again and the conversation with colleagues in the car shifts as we resume overtaking the long line of mechanics’ trucks also completing this

words by
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fantastical lap of France. Tot up all the cars and bikes in the race, throw in the many bizarre contraptions that make up the advertising caravan, then consider all of this on top. On any given day at the Tour, there are 4,500 accredited individuals following the race, ferried around in a sprawling fleet of cars, vans and minibuses. As much as we adore this great travelling circus, it is surely unsustainable.

So as we run down our own fuel supplies on the road to Chartres, it becomes increasingly clear that a sport which prides itself on promoting the most environmentally-friendly of transport modes can’t go on mixing that message with flagship events that pollute the air and litter the roads. It cannot use the world’s beauty spots as a stadium while at the same time risking permanent damage.

But the good news is that cycling is fast catching up to that fact. Race organisers, teams and governing bodies are starting to imagine a new, more environmentally-friendly future for the sport.

Few events feel the need to act more than the Arctic Race of Norway. The world’s

illustrations by
TOM JAY

10–12 million

total Tour de France
spectators roadside



northernmost race can market itself on the unique drama of its landscape – the remote islands and fjords that make up the land of the midnight sun. Yet it is this backdrop which puts the August event on the front-line of the fight against climate change. “We are very close to the most hurtable areas,” race director Knut-Eirik Dybdal said. “The conditions here are very special. The world needs to change. We have to ask ourselves how we can be part of it.”

To that end, the event has pledged to shift entirely to electric vehicles by 2022, a promise which includes not only the ones used by officials but also those driven by the teams, who do not bring their own cars so far north. To deliver on their goal, race organisers must first help build the infrastructure, working with the major hydroelectric power suppliers in the area to design and install mobile charging hangars which can keep their cars topped up. And with Norway planning to phase out the sale of diesel and petrol powered cars by 2025, this is infrastructure that will provide a real and long-lasting benefit for the people who inhabit this remote region – just as the race

has already helped install a permanent 4G mobile network.

Hyundai supplied 46 electric cars that were used in last year’s race, a number which had been due to grow to between 70 and 80 in 2020. The coronavirus pandemic may have put paid to this year’s event, but Dybdal said it had done nothing to slow work on this project, which remains on course for all 120 cars to be electric from 2022.

“We hope what we are doing up in the north can be shared with others,” Dybdal said. “We can tell people what we are doing and how it can work. We are trying to build something here.” It is a significant statement given that this is a race organised in partnership with the Amaury Sports Organisation, the single biggest bike race organiser on the planet. Ideas that work here can go global and Dybdal has already been quizzed on his progress when visiting other events, not least the Tour itself. “[Race director] Christian Prudhomme did an interview here in which he said the Arctic Race is really pushing ASO to go in one direction,” Dybdal said with evident pride. “We are not saying that everyone

The environmental impact of a WorldTour team
Deceuninck-Quick Step in 2019

KILOMETRES RIDDEN

325,000

RACES

79

COUNTRIES

20

DAYS OF RACING

272

HELMETS

180

GELS

12,500

BIKES

280

WHEELS

400

JERSEYS

750

GROUPSETS

300

CAPS

2,500

CHAINS

600

has to do this the same day as us or even tomorrow, but we have to have this in our minds and take things step by step.”

Prudhomme has followed up his words with action. This year’s Tour de France was shepherded on to the Champs-Élysées by an electric car, with ASO using Skoda’s new Enyaq as the race director’s transport on stages five, 20 and 21. Baby steps perhaps, but a clear statement of intent.

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Other races are making progress of their own, though the pace at which everybody moves is generally dictated by a myriad of commercial and sponsorship deals, and the reality of what different partners can deliver. At last year’s World Championships in Yorkshire, ambitions for the entire car fleet to be made up of hybrids were quickly derailed by supply issues and they were forced to accept diesels. But as the technology develops at a rapid pace, so do the opportunities. The Tour of Britain had been due to switch to hybrids this year until it too had to postpone its 2020 event, and hopes to quickly move to electric cars after that, perhaps as soon as 2022.

But though the vehicles within the race are a huge factor – and one of the most noticeable for anyone watching – the more race organisers think about their environmental impact, the more they realise how much more can, and should, be done. After being taken aback by the impact of hotel rooms when studying its own carbon footprint, Tour of Britain and Women’s Tour organiser Sweetspot has changed its booking criteria, with price no longer the sole concern as it also looks at green credentials.

It is a decade since the environmental group Coalition Nature tried to bring criminal charges against three riders, including a young Chris Froome, for littering at La Flèche Wallonne, but there has been a huge push since then made on “green zones” for the discarding of gel and food wrappers. From last year, the fines were increased, up to 1000 Swiss francs a throw, for tossing a bidon in the wrong place, even if actually policing it remains fraught with difficulties. It can seem like a small thing, but for organisers the bad image resulting from riders dropping a gel wrapper can be a considerable problem. Gone are the days when local authorities simply looked at the economic impact hosting a bike race could bring. Now it is all tied in with promoting healthier lifestyles and green transport alternatives. That message can be hugely



12–15 million

freebies thrown out by
Tour advertising caravan

27,000

bidons used by Deceuninck in 2019



undermined if a race leaves a major clean-up operation in its wake.

That is now a key focus for the UCI, which has shifted environmental issues well up the agenda when it comes to organising both its own events and in shaping the framework for others. The UCI Organiser’s Guide To Road Events is a 334-page handbook covering pretty much every detail of how to put on a professional bike race worthy of a place on the international calendar, but it is noticeable that the section emphasising the importance of environmental values comes before you even get to the contents page. “By its very nature, the bicycle is the perfect environmentally-friendly means of transport,” the guide states. “It is thus essential that all cycling events are exemplary in their environmental considerations.” To that end, organisers are told that environmental issues should be “completely embedded and form an integral part of the organisational plan”.

Earlier this year, the UCI signed up to the United Nations’ Sports for Climate Action Framework, which brings together governing bodies, competitions, teams and other stakeholders with a goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Joining commits the UCI to five principles: undertaking systematic efforts to promote greater environmental responsibility; reducing the overall climate impact; educating for climate action; promoting sustainable and responsible consumption; and advocating for climate action through communication.

“We realised there was something lacking within the federation guidelines in terms of having a standard policy and guidelines that we could apply across all disciplines,” said Isabella Burczak, the UCI’s advocacy manager. “How can we improve the way we deliver our sport? How can we reduce the amount of waste? How can we improve transport patterns and promote the bicycle as a form of transport at our events? That is work that has just started and we’re hoping to deliver a framework by the end of the year.”

The UCI’s focus to this point has been on race organisers and events, but now we are also seeing teams step up to the mark with their own initiatives. The biggest wow factor at this year’s Deceuninck-Quick Step team launch didn’t come from a surprise signing or a new bike. The numbers leapt straight off the page as the Belgian squad revealed the full environmental impact of running a WorldTour team: 27,000 bidons used, 12,500 energy gels, 1,288 tonnes of CO₂ – the list went on. But Patrick Lefevere’s team were spelling this out to

1,288

tonnes of CO₂
(equivalent of 1,288 return
trips between Paris and New York)
used by Deceuninck in 2019

make a point as they pledged to become carbon neutral. The project, a baby of the team’s marketing and communication manager Alessandro Tegner, committed the leading WorldTour squad to reducing its own plastic and carbon use, while also working to offset the remaining CO₂ emissions through certified climate projects – one in Uganda and another close to cycling hearts on Mont Ventoux.

“Cycling has a unique relationship with the environment in that it is our stadium. And like any stadium, it needs to be cared for and looked after,” Tegner said at the time of the announcement. “As a team we travel thousands of miles every year and expend a large amount of energy, so we have to take our share of the responsibility.”

In June, Movistar joined the cause, unveiling their own project to become 100 per cent sustainable through carbon reduction and off-setting, and working with Spain’s Ministry for Ecological Transition (MITECO) to make sure it happens. “We need to be responsible not just in our professional activities as a team,” the team’s chief executive Miguel Gravalos explains. “But also recognise our position as a speaker to the general public: to transmit a positive message that we can all implement in our lives.”

The project will take time to deliver. The team’s headquarters in Pamplona is being kitted out with solar panels but other elements must wait. A new fleet of hybrid Volvo cars will not be ready until next year. In all, Gravalos believes it will take between three to four years for the team to reach its target of zero net emissions. Working with MITECO, the team estimated they can cut their direct emissions by around 25 per cent, relying on offsetting for the remaining 75 per cent.

It is far from perfect – offsetting has been heavily criticised by organisations

such as Greenpeace, who say it cannot be a viable alternative to carbon reductions, though some see it as a step in the right direction at least. It also doesn’t come cheap, but even in a sport where many teams face a constant fight for survival, Gravalos does not believe that should prevent others from seeing what they could do. “In my opinion, it’s not an economic problem,” he said. “All of the teams spend a lot more money on other things than they would on this. There might be some economic issues around changing your energy use and putting up solar panels that might cost money, but there is another part to this which is about educating, and that does not cost money. That is an internal process.”

Whether initiatives come from race organisers, teams or the UCI themselves, every idea, big or small, can push the sport in the right direction. “Top down or bottom up, change is happening,” said Claire Poole, founder and chief executive of the Sport Positive summit, which aims to promote the advance towards a low carbon future for sport. “There is always low-hanging fruit to be had and many sports organisations have started small with their sustainability efforts. Behaviour change such as ensuring recycling takes place, swapping out high-carbon footprint staff meals with plant-based alternatives or changing lighting to LED. We need to be doing much more than this to drive real change, but doing something is always better than doing nothing.” Put in cycling terms, this is marginal gains writ large.

And the will is increasingly there across the sport. The more we see podium jerseys made of recycled fabrics, the sooner we will see them worn in the peloton. ASO, meanwhile, has acknowledged the issues with its beloved advertising caravan, which was denounced on environmental grounds by a group of 30 French MPs on the eve of

120

trucks in Tour technical
area for broadcast



last year’s Tour de France. Prudhomme has spoken of the need to reduce the amount of plastic tat, usually quickly thrown away, handed out to spectators, while at the route launch for this year’s Tour, ASO president Jean-Etienne Amaury spoke of a future in which all the caravan’s vehicles were electric.

There is always more that can be done. Every day at the Tour, journalists get through thousands of single-use bottles of water, doled out in the usually baking-hot press rooms by sponsors. But give everyone a bidon on stage one, park a tanker outside the building each day and we could get to Paris having used a tiny fraction of the plastic.

Back in Norway, Dybdal and the Arctic Race are thinking even bigger. Any roadside fan will know the telltale sign of an approaching race is the tremendous noise of the television helicopters roaring overhead. Dybdal wants to see them grounded for good. “We’ve been working with a university to see if we can take away those helicopters and use drones,” he says.

Had this year’s race gone ahead as scheduled in August, the plan was to experiment with these during the parts of the race not shown live. It is too soon to know if the idea can work reliably, but that won’t stop Dybdal and his colleagues from trying. “It may need more time, but we are looking at everything,” he said. “We have to ask ourselves what might be possible. We have to look into it and challenge ourselves to make the sport greener. We have to be at the forefront of it. If you ask me, the future for cycling looks good.” ●