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It's time to liven up the grand tours of pro cycling

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The first half of the 2019 Giro d'Italia prompted hundreds of fan comments on how boring it was, repeating a pattern I've noticed for many years. Long, flat stages early in a three-week race means nothing happens until sprinters' trains ramp up a few kilometers before the finale. During such stages, TV commentators must dig hard for something to say, and when they do, it rarely relates to the action on the road. Might as well wait to tune in for the last half hour.

I'm a diehard fan of cycling, but come on, it's time to do something to make cycling more interesting, both to its faithful fans and to those we might attract to this magnificent sport.

There's much to love and appreciate about pro racing, from the other-worldly level of fitness of the athletes to the complex tactics. But the criticism of stage races, along with the difficulty of finding sponsors and growing the audience, call for reforms. For tuning in early, we need more than a curiosity about the countryside or historical buildings of Italy.

Two ideas: shorten the stages and allow some substitution.

It's fine to have a 250-kilometer one-day race. The directeur sportif can choose his line-up based on the terrain and each rider's traits. It's do or die, and riders will give their all. Those in supporting roles can drop out as soon as their utility has been spent.

But in a grand tour, 250 kilometers today and 200 tomorrow means that many riders need to spend six hours soft pedaling in the grupetto to finish within the time limit. The stage winners of those races, especially in the last week, can

scarcely get out of the saddle to sprint. Yes, in the early days of pro cycling, the racers commonly collapsed at the finish line and had to be carried away. Do we really want to watch the equivalent of the Bataan Death March today?



Shorter Stages

So for starters, shorten the stages. No more allowing an early breakaway to build up a nine-minute lead with the peloton just pedaling tempo for three hours. Shorter stages mean breakaways would be kept on a tighter leash. And if you have a crash or a mechanical or need a

nature break, your anxiety of catching back onto a charging peloton goes up a notch. Shorter stages raise the stakes and reduce the margin of error.

A shorter mountain stage means that the whole peloton can't just pace themselves up the first two climbs, knowing it's too far away from the finish for anyone to mount an attack. Stage 17 in the 2018 Tour de France was only 65 kilometers but included three tough climbs and was one of the most exciting stages of the race, with Nairo Quintana taking the win and forcing gaps among all the contenders.

We need more days like that.

Let's say on average, we cut one hour from each day of racing. That's not a subtraction of TV time since often TV does not cover the first two hours of riding. No loss there. And one hour of less road time means another hour for riders to rest and recover and prepare for the next stage or preview the next stage. (And for all the support staff.) Currently, very long stages mean that riders meet the next stage blind.

One fewer hour of racing each day would make transfer less stressful and give teams and set up



crews more time to do their work. Sure, covering less distance each day on the bike means more transfer mileage by car and bus, but what's quicker?

Do more hours of racing bring in more revenue to the sport? I very much doubt it. Even the extended commercial coverage on NBC Sports for the biggest races, the few original commercials are

repeated ad nauseum. If the races were shorter, they could be covered start to finish—a more concentrated product.

Because grand tours are so demanding, riders get sick, riders crash, riders exhaust themselves and drop out. What other professional sport grinds up and spits out its stars like that? Sprinters often just leave the race before the big climbs so they can compete in the next grand tour a few weeks later. The sport is designed to deprive fans of the opportunity to watch and cheer on their favorite riders.

Allow limited substitution

Substitution could change all that. Requiring all team members to ride every day means team managers must race conservatively so their riders have something in the tank many days on. Let's change that.



In the grand tours, teams are nine riders. Leave it at nine but have only six riders on the road every day. Or make it eleven to make seven. The UCI could tinker with the numbers to keep it practicable to transport a whole team and its equipment. But give directeurs sportif a few riders to substitute every day. Consequently, a sprint stage would have a different line-up than a mountain stage, and every rider would have a more prominent role to play and potentially be a lot fresher to play it.

With a smaller peloton and fresher riders, fewer crashes would result from fatigue—the touching of wheels or overcooking a corner. With a smaller peloton, the percentage of riders contesting the stage would be higher. In the current format, about half the peloton are just extras with little reason to race.

General classification contenders would have to ride every day, but as in baseball, where you don't have to play every day to win the batting championship, you wouldn't have to ride every day to win the sprint or the mountains classification.

Allowing substitution would raise the excitement level by keeping specialists in stage races to the end. Caleb Ewan won two stages in the 2019 Giro d'Italia and then dropped out when the mountains loomed. So did the season's winningest sprinter, Elia Viviani. This was a big drop on their teams' profile in the race and in the media. Wouldn't a sponsor want to keep its stars in the news rather than have them disappear for a month?



Allowing substitution would multiply the tactical options exponentially. Some directeurs sportif might opt to change riders every day while others could run with the same lineup for a week, with three fresh new pairs of legs for week two. And every day, the DS's must try to outwit their rivals in choosing the right mix of talents to carry out the team plan and thwart its opponents.

Racers often talk of having a “day off” during a stage race when the terrain does not suit their special skills. They don't race; they just pedal. At the end of six hours on the 231-kilometer Stage 7 of the 2018 Tour de France, reporters asked Peter Sagan what he did to distract himself. “It was boring today. I talked to everyone.”

Riders are Here to Race

If you're a professional, wouldn't you prefer to be racing when you are on the road? Having shorter stages and allowing substitution would promote all riders being there to race. And we

the fans would be watching every minute instead of waiting for the last half hour when the looming finish line finally awakens the peloton from its dogmatic slumber.

Let's try it. If it doesn't pan out as I envision, try something else. Cycling deserves more excitement.