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You can't buy something you aren't. On fixing results in cycling

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You can't buy something you aren't. On fixing results in cycling

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Abstract

Wind resistance is the primary external factor teams organise themselves around in cycling. In order to share this burden, members of opposing teams often cooperate, e.g. to secure the existence of a breakaway. To avoid free-riders the riders in question form a tacit social contract on sharing the workload. Taking its point of departure in qualitative interviews with Danish elite cyclists, this study demonstrates how the social contract sometimes becomes explicit, and riders form an agreement of the podium placing in the final breakaway before they arrive at the finish line. This study examines riders' explanations of and attitudes to such agreements and discusses to what extent they should be regarded as match-fixing. While the available evidence suggests that the agreements are best understood as an integrated element of cycling culture with a purpose of upholding a certain social order, this study also demonstrates how the social contract and the accompanying agreements imply corruption in the sport of cycling, if only in germ form. On this basis, the study concludes that it is only the sport's culture and individual riders' self-discipline that can protect cycling from real corruption.

Keywords: agreements, cooperation, reciprocal altruism, sporting ethos, socialisation, corruption

Resumen

La resistencia al viento es el principal factor externo alrededor del cual los equipos ciclistas se organizan. Para compartir esta carga los miembros de los equipos rivales a menudo cooperan, esto es, para asegurar la existencia de una escapada. Para evitar free-riders, los corredores en cuestión llevan a cabo un contrato social tácito de compartir la carga de trabajo. Tomando como punto de arranque entrevistas cualitativas con ciclistas de élite daneses, este estudio demuestra como el contrato social tácitos a veces deviene explícito, y los corredores realizan un acuerdo para repartirse las plazas del podio en el final de la escapada antes de llegar a línea de meta. Este estudio también examina las explicaciones de los corredores así como las actitudes hacia tales acuerdos y discute hasta cierto punto que deben ser considerados amaños. Mientras que las pruebas disponibles sugieren que los acuerdos son mejor entendidos como elementos integrados en la cultura ciclista con un propósito de mantener un cierto orden social, este estudio también demuestra como el contrato social y los acuerdos que los acompañan implican corrupción en el ciclismo, aunque sea en un forma germinal. Sobre esta base, el estudio concluye que solo la cultura del propio deporte y la autodisciplina de los corredores puede proteger al ciclismo frente a la corrupción.

Términos Clave: acuerdos, cooperación, reciprocidad altruismo, etos deportivo, socialización, corrupción.

“No one who hasn't got the class will have the laurel wreaths hung around their necks” (Werner, 1958)

1. Introduction

When the Kazakh Alexandre Vinokourov and the Russian Alexandr Kolobnev attacked 15 kilometres before the finish line in the 2010 edition of one of professional cycling's most prestigious events, the spring classic Liège-Bastagne-Liège, neither Cadel Evans, Alejandro Valverde, Philippe Gilbert, Alberto Contador nor any of the other favourites were able to follow them.¹ The two co-operated in an exemplary manner, but when they reached the last climb in Liège, Vinokourov broke away and rode across the finish line 100 metres ahead of Kolobnev, to one of his career's biggest triumphs. For the 36 year old Vinokourov, who had just returned from a two year long doping suspension, it was an important victory. “I showed”, as he said himself,

“that Vino is here, Vino c'est la classe. I am finished with this wrong and dark page of my history. I would like to show all of you that I can win great races without doping. I am trying to earn your trust. Today is the best proof and revenge for me.” (Brown, 2010)

However, just over 18 months later, in December 2011, the Swiss magazine *L'Illustre* told its readers that they were in possession of an e-mail correspondence between Vinokourov and Kolobnev, which allegedly documented that Vinokourov had paid Kolobnev €150,000 to secure his support on the last kilometres towards his 2010 victory. Vinokourov, unsurprisingly, denied that he had bought Kolobnev's help and claimed that the money was only a loan to the Russian (Cyclingnews, 2011).

In the international cycling media the case once again brought riders' moral standards on the agenda; could it really be true that riders could buy such a prestigious victory, and if so, how can fans be sure all races aren't fixed? The case, however, did not lead to questions about pro-riders' credibility in general. But that agreements involving money and podium placing are made is not a phenomenon restricted to Eastern European riders or the professional peloton. It also

¹ An earlier version of this paper has previously been published in Danish, with the title: "Du kan ikke købe dig til noget du ikke er" – om aftalte resultater blandt danske cykelryttere (Hjørngaard & Christiansen, 2012)

exists in lower ranked races in Denmark, as Danish cycling's grand old man, Henrik Elmgreen, reported on in the Danish daily, *Politiken*, in 2001:

“The scene is a town in the province; we are at the yearly criterion, a race around the local shopping mall. Two young amateur riders have broken away and the race will be decided between them. One is from the local club and would like to win. "That's all right", says his competitor, "but then I want your prize money!" And so it came to be. The incident is taken from real life, and took place 5 to 6 years ago, but it could have happened yesterday, today or 50 or 100 years ago for that matter. And it will happen again tomorrow.” (Elmgreen, 2001).

Elmgreen wrote the piece as a reaction to a heated debate on buying and selling victories in cycling, which *Politiken* had been covering for the past week. It was the loser himself who had told Elmgreen about the episode. As one of the elder statesmen in Danish cycling, one would perhaps expect Elmgreen to report the culprits to the Danish Cycle Union (DCU) so the two could receive their well-deserved punishment, or at least take them to task and teach them how unsportsmanlike and morally reprehensible their actions were. But Elmgreen did neither. He considered "the incident as banal and harmless". But why is this? Isn't it cheating and rigged game like the series of articles in *Politiken* indicated and as also suggested in the case with Vinokourov's 2010 victory? Isn't it in line with a destructive activity like match-fixing, which deceive spectators into believing what they are watching is an open, unplanned competition? Isn't such deception something sport should strike hard upon? "No", Elmgreen replies, because "you can't buy something you aren't" (Elmgreen, 2001).²

That point of view is not straightforwardly understandable. For the outsider, neither in the Belgian nor in the Danish case was it a question of pure competition between the two who were strongest on day, such as the ethos of sport dictates, but that the riders in question agreed on the result before they reached the finish line. Fixing the match, indeed. And it is an established fact that fixing matches is destructive to sport.³ That at least was the fear for *Danske Spil*, the national

² As can be seen, we have borrowed Elmgreen's statement and heading for this paper.

³ When using the word 'sport' in this article, we refer to achievement sport, which means that the activity must involve competition, have a hierarchical structure, where results are ascribed meaning, an institutional framework and be governed by a set of written rules (Møller, 2010).

Danish lottery operator, who in 2001 stated that they would "consider whether they should continue to offer betting on for instance Tour de France". As the chairman Leif Mikkelsen explained: "In general we always have to preserve our reliability, which means that we cannot offer betting on events where doubts are raised regarding the results. Therefore we also have to consider our position on cycle sport."

But it is worth examining whether Elmgreen has a point. The sport of cycling has a fundamental feature that makes it different from all other sports: It is unique in the sense that the athlete has to cooperate with his/hers competitors in order to have success. If s/he doesn't learn that, s/he won't win many victories. Most obviously the cooperation is seen among riders in a breakaway who take turns leading the group, by means of which they share the burden of breaking the wind. Other times, cycling teams work together to chase down breakaways as their interest dictates. But as the previous examples illustrate, the cooperation sometimes go further than this.

In this paper we give an account of how riders in the decisive breakaway in some races agree on the result, and share out the placing among them, before they reach the finish line. We examine how and why such agreements are made, how riders understand and handle them, and discuss to what extent they should be seen as swindles and foul play caused by corrupt morals on the implicated riders' part. Or if they can be understood as an inherent element of the sport, that, among other things, contributes to preserving a form of social order in the races.

The paper's point of departure is the best Danish cycling league, the A-class. The A-class is a semi-professional league with a comparatively high level of competition. It consists of 4-7 so-called continental teams (also known as 3rd division teams), and equally as many national teams. Altogether the A-class consists of 120-150 riders. Approximately half of them are paid by their team, while the other half rides on an amateur basis. The study is analytical as much as it is empirical. We did, however, do long, qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, applying the recommended guidelines (Silverman, 2010), with three active riders from the A-class. All high ranked in the national hierarchy and all three have for a number of years achieved good

results. Additionally, one of the authors (MWH) has a past as an active A-class rider and is thus an insider to the culture. After having reviewed the literature, it is our assessments that this is the first time active Danish elite riders pass on their experiences with and attitudes to agreements on podium placing and trade with victories. Both a Belgian and an Australian study has previously briefly touched on the issue, but both had other primary interests and thus did not deal with it at length (Fincoeur, 2010; Hardie, Shilbury, Ware, & Bozzi, 2010). Although the Danish context is our point of departure, the discussion and analysis addresses the sport as such and is thus not limited to any specific national context. Names and places have been changed or omitted in order to secure riders' anonymity.

2. On guard

In the media, cycling lives a paradoxical life. On the one hand it is the third most popular sport in Denmark⁴ after European football and team handball, wherefore riders – and especially those who are employed by the Pro-Tour teams – can expect quite some attention from the press. On the other hand, since the doping relegations in Tour de France in 1998, riders have gotten used to a media that also have a critical eye on the sport. Riders have therefore felt a pressure to be extra-ordinarily observant to not attract negative media attention. When in the preparation phase for this study we contacted potential informants, their precaution and scepticism was evident. Without rejecting that the phenomenon of trading, buying and selling victories exists, one rider explained in an e-mail, that he did not want to participate since he felt that the sport had had more than enough of negative exposure in relation to the doping problem, and that there was no reason to once again declare the sport of cycling in crisis.⁵ Such a viewpoint is understandable. Often riders' morality has been questioned. The verdict has come quickly and nuances and critical reflexion have been the rare exception. So, if there is anything the sport does not need, it is another simplified and stigmatising representation of riders as cheaters.

⁴ Cycling is also among the top 10 popular sports in a number of European countries including Belgium, Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain and Switzerland. Source: <http://mostpopularsports.net/cycling-popularity> [visited 27 August 2013]

⁵ In his suspicion of the media not being able to treat the matter in a nuanced manner, he was right. When the Danish tabloid daily, BT, got hold of a Danish language version of this paper they had this caption in yellow on the front-page: "There IS match-fixing in Danish cycling" (Staghøj, 2012).

But perhaps cycling is not totally blameless, if the outside world should perceive agreements and alliances between riders of opposing teams as morally problematic. The experienced sports director and former professional rider Johnny Weltz, stated in 2001, when he was sports director at *Team CSC WorldOnline*, that if such agreements were revealed on his team the involved riders would be sacked: "I almost consider it as sacrilege to sell a victory, and it is my firm conviction that if a man is found guilty of such a thing he should be freed from his duties immediately" (Jacobsen, 2001). Now, from his own career as rider and sports director (also on *US Postal*) Weltz knew very well what was going on, and that such agreements do take place. But it is just as obvious that if a leader in cycling makes such a statement to the press, it is not something that boosts the incentive for active riders to discuss the issue

3. The paradoxical life in the saddle

Life for an elite cyclist is characterised by privations on the part of the rider's social life and family, as well as a lifestyle marked by what has been characterised as 'ascetic discipline' in relation to diet, training and recovery (Christiansen, 2005; Hamilton & Coyle, 2012; Hardie et al., 2010; Kimmage, 2001). On top of this, wages in Danish elite cycling are low and many riders on the national teams ride without even getting paid. And if they are, wages correspond to what students receive through study grants. Also prize money is not big in Denmark, and the potential to win money from participation in foreign races is limited to very few riders. On occasion, a sponsor will offer an extra prize in connection with a prestigious race, but that money goes to the team – which operates on a tight budget – and not to individual riders. The low wages are also a result of the fact that the Danish media's interest in cycling is reserved to big international races and not the Danish A-Class, wherefore the exposure is insignificant. The motivation to perform and get results therefore is not caused by the financial returns from victories. When riders explain what it is that makes them accept the many privations, it thus is not the money they emphasise. One rider, John, explains:

“I believe it's that feeling you get when things go your way. That feeling is hard to find anywhere else. Some days it can be really strenuous with training, if the weather is bad. But perhaps it's those few very good days that makes all the other days worthwhile. When

finally there is some success [...] it gives a kick, which I don't think I've found anywhere else.”

Another rider, Simon, points at something similar when he says that it is "that feeling you get in your body when you've won a race or something similar. To win means everything for athletes."

The statements are in line with the thesis of victory being the pivotal point and absolute value in sport (Christiansen & Møller, 2007; Møller, 2010). But if it is also true that agreement on podium placing, and buying and selling of victories is not unfamiliar to the sport, a paradox arises: How can one, on the one hand, have victory as the absolute value and, on the other, be willing to trade it away for, perhaps, a small amount?

Part of the explanation can be found in the structure of bicycle racing.

4. Wind resistance and cooperation

Road racing is unlike other sports in that it is a competition between teams but is won by an individual rider. In the competition wind resistance is the primary external factor the team organise itself around. In a breakaway group, the power required to overcome air resistance is reduced because the lead can be shared, with trailing riders sheltering or drafting behind leading riders. By riding close behind each other's wheels, riding a paceline, sheltered riders can thus diminish wind resistance by up to 38 %. For a speed of 32 km/h that results in an estimated reduction in VO_2 of 27%, for a speed of 40 km/h it reduces VO_2 of 31% (Olds, 1998). The higher the speed the more benefit there is from drafting since the power needed to overcome wind resistance increases with the velocity lifted to the power of three. Those who ride on the front of the peloton allow other riders to travel at the same velocity with substantially lower energy expenditure. It is thus a major advantage to let others do the hard work in front, but it is also a naïve rider who allows competitors to sit in and shelter all the way to the final, just to let them sprint by and take victory. To avoid such things from happening, a tacit social contract is formed among the riders in the breakaway where one cooperates and shares the toil with the wind in the front. Ideally, everyone in the breakaway contributes equally to the work, and the

contract can be disbanded shortly before the finish line, where each rider will employ individual tactics to pursue victory (Albert, 1991).

In practically all other sports (i.e. sports that are at, or could be considered for, the Olympic programme, see also note 3), this level of cooperation between competitors is regarded as unsportsmanlike, since it is considered destructive for the ideal of the competition's objectivity and transparency. Cycling is abnormal because cooperation between competitors is an integrated element of the competition.⁶ For the novice this means that he has to learn to shift his perspective on his competitors. In the one moment he must cooperate (in order to keep distance to the chasing peloton, for instance), in the next he has to disregard the cooperation and compete (for victory). A racing cyclist thus has to internalise an ideology where competition is dynamic rather than static, and where he must be able to change the perspective from pure opposition to close cooperation and back again (Albert, 1991; Christiansen, 2005).

In the beginning of a 200 km long road race everyone feels strong and fit. The early phase of the race is characterised by constant sprint-like accelerations from riders trying to break free from the peloton. This is physically demanding, and as more riders gradually get drained, a group of stronger riders often succeeds in escaping the peloton and forms a breakaway. Yet, the typically five to ten riders that take part in the breakaway, find themselves in a situation which on paper is much harder than that for the perhaps 100 riders who are left in the peloton, since they are fewer to share the work of breaking the wind. It is thus decisive to have a sound form of cooperation established in the group of breakaways. The riders, in other words, need to get the social contract under control, and if necessary make it explicit.

5. Agreements

Immediately after the formation of a breakaway, all riders are usually willing to fight hard to make distance to the peloton. In order for a breakaway not to get caught by the peloton, cooperation needs to work flawlessly. If one or two riders sit in and save their strengths, the

⁶ A few other sports like e.g. roller-skating and cross country skiing have elements of cooperation that are somewhat similar to those found in cycling. However, structural elements relating to the competition in these sports makes them differ from cycling in significant ways. Space restrictions do not allow expanding on this here.

chances of the breakaway diminish. But for the individual it is an obvious advantage to skip a lead or two in the front, in order to save energy and thereby increase one's own chances in the final. But this also increases the risk of the breakaway getting caught. Therefore; when the riders sense that the breakaway can survive to the finish, negotiations begin with possible agreements on the final results. If an agreement that everyone can accept is reached, the cooperation can work flawlessly, since everyone knows that they will gain something from their effort. Agreements are thus most often formed with the purpose of securing the existence of the breakaway. But at the same time they stand in stark contrast to the traditional zero-sum nature of sport (what one part wins, the other loses), and shows that the social contract among riders is not always ideal, but sometimes prosaic.

On the importance of forming agreements John says:

“They can mean everything! If everyone has their own agenda, and everyone wants to win, then you can't cooperate as you should, and you end up with half-hearted pulls in the front. These kinds of breakaways are doomed to fail. [...] It is perhaps first in the last quarter [of the race] that agreements start being formed, and it is only there, one can start to see the difference in how strong the various riders [in the breakaway] are. Then you enter into the last part [of the race], where differences become more obvious, and then you can voice if you just want to sit in the wheel, and give up going for victory.”

If a rider stops participating in the work, the others will try to clarify his motives. Is he tired out or is he being tactically, saving energy for his sprint?

Also, the fact that agreements are sometimes made is not tantamount to saying that they are always made in any breakaway. Neither is it compulsory for anyone to be part of the agreements that are made. As long as he is honest (and e.g. do not enter into agreements, just to break them later), a rider who does not want to be part of an agreement is not looked down upon, although he does constitute an element of irritation for the others, as John explains:

“If you don't want to be part of the agreement, you can just ride to win. But the rest of the group will then race against you, so they don't end up in a situation, where you disrupt the others' agreements.”

Thus, there is no requirement that one takes the deal, only a tacit threat that if they don't, the deal makers will do what they can to ensure that the rider in question loses anyways.

Agreements on victories and (podium) positions exist in many different varieties and with various designs.⁷ And it is far from all races wherein agreements are made. Also, whether or not agreements are made there is always the uncertainty that the break is caught. In line with what happens in the breakaway group, the chasing peloton will try and organise itself with the aim of catching the breakaways and e.g. launch the sprinters for the final. Also here, agreements between chasing teams can be established.

However, when agreements are made in the leading group, irrespective of their concrete design, they most often have the purpose of securing the breakaway's existence and in addition to that (in breakaways that are certain not to get caught) to secure what internally in the breakaway group is regarded a fair distribution of positions and prizes.

If riders from the same team are overrepresented in a breakaway, they are naturally in a favourable position. But also in such situations, agreements in the breakaway group may be needed, as Simon explains:

“You can find yourself in a breakaway where one team is strongly overrepresented compared to the other teams. That team then has the opportunity to ensure that the other teams get nothing. But then again, those who are in a majority can also mess it up, and lose their almost certain victory. So, they all agree to make an arrangement where the team that has the majority gets victory and the others can then divide the rest of the good positions amongst them. Then, in principle, every team get a slice of the pie.”

To be in a majority situation is advantageous and the chance of victory is relatively high. Riders who are in a minority are placed in a correspondingly bad situation. To secure collaboration in the breakaway the riders who are in minority must be sure to get their "slice of the pie"; otherwise there is no reason for them to take part in the work. Correspondingly, the

⁷ A kind of agreement that is probably known by many readers is when in stage races a contender for the general classification (GC) is in a breakaway with one (or more) non-GC contender(s). The two (or more) may enter into an agreement where the non-GC contender gets the stage win. Thus, both put in an effort to keep distance to the chasing peloton, and both are doing what is in their best interest since the non-GC contender gets a stage win and the GC contender put additional time on the other GC contenders.

team who are in majority needs to be confident that victory is theirs, so they do not drag a competitor all the way to victory.

In instances where the distribution of power is not skewed it may be necessary to offer some kind of quid pro quo if one wants to make an agreement on victory. Peter gives an account of one time when he was involved in an agreement.

“We were in [this town] when I was in a breakaway with [a strong rider] Magnus and [a young up and coming talent] Frederic. Magnus wanted to win ‘cause he and his team where on home ground. And perhaps I was in a breakaway which was a bit too strong for me, so I just wanted not to get dropped. Frederic went down [to the sport director's car] to talk to Magnus' sports director, and shortly thereafter Magnus goes: "Now, we do so and so; I break away on this and that time, and then we are [Magnus] first, [Frederic] second and [Peter] third.”

Q: Do you know what Frederic got out of that agreement?

I don't know if he maybe got some money, but I do know that he is on Magnus' team now. But you can be sure he was offered something. He rode for [another big team] back then, and for him the race in [that particular town] isn't important. And there is this standing agreement that when you race in [that particular town], then it's Magnus' team that wins, because it's their home ground, and it's the same with the other bigger teams in Denmark.”

Given the importance of victory for Magnus, his sports director and his team, it is an obvious conclusion that money or a future contract was part of the negotiations between Magnus, Frederic and the sports director. What exactly Frederic obtained in the negotiations we do not know, but according to Peter a home ground victory would trigger a sponsor bonus of DKK 50,000-100,000 (€7,000-14,000) to Magnus' team. Even if that money does not go into Magnus' but to the team's pockets, it illustrates the importance of settling negotiations on victory. By comparison, prize money for a victory in the A-Class is normally around DKK 800 (€110).

But having that amount of money as part of the calculation is the exception rather than the rule, when agreements are negotiated. *"Most often money isn't part of it. It's more like you owe one another something"*, John explains. By voluntarily ceding victory and making do with a secondary position, riders can establish a “credit” from the rider and the team who gets victory. Peter offers an example of how this works:

“When you're in a race, teams ride against each other and try to establish a winning situation on their team by, for example, being in the majority in the final. And if you're in a breakaway of six riders, where three are from the same team, then you're in a good position to win the race. Then maybe one of the three others says: "I've got no problem in you guys winning; I just want to be second or third". By doing that he puts a little deposit in the bank, and then you know that you can make an agreement with him some other time or vice versa. That's how things work.”

By abstaining from racing for victory, and by that putting a "deposit in the bank" at the other riders, the rider earns a credit from the winning rider and his team, which he can draw on in the future. At the same time, the team that was in majority converts the likely victory to a certain victory. This demonstrates how the general zero-sum nature of sport is sometimes suspended in cycling, since he who agrees losing (or not winning) in a breakaway wins something else – namely an improved chance of winning future races. Hence, the ‘wealth’ of the sport is distributed not only according to riders’ strengths and luck in the actual race, but also according to their known records of sharing and contribution in previous races. Riders may therefore engage in a kind of long-term strategic thinking about victories that is unfamiliar to other sports.

Irrespective of how normal the phenomenon is, the informants do not expect people from outside the sport to have an understanding for the agreements that are made in cycling. On spectators' and other sports interested peoples' attitude to riders' praxis, Simon says:

“Most people haven't tried it, and it doesn't really take place in other sports, I think. I believe it's only internally between riders that one really knows. And on the face of it, it seems totally wrong and illogically to accept not winning a race, just because someone else perhaps needs the victory more than you do. But inside cycling it seems quite logically and generous to give it away, if somebody needs it more than you.”

It may sound noble, but it is not. At least not completely. It is also self-interest. Any rider who offers to give away a position knows that in the next race he may be the one who will be in need of another’s help. Hence, victories are not given away in pure altruism. The informants all know about giving away a victory or another top-spot, but it happens in the expectation of a return of the gesture, as Peter explains:

“If it is internal on the team, then I expect nothing. That's part of being a team, and you're loyal to your team-mates. And we usually say that the wheel is round, and it will come back to you some other time. But if it's between two different teams I certainly expect to get something back later.”

6. Reciprocal altruism

Even though we are looking at concrete actions among people with distinct social relations in a specific cultural context, the phenomenon of agreeing on victories, podium placing and prizes can be understood in the light of what since the beginning of the 1970s in socio-biology and evolutionary psychology has been known as reciprocal altruism.⁸ Reciprocal altruism is a concept introduced by evolutionary psychologist Robert Trivers to understand the kind of collaboration that can be observed between non-kin individuals. It designates the kind of behaviour where an individual acts in a way that momentarily reduces its own fitness or chances of surviving, but increases another individual's fitness, with the expectance that the other will behave in a similar way at a later time. Contrary to pure altruism, which for instance was suggested to be the foundation stone in utopian communism, reciprocal altruism is sensitive to cheaters who want to profit from the work of others but not contribute themselves. This is why reciprocal altruism may have developed with evolution, and exists as a fundamental feature in man. As Harvard Professor Steven Pinker explains: "Reciprocators who help others, who have helped them, and who shun or punish others who have failed to help them, will enjoy the benefits of gains in trade and outcompete individualists, cheaters and pure altruists." Also, humans are psychologically well equipped for the demands of reciprocal altruism: "They remember each other as individuals [...], have an eagle eye and a flypaper memory for cheaters" and possess moralistic feelings such as "liking, sympathy, gratitude, guilt, shame, and anger" (Pinker, 2002, 255).

⁸ Other theoretical approaches could of course have been applied here (e.g. management theory, theory of work dynamics, sociology of work, sociology of deviance, game theory, Mauss' study on the gift, etc.). They would probably all have revealed something interesting. The decision to apply 'reciprocal altruism' as the theoretical framework here is due to the fact that it, being associated with evolutionary psychology, can help explain elements of human behaviour that, although they appear connected to a specific cultural and social setting have roots in our common evolutionary past, and thus are of a more universal nature. If the phenomenon can be explained by referring to evolved emotional and cognitive adaptations that represent a human psychological nature, we believe that understanding of the phenomenon is added in a way that is not the case had we only referred to the local cultural context.

When Peter, as part of an agreement in a breakaway, has accepted not to race for the victory, he has done so with the expectance to have the favour returned later on. By that he chooses not to reach for the small chance he had in the specific race, to instead have an advantageous starting point for a result in a future race. He shows that he is 'generous', as Simon says, by not racing for victory but continue to contribute to the work of the group, while he simultaneously lends his support to the outlined plan for distribution that ensures everybody a piece of the pie. Such behaviour, with its traits of reciprocal altruism, is thus connected to the suspension of the sports' zero-sum nature, which was discussed above.

The risk, of course, is that someone may try and cheat. That someone will be part of an agreement and then break it shortly before the finish line in order to take the victory he wants so badly. When answering the question on whether agreements are ever broken and the possible consequences hereof, John spells it out: "It's totally unheard of. If you do that, you're in really bad standing. And it will spread like wildfire through the peloton grapevine that he has done so and so, and he isn't to be relied on." In general the riders have difficulties in recalling examples where agreements have been broken, and they have even more difficulties in imagining a situation where they themselves broke an agreement. On the consequences that would have, Simon states:

“Firstly the rider wouldn't be allowed to be part of a breakaway any longer. He would either be caught by the peloton or no one in the breakaway would work while he's there. And if he somehow would be allowed in a breakaway it would only happen if he was in a huge minority situation. And everybody in the breakaway would race against him, and he would have no chance whatsoever to play any part in the final.”

The message is clear. If you break an agreement in order to win on your own, everybody will see to it that you will not win anything in the races you participate in, from this time forward. The peloton will "shut you down", as it is called, to make sure that you will not race for future victories.

If you break an agreement, you cheat your competitors in a situation where they trust you. That kind of cheating threatens the peloton's capability for future collaboration, and if such

egotistic behaviour should thrive it would break down the peloton's behaviour of sharing and reciprocity. Therefore, riders in the peloton stand shoulder to shoulder in sanctioning such cheaters.

The economist Ernst Fehr has labelled such a reaction strong reciprocity. This concept is used to describe how a community will restrain those who cheat and act parasitic on behalf of the majority, by sanction and punishment. For instance studies based game theory shows that humans, in order to reciprocate what they consider unjustified parasitic behaviour on the community, are willing to make personal sacrifices to sanction the cheater, even if it was not them who were the injured part. A violation of the community's agreements will stick to the sinner with consequences for the far future. (se e.g. Fehr, Fischbacher, & Gächter, 2002).

To illustrate how this works, Simon recalls an incident at the Tour of Denmark, where it was not an explicit agreement, but one of the sport's unwritten rules that was violated. A foreign team launched an attack while the yellow jersey – which at the time was worn by Danish Jacob Fuglsang – was off the bike for a pee early at a stage. Because of the attack Fuglsang had to spend a lot of energy getting back to the peloton:

“It's totally unacceptable to do such a thing. The majority of the peloton will then cooperate to make sure that that team won't get any results in the rest of the race. And it's somewhat the same that happens if a rider breaks an agreement like the ones we talk about here. There is no set rule for how long you are in the black book. Usually the peloton pretty much agrees on that. And it isn't something you talk a lot about, it's just something you do – it feels natural.”

And the social sanctions seem to work. Agreements are (as a rule) not broken and riders does not (as a rule) cheat each other. It is not in the riders' interest since the consequences are too extensive. Cyclists that break an agreement reduces their own chance of survival in the future so much so that any small gain is outweighed by the larger loss. Further, it will be almost impossible for a cheater to later find his place as part of the peloton. As Peter express it when asked to relate to how he would feel about violating an agreement: "*You know, if I should ever do that, I would prefer it to be in my last race!*" The social order of the peloton is thus maintained

through sanctions and punishment which ensures that cheating and parasitic behaviour does not gain ground.

7. *Unsportsmanlike?*

Two issues remain unsolved, however: The thesis on the absolute value of victory in sport and the sporting and moral consequence of the agreements.

Firstly, we can point out that the agreements in cycling shows that the thesis that "*sport has victory as its pivotal point and its absolute value*" (Møller, 2010, 24) either has to be modified or qualified. It can be modified to the following: "*sport has victory as its pivotal point and its central value*". The will to victory is the central value that is the cause for the fight between riders to enter into the decisive breakaway. But the fact that there in the breakaway group is a willingness to let victory be part of a quid pro quo negotiation indicates that its value is not absolute. Not here and now at least. With a longer time perspective in view, the thesis can alternatively be qualified. Because it is indeed the desire to win in the future that make the individual rider, in the actual situation, weigh his potential for victory and perhaps yield on his little chance now for a better opportunity later. In this respect victory is still the absolute value and driving force for the decisions that are made.

Secondly there is the money. Vinokourov presumably paid Kolobnev for his assistance. In Elmgreen's example one rider received the prize money for not sprinting (genuinely) for victory. Our informants all knew of instances where money had been involved in an agreement among riders in the decisive breakaway. That other teams' assistance can be bought is also known and considered among Under 23 riders in the Danish national team (Christiansen, 2005, 143-44), and among Belgian riders (Fincoeur, 2010). In line with this, the then sports director at continental *Team fakta*, Peter Sejer Nielsen, in 2001 told *Politiken*:

“It is a well-known part of the strategy that certain agreements are made, where also money is involved. And for me there is nothing reprehensible in individual riders, or a whole team for that matter, allows themselves to be hired to assist others, when they have had their day. That has nothing to do with buying victories.” (Jacobsen, 2001)

Sejer Nielsen probably shares that point of view with many others in the sport. Money exchange hands between riders, and if needed it is possible to buy the help of others. Riders know this; it is accepted in the culture and is not regarded as cheating. But it is not as uncontroversial as Sejer Nielsen will have it. In fact Sejer Nielsen speaks about two phenomena that have to be dealt with separately: First, buying individual riders help in the front of the race, second controlling the race from the peloton by buying the assistance of whole teams. Whereas the former is in line with the subject matter of this paper (cf. the Vinokourov example), the latter is something different, more radical and also ethically more problematic. Space does not allow for an exhaustive discussion of the latter situation, but let us just briefly touch upon it. For instance, buying one or more whole teams in order to control the pace in the peloton to avoid breakaways or to chase back a breakaway un-levels the playing field in a radical way. If a team captain has, say, 17 or 26 helpers instead of eight, the power balance of the race has shifted dramatically. And it has so from the back or the peloton of the race. This is different from making agreements on podium positions or buying and selling one's assistance in a breakaway group, since riders with effort have to have brought themselves into such a position.

However, the former phenomenon, where money exchange hands in the front of the race, in the breakaway group, also needs consideration, since it raises the question on whether a line between legitimate and non-legitimate agreements can be drawn. It seems obvious that Vinokourov and Kolobnev were no less (or no more) corrupt had only 100,000 euros been exchanged between them. Or 10,000 or 1,000 euros. Hence, it does not appear to be the amount of money being involved that makes the behaviour corrupt or not. The decisive factor seems to be the sheer act of being willing to renounce victory with the expectation of getting some kind of quid pro quo. This can be either as money or as assistance in pursuing a victory on a similar level some other time. The only obvious condition that supports money exchange being ethically more problematic than physical assistance is that money can come from external sources, and thus be influenced by a third party (see below), whereas support in future races can only come from the rider himself. When riders chose money as opposed to returning the assistance in a future race, it is likely due to the fact that the involved riders cannot expect in the foreseeable future to be in a situation where the reciprocity can be met. The Danish A-class has been the point of departure

for this study. Here it is often the same riders, and the same favourites, that meet for races weekend after weekend. This is why money rarely is involved, since riders with a high degree of likelihood can expect to have their favour returned on the same level at a later race.

Both phenomena thus hold the potential for corruption: If a team can buy the assistance of another team, then why not buy the assistance of two teams? Or three or four teams? Or the entire peloton? If a rider can secure a victory by paying the other riders in the break for not sprinting wholeheartedly in the final, then it could be possible for a sponsor to sit in the wings and double (or triple or quadruple) the amount to secure victory. And if a sponsor can do that, a gambling syndicate in Asia could potentially do the same. Such hypothetical extrapolations of the phenomenon to a level far beyond what we have empirical foundation for claiming is practised in reality, makes it evident that the culture of agreements in cycling implies the *possibility* of full blown corruption of the sport.

Still, both versions of the phenomenon differ from match-fixing in football (or other team sports) where the result has been agreed upon or fixed *before* the match. This is not the case in cycling. Or at least we have no evidence that this has happened in cycling (except for the post Tour de France criteriums, where the top three has known to be fixed for a long time (Jones, 2002)). Agreements in cycling have to be made *during* the race, which makes them dependent on riders' skills and abilities rather than external powers.

On this basis it can be concluded that the sport of cycling is paradoxical in its essence, since it contains the precondition for its own destruction. The agreements are part and parcel of the basis of the sport. Without the social contract (tacit or explicit) on sharing the workload, few breakaways would escape the peloton, and most races would have to be decided in a mass sprint. Thus, the social contracts (verbal or non-verbal, with or without agreements) are the sports' precondition without which it could not exist (except in the form of time trials or races in mountains). But with the necessary acceptance of the social contract and the agreements in the break, the sport's zero sum nature is also suspended. That suspension entails a potential corruption of the sport.

8. Conclusion

Even if it is not common knowledge, agreements on victories and placing are often made in road races. The riders naturally know how to put on the show for the crowd and the media, and attune the use of grinding teeth, celebration and disappointment in accordance with their role and placing. The fact that riders regard these agreements as a natural and integrated part of the races' *modus vivendi* is partly because they are necessary in order to secure collaboration in the group and reinforce the breakaway's sustainability. Partly because they are based on reciprocal altruism, whereby a band of loyalty and reciprocity is established between riders, which enhance the donor's possibility of achieving results in the future. Finally the agreements have a socialising aspect, in that the willingness to enter into agreements is reinforced by the awareness of clear sanctions if an agreement is violated. Thus, the agreements are both the sport's precondition and part and parcel of cycling's social and cultural foundation. But the agreements and the social contract that is established among the riders in a breakaway also contain – even in their ideal form – a corruption of the sport in germ form.

It is therefore only the culture and the riders own self-discipline that can act as bulwark against real corruption of the sport. In reality it is these two conditions that must secure that an agreement about victory cannot be entered into by anyone, but those who have a genuine chance of winning. And as the sport has been practised hitherto, a weak rider cannot – disregarding his financial resources – negotiate a good placing. Before being able to enter into negotiations (and subsequently maybe win a race), riders have to have the skills and the strength to place themselves in a situation where such negotiations are relevant – that is in the breakaway in the last or most decisive part of the race. Thus, “you cannot”, as Elmgreen states, “buy something you aren't”. Riders' praxis therefore should not be seen as being on par with the kind of match fixing that has been uncovered in European football, but rather as agreements in the game.

It can thus be concluded that even though there is a risk of corruption built into the agreements and the social contract, the culture of agreements in effect upholds and reinforces a certain social order rather than it is an expression of corrupt morale among cyclists as a group.

Thus, it is up to the culture and the socialisation of young riders to make sure that, with a formulation borrowed from Kay Werner, one of Denmark's all-time greatest six-day riders, "no one who hasn't got the class will have the laurel wreath hung around their neck."

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