

What it Takes to Break into the Pro Ranks

Written by Kirk Willett
Monday, 24 June 2002 15:01 -

What It Takes to Break Into the Pro Ranks From a Team Director's Perspective

Cycling is divided up into multiple racing categories that are designed to create a competitive arena for a wide range of talents, time commitments and age. There is a home for just about everyone who enjoys racing a bike. Professional cycling is quite different though, as only a select few ever reach that level. There are a limited number of pro teams making the competition quite intense for the limited number of spots. Every year there are dozens of athletes hoping to get their big "break." One good thing about racing in the US is that professional competition is quite accessible since Category 1 and 2 riders often race against the pros. To many aspiring riders, how to go about maximizing your chances of breaking into the pro ranks is not too clear. Hopefully I can provide a bit of insight as to what it takes.

As a team director, I use many markers in searching out new talent, but there are some pretty basic guidelines to follow when trying to get the attention of pro teams. The bottom line is that you have to be able to show you have the strength to perform in events that have professional competition. That doesn't necessarily mean beating the pros, since it is very difficult to beat organized professional teams, but it does mean consistently performing at a level where you make hard selections or place well in your discipline. Getting to that point is generally a step by step process. The first task is to know when you (as an up-and-comer) are physically ready to put resources towards racing NRC events, second, you need to be smart in choosing the NRC events that suit your skills, and finally, you need the dedication and persistence necessary to show those skills consistently.

The biggest mistake that I see fresh riders make is to over-look the initial step of knowing when it is time to take on a diet full of NRC events. The first thing any rider needs to do is conquer the regional level. If you have dreams of getting paid to race your bike, the first step is to develop the ability to consistently place well in regional Pro/1/2 events. It doesn't mean that you have to win all the time, especially if you are not a sprinter, but you do need to be able to have the skills to place high month in and month out in a variety of events, and then excel in your specialty. Generally, if you are not an impact rider locally and regionally, you are not ready to make NRC events your focus. You may need more time to develop. It might be best to put your efforts towards regional success and use NRC events your area as training for regional events. When you start to become an impact rider, then it is time to look for more.

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The second step towards being considered for a spot on a pro team is to pick NRC events that will show-case your abilities. Most professional teams look to recruit three types of riders: sprinters, climbers, and all-arounders. If you are a sprinter, you need to attend events that generally see professional sprinters win. If you are a climber, you need to attend events that have big climber-type selections. If you are an all-rounder, you need to attend events that historically have that rider type excel. Alex Candelario, a neo-pro sprinter/strongman on our team, is a perfect example of a rider who made some smart choices when attended NRC events last year. He knew he was a strong finisher and chose to attend events that had a high percentage of sprint finishes. He repeatedly found himself in the top five and caught people's attention. He didn't win, but he showed he had the ability to be in the sprinting mix against the top pros. I immediately thought...great lead-out potential, great break-away sprinter, and then maybe developing into a future field sprinter too! In addition, he also showed work-capacity by jumping off into hard breaks as well. It was a really smart move for him to choose events that suited his talents. Otherwise, he may not have shown up on the pro team radar quite so brightly.

Cycling is filled with many ups and downs. Form often swings radically, especially for up-and-comers, due to part-time work, horrible travel hardships, and often very limited support at events. The final pieces of the puzzle needed to get onto a professional team are persistence and dedication, not only month to month, but even for a couple of years. One good week of results in races that suit your skills often will not bring you a contract. You need to show some consistency to have value to a professional team. In order to do this, you must be willing to do the hard training work and be able to piece together a schedule within your current team that gives you maximum opportunity to show your skills. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again! You never know when things will come together and you make strides towards you goals. Talent is not the only thing that makes a good pro. It is often work-ethic, dedication, and a smart plan that really makes the difference.