

Sport and politics don't mix, as the saying goes. But like many of those sayings that work in theory, in reality, it's untrue.

Take Australian cycling, for instance. Politics has been a part of the sport ever since the arrival of money and trophies. The disputes date back to the late 1800s, when amateur and professional cycling bodies started competing for control.

The [recent controversy](#) surrounding some of the Australian 2017 road worlds team selections by the new Cycling Australia (CA) high performance director Simon Jones is the latest example of cycling politics.

[Eyebrows were raised](#) by some commentators over the inclusion of the lightly raced Heinrich Haussler in the men's elite road race team. But there was a [far greater reaction](#) to the initial CA selection of a women's elite team of just five, instead of the full team of seven permitted.

The episode prompted a flurry of public discussion and social media traffic around issues like equity, leadership, hidden agendas, and justice – perennial themes in politics, but hardly core business in cycling, or so you'd think.

Australia's history of cycling disputes

This is not the first time national selection decisions have been disputed in Australian cycling. The examples are plentiful.

Take [Charlie Walsh](#), the former Australian track team coach. He was at the center of a [1988 dispute](#) following the selection of Dean Woods for the individual pursuit event at the Seoul Olympics, despite Tony Davis beating Woods by 2.5 seconds (and a world record time) in the track nationals that year.

Cycling and politics: Australia's World Road Championships selection controversy

Written by Craig Fry, Associate Professor of Public Health, Victoria University

In 1996, Olympic champion [Kathy Watt appealed](#) the then Australian Cycling Federation's decision to exclude her from the pursuit race for the Atlanta Olympics team. It was a very public dispute, which saw Watt successful in her appeal to Court of Arbitration for Sport.

Watt was involved in another non-selection appeal to CAS ahead of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, but [was unsuccessful](#) on that occasion. Brent Dawson, Scott Sunderland, and Stephen Wooldridge also appealed their non-selection for the Sydney Games, but were [unsuccessful](#) too.

Long serving CA official, and immediate past high performance director Kevin Tabotta had his decisions questioned too, some of which included:

- [Mark Renshaw's omission](#) from the 2011 Australian road worlds team, with some suggesting links between the Green Edge professional team and Cycling Australia had influenced selections.
- [Shane Perkins's omission](#) from the national program prior to Rio, and his subsequent take up of [Russian citizenship](#) to continue his riding career.
- The [unsuccessful appeal](#) lodged by one unnamed rider who missed Australian women's road team selection for the Rio 2016 Olympics.

Cycling and politics go together

National team selection is a serious matter for Cycling Australia. For better or worse, [significant government funding](#) is tied to getting those team selections right for the best possible performance outcomes on the world stage – particularly, at the Olympics.

I'm no expert in elite performance measures that determine national selection, but it's pretty clear that it can't be an easy task for the CA high performance unit to make such high stakes decisions that impact individual, team, sport, and national interests all at once.

How do you really balance those things on the numbers alone? Short answer: you can't. And that's where the politics and culture of cycling comes in.

Further change and controversy seems certain for Cycling Australia. Simon Jones has already made an impact since starting in his [new role](#) early this year, axing the popular [national coach Gary Sutton](#) and installing new people.

And then of course came the recent Bergen World Road Championships selection controversy, that saw Hosking and Neylan [winning their appeals](#) and joining the women's team anyway.

Politically, the [back down by CA selectors](#) on Hosking and Neylan last week was surprising.

In the high performance context, you can't please everyone all of the time, and it arguably sets a destabilising precedent to try. Doing so leads to confusion around [selection processes and standards](#), and probably adds to athlete anxiety and uncertainty.

How athletes respond

Of course, we'll never know if the elite road race result would have been any different if Chloe Hosking and Rachel Neylan were left out of the women's team as Simon Jones and Co originally intended.

What we do know is that those riders acquitted themselves well in Bergen, and the [outcome](#) was Australia came away with silver in the women's elite road race event and bronze in the men's. These are results to be proud of, and this should be the focus of any post-Worlds review.

Yet the races are done, but the aftermath continues.

Chloe Hosking took to social media after the race, tweeting that the women's silver medal result wouldn't have been possible without seven riders.

The silver medal winner Katrin Garfoot agreed, and another high profile professional Annette Edmondson also joined in with a similar message.

Garfoot's silver medal was certainly a terrific result for her and the women's team. No argument there. But, the virtual finger waving in the direction of Simon Jones and Cycling Australia after the event may yet prove to be bad politics.

It may have been a better strategy to follow Gary Sutton's lead. After Simon Jones ejected him from the national program in May after 26 years of service, [his statement](#) said:

As I am not on social media, I ask all the cyclists current and retired, staff and family close to me not to post anything that is not positive. I would like us all to keep our standards high for the good of the sport.

The future of Cycling Australia

If history is anything to go by, it seems likely there'll be more difficult decisions to come from CA as its new officials stamp their authority on the sport.

Jones' leadership and CA's direction is already being challenged. And the Australian women's team World Championship road race result arguably proves that he and his selection group might have been "wrong" in their original decision to leave Hosking and Neylan out.

Add to that the manner in which some voices of influence are claiming a team rather than selector's victory for the women's elite road race result in Bergen, and it also looks possible that the push back on CA leadership from some emboldened riders will continue.

The politics of that approach could go either way for Australian cycling. Who wins? Only time will tell.

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