



Cycling Events Gear Up for Future Growth

From statewide stage races to single-day community festivals, cycling events draw millions of spectators and some of the best international athletes to one of the world's most exciting sports

By Zoie Clift



The Amgen Tour of California debuted in February 2006 and has become one of the largest cycling events in the United States. This year's race will feature several return host cities, a time trial and new fan events.

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hile individuals are often given all the credit for winning, cycling is nonetheless a highly strategic team sport. Road cycling, arguably the most popular category of bike race, is run in

various formats, from stage races and criteriums, to circuit races, time trials and road races, with the latter featured at the Olympics.

In the past few years the sport has hit it big outside of Western Europe, with American events such as the Amgen Tour of California, the USA Pro Cycling Challenge and the Larry H. Miller Tour of Utah gaining attention. These races attract the world's top cyclists and have put the United States on the international cycling map. What's

more, these races are free to attend, making pro cycling something of a novel spectator sport.

Coming to California

The longest cycling event in the nation, the Amgen Tour of California, is an eight-day stage race that attracts the world's top pro cycling teams. The event, now in its seventh year, is a Tour de France-style race that highlights the state's diverse terrain as riders travel more than 750 miles through 14 host cities over the course of the tour.

This year's race, scheduled for May 13–20, is on the calendar of the UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale, cycling's international governing body) and 16 elite teams, with contenders from more than 20 countries, have signed on to compete. The tour, which boasts of being the largest annual spectator sporting event in California, offers fans a preview of which athletes and teams are best positioned entering the summer's main events: the Tour de France and the Olympic Summer Games in London.



Doug Penninger/Amgen Tour of California

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USA Pro Cycling Challenge

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- 11 The switch from a February to a May event has allowed the Amgen Tour of California to add mountain-top finishes at several stages.
- 21 The USA Pro Cycling Challenge attracted an estimated 1 million spectators along its Colorado route in 2011, including large crowds at the finish in Denver.
- 31 The Larry H. Miller Tour of Utah takes place annually in August and features six stages that cover 400 miles of the state.

"We couldn't be more thrilled with how the race has grown over the years," said Kristin Bachochin, executive director of the race and senior vice-president of AEG Sports, which owns the event. "When this race was first conceptualized, the ultimate goal was to promote the sport of cycling, especially in America where so much young talent goes unnoticed. We are proud of what our race has done for the sport."

In 2011, Versus (relaunched as the NBC Sports Network this year) broadcast 27 hours of race coverage. The event has also harnessed a partnership with the Amaury Sports Organisation, which owns the Tour de France and brought

its television production team to California last year to shoot the entire race in high definition.

Producing a multi-stage road race requires intense planning. "Essentially, we are coordinating a 1,000-person entourage throughout the state for eight straight days," Bachochin said. "There's simultaneous planning with 14 host cities, not to mention the California Highway Patrol. We have to keep an eye on everything from accommodations to meals to race vehicles to permits and beyond."

This year's race is scheduled to begin in Santa Rosa—hometown of three-time Amgen Tour winner Levi Leipheimer—and end in downtown Los Angeles. Stage 8

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(the final stage) will begin on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills and run through Hollywood and Chinatown, past numerous city landmarks. This year's Amgen Tour has also planned new mountain climbs, a time-trial course and a return to the Pacific coastline.

This year also featured the return of L'Etape du California in April, an amateur ride held in connection with the race. The event, limited to 2,500 people, gave riders the chance to tackle Stage 7's mountaintop finish. Also making a return is the Carmichael Training Systems' Race Experience, which gives a select team of amateur cyclists the opportunity to race every stage of the tour.

So what do race organizers look for in host cities for stage starts and finishes? "First and foremost, we have to make sure that the cities make sense, given the overall route we are planning," Bachochin said. "We also look at factors such as infrastructure and city resources, as our race has quite the entourage between the teams and production crew."

Bakersfield, California's ninth-largest city, is set to host Stage 5 and has hosted stages in the past. "The short-term impacts are obvious," said David Lyman, manager of the Bakersfield Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Hotel rooms are full, restaurants are full, local merchants see an increase in sales and tax revenues also go up. In short, people spend money—and lots of it."

Lyman added that long-term impacts are less tangible but just as important. "First, visitors, tour officials and cyclists return home and have positive things to say about their stay in Bakersfield," he said. "Second, the international media exposure is priceless. Hosting this year's individual time trial means that, for an entire day, the Amgen Tour of California will be in Bakersfield."

An Impressive Debut

Last year, the USA Pro Cycling Challenge debuted in Colorado and garnered significant network television coverage and fan attendance, as it was the first American race to feature the top three finishers in that year's Tour de France. As a result of its success, the 2012 edition of the

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Stephanie Williams

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Matt Moses/USA Cycling

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- 11 *The Nature Valley Bicycle Festival in Minnesota includes several events that allow children to participate.*
- 21 *Jeremy Powers is the elite men's national champion in cyclocross, one of five disciplines overseen by USA Cycling.*

520-mile, week-long stage race, which plans to return to 12 host cities from August 20-26, has been upgraded to a 2.HC ranking—a UCI status shared by the Amgen Tour of California that indicates the event is at the highest registration level next to the World Tour that includes the Tour de France.

Though 2012's television details have not been announced, the 2011 race received 25 hours of national coverage on Versus and NBC, which aired live the final stage in Denver.

When Shawn Hunter took over the race before last year's contest, one of the first things he did as CEO and co-chairman was meet with executives at NBC. "We tried to

share the vision for what we wanted to do in Colorado and were able to pretty quickly strike a one-year deal," said Hunter, who has plenty of work experience with major sports entities having served as an executive for the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League and Major League Soccer and helping to launch the Amgen Tour of California. Hunter said the race is now in conversations for a multi-year relationship with the NBC Sports Group.

According to organizer Medalist Sports, the race's economic impact was near \$83.5 million. More than \$67 million of that was generated as direct spending by spectators.



Like the Amgen Tour of California, planners have also decided to incorporate the Carmichael Training Systems' Race Experience into their race as a way to get more people involved. "So as our race grows in relevance and hopefully stature, we wanted this training system as part of our race," Hunter said.

The Tour of Utah Grows

As one of the top multi-day road races in North America, the Larry H. Miller Tour of Utah was recently added to the UCI calendar. The event, scheduled to run August 7–12 this year, also attracts the world's top pro teams and riders, many of whom are expected to come directly from the Tour de France and the Olympics.

"There is a lot of traction here in terms of outdoor recreation, in particular with the cycling community," said Jeff Robbins, president and CEO of the Utah Sports Commission. "Most of the race is occurring in what we call the Wasatch Front, which is the Ogden, Salt Lake, Provo and Park City area. But I think as it continues to grow, it has the potential to become a statewide race."

The Tour of Utah is scheduled to start in Ogden and wrap up six stages and more than 400 miles later in Park City. "We like to try to start and finish in communities where there is a good population," said Steve Miller, president of the Utah Cycling Partnership, which owns the Tour of Utah. "Because spectators are part of what makes the event come alive."

Miller said that organizers try to keep the stage cities within 90 minutes of each other because once a stage is over, they don't want participants, teams and the team management to spend hours on the road traveling to the next start site. Organizers are also trying to keep the race in communities longer. "Our goal is to have a positive economic impact on the communities the race visits. So by staying there a bit longer, we are hoping to benefit and reward them for hosting the Tour of Utah," Miller said. The race is nationally televised on the Fox Sports Network and will air live this year for the first time.

Increasing the Fan Base

Along with the three powerhouses—the Amgen Tour of California, the USA Pro Cycling Challenge and the Larry H. Miller Tour of Utah—many successful cycling races have taken root across the nation.

April marked the 35th year of the Joe Martin Stage Race in Fayetteville, Arkansas, an example of a smaller city that has done well with a cycling race. More than 700 athletes participate in this event, which is listed on the national race calendar of USA Cycling, the sport's national governing body.

The Exergy Tour is slated to debut May 24–28. This professional women's stage race in Idaho is being billed as a major lead-up event prior to the Summer Olympics. A field of some of the world's top female riders, such as

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2008 Olympic gold medalist Kristin Armstrong, have signed up for the five-day, 200-plus-mile event, which is the only scheduled UCI 2.1 race for women on the continent this year.

Elite pro cyclists from 30 countries are set to descend on Philadelphia on June 3 for the 28th TD Bank Philadelphia International Cycling Championship. At 156 miles, it is known as the longest single-day race in America. The event includes a men's and women's race called the Liberty Classic, which Lance Armstrong won in 1993 at the beginning of his professional career.

Also in June is the Nature Valley Bicycle Festival in Minnesota. This 10-day celebration of bicycling includes amateur and professional racing—including a pro stage race scheduled to head through seven cities June 13–17—and community events. “Our goal is to grow the fan base for cycling,” said festival director David LaPorte. There are 60 million people who identify themselves as cyclists in the United States, but only a tiny fraction of them are cycling fans, he said. “They see cycling as something they do, not something that they watch,” he said. “Our goal is to convert them into bicycle racing fans.”

Any Time, Anywhere

In 2011, USA Cycling experienced its 10th consecutive year of membership growth. In 2010, membership reached 69,771, a 5.9 percent increase over 2009. The increase

wasn't quite as substantial between 2010 and 2011—less than 2 percent—but in that time it “eclipsed the 70,000 mark in number of licensees,” said Micah Rice, USA Cycling's managing director of national events.

Rice said nearly any town can host a race, and many cities and states have helped with different kinds of grants to help offset costs. “Our relationship is always first and foremost with the convention and visitors bureau or sports commission, who can pave the way with permits, police, departments of transportation, etc.,” he said.

USA Cycling organizes a total of 17 championships for the five disciplines of cycling in the United States—road, mountain bike, track, cyclocross and BMX. More than 3,000 events were sanctioned last year by the organization including the Amgen Tour of California and the USA Pro Cycling Challenge.

The Road Ahead

The road ahead seems primed to give the sport more exposure. Richmond, Virginia, was recently chosen to host the 2015 World Road Cycling Championships—the first time the event will have been held in the United States since 1986. It will serve as preparation for those aiming for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. With stage races thriving across the West and cycling events of all disciplines being staged nationwide, American cycling fans have reason to look toward a positive future for the sport. ■



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