



Cycle sport promotes cycling?

Racing cycling can be great to watch, but does it promote everyday cycling and get bums on bikes? Dave Horton and Matt Wilson disagree

Dave Horton



YES

Dave Horton is a sociologist at Lancaster University and edited the study 'Cycling and society'

(Main photo and far right) Big crowds in London saw the Tour de France prologue there in 2007

The Olympics and the Tour de France have made household names of professional British cyclists such as Chris Hoy, Victoria Pendleton, Nicole Cooke, Mark Cavendish and Bradley Wiggins. These elite racers who earn a living competing on ultra-expensive bikes seem to occupy a different world from us mere mortals making our ordinary journeys on ordinary bikes. But is there a connection? Does cycle sport promote ordinary cycling?

I think so. As Wimbledon enthuses people to play tennis, as the London Marathon encourages people to run, so cycle sport inspires people to cycle. People who are paid to promote cycling concentrate mainly on short urban utility journeys. For them, cycling's a simple and straightforward means of getting from A to B, and it replaces car journeys in the process. It's good for you, it's good for the economy, and it helps you do your bit to save the planet. Of course they're right, but does this view of cycling inspire? I don't think so.

Most of us already know that we cycle for much more than 'good reasons to cycle'. We cycle because to ride is to affirm life. Paid promoters of cycling cannot communicate this, but the stars of cycle sport can. Cycle sport doesn't issue injunctions to cycle – it provides us instead with dramas full of passion and heroism, dramas in which cycling takes centre stage. Cycle sport demonstrates that cycling is often about much, much more than getting from A to B.

Many people who pedal may be happily oblivious to the world of cycling superstars. That's fine. But those superstars also help to sustain and animate a massive – and growing – interest in cycling. Cycle sport is not a

trivial aspect of British cycling. Out on the lanes on a weekend, or a summer's evening, just see what's going on: a renaissance of road cycling. Some of these people are training for races, but most people are doing it simply for the love of it. And every time Pendleton pockets another medal or Cavendish bags another stage win, if they're at all like me, they'll feel affirmed in doing what they're doing, riding a bike. I'd bet a good chunk of these cyclists ride to work too.

It's easy to be cynical about the significance of cycle sport in promoting cycling without questioning the effectiveness of other ways of more established methods. Yet the extent to which the two dominant methods of cycling promotion today – providing infrastructure and cycle training – actually work is unclear. Of course, some cycling infrastructure is really good and makes a difference, but some seems designed to put people off cycling. Nor does the amount of time, energy and money spent teaching primary school children to cycle necessarily translate effectively into cycling among secondary school children. It's easy to teach young children how to cycle; it's harder to keep them cycling.

People need positive role models as much as they need safe routes and on-road cycle training. By giving us heroes, racing increases people's appetite for cycling.

I'd suggest that cycle sport is doing as much – if not more – to promote cycling in Britain than Cycling England, the body funded by the Department for Transport to get more people cycling, more safely, more often. That's not to knock Cycling England; it's to suggest that the successes of Britain's cyclists really do boost cycling. I'd bet that every win for Mark Cavendish sees a whole new crop of people eager to hop onto bikes, and so is another win for everyday cycling.



Matt Wilson

When people think about making journeys, their thinking is influenced by wider cultural attitudes. Attitudes to cycling in Holland, for example, are very different from those in Britain. The way British society thinks about the bike is generally negative; cyclists are not normally treated with the same respect as car drivers. This isn't a conscious thing, but the deep-rooted view of bicycles is that they are an obstacle to the efficient comings and goings of the car.

This view is built up from a number of different cultural ideas about bikes: they are for children; they are for people who can't afford cars; they go too slowly, etc. One of those ideas is that cycling is a wonderful form of exercise, not a practical form of utility transport; that bikes are good for your health, but they don't have the same right to the road as cars do. Of course, thinking about something as a sport doesn't automatically mean that we don't take it seriously, but if the general cultural view is already one that denies the legitimacy of bikes as road vehicles, then the danger is that cycle sport simply strengthens this position. This is all very subtle; just as we stereotype people without realising it, so we stereotype modes of transport.

And, if there are some people who are inspired by cycle sport, what will their image of cyclists be? Maybe some people will be more accepting of the high-speed, hi-viz persona, but couldn't this hurt the image of the everyday, humble, utility cyclist? At an inquest into the death of a cyclist killed by a car recently, the coroner allowed the driver to argue that the woman killed 'wasn't a "proper" cyclist'; the fact that she wasn't wearing lycra and a helmet somehow made the car driver's actions more acceptable because of the powerful but unarticulated

view that the cyclist shouldn't have been there in the first place. Her status as a road user was already diminished as a cyclist, but it was weakened still further by being juxtaposed with the image of the 'acceptable cyclist'.

And a recent court ruling even declared that cyclists who are injured when not wearing a helmet, even when the accident is not their fault, 'only [have themselves] to thank for the consequences'. This ruling has been widely criticised: Bernard Jenkin, MP said: 'The judge is clearly not a cyclist and he's exhibiting all the prejudices of someone who does not regularly use a bicycle.'

The question here is: what does professional cycling do to alter these sorts of prejudice? My fear is that it in fact strengthens them.

Finally, we need to ask what is likely to encourage people to get on their bikes. What message do arduous cycle races send to people who are already convinced cycling is too much work? Maybe some people, eager for their daily adrenalin rush, may decide cycling to work is a good way to get it; but do these people make up anything like the majority of people we want to encourage to cycle? Surely we want to normalise cycling, to demonstrate it is not only safer, but also easier than most people think. We need positive images of normal, utility cycling; not stereotypes about cyclists as sports stars.

Over the last half century, the cyclist has been literally and metaphorically pushed into the gutter. Cycle racing simply reinforces many of the negative views of the bike that have made cycling an increasingly marginalised activity. And now a new stereotype – the 'proper' cyclist – threatens to help push the daily commuter still further down the hierarchy of the road. If this sort of prejudice can be enshrined in law, just think what this means for the way car drivers react to cyclists on a daily basis.



NO

Matt Wilson is a cycling instructor and campaigner, and a member of Bicycology

(Above, left and centre) The Cross Country Mountain Bike UCI World Cup at Dalby Forest, North Yorkshire, in 2010

What do you think? Write to Letters and/or visit the CTC Forum: www.ctc.org.uk/forum