Culture

Tour de France winner's Tadej Pogačar, center, and his UAE Team Emirates were awarded the best team after the 21st stage of the Tour de France cycling race, an individual time trial over 33.7 kilometers (20.9 miles) with start in Monaco and finish in Nice, France, July 21, 2024. (AP/Daniel Cole)

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On Sunday, July 21, the Tour de France celebrated the winners of the most prestigious competition in professional cycling. It was, as always, a grueling three weeks for the riders. Each day brought its own challenges: intense mountain summits, quick group sprints to win the day, crashes, unpredictable weather and illness.

As the sun began to set in Nice, Tadej Pogačar stood atop the podium with the fastest cumulative time, beating his rivals Jonas Vingegaard and Remco Evenepoel to win the yellow jersey. History was made as Biniam Girmay became the first Black African racer to win the green jersey by securing the most sprinting points throughout the 3 weeks. Richard Carapaz also claimed a spot in the history books by becoming the first Ecuadorian rider to win the King of the Mountains competition. He celebrated his high total of mountain summit points in the traditional white and red polka dot jersey. A contented Mark Cavendish looked on, knowing he had secured the record number of stage wins — 35 — when he won the sprint on day five.

My family and I watched the podium ceremonies, grateful for 21 days of engaging story lines, perseverance and teamwork. These names and awards have become common parts of conversation in our house over the past four years.

In the fall of 2020, between baby sleep math and doom scrolling mask mandate fights, my husband and I found a mental escape in professional cycling. The Tour de France had orchestrated a way to host their event with as little COVID-19 risk as possible, delaying it from July to September, and we took the spare time provided by lockdowns to dive deep into the strategy of the sport.

Growing up playing softball, I was used to a traditional team sport equation: collective effort, with occasional individual distinction, led to collective success. This felt antithetical to American individualism and seemed to align with the principle of the common good. Professional cycling confused me; it's called a team sport, but the awards are given to individuals.

Prior to 2020, as a casual fan, I didn’t quite understand. Sure, you wear the same colors and have the same coach as your teammates; but during the competitions,

are you really working together?

The answer, I found, is absolutely yes.

Each team has a leader that is pursuing some kind of goal based on the leader's strengths. Some riders are incredible climbers, some are fast sprinters and others can do a little bit of everything. Based on the leader's strengths, the team may pursue winning the general classification, winning as many sprint stages as possible or securing the King/Queen of the Mountains jersey. The rest of the team is built around that objective.

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For example, a top helper, or domestique, has the purpose of accompanying their leader to the summit of mountains: they set the pace, help chase attacks from competitors and are even willing to give up their bike if the leader has a mechanical problem. Domsquites are without a doubt some of the best cyclists in the world, yet they are willing to give up the podium to set their leader up for success.

Watching teammates sacrifice notoriety and podiums of their own in order to help their leader can be both inspiring and infuriating. I tend to want recognition for all teammates, and not just in "thank you" interviews from the leader. It takes a whole team to achieve greatness in cycling, but why are the titles primarily individual ones? Shouldn't the helpers get the awards, too?

In 2020, when I fell in love with professional cycling, public conversations about the common good were more, well, common. Could we not — would we not?! — all wear a mask, distance and isolate to protect not only ourselves, but those with more immune fragility? It seemed straightforward to me: make a small sacrifice that serves those with a greater need, while still meeting my own. And that's when it clicked. Professional cycling operates within the principle of the common good — maybe even more directly than a traditional team sport.

Tadej Pogačar and his team in front of the peloton during the Simacourbe climb of Tour de France 2024, stage 13 (Wikimedia Commons/Hugo LUC)

In cycling competitions, the entire team benefits when the leader does the best that they can. This might mean cash prizes, better sponsorship and gear, glory and respect from opponents. When each person on the team knows their role, the supporting athletes sacrifice for the leader while being cared for by their leader and team. Their own needs are met through access to the same sports medicine, coaches and fan base. Some riders might even be better suited for the helper role, not desiring the pressure that comes with being in the spotlight.

I have grown to enjoy cheering on the domesquites in their unique role as much as I love watching the leaders. While to the casual viewer they may be overlooked, the cycling community praises their efforts and sacrifices.

This year, Matteo Jorgenson, a member of the United States' Olympic team, was often the last teammate accompanying Vingegaard on the mountain climbs. With Vingegaard coming back from a serious crash in early April to defend his Tour de

France title from 2023, Jorgenson’s role was even more important than usual. With the support of the team and the sacrifices of Jorgenson, Vingegaard was able to secure second place this year. This season, their team’s story demonstrated resilience, commitment to a goal, community and gratitude — all important components of living out the common good.

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