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CYCLOCROSS

Magazine

**IS THERE
MONEY IN
'CROSS?**

TIM JOHNSON
FROM PUNK TO ICON

**CUSTOM-BUILT
DREAMS:**
FIVE FRAMEBUILDERS
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ISSUE 17





IS THERE MONEY



IN 'CROSS?



by Chris Bagg



Dylan McNicholas bought his first road bike less than four years ago after a few of his motocrossing friends invited him for a ride. “We rode 40 miles,” McNicholas says. “That seemed monumental to me. A month later, all my buddies quit. I bought a bike, did some races, won all of them.”

Road cycling, sometimes a gateway drug to the other disciplines, offered McNicholas some early success, and one of his training partners led him down another path to 'cross. “It’s just like motocross,” he told me, so I bought one of his old frames and put together a piece-of-shit bike.”

This past January, the Exeter, N.H., native rode a bike no one could describe as a piece of shit to an age-group national championship, following the trick up with an eighth-place finish in the elite race the next day and losing out to a short list of domestic cyclocross royalty: Jeremy Powers, Ryan Trebon, Jonathan Page, Zach McDonald, Tim Johnson, Chris Jones and Jamey Driscoll.

“Royalty” is an apt term as that gap between seventh and eighth divides the top tier from the second tier of professional cyclocross racers, a differentiation that goes beyond results and visibility to economics. Last year, McNicholas pocketed (before taxes) about “seven or eight thousand dollars in prize money.” He adds, “I wasn’t paid to race my bike. I was able to sell some equipment too, which was great, and I do some part-time work in landscape construction.”

The dirt-poor professional bike racer, of course, is no new story. Each of the seven riders finishing ahead of McNicholas weathered his own salad days: sleeping on friends’ couches, driving cars valued at a fraction of his bikes’ worth, living off of free sports nutrition products. Their perseverance (coupled with skill, talent and luck) eventually landed them on teams willing to pay them to ride their bikes, and they now represent the exception in professional bike racing: making a living, not just a lifestyle.

But what is “a living” when you’re used to sleeping in your car and eating whatever you

A HUNGER TO MAKE IT pushes most Elite racers to scrape together a living and find dollars wherever they can. Golden Gate Park Bay Area Super Prestige. (Chris Nguyen)



can get your hands on? I set out to discover the exact amount “a living” means to each of these top professionals in the hopes of emboldening riders that will come after them.

Despite the fact that a professional sports career is improbable for many, witness the transformative power (for better or for worse) of football, baseball and basketball upon youth participants in America. The promise, however elusive, of making a living playing the game one loves has given those three sports a deep talent base from which to draw, in turn raising the level of their competition and market appeal.

Cyclocross in America has come far in the last two decades, to be sure, to the point that a sincere fanbase clamors for the sport's inclusion in the Olympics and the chatter among promoters and racers revolves around how to get competitions aired on mainstream television. The present reality, though, is that even cyclocross royalty live a pretty middle-class existence, galaxies away from the daydream-inspiring lives of even the most modest NBA players.

It's so middle-class, in fact, that contrasting cyclocrossers' pay with other professional athletes' borders on specious. Compare the probable salaries of those seven riders mentioned previously with a moderately successful professional in any other line of work and the answer is obvious: The top racers in cyclocross work at a discount. Toss in the fact that they are compensated as independent contractors, pay self-employment tax and have to arrange for their own health care, and you're presented with a pretty bleak picture as far as take-home dollars are concerned.

“None of us are being forced to do this, though,” Jeremy Powers pointed out when I talked to him on the phone. “We could all go and do something else other than racing our bikes. But it's awesome to be able to do this, to ride bikes for a living, be an athlete and always try to get better.”



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Almost every rider I spoke to voiced a similar sentiment: Just being able to follow the dream of racing professionally carries a kind of compensation alone, one that makes their lower relative salaries palatable. Many riders would race for just expenses and equipment,

I discovered, revealing a love for the game not seen for decades in major American sports, where salary competition and market economics have turned athlete compensation into an industry in itself.

Does that love for the game and willingness to accept lower relative pay help cyclocross continue to grow and develop, though? Powers told me, “I believe it's good for people to know where the sport is in the United States and what sponsors are putting in and getting out of it. With arguably more exposure in this growing segment of cycling, you can have a really good investment for a lower cost.”

Tim Johnson, speaking to our online editor Molly Hurford, espoused a similar opinion, discussing younger riders like Powers and Jamey Driscoll: “You want to tell people, ‘You're good at 'cross and should apply your talent to that.’ But secondary is, ‘Can you make a living at it?’ So if they know what's going on, there's going to be more people trying to make it in 'cross, because that's something guys should do.”

Two of our biggest stars in 'cross feel that some degree of transparency can help the sport reach the next level, whether that is the Olympics, television coverage, greater participation at the amateur level or higher pay for themselves and their colleagues. That being said, not one of the riders I spoke with was willing to tell me what he or she made last year.

Jeremy Powers and Ryan Trebon signed their first professional cycling contracts in 2004 for the same amount of money—\$10,000 in expenses—to race in two disciplines: cyclocross and road cycling (Powers) and 'cross and mountain biking (Trebon).

“I was living off of \$800 a month,” Trebon told me at a coffee shop in his hometown of Bend, Ore. “Four guys in one house, only paying \$250 in rent. So yeah, there wasn't a lot of money, but there wasn't a lot of

expense either.” Trebon stayed with Kona for the next seven seasons, making \$25,000 a year in both 2005 and 2006 before getting a raise to \$36,000 in 2007. Prize money and bonuses swelled those numbers, but taxes and health care deflated them.



THE TOP THREE

Powers paints a similar picture, saying his contracts went up every year. “But even when you'd get paid more, you'd always be thinking, ‘I'm making \$20,000 a year now—what if I was making 25?’ And then the pattern repeated at 25, but with 30 being the new goal. You'd imagine all this stuff: being able to shop, eat real food, start projects.”

For Powers, the big change came in 2007, when Stu Thorne—the manager of the powerful Cannondale p/b Cyclocrossworld.com team—signed him. “I thought I could really make a living in the sport after that,” Powers says. And that's what he's gone on to do, buying a house in 2009 on the strength of his earning potential and savings, even though he arrived to buy the house in a 1990 Chevy Caprice: “It was awesome. Three in the back and three in the front. It was a party everywhere we went.” He now owns a couple of cars. “It's nothing crazy or elaborate, though,” he says. “It's a solid living.”

Trebon estimates he was making \$48,000 a year from Kona by the time he left his long-term team at the end of 2010, but the company



earners in cyclocross (based on estimations from interviews), fight for the holeshot at the 2010 National Championships. (Yee)

had changed pay structures to include travel expenses in his salary, which made the increase more of a horizontal move than a vertical one. Prize money and bonuses probably pushed that number to around \$65,000, which put Trebon in the middle class of American working society (or lower, actually, when you factor in taxes and health care expenses). Figuring they could do better, Trebon and longtime friend and mechanic Dusty LaBarr set out to form their own team, LTS/Felt, for the 2011–2012 season. “The marketing guy at Kona just didn’t seem to get racing,” Trebon recalls. “Dusty and I thought we could do a better job.”

The next 14 months went very well for Trebon as his newfound freedom seemed to spark a change in the sometimes-gloomy rider. He posed the only real threat to Jeremy Powers’ ascendance in American cyclocross, pushing the Rapha-Focus rider to the limit in several races and beating him in several more. At the finish in Madison at the 2012 National Championships, Trebon was unreserved in his praise of Powers and proud of his own second-place finish, saying, “I’m really happy with second place

today, man. This was really hard.”

Behind the scenes, Trebon and LaBarr worked several different jobs to keep the new team afloat. “We didn’t pay ourselves for 14 months because we’d promised sponsors we’d be at certain races, and we didn’t want to go back on those promises if I got injured or something. So we waited until January and then split what was left over. We each took home \$17,000.” (For a single-person household, \$17,000 is about \$6,000 over the U.S. Census Bureau’s poverty threshold figure for 2011.)

Despite his success on the ’cross course, Trebon wasn’t making any money, and as many Americans have had to do in the current economic climate, he’s had to make difficult decisions. “I sold my house last year because it got to the point where I wasn’t making any money and trying to pay my mortgage was eating up what little savings I had (and I needed to be able to eat and pay for health insurance and nonsense like that). So I had to make the decision to just take the loss and sell the house if I wanted to be able to continue

racing. So I sold and rented a place that was half the price for rent. It was just another of life’s lessons learned the hard way.”

Powers echoes Trebon’s message, saying that “coming up as a bike racer was probably the best thing for me financially.” Powers, really the face of American cyclocross with the success of his *Behind the Barriers* series, plays the cutup to Trebon’s straight man, laughing and singing his way through the domestic cyclocross calendar. For years, his race results betrayed a streakiness that seemed to fit with that public persona: the off-the-wall, record-spinning, techno-singing Powers we’ve come to know from *BiB*. But balancing that persona is a canny businessman whose race results have bloomed in accordance with his matured focus on the sport. “I grew up becoming a business,” Powers avers. “*Behind the Barriers*, J-Pow Racing, the JAM fund—you grow up by wearing a lot of hats. I tend to max myself out, though. Even if I make a lot of money, I always want to start more projects. I get stretched out like a gummy bear, but that’s what I’m like—at least I know that. What I want to do is start awesome projects for friends and racers.”

Powers couldn’t tell me what he’s making under Rapha-Focus, but he bought a house with his own money in 2009 after three seasons with Cannondale p/b Cyclocrossworld.com. He sends “about 45%” of his money to the government after factoring in self-employment tax for the feds and state. Crunching some very rough numbers and making some estimates leads me to guess that he made between \$90,000 and \$170,000 in 2011—impressive gross numbers for an American bike racer focusing primarily on cyclocross, yes, but still firmly middle-class after taxes, not to mention the eight years of constant, underpaid labor to reach that point.

Underpaid is better than zero pay, of course, and nowhere is there a more glaring example of compensation inequality than between men and women in professional cycling. “Don’t get me started on it,” Mark Legg-Compton, husband of eight-time cyclocross national champion Katie Compton, told me via email. Compton, despite being the most decorated American off-road racer (male or female) of her generation, has had to scrounge for sponsors regularly during her career. Mark and Katie employ an agent to assist with representation because selling Katie is a full-time job—even though her house is full of world cup trophies. Last year Katie signed with the Rabobank-Giant Off-Road Team, and the couple figured their troubles were over, only to discover that the team wanted Katie to focus on mountain biking and that cyclocross expenses weren’t covered. The greatest unfairness, of course, is that if Katie were a



CHASING THE DOLLARS IN CYCLOCROSS (Jeffery Rosenhall)

man racing in Europe, her results would have her set for life.

Alison Dunlap, who won six national cyclocross titles, a mountain bike cross-country world championship and placed in the top 10 at three cyclocross world championships, told me, "I honestly don't think women will ever make the same money as men in 'cross or any discipline in cycling. There are more men racing 'cross, their fields are bigger, their races are longer and the talent pool is much deeper."

Dunlap had the good fortune, though, of riding the cresting wave of mountain biking enthusiasm that was American MTB in the 1990s. She won many races on the cyclocross circuit during that time, but like Todd Wells, who also raced for GT, she rode for a sponsor that understood the value of racing in two disciplines rather than just one. In 1997, Dunlap's first contract at GT paid her

\$30,000 to race 'cross and mountain. During 1998–2000, she was paid \$90,000 a year, and in 2001 (her world championship year), she signed a contract for \$164,000, a figure she attended with several exclamation points in an email. In 2002, she moved over to the Luna Pro Team for an undisclosed amount, but told me she was paid \$50,000 in 2005, when she scaled her racing back to domestic races only. In 2009, during her one-year comeback to cyclocross, she was paid \$30,000, but not just to race—her responsibilities included running clinics and maintaining the team's website.

Dunlap's prodigious salaries (the 2002 Luna salary, although undisclosed, was for six figures) are the exception rather than the rule. Compton, who picked up where Dunlap left off, has never seen the same kind of money, and the women just a few steps below Compton on podia across the country see far

less than she does.

Nicole Duke, whose story seems prefabricated for successful marketing, raced for nothing beyond support last year before being cut from the Cannondale p/b Cyclocrossworld.com team after a third place at Nationals and a 16th-place finish at Worlds. Duke, a former professional downhill mountain biker, owns her own hairdressing business, is a mother of two and looks like Vivien Leigh. She is classically beautiful, a fact completely irrelevant to her racing but probably very relevant to anyone responsible for marketing her to the cycling community. Couple those facts with a sparkling set of palmarès in 2011, and Duke's dismissal from CCW seems inexplicable.

"I believed I proved to be a worthy rider/ambassador and asked for a salary for 2012," Duke says. "I got let go. I feel that by being a



female rider and brand ambassador I would be doing future athletes a disservice by not asking for a salary. We all need to realize that we are setting a precedent for others coming up in the sport.”

On the other side is Sue Butler, a well-known Portland-based international racer with results similar to Duke’s. Struggling for support and hoping simply to keep racing, Butler says, “I only really want support. My year with Hudz-Subaru was great. I was in tears once before Vegas, racing without support. It’s that stress that takes away from your racing.” Butler has signed a contract once, with Hudz-Subaru in 2010, for \$3,500 (\$1,300 of which she is still owed).

Given these two women’s positions, it’s easy to see the double bind in which they find themselves. Someone needs to establish a precedent for women making a salary in the sport so others can point to that fact and aspire to it. On the other hand, taking that stand may risk losing even the basic support that has given female racers the chance to excel in the first place. It’s a Catch-22 familiar to many niche sport athletes: *To get support, I need results, but to get results, I need some support.*

If you follow that support in domestic cyclocross, most roads eventually lead to Stu Thorne, owner of Cyclocrossworld.com and director of the ubiquitous (at least in this article) Cannondale p/b Cyclocrossworld.com team. He has shepherded household ’cross names such as Tim Johnson, Jeremy Powers, Jamey Driscoll and Kaitlin Antonneau from modest beginnings to huge successes. He has made canny additions to his team when necessary, bringing the great Christian Heule to America last year and then signing Ryan Trebon to his new contract. He is a kingmaker, and his business has profited from his ability to spot and nurture talent. “I do it because I like to do it, though—not only because I see a return on my investment,” he told me over the phone. On the subject of Nicole Duke’s dismissal, he said, “It was hard to run a team with five riders. We don’t have a lot of cash, and adding one more paid rider is a pretty big undertaking. I had to cut back, and Nicole was the lowest on the totem pole.”

The unfortunate reality of cyclocross at the moment is that it is still male-dominated, and Thorne’s decision to include two women (Duke and Antonneau) on the team in 2011 should be applauded. Despite understanding firsthand the economics of rider salaries, he went ahead and supported Duke and Antonneau to their best seasons to date. Antonneau, who rode to

a second place at Nationals and a 10th-place finish at the Namur World Cup last year, remains with the team in 2012. Antonneau is still young (she’s in college), has dominated the youth divisions of the sport and appears poised to take over from Katie Compton as queen of American ’cross when Compton retires.

Thorne declined to comment on rider salaries, saying that discussing pay was similar to comparing pay in an office environment, where the inability to compare jobs exactly—coupled with human traits like jealousy and arrogance—can create uncomfortable situations.

He’s right. A study conducted by UC Berkeley and Princeton University in 2010 suggested that if all of our salaries were made public tomorrow, half of us would be miserable and the other half would find no extra satisfaction. The study used the 2008 passage of a right-to-know act in the University of California system (of which, it

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should be noted, UC Berkeley is a glittering member), which publicized employee salaries on a website. Authors of the study contacted a random set of employees in the system, informed them of the website and then followed up with those employees about their use of the website and how their job satisfaction had been affected by it. Use of the site increased dramatically, and workers who discovered themselves below the median salary in their departments reported dissatisfaction with their job and an increased likelihood of looking for a new one. For workers above the median salary, there was no meaningful change in job satisfaction.

So employers have much to lose by publishing salaries: underpaid (i.e., inexpensive, like Nicole Duke) workers may leave, while costly ones are not made more loyal. From a business standpoint, I can understand Thorne’s decision to stay quiet. But it’s a decision that primarily benefits the employer since secrecy discourages the growth and fairness of salaries.

When I asked Todd Wells, the great American mountain biker and cyclocross racer, why I couldn’t get any current, specific

numbers from the people I interviewed, he neatly summarized, “The more open things are, the more money people want.” (Wells has a non-disclosure clause in his contract with Specialized, as do many of the riders with whom I spoke.) Wells, like Alison Dunlap, has always raced for teams that have supported him for mountain biking *and* for cyclocross, and like Dunlap, Wells strikes me as the most financially successful racer of the bunch. His long-term relationships with Hyundai-Mongoose, GT and Specialized put him in a different sphere of support and compensation. Although he wouldn’t discuss numbers, he estimated that the line item in the Specialized budget that reads “Todd Wells—race support” would be a generous six figures. (He then went on to explain that his bikes alone would bring the support package close to \$100,000, an easy computation for anyone in cycling these days).

His contract, like many, includes bonuses for performance, and he has hit a few of his annual bonus caps (probably for the years that included national titles in cyclocross, cross-country mountain biking or short track), running his take-home pay even higher. Prize money, crucial to riders like Dylan McNicholas, is something Wells “doesn’t rely upon.” When I asked him if he does anything else to support himself, he said, easily and without arrogance, “No, just racing.” He agreed that he’s benefitted, like Dunlap, from the explosion of mountain biking’s popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but he

has remained successful despite the contraction in mountain bike racing after Lance Armstrong brought road cycling to the masses. “Road has taken over from mountain now, even though the mountain bike industry is still healthy—we still sell a lot of bikes. I didn’t suffer from it, but I saw a lot of racers not making any money.” I asked him if he thought cyclocross might experience the same contraction after its oft-expressed “explosion” over the past decade. He thought not, because cyclocross bikes are primarily used for racing, whereas many mountain bikes never wear a number plate.

Wells did offer, at the close of our interview, an unsolicited warning about salaries in bicycle racing in general: “Julien Absalon’s salary has been reported to be around 500,000 euros. That’s not the five million Alberto Contador reportedly got, but Absalon doesn’t have to do drugs or compete with people who are doing drugs. That’s why I think mountain biking is attractive, because of the pure aspect to it. The top guys make enough money to not have to cheat.”

So how does Dylan McNicholas become Todd



Wells or Jeremy Powers and be able to put aside his part-time landscape construction work? Tim Johnson would say, "I think you need to come up with a combination of different features that appeal to sponsors. You need to be able to get the results, which gets you out in front of people, in stories, photos, whatever. You also need to learn how it works, and the way that it works is that you piece together support through different aspects of the industry, and it's something that takes a while to learn the ins and outs [of]. But it's a basic thing. You're selling yourself as a promotional vehicle for sponsors that want to be involved. It's really sponsorship 101, but it's tough because there's no book on how to be a pro racer. There's plenty of books on how to be the fittest, be the strongest, but there's no book about how to find and keep a sponsor. Those are all learned experiences."

Johnson makes a strong point in his observation that riders are selling themselves as promotional vehicles for a saleable product. It's an incredibly tenuous proposition, one that lives or dies on the vague winds of the bicycle industry. Maybe your results aren't as good as they were last year, maybe you got injured,

maybe the sponsor just decided to leave the sport although they liked you just fine, maybe you said just one wrong thing to the wrong person. All of the successful riders with whom I spoke have one shared quality: consistency. Johnson, Compton, Powers, Dunlap, Trebon and Wells have all remained consistently successful over many years despite heavy competition, meager support during their hungry years and the vicissitudes of the cycling industry. They are to be admired for their success in an incredibly difficult endeavor.

But an uneasiness remains. Now that Trebon races for Cannondale p/b Cyclocrossworld.com, six out of the top seven riders at 2012 Nationals race for just two teams: CCW and Rapha-Focus. Jonathan Page is the odd man out, but since he makes his career in Europe, he doesn't really apply. With the two most powerful and best-funded teams in America employing the top talent in the sport, where is there a spot for an up-and-coming racer to target? What's to prevent those two teams from keeping salaries depressed—a real possibility in any stratified economy? And how would that up-and-comer know that there was even money to be made out there? The

lure of real money for racing on the road has drawn away true cyclocross talents such as Danny Summerhill and Jesse Anthony, riders who surveyed the landscape, decided a better living was available elsewhere and went there.

Everyone in the sport talks about cyclocross making the next leap: to television, to the Olympics. To make that leap, undeniably an economic one, riders cannot simply race because they love the sport. Other sports have gone through this transformation—the shift away from amateurism to professionalism—and like anything, there are positives and negatives to such a shift.

To the kid bouncing a basketball somewhere right now, though, who's shooting an extra thousand free throws before he has to go in for dinner, the goal is clear despite the long odds. For the junior dominating his local racing scene, beating the regional elites and causing ripples in this sport's small media pool, there has to be a similar carrot, something to dangle from his handlebars to keep him in the backyard before dinner, practicing turns on self-made corners, testing the balance of momentum and gravity. ▢

Mo Bruno Roy

All the grit she can muster.
All the pain she can endure.
How do you help her win
when she's already a winner?

