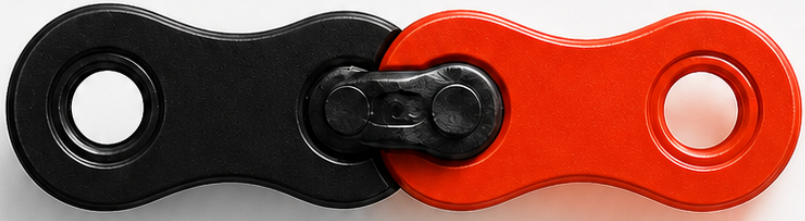
EDIÇÕES ESGOTADAS

ALLIES UNTIL THE NEXT BEND



WHAT CYCLING TEACHES US
ABOUT LEADERSHIP, STRATEGY
AND TEAM PERFORMANCE

RUI GOMES

Allies Until the Next Bend

Allies Until the Next Bend

What cycling teaches us about leadership, strategy and team performance

RUI GOMES

Edições Esgotadas

“As long as I breathe, I attack.”

BERNARD HINAULT

A tightly packed peloton, seen from the roadside, is an almost beautiful thing: dozens of cyclists moving as if they were a single mass, opening and closing gaps, changing shape, adjusting speed and line. There is something in that movement that brings to mind a shoal of fish or a flock of birds. Nobody coordinates each small gesture, and yet the whole keeps reorganising itself... [1]

Until...

[1] J. Belden et al., "How Vision Governs the Collective Behaviour of Dense Cycling Pelotons", *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* 16 (2019), artigo 20190197. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2019.0197

“The peloton offers shelter. The breakaway offers a story.”

LE CYCLISTE BAROUDEUR

Dedication

My daughter Sofia Gomes's head coach was called Arménio Alves. I met him in 2018, when she was fifteen, a year before she became national mountain-biking champion. In 2021, at eighteen, she would go on to win the youth classification and finish second overall in the first Volta a Portugal Feminina. Afonso Gomes, a former athlete with several national podium finishes, would also come to cross paths with Arménio.

That is how someone entered our lives who, to me, would come to represent far more than a cycling coach.

Arménio was already a well-known figure in Portuguese cycling, but what struck me most was how he understood the development of young athletes. He had a firm, disciplined presence, the bearing of someone used to demanding a great deal, yet that demand was never confined to performance or results. He saw in the making of a young cyclist something broader than teaching them to ride fast or win races.

He cared about shaping athletes, certainly, but also people. Discipline, humility, courage, the capacity to suffer and the will to keep going were all part of what he tried to instil.

Arménio loved cycling. Blimey, did he love cycling.

And he loved competition. But he knew how to recognise merit, courage and talent in equal measure, whether in his own athletes or in their rivals. Perhaps this is one of the first ideas in this book: wanting to win does not require belittling those who compete against us.

With Arménio I also came to understand that being fast and strong is never enough. Speed, energy and power create advantages, but they are not sufficient. An athlete needs intelligence, skill, courage and discipline. And, above all, a moment comes when they need others.

Having the ability to win is one thing. Getting a team to want to work towards that victory is another. For that, talent is not enough. You have to earn trust, respect others and be willing to work on their behalf. Often, you have to be a leader.

It was by watching Arménio, the athletes and the teams that I began to recognise several of the ideas at the root of this book.

These pages are therefore dedicated to Arménio Alves, for the principles he passed on to my children and for everything he, probably without knowing it, ended up teaching me too.
And to my wife, Rosário Coelho, a quiet but essential presence throughout all those years.
Because some people are decisive to a victory yet never appear on the podium.

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Prologue

Late in the morning, as the light began to fall hard over Monsanto, we would often climb up to Alto da Ajuda. Below us lay Belém, Restelo, the Tagus. Ahead of us, another trail.

Sofia was fourteen. Afonso, eleven.

Between 2009 and 2018, we did that often enough to lose count. Many Saturday and Sunday mornings began like this: three bicycles, a few hours ahead of us and Lisbon opening up before us, street by street, climb by climb.

The bicycle began as just that. A bicycle. A means of transport, a form of training, something we did together. Then, without our noticing, it began to organise a decade of our lives.

We cycled through Lisbon, Sintra and Arrábida. We crossed the Águas Livres Aqueduct and painted our way across the trails of Monsanto one climb at a time, bend after bend, effort after effort.

We joined mountain-bike rides organised by associations we barely knew, local clubs, community groups, GNR initiatives. At the start, nobody asked much about who we were or where we had come from. Turning up with a bicycle was enough. For a few hours, that was enough. We were just a few more among many, united by the same trail, the same dust, thorns, tiredness and the will to keep pedalling.

Then we began travelling the country in search of greenways: the Dão, Vouga, Tâmega, Mora and many others. Old railway lines turned into paths of discovery, tunnels, landscapes that opened up slowly ahead of us, and that hard-to-explain feeling that, on a bicycle, the world always seemed a little bigger.

Some of those trips are etched in my memory. At the time they were just adventures; only later did I also come to understand what we were demanding of ourselves.

On the Mora to Évora greenway, with around twenty-three kilometres still ahead of us, we hit one of those days when the heat seemed to crush everything. The thermometer hovered around forty degrees and the kilometres already weighed too much. Much of the route left us far from any roads or any chance of support. Afonso, younger, had already been in the family support car for five kilometres.

Sofia and I carried on.

At one point, I got a puncture.

We were on an isolated stretch, with no mobile signal. And even if there had been signal, it would have done little good. The support car would have had no way of knowing exactly where we were, and even if it had known, it would not have been able to reach us.

We stopped to mend the tyre.

But the heat and the effort had pushed me to the limit. The water in my bottle seemed to have absorbed the heat of the road. I leant back, completely spent, unable even to do what I had done so many times without thinking. The tyre was right in front of me, and so were the tools, but my body no longer responded.

And I remember Sofia.

Without making a drama of it, without complaining, she sat down beside the bicycle and calmly set about working out how to mend the tyre. As if forty degrees of heat, dozens of kilometres in her legs, no contact with the outside world and a father falling apart beside her were just one more small setback on the road.

There are images that time blurs. Not that one.

We covered many kilometres. Perhaps too many.

It would only be years later that I came to understand that, for young cyclists, kilometres tell only part of the story. The body doesn't respond to a round number on the odometer. It responds to the load we place on it: the duration of the effort, the terrain, the heat, the preparation that came before, the way that load built up and the time we give it to recover. A hundred kilometres could just be a hundred kilometres for someone prepared for them. For an eleven- or fourteen-year-old, without that preparation built up gradually, they could simply be too much.

At the time, though, we knew none of this. There were no great theories, training plans or concerns about load, recovery or

progression. There were bicycles, paths and the will to find out how far we could go.

The further, the better.

But back then we didn't count kilometres that way.

We didn't think about what was too much, what was advisable, or what we would one day do with all of it.

We counted climbs. We counted punctures. We counted the places we had reached.

And, above all, we counted stories.

Several broken bicycles, some on the trails, others on the roof rack right at the garage entrance, more than once. Expenses the budget never accounted for, some painful falls and a few trips to A&E. There was also a night in the Monsanto woods when we searched for Sofia for around four hours, with 112, firefighters and passing cyclists who decided to stop and help.

And the victories came.

The biggest would come later, once we were in Coimbra, after a cycling team from the Cantanhede area took the two of them in. Sofia and Afonso won national titles in mountain biking, on the track and on the road.

But this book is not a family album. Nor is it a celebration of suffering, of hardship, or of that old idea that suffering necessarily makes us special. None of that.

What interests me is something else: what competitive cycling makes impossible to hide.

Discipline. Decision. Trust. Risk. Collective work. The moment someone decides to pull and the moment they decide to let someone else do the work. The road doesn't automatically turn anyone into a better person, just as an organisation doesn't become better by writing its values on a wall. But both create situations in which choices end up surfacing. Sometimes brutally.

The logic running through this book is simple. The team represents the organisation. The peloton is the competitive space in which it moves: rivals contesting the same race who, at certain moments, find an advantage in working together. Breakaways and small groups represent temporary alliances, lasting only as long as interests point in the same direction.

Then a bend comes.

And after that bend, whoever was riding alongside you five minutes ago, sharing the effort and the wind, can be the first to accelerate and try to leave you behind, what, later on, we will simply call *attacking*. There is no betrayal in that. There are only interests that have stopped coinciding.

That is where the title of this book comes from.

The analogy, of course, has its limits. A domestique, the rider who works to protect, position or help the team leader, is not a justification for organisations that sacrifice people in the name of results. Likewise, a rival in a race doesn't turn clients, regulators, competitors or colleagues into enemies. Analogies are useful precisely up to the point where they stop being useful. Throughout these pages I will try to show where that line is crossed.

I write from two places. There are around thirty years leading teams and projects in healthcare information systems. I also spent a considerable part of those years on a bicycle. For a long time I thought they were two different lives. I stopped thinking that way when I realised that, too often, I was using the same reasoning in both.

The clearest confirmation came in Cantanhede. For around five years I was sporting director of the team that took in Sofia and Afonso. The setting was different. So was the vocabulary. Instead of projects there were races. Instead of meetings there were pre-start briefings. Instead of multidisciplinary teams there were riders, coaches, mechanics and parents. Parents, that most difficult breed to manage.

But the problems were strangely familiar: scarce resources, people with different ambitions, some more generous, others more selfish, unevenly distributed talent, imperfect information, decisions made under pressure, plans that stopped making sense five minutes after the race began. And difficult choices everyone preferred to put off.

There is a fork in a trail that sums up a good deal of this.

To the left, the path follows the slope. It's longer, but reasonable. To the right is the wall. The destination is practically the same. The gradient isn't.

When I could choose, I chose the wall.

Not because I was particularly fond of suffering. I never quite understood the romanticising of suffering. I chose it because I distrusted the detour.

A climb avoided doesn't vanish from the route. It stays somewhere further ahead. And there's a good chance it will come back on a worse day, when your legs are no longer what they were and climbing has stopped being a choice.

In organisations, we do exactly this. We just give more respectable names to the path on the left.

Temporary solution. Phase two of the project. Migration to follow. Decision to be revisited.

We don't necessarily do it out of incompetence or bad faith. We do it because there's a meeting tomorrow, a budget to close on Friday, management asking for results, a tired team, or simply because, that week, nobody has the energy to discuss the matter again.

The decision seems sensible. For a while, perhaps it is.

Then three years go by.

The temporary solution is still there. In the meantime it has gained interfaces, users, contracts, dependencies and an application nobody knew existed. What could have been switched off in an afternoon has become a six-month operation nobody wants to authorise.

The bill arrived. It only brought technical debt.

There is, however, an important difference between the bicycle and an organisation. On a bicycle, the bill for the easy choice arrives fast. Sometimes it arrives two minutes later. And it arrives in front of everyone.

Whoever skirted the climb knows they skirted it. So do their companions. The stopwatch doesn't accept PowerPoint presentations.

In organisations, the same decision can take years to catch up. And when it finally does, the person who made it has often already become a board member, chair or manager in another department, another company, or is simply far from the problem.

During that interval, the shortcut stops looking like a shortcut. It looks like prudence. It looks like cost containment. It looks like pragmatism.

This is one of the reasons difficult decisions are so easy to put off: they rarely fail on the day they're made. They fail much later. And almost always on someone else's account.

This book is not a manual. There are no fifteen rules for winning a race, nor seven secret habits of managers who finish first. The stories and analogies that follow are meant to help us think, not to decide for us. And I will try to flag the situations where they stop being useful.

If you cycle, you will probably recognise some of these situations before I explain them. If you have never cycled, it makes no difference. The bicycle doesn't require initiation to teach what matters.

It only requires that we pay attention to what happens when a person, a team and a machine head out together onto a road where the wind doesn't know who we are, the route doesn't know our plans, and the climb couldn't care less about our excuses.

We begin with the machine.

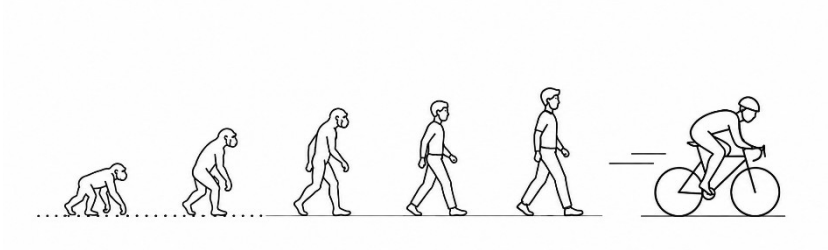
“Accidents are to Cycling what crying is to Love”

– PAUL FOURNEL–

CHAPTER I

The Machine That Beat Evolution

> *Almost everything about it is visible. Two wheels, a frame, a drivetrain, brakes, handlebars. There's no great mechanical mystery.*



Steve Jobs liked to explain the computer through the bicycle. The image became famous: if the bicycle amplifies the body, the computer can amplify the mind. It drew on an article published in March 1973 in Scientific American, “Bicycle Technology”, by S. S. Wilson. In a video recording that originated in a 1990 documentary, later widely circulated online, Steve Jobs said:[2]

"*I read a study that measured the efficiency of locomotion for various species on the planet. The condor used the least energy to move a kilometer. And humans came in with a rather unimpressive showing, about a third of the way down the list. It was not too proud a showing for the crown of creation. So that didn't look so good. But then somebody at Scientific American had the insight to test the efficiency of locomotion for a man on a bicycle. And a man on a bicycle, a human on a bicycle, blew the condor away, completely off the top of the charts. And that's what a computer is to me. What a*

[2] S. S. Wilson. "Bicycle Technology."*Scientific American*, vol. 228, no. 3, March 1973, p. 81.

computer is to me is it's the most remarkable tool that we've ever come up with, and it's the equivalent of a bicycle for our minds."
In his talks, Jobs added the story of a condor at the top of the efficiency table. The condor, however, doesn't appear in Wilson's original chart. What the article shows is strong enough without that embellishment: a human being on a bicycle used, per unit of mass and distance, far less energy than walking, and ranked first among the animals and machines compared. Jobs's conclusion fitted into a short phrase: the computer would be a “bicycle for the mind”. The phrase survived because it doesn't praise the machine on its own. It praises a tool when it amplifies a human capability.

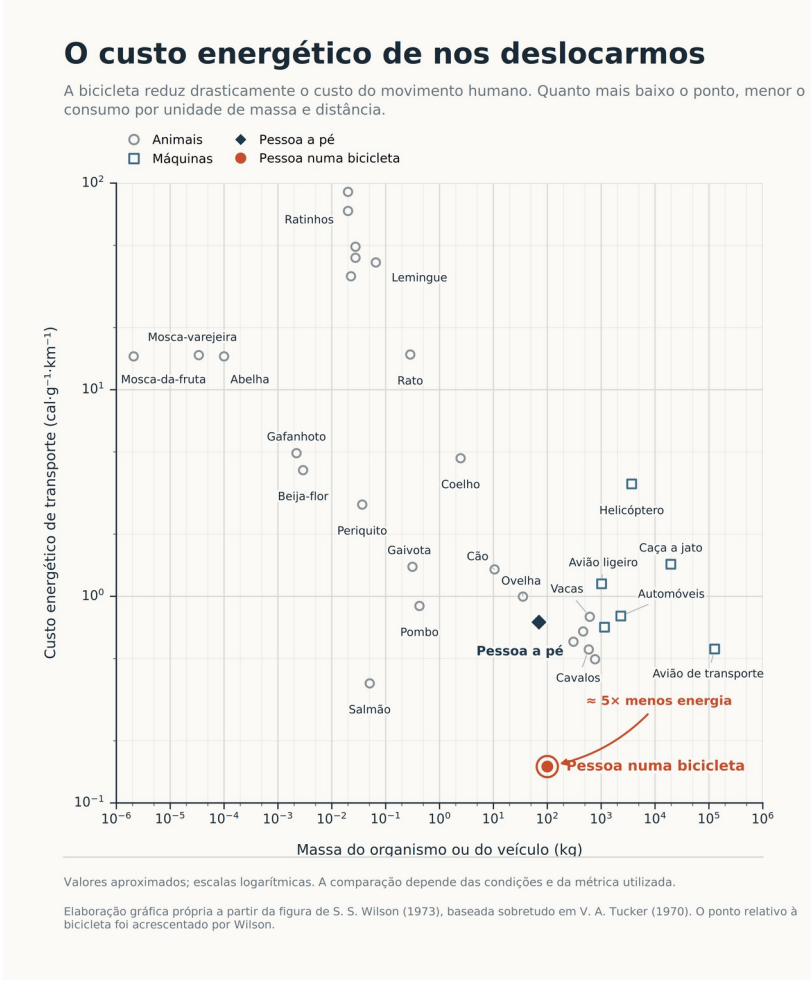


Fig. 1: Energy cost of transport per unit of mass and distance

S. S. Wilson taught engineering at Oxford and had long been a cyclist. In the article, he calculated that the bicycle reduced the energy cost of getting around, compared with walking, to around a fifth, and allowed speeds three to four times higher, without any motor.

That's the small mechanical miracle. Two wheels, a light frame, a drivetrain and a human body turn limited effort into distance. The bicycle doesn't beat evolution in the biological sense; it beats, on that measure, the limits of unassisted human locomotion.

The scale of the vehicle is the scale of the body: it can be lifted, repaired and moved without disproportionate infrastructure. It uses few materials, little energy, little space. And it gives the user back a considerable share of control over movement.

This doesn't make the bicycle a universal solution. Distance, terrain, age and mobility all change the answer. What it does make it is an extraordinarily efficient option when the context allows it.

A city that takes that option seriously doesn't stop at painting a lane on the ground. It reduces conflict with cars. It creates secure parking. It connects the bicycle to the train and the bus. And it designs junctions where a mistake isn't paid for with the body. Wilson closed with a formula that still holds true: pedal and recycle. Half a century on, the strength of the idea lies in its modesty.

A Teacher Without a Pulpit

Efficiency explains why the bicycle is an extraordinary machine. It doesn't fully explain why so many people end up giving it a disproportionate place in their own lives. To understand that, you have to step outside the numbers and look at a story.

In the autumn of 1893, Frances E. Willard was fifty-three when she decided to learn to ride a bicycle. She was a public figure, a social reformer, a writer and a speaker. The decision was not trivial: at the end of the nineteenth century, women's cycling still

clashed with conventions around clothing, behaviour, exercise and independence. Willard named the bicycle she received from Lady Henry Somerset Gladys, and described learning to ride it as a small conquest of personal territory.

The machine didn't make things easier for her out of respect for her age or her reputation. She fell when she lost her balance. She moved forward when she found momentum. She only managed to start turning once her body, her gaze and her will began working together. That indifference fascinated her, and she ended up calling the bicycle a teacher "without pulpit or creed".

The image survives because it says something we still recognise. There are teachers who explain. Others create the conditions for reality to explain, and the bicycle belongs to the second category. It doesn't accept an argument about balance: either you balance, or you don't. It isn't impressed by the effort you put in before the climb. The gradient stays exactly where it is. It doesn't change the wind because you prepared your start well, nor shorten the distance home because you're already tired. It's a pedagogy without ceremony.

In companies, much of the work happens the other way round. We spend months discussing a decision without testing it, without exposing it to reality. An initiative can survive in presentations, committees and reports long after it has stopped solving the problem that justified its existence, and the vocabulary helps: "transformation", "alignment", "strategic priority", "synergy". There are words that can keep things standing, for quite a long time, things that would no longer hold up on their own. The road has less patience with language.

Perhaps that's why a bike ride teaches, in two hours, what a project takes six months to reveal: declared capacity and available capacity are not the same thing. A rider might know they can produce a certain power output and discover, on a hot afternoon, that on that particular day it simply wasn't available. A team can have excellent specialists and discover, at the critical moment, that it can't make a simple decision without going through four levels of approval. In neither case is reality being unfair. It's just filling in the information.

The bicycle doesn't teach humility by magic, and it doesn't make anyone more lucid. There are arrogant cyclists, and there are

managers who cycle without learning anything from it. What the machine offers is fast feedback, relatively hard to negotiate with. The human outcome depends on what's done with it.

An experienced cyclist doesn't stop making mistakes. What they do learn is to recognise the mistake sooner: they feel a change in grip, a chain starting to run badly, the sound of a tyre, the difference between the normal suffering of an effort and a signal that deserves attention. Experience doesn't eliminate uncertainty. It improves the quality of the reading.

Something similar happens in organisations. The best professionals aren't the ones who live in a world without problems, either. They're often the ones who notice, before others do, that something has stopped fitting: the deadline that's no longer realistic, the dependency that grew quietly, the indicator that started rewarding the wrong behaviour, the client who no longer expects what they expected a year ago.

We like to think we first acquire knowledge and only then apply it to reality. In practice it's usually the other way round: reality resists, forces a correction, and only afterwards do we realise what we've learned from it.

That's what Willard found in Gladys. And it's a good way to look at the bicycle throughout this book. Not as a decorative metaphor. As an instrument that returns consequences.

The road doesn't hand out certificates. It gives feedback.

The Road as a Second Language

There's a reason some of this book's ideas began on a bicycle and not in a meeting room. On the road, certain abstractions stop being abstractions.

Energy becomes weight in the legs. Risk takes the shape of a bend, a wet surface, a wheel too close for comfort. Trust stops being a word from a presentation and becomes following someone at fifty kilometres an hour, believing they won't make an absurd move. Strategy stops fitting on a slide the moment the wind changes side. The road has that lack of delicacy: it doesn't explain first, it shows.

Perhaps that's why cycling creates such a rich language for talking about organisations. Not because a company is a bicycle, nor because a board should behave like a peloton. The comparison

earns its keep when it makes visible a relationship that stays hidden in the office. Who's in the wind? Who's sheltered? Who's spending energy correcting decisions made too late? Who's clearing the way for others? Who arrives at the decisive moment with nothing left to give?

And there's something else, harder to measure. A bicycle is a strange machine. Almost everything about it is visible: two wheels, a frame, a drivetrain, brakes, handlebars. There's no great mechanical mystery. And yet, whoever learns to ride quickly discovers that understanding every part doesn't mean understanding the experience.

We can explain balance, but that doesn't teach a child to balance. We can calculate power output, but the number doesn't say when to attack. We can draw the line through a bend and still keep taking it too fast. There's knowledge that fits into a formula, and knowledge that only appears when body, attention and circumstance meet. Organisations are no different.

We know how to draw org charts, processes, responsibility matrices, indicators and strategic plans. They're useful, some even indispensable. But none of these representations contains the whole organisation. What's always missing is what happens between the boxes: the trust built up over time, the information that arrived late, the decision nobody owned, the professional who no longer has the energy for another emergency, the supplier we depend on more than the contract lets on. The road doesn't eliminate that complexity. It just makes it harder to hide.

Today's bicycle is a different machine. So is the world. But the uncertainty remains: an almost elementary machine still forces us to negotiate with forces we don't control. That's the second language we're going to move through in these pages.

On the surface there will be races, wind, power, teams, falls, attacks, sprints. Underneath, there's another road: the one that asks what we do when the plan stops matching the terrain, how much control is enough, how much help starts to block autonomy, when to push on, when to stop, how to tell strength apart from waste. And what it means to keep moving forward without pretending to see everything that lies beyond the next bend.

You don't need to believe the bicycle holds a secret philosophy. You just have to pay attention to what it demands.

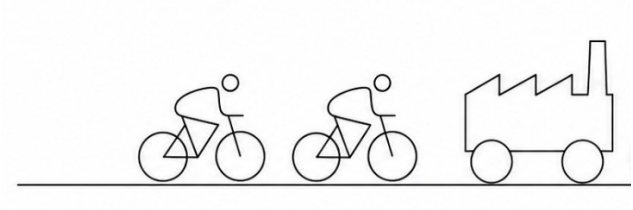
Chapter I

The road will do the rest.

CHAPTER II

The Company Rides in the Peloton

> *Look as far ahead as you can. Read the road and anticipate what's coming. There's no use stopping to complain about the bend or the potholes. Keep going.*



Why Cycling and Business?

There are hours in the day when a company and a peloton resemble each other more than it would be reasonable to admit. It's not in the official photograph, nor in the org chart, nor on the podium. It's when the road narrows.

In a professional peloton, dozens of men or women advance within a scarce amount of space. Each one reads the wind, weighs the risk, saves energy, watches rivals, looks for momentary allies and tries not to lose the right wheel. There's a strategy drawn up in the team car, but there are hundreds of micro-decisions that never reach the radio. Seen from a distance, the jerseys seem to form a single creature. Seen up close, they reveal rival teams, different interests and agreements that might last only until the next bend.

This is where the analogy with business becomes useful, provided it's corrected before it's romanticised. The company is not the

whole peloton. The precise equivalence is different: the professional team corresponds to the organisation; the peloton is closer to the sector, the sum of everyone competing for the same space; and the groups that form and dissolve during the race (breakaways, chases, echelons, groups of favourites) resemble alliances, consortia, projects or temporary coalitions.

Within a team there is intentional cooperation: resources, information, logistics and objectives are shared. In the peloton, cooperation is circumstantial. Two rivals can work together for fifty kilometres because both benefit from the advantage they're creating. Ten kilometres from the finish, that understanding disappears without warning. The relationship wasn't false. It was conditional.

Companies live within the same paradox: they cooperate with suppliers who also serve the competition, build technical standards with those who contest their market, share infrastructure when doing everything alone costs more, and compete when it's time to decide. In management, this coexistence became known as co-opetition, a concept Adam Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff gave great visibility to in their book Co-opetition, published in 1996.

In cycling, it's simply called a race.

The value of the metaphor isn't in saying everyone should pedal in the same direction. That would be too simple and, in most cases, false. It lies in understanding that collective performance is born from managing interdependencies: knowing when to cooperate, when to protect, when to attack, when to let someone else do the work, and when to recognise that the terrain has changed.

A company can have extraordinary resources and still be poorly positioned. It can have brilliant people and ‘burn them out’ in the wind. A flawless PowerPoint strategy doesn't survive the first crosswind. Cycling is a particularly good language for talking about organisations because it exposes, without ceremony, what management sometimes prefers to hide: nobody competes alone, nobody controls the terrain, and **almost every advantage has an energy cost.**

A Wheel Within a Wheel

A wheel within a wheel.
It's an old image, and a surprisingly useful way of looking at what happens within an organisation.
In cycling, almost nothing exists in isolation. The wheel turns within the bicycle. The bicycle moves with the rider. The rider belongs to a team. The team rides within a peloton. The peloton makes its way through a stage, and the stage is subject to the route, the regulations, the weather, the organisation and what the rivals decide to do. Change one of these layers and you alter all the others.
That's why asking 'who's the best cyclist?' is rarely enough. Best for what? On what terrain? In which team? In what role? How far from the finish? With wind from which direction? A rider who looks extraordinary in a time trial might not be the right choice to lead out a sprinter. A brilliant climber can lose minutes on a crosswind day before even reaching the mountain where they should have the advantage. Performance belongs to the system in which it appears.
Companies have the same tendency to hide wheels within wheels. We assess a person without looking at the team. We assess a team without looking at the architecture that constrains it. We assess an organisation without realising that some of its decisions are responses to rules, markets, technologies or dependencies that come from outside. Then we're surprised when the same professional changes context and seems like a different person.
Sometimes they are.
Not because talent has vanished or appeared overnight, but because the position has changed. Information that once arrived early now arrives late. A manager who protected the team is replaced by one who passes pressure down. A platform eliminates repetitive tasks. A regulation closes off an option. An experienced colleague leaves. The formal job may keep the same name; the system is no longer the same.
This way of thinking avoids two opposite errors. The first is the cult of the individual, the idea that extraordinary results prove, on their own, an extraordinary person. Cycling dismantles this every Sunday: the rider who appears alone in the photograph may have

spent four hours protected by others. The victory is individual in the record books. The causality and the credit are distributed.

The second error is system determinism, the idea that, if everything depends on context, nobody is responsible for anything. That doesn't work either. Under the same conditions, riders make different decisions. Some read the race early, others late. Some conserve energy, others waste it. Some cooperate when it makes sense and know how to pull off the front once their job is done. Position matters. So does decision.

The cycling team corresponds to the organisation; the peloton is close to the competitive sector; breakaways and temporary groups resemble alliances that exist for as long as interests coincide. The route blends economic, technological, regulatory and social context, and the support car is close to the structures of leadership and support. No equivalence is perfect, and none needs to be. What matters is the relationship between the layers.

A local decision can have systemic effects. A cyclist who lets a two-metre gap open forces whoever's behind to accelerate, just as a unit that creates an exception forces others to build mechanisms to support it. A rider who attacks can force three teams to spend resources. A technology adopted by one competitor can shift the expectations of the entire market, even for those who would rather ignore it.

And the reverse is also true. A distant change can reach the body fast: the wind shifts at the top of a hill and, seconds later, a rider is out of the front group. A new regulatory requirement is published and, weeks later, a team that seemed over-resourced is working flat out. There's always a bigger wheel turning around us.

It doesn't mean we're condemned by circumstance. It means strategy begins by working out which system we're actually competing in.

Many companies do the opposite. They start with the org chart, who reports to whom, which unit holds the budget, where the centre of competence sits, and only afterwards look at the problem.

A sporting director starts with the terrain.

Perhaps management could use more of that. Before choosing the line-up, look at the stage. Before rewarding effort, understand the position. Before asking for speed, ask who's breaking the wind.

A wheel within a wheel.
It's an old image for a thoroughly current problem. Nobody works only inside the box that appears around their name.

PELOTON: THE POWER OF COOPERATION

The most misleading image in cycling is that of the lone hero, so common at the Tour, the Vuelta or the Volta a Portugal.
We see him alone on the climb, face set, the bike rocking beneath him. Television needs a protagonist. But the race that put him there began hours earlier. Someone studied the route, handed out bottles and food, closed gaps, answered attacks and moved the leader up before a dangerous stretch. Someone agreed to spend their own chance so another could arrive intact at the place where the race is decided.
High-level performance is almost always less a celebration of individual power than an engineering of interdependence.
Even if you're not a fan, try to picture a peloton in motion: a compact, dynamic force, pedalling in unison, filling the entire width of an open road. It's one giant living creature, the soul of the race, and this is the image we'll use throughout the book, with the caveat we've just made: the whole peloton resembles the sector you compete in, and it's inside it that your team does its work. In Chapter IX, in the section 'Peloton Rolling Compact', we'll come back to this in detail: the sharing of effort, communication among team members, what happens when the peloton breaks apart.
Physics makes cooperation visible. In 2018, a team led by Bert Blocken combined high-resolution computational simulation with wind-tunnel testing to study a peloton of 121 cyclists. In the most sheltered positions, aerodynamic drag could fall to around 5% to 10% of what a lone cyclist faced at the same speed. The figure needs care: a 90% or 95% reduction in drag doesn't mean an equal reduction in total effort, because rolling resistance, mechanical losses and physiological cost are still there. Even so, the saving is extraordinary.[3]

[3] Blocken, B., van Druenen, T., Toparlar, Y., Malizia, F., Mannion, P., Andrianne, T., Marchal, T., Maas, G.J., & Diepens, J. (2018). "Aerodynamic drag in cycling pelotons: New insights by CFD simulation and wind tunnel testing." *Journal of Wind*

This doesn't prove the slogan that 'the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts'. It shows something more precise: your position within a collective structure can radically change the cost of producing the same result.

In an organisation, nobody gets aerodynamic shelter. They get something else: infrastructure, standards, reliable and well-managed data, reusable components, shared services. Everything that stops each team having to overcome, all over again, a resistance the organisation has already overcome.

This is no longer the shelter physics gives for free to whoever is well positioned in the peloton. It's someone choosing to spend effort clearing the way for someone else: the same work a domestique does.

This is where cooperation stops being a nice word and starts being economics.

A well-designed identity management platform stops ten products building ten different authentication systems. A central cybersecurity team saves each unit from having to reinvent the same critical controls. The same applies to a framework agreement, which turns months of negotiation into days, or to a well-built design system, which removes decisions already taken. A governed data repository has the same effect: nobody has to discover, all over again, where the data lives and whether it can be trusted.

There is, however, a boundary. Too much protection creates dependency. Shared services become bottlenecks. The platform that was meant to cut the wind ends up, itself, being a headwind. The measure of a support service lies in the friction it removes, not in the number of processes it controls.

The difference between cooperation and dependency lies in who keeps the decision. It isn't the central structure that should decide when a team can ride on its own: that's dependency, however well-intentioned. Real cooperation means giving the team the conditions to make that decision for itself.

Good cooperation doesn't decide for the team riding behind. It gives them better conditions to know when to come off the wheel.

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Sitting on the Wheel

There's an expression in cycling that seems small until you understand what it holds: sitting on the wheel.
It doesn't mean giving up. It doesn't mean working less out of laziness. It means recognising that someone else is already breaking the wind, and that spending energy to prove your independence can be a sophisticated form of stupidity.
In business there's no wind or water bottles, but the decision is the same. Use the resources that already exist (the platform already paid for, the process already tested, a contract negotiated before, or simply the component that already works), or clear the way again, from scratch, so as not to owe anyone anything.
The lesson is uncomfortable, because many organisations reward reinvention more than reuse.
A new project arrives already born with its own repository. It only takes a new team to turn up with another concept, a better idea, another dashboard. A director changes and the process gets a new name. Every unit breaks its own wind as if nobody had ever ridden that road before.
The cost rarely shows up on a single line of the budget. It's spread across time, attention, rework, mistakes and dependence on the same people as always, called on once again to solve the same problem. The organisation looks busy. It's paying, over and over, for the same resistance.
Sitting on the wheel also requires trust. You have to believe that whoever's in front won't brake without warning, that information will be shared, that the shared system won't drop you at the moment that matters. This is why badly designed shared platforms fail even when they're technically competent: the team stops trusting them and goes back to building everything in parallel.
The wheel teaches a simple moral economy. Not all autonomy consists of doing everything alone. Sometimes real autonomy is being able to use what the collective has already built, and saving your strength for the problem nobody has solved yet.

Attacks: Disrupting the Peloton

An attack is rarely just a man rising up on the pedals and launching forward.

Before it comes calculation. Who's tired? Who has teammates up the road, and who will be forced to respond? What does it cost to close twenty metres now, against what it might cost to let the gap grow for a minute?

Attacking is disrupting a balance. An early breakaway might be chasing victory, but it can also force rivals to work, put a useful rider up the road, or create an option for later. Change here isn't a permanent abstraction: it's a move that alters costs and choices.

The business reading isn't 'constantly attack your rivals'. It's thinking in options: small bets that buy learning, presence or flexibility before a decision becomes irreversible.

The Col du Granon, at the 2022 Tour de France, shows this logic with rare clarity. On stage 11, Primož Roglič and Jonas Vingegaard attacked Tadej Pogačar alternately on the Galibier and forced him to respond repeatedly. Later, around five kilometres from the top of the Granon, Vingegaard attacked again. Pogačar conceded 2 minutes and 51 seconds; Vingegaard won the stage, took the yellow jersey and kept it all the way to Paris.

Richard Plugge, then general manager of Jumbo-Visma, said the team had prepared for that Tour for almost a year, working out every detail. Recalling what Primož Roglič had done for Jonas Vingegaard on the stage where the Dane took the yellow jersey, he summed it up: 'That's the process I call cycling.' It's tempting to tell this too cleanly: successive attacks, exhausted rival, inevitable victory. It's worth not going that far. Nobody can break down how much of Pogačar's collapse came from those attacks, how much came from the altitude, the nutrition, or simply the physiology of that particular day. And the description of the plan comes from the team itself, which has every interest in telling it that way. But what remains is enough: there were alternating threats, there was the sacrifice of a resource of enormous individual value, and the team executed a strategy prepared well in advance.

In business, the lesson lies less in the attack and more in the distribution of the threat. An organisation with a single,

predictable response makes the rival's job easier. With credible options (product, channel, partnership, technology, pricing power, specialisation), that same rival is forced to spend attention and resources even before any confrontation happens.
But there's a symmetrical error. Chasing everything.
A team that reacts to every move burns out its riders before the moment that matters. The same happens to a company that responds to every trend, every rival's announcement, every emerging technology and every internal request: it loses the very thing it believes it's protecting, its strategy.
That's why judging a breakaway, working out whether it's fleeting or, in the jargon, whether it 'sticks', is worth as much on the road as in a boardroom. Responding right away to a rival's bold product, holding resources back for the next move, or doing nothing, betting that the sector itself will neutralise a fleeting distraction: which of these is the right call?
Not responding can be an offensive decision.

Sprints: All Is Not Lost

From the outside, the approach to a sprint looks like chaos.
It isn't.
It's order compressed to the limit.
A sprint train is a sequence of specialists handing each other off at high speed. One rider holds position. Another lifts the pace. Another carries the sprinter to a window where hesitation costs metres and metres cost the race. The last man in the lead-out can put in a maximum effort and, seconds later, vanish from the photograph. The sprinter crosses the line alone. The victory, though, began further back.
And the reverse happens too. A rider can lead alone, with the finish in sight, and watch the advantage disappear because they spent everything in the breakaway. There's no reliable rule for converting two kilometres into ten or fifteen seconds: speed, the size of the group, the wind, the road and the quality of the turns on the front all change the sum. The only certainty is that an advantage with no energy left to defend it is worth less than it looks.

Visibility is not causality, and management trips over this often. Whoever signs the contract didn't always create the conditions for it, and whoever presents the project to the board didn't always do the most critical work. Behind whoever appears on stage there's technology, operations, data, legal, finance and dozens of earlier decisions nobody sees. The visible result is just the last metre of a sequence.

The Tour de France itself refuses a single measure of performance: it keeps classifications for the general standings, the points, the mountains, the youth riders, the teams and every stage. In 2023, Jasper Philipsen won the green jersey after winning four stages. In 2026, Mads Pedersen won the same classification with a broader repertoire: he scored 559 points against Philipsen's 475, picking up points in finishes, intermediate sprints, breakaways and selective stages. Two ways of chasing the same prize. In an organisation, the design of the metric also decides which behaviours win. The costly mistake is choosing just one and making everyone chase after it.

There's another lesson in the sprint zone: risk rises when everyone wants the same position at the same time. In an analysis by SafeR of 497 incidents recorded in 2024 across the WorldTour, the Women's WorldTour and the ProSeries, 13% were linked to tension in the approach to decisive points, such as cobbles, climbs and sprints. The largest single category was the rider's own unforced error, at 35%. Both things can coexist: it's under pressure that mistakes happen.

The UCI sought to create more margin. The protocol, approved by the UCI in 2024 and extended from 2025, began allowing, at the organiser's request, the time-neutralisation zone for crashes or mechanical issues to be extended up to a maximum of five kilometres on suitable finishes. It doesn't eliminate the risk; it removes part of the fight for position from where it's least needed.

Companies have their own ‘last three kilometres’: a go-live, the quarter close, a regulatory deadline, a migration, an audit, a final negotiation. That's where the whole organisation tends to tighten up: more meetings, more sign-offs, more urgency, more last-minute changes. And that's precisely where it should do the opposite: strip out non-essential work, clarify who decides,

reinforce support and eliminate conflicts of priority. Widen the space, instead of compressing it.

All is not lost when the race comes down to a sprint. But the sprint isn't where victory starts being prepared either.