



Pete Burton (Producer). *Re-Cycle: The cycling history podcast.* Issy-les-Moulineaux, France: Eurosport, 2019-2020. Podcast

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As an early career historian of sport with an interest in podcasting, I was excited to be asked to write a review of the cycling podcast *Re-cycle*. A well-produced podcast created by the European sports media network Eurosport, each episode of *Re-cycle* recounts a dramatic, seminal, or controversial moment in the history of cycling in Europe. The episodes typically consist of a narrator reading a historical account written by the cycling journalist Felix Lowe, with each account filled with intimate detail about the cyclists, their lives, and the cycling events. The episodes use a minimal amount of other forms of sound beyond the narrator reading Lowe's written account, which means that the voice of the narrator Graham Willgoss, who hosts other Eurosport podcasts, is the primary means of conveying the information and the drama of the stories to the listener. This was a bit disappointing for someone who has a nominal understanding of cycling history, for the podcast presents itself as covering some of the most compelling moments in cycling—to name just a few, there are episodes devoted to the 1980 Liège-Bastogne-Liège in Belgium and the story of Jacques Anquetil, the first cyclist to win all the “Grand Tour” races (the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia in Italy, and the Vuelta a España in Spain). *Re-cycle*'s dependence on a narrator reading a pre-written script represents perhaps its fundamental

weakness as a sports podcast, for the episodes come off more like chapters of an audiobook and miss an opportunity to enliven the stories through produced sound.

To write this review, I listened to five episodes: the first and last episodes of each of *Re-Cycle*'s first two seasons, and an episode in the middle of the second season. As of January 2021, the podcast has released two total seasons of content, with a third season scheduled for this year. With a total of thirty-three produced episodes, five episodes is admittedly a small sample of the podcast. However, my interest is not just in the content of *Re-Cycle*, but in its effectiveness and value as a sports podcast. Though I research and teach the history of sport, I possess barely a cursory understanding of the history of modern competitive cycling (and I consider that characterization quite generous). My interest, rather, is in the academic value of *Re-Cycle* as a podcast and an example of communicating sport history through produced sound. There are an increasing number of academics who are realizing the still-untapped potential of podcasting with their research practice and promotion.[1] Thus, I listened to *Re-Cycle* focusing on the podcast's effectiveness in terms of its production quality and its ability to communicate a sporting context like cycling through digital audio.

Each episode's narrative overflows with the minute details of cyclists and cycling events. This is not surprising given that Lowe has extensively covered the sport of cycling for years and wrote a book about his personal experience cycling some of Europe's famous routes.[2] The listener learns about the thought processes of cyclists, the weather conditions of rides and events, the grueling circumstance of the rides and their impact on the cyclist's health, and the various opinions and perspectives of riders and sport leaders involved. There are few moments in which the narrator pauses or different forms of sound (music, soundscape, clips of events, news coverage, or interviews) are introduced, but for the most part there is a short opening of theme music and a brief playing of ambient sound of presumably a cycling race, followed by the narrator Willgoss reading Lowe's written account until the end of the episode. This makes the episodes often difficult to follow due to the intricate, almost tedious amount of detail of specific cyclists, races, and events. Numerous times I found myself having to pause and replay episodes because I was lost or confused about the story. Moreover, the stories are rarely situated within broader historical context, and when they are the discussion of context is brief and undeveloped. The lack of contextualization and absence of other forms of produced sound lead me to think that *Re-Cycle* is specifically tailored for a niche audience of cycling fans who are already immersed in the history and culture of the sport. Listeners who are unfamiliar with European cycling will have difficulty following along with each narrative's narrow focus and faster pace of the narration, and there are rarely pauses in the narration or an inclusion of historical audio clips that allow for reflection or a discussion of context.

For example, I listened to the January 9, 2020, episode, "Kidnappings and controversy: South America's first Grand Tour winner." I began the episode hoping to learn more about the international politics of cycling: why was it not until 1987

that a South American—Colombia's Luis "Lucho" Herrera—won a Grand Tour? What did Herrera's victory signify in terms the growth of cycling in Colombia and South America? The episode, however, provided little explanation of broader issues or context. Instead, the narrator provides detail after detail about Herrera's cycling career—the contests he won, his physical attributes and gifts as a cyclist—and the 1987 Vuelta a España. At one point, Willgoss talks about how one competitor struggled with a saddle sore in the days surrounding the race, how it was painful and became infected and filled with fluid. This nugget of information, if subsequently contextualized, could have potentially provided a fascinating look at the role of pain and physical ailments in the experience of competitive cycling. Unfortunately, the narrator introduces the issue as one of numerous details about the event and does not give any time to reflect or explain the significance of the issue to the history of cycling. Toward the end of the episode, the listener also learns that Herrera was kidnapped in 2000 by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Party. Again, the narrator details the kidnapping itself, but gives little discussion or contextualization about the national politics of Colombia and just how the sport of cycling became embroiled in Colombian national conflicts with guerilla groups. This happened numerous times in the episodes: instances of fascinating detail that were left without analysis, reflection, or contextualization.

As a podcast about sports, *Re-Cycle* would benefit from interweaving varied forms of produced and ambient sound with each narrative. If a sporting experience is anything, it is an affective and sensory-laden experience: participants sweat, physically exert themselves, feel pain, struggle to persevere, experience the intense effects of rain, heat, and wind. Outdoor cycling events, often involving difficult and physically demanding routes, would qualify as one of the more affective sporting experiences. Moreover, sound is affective: the waves and reverberations impinge on the body,

move the body in various ways.[3] Certainly, the sound of a person's voice can affect a listener in important ways, but so can music, clips of historical events and interviews with cyclists, and ambient soundscape. One need only look at the some of the popular public radio podcasts like *This American Life*, *Snap Judgment*, and *Radiolab* for examples of how interwoven music and soundscape can enliven the emotional power of the story. Listening to the narrowed focus and rich detail of the *Re-Cycle* episodes, I wondered whether written narratives are the most effective way of conveying the affective dimensions of sport, and whether digital audio forms like podcasts can be wielded to more effectively convey those dimensions.

Ultimately, *Re-Cycle* is a sport podcast geared toward cycling fanatics and is unfortunately of limited value to academics and researchers of sport. Historians and researchers will surely find useful detail related to notable moments and the biographies of famous cyclists, but the episodes do not provide enough discussion of historical context to inform research. The episodes also predominantly focus on the experiences of male cyclists and the men's cycling contests, leaving little insight into more critical questions like gender inequality and the gendered dynamics of cycling. However, this is from the perspective of a historian of sport who approached the podcast in terms of its significance to academic study of podcasting and sports. For those keen to learn the intricate details of some of the more dramatic and controversial moments in the history of cycling, they would do well to check out the podcast.

Notes

[1]. Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry, eds., *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[2]. Felix Lowe, *Climbs and Punishment: Riding to Rome in the Footsteps in Hannibal* (London: Corgi Books, 2015).

[3]. Michael Gallagher, "Sound as Affect: Difference, Power, and Spatiality," *Emotion, Space and Society* 20 (2016): 42-48.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-podcast>

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