



THE CHIEF ARCHITECTS

BUILDING THE GIRO LEGEND

THE GIRO IS A CELEBRATION OF SPORT AND COMMUNITY AND ABOVE ALL OF THE *BEL PAESE* ITSELF. HOW, THOUGH, IS IT BUILT? WE MEET THE THREE ARCHITECTS RESPONSIBLE...

For over 100 years the *Corsa Rosa* has enraptured the Italian public. That the race is an architectural, geological and cultural tour de force goes without saying, but where do you begin in creating a work of such vast scale and ambition? How do you construct the canvas which will be coloured the pink of the Giro d'Italia?

To better understand the process, we're in the company of the three men responsible for doing precisely that. Michele Acquarone, Mauro Vegni and Stefano Allocchio head up a team of some 20 full-time staff, and collectively they are responsible for RCS Sports' cycling division. Broadly speaking, Acquarone, Director General of the organisation, is both its mouthpiece and commercial engine. Meanwhile, Vegni, helped by a lifetime in and around the sport, provides the creative energy. If he is chief architect then Allocchio, a veteran of nine *giri* as a rider, is his master of works. He assumes responsibility for ensuring that the stages work logistically, that the riders' welfare is protected, that the infrastructure is solidly in place. Between them they are tasked with ensuring the wellbeing of their country's most inclusive event, and its

great sporting patrimony.

Very obviously the *percorso* is subject to an infinite number of variables, but Acquarone is keen to begin at the beginning. All roads, therefore, lead to... Naples.

"Of course there is no precise formula, and nor could there ever be. There are so many elements to combine that by definition it's subjective, but we begin with a few core elements. Last year we began in Denmark, and as a result we weren't able to spend as much time in the south. We needed to address that this year, and we very much wanted the Giro to begin in the south. Therefore when Naples approached us for the opening stage it made perfect sense for everybody."

That the city last hosted the *grande partenza* 50 years ago was instructive, but only to a degree. In recent years the image of the city has taken a real battering, most notably from the refuse crisis. Given that tourism is absolutely critical to its wellbeing, the city fathers are embarked on a major incentive to rebuild the town's image, in effect to rebrand it. As Vegni is quick to point out, the Giro represents the perfect fit for that process.

"They called us in November 2011, and then

there were a series of meetings during which they presented their project. There's a new administration down there, and they have new ideas. They're building 20 kilometres of bike lanes, and so the Giro is a real catalyst for the regeneration of the city."

The image of cycling, too, has suffered in recent times, but conversely the Giro has never been more in demand. Acquarone explains how they try to put the pieces together. "I'd say that on average we get about 100 requests for stages, and if anything it's on the increase.

↓ Just some of the views that hang in their office



The Giro is a global event now, and the fact is that there is no other marketing tool like it. Essentially you have 21 stages, ergo 42 departures and finishes. They are fabulous shop windows, and so the majority of the stages are derivative of the requests."

Obviously it's impossible to accommodate everybody. It often falls upon Allocchio, tasked with the matter-of-fact business of hauling the whole thing around Italy, to make the big decision.

"There are financial and cultural factors at play, but my job is to ensure that it works in a practical sense. In the first instance it's contingent on ensuring the riders aren't exposed to undue risk, that the roads themselves are adequate. Then you've to factor in all manner of issues that the public might not necessarily be aware of. To give you an idea of the scale of the thing, a 'normal' Giro stage has an average of about 2,000 people involved. As regards the start and finish towns we need a huge parking provision, a press centre, a temporary tribune, and we need to be able to build the Giro Village. We need to ensure that the host broadcaster has everything it needs to provide coverage, and then to think

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about where we're going to put everyone. In addition to the teams themselves you've an army of staff, the Caravan, journalists. Everybody needs to be fed, and everybody needs a bed for the night."

Vegni is also mindful of the fact that the investors themselves, local politicians spending public money, need be guaranteed a return on their outlay.

"Each has his own set of objectives, but ultimately it's about exposure and, by extension, investment. That may be in the form of new business partners, or simply tourists, but we have to provide them with a rewarding experience. These are extremely trying times, and if we're asking for a significant financial investment we have a responsibility to leave our partners feeling good about having hosted

the race. The mere fact that they will fill their restaurants and hotel beds is a great start in that, but we're a business like any other. We have to offer value for money, and I believe we do. If we speculate that each of the 2,000 or so spends maybe €100, and then add the fans, it gives you an idea of the kind of value the Giro brings."

The number crunching is all well and good, but cycling's unique appeal is the fact that it's free, and that it comes to its public. The Giro is mandated - albeit unofficially - to reach as many Italians as possible, but Acquarone believes that others should be afforded the chance to witness it at first hand.

"I'm relatively new to this, but one of the things which struck me most was the sheer joy the Giro delivers. That may sound trite, but

↑ Three heads are better than one. The new Giro has a much more inclusive feel to it



↑ Organising the Giro d'Italia

it's anything but. It's a statement of fact, and I see no reason why others can't be exposed to it. We're happy for the Giro to start abroad if it fits, but we're also mindful of the fact that we have the Dolomites, the Alps, Tuscany, thousands of kilometres of sensational coastline. Then we have the Apennines, Puglia, Turin, Florence and Venice. We're enormously lucky, but by the same token we only have 3,500 kilometres. Sometimes I'll be on the road with Mauro and Stefano and they'll show me sights which simply take my breathe away. These are places that even I, an Italian, never knew existed, and they're absolute marvels."

↓ The same, but different; Vegni and Acquarone explain their respective roles

The problem this year, as every year, is what to leave out. The Dolomites are the cornerstone of the Giro, and cycling people quite rightly expect that the defining moments of the race



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will happen there. That's a major determining factor in the decision making process, but there are dozens of others. Vegni cites the stage to Vajont as an example.

"We have a responsibility to history, and I thought it important to remember the tragedy there 50 years ago. Michele's starting position tends to be commercial, but historically the Giro played a fundamental role in unifying this country. It united Genoa with Palermo, and Venice with Bari. After the Second World War the symbolism of the Giro was huge, and as an Italian I want to continue the work. So Vajont was unusual in the sense that the idea came from me. It may not be the most profitable option, but the Giro is an exposition of Italy geographically, culturally and emotionally. It has to be showcase for our past and our present, and that's why visiting Vajont is so important."

The building of the *percorso*, then, is based upon a wealth of cultural and commercial imperatives. A Saturday stage offers greater television exposure than, say, a Tuesday, and the arrival attracts more attention than the departure. Equally they try to ensure that the

key moments of the race are witnessed by as many as possible, and Allocchio describes the whole process as a kind of 'Tetris'.

"It all has to fit together, but we mustn't forget that we need to build it around the riders. They are the heart and soul of the Giro, and I don't mind admitting that on occasion we lost sight of that. We're getting it about right now as regards the amount of climbing, the amount of transfers, and I think the total kilometres. Notwithstanding the fact that Mauro and I claim to know Italy like the back of our hands, every inch of the route has to be scrutinised. If a new roundabout is built, or a new one-way system, it needs to be factored in. There's not much glamorous about that side of the job, but nothing is left to chance."



MUCH HAS BEEN MADE of the fact that Brescia, not Milan, will host the grand finale of the 2013 Giro. Some are convinced that Milan's status as the unofficial command post of Italian cycling ought to guarantee it the big send-off. Many are lobbying for the Giro ➔



“WHETHER WE FINISH IN VENICE, BARI OR CREMONA DOESN'T MATTER. WHAT MATTERS IS THE ENTHUSIASM OF THE PEOPLE AND THE QUALITY OF THE RACE ITSELF”

out to ape the Vuelta and Tour in concluding, year on year, in an iconic big city location, specifically Piazza de Duomo. Vegni understands the premise, but suggests that the flexibility (or portability) of the final stage actually gives them more options. Moreover, he isn't prepared to compromise the integrity of the Giro as a whole to accommodate Milan, or indeed any other city.

“The first thing to remember is that it's no



longer possible to conclude a road stage in Piazza del Duomo. If we want to finish there it has to be a time trial, and I've no intention of finishing the Giro every year with a time trial because it would imply too much compromise. The Giro deserves better, the racers deserve better, and the public deserves better.

“Now you could argue that there's a strong case for Rome, and I defy anybody to convince me that we couldn't produce the most spectacular finish in cycling. With all due respects to the Champs Élysée, it doesn't come even remotely close, but here again it would impact on the quality of the Giro. Rome is a long way from the Alps or the Dolomites, and that presents us with a big headache. Either we subject the riders to a horrendous transfer on the eve of the final stage, or the Dolomite stages are moved to midweek and we have them trundle back down to Lazio. That would be terribly damaging to the race as a spectacle, and also as a sporting contest. It's down to the authenticity of the race, and we're

↑ (From left to right) Acquarone, Vegni, Allocchio


not prepared to damage that at any cost...”



ACQUARONE VERY WELL understands the historical perspective where Milan is concerned, but he's not about to cry over spilt milk.

“Whether we finish in Venice, Bari or Cremona doesn't in itself matter. What matters is the enthusiasm of the people, the beauty of the Giro and the quality of the race itself.”

On paper the 2014 Giro is all but complete, and they're working feverishly on both the 2015 and 2016 editions. They apply the same principles and the same degree of rigour to every stage.

And so there we have it. In conversation with these three it's clear that there's no magic formula for producing a textbook Giro d'Italia. They're not so arrogant that they profess to have all the answers, but as regards experience and plain know-how they're a seriously formidable outfit. What's perhaps still more striking, however, is the zeal with which they approach the job. Even Vegni, the old hand, declares himself as enthusiastic about the race as he's ever been, and it's testament to their own energy that the 2013 Giro is the most eagerly awaited for well over a decade. The future's bright. The future's pink. 

← The Bel Paese offers a dazzling array of possibilities...