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Batteries Power New Talk of Cheating in Cycling

By IAN AUSTEN

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Cycling's long history with doping means that any dramatic victory is as likely to create suspicion as admiration. But the whispers surrounding Fabian Cancellara's decisive wins in two of this spring's most important races have a novel twist: they accuse him of using a tiny electric motor to help power his legs.

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Lionel Bonaventure/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Swiss Fabian Cancellara has denied using motors in races.

Although no one offered proof, and Cancellara dismissed the allegations as "stupid," online speculation reached such a point that on Wednesday it crashed the Web servers of an Austrian company that makes an invisible motor system for bicycles. And the [International Cycling Union](#), while carefully noting that it is not investigating any specific rider or team, is reviewing the need for a new bicycle inspection system to detect motorized cheating.

Several weeks have passed since Cancellara, an Olympic champion from Switzerland, won [the Paris-Roubaix](#) and the [Tour of Flanders](#). The suspicions about his winning methods were outlined in a report shown last week by RAI, the Italian broadcaster, that did not mention his name.

In the [report](#), [Davide Cassani](#), a cycling commentator for the network and former professional rider, displayed a racing bicycle that looked normal. When he pressed a button hidden under the rubber hood of a brake lever, the pedals began turning, powered by a motor and batteries tucked into its frame.

Cassani, 49 and long retired, said the assistance of a motor might enable him to return to racing and win a stage of the Giro d'Italia, which ended Sunday. Such bicycles, he said, had been used by professional riders in races, but he offered no names.

The idea of motorized cheating strikes many in the cycling world as absurd. Nevertheless, some prominent professional riders are concerned that some of their race competitors may be motoring away from them. Marco Pinotti, an Italian [who races for HTC-Columbia](#), said that

when he first heard about the hidden motor, "it seemed a stupid thing."

"But then I came to know the technology," he added, "and I started making connections."

Because he lacked hard evidence, Pinotti, who finished ninth over all in the Giro d'Italia, declined to say who he thought might be using motorized assistance or in what races it might have been used.

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Cancellara is an exceptionally powerful cyclist and, as a result, often the subject of rumors. His victories in the Paris-Roubaix and Flanders races followed unusually strong attacks, swiftly prompting speculation about conventional doping in the cycling world.

The talk turned to mechanical cheating after Michele Bufalino, an Italian, posted a [YouTube video](#) combining Cassani's RAI report with video from an electric motor system maker and footage of Cancellara's big moves in the two spring races.

Bufalino slowed the action, somewhat like analyzing the Zapruder film, to focus on Cancellara's hand movements. The video's suggestion was that Cancellara pressed a hidden button to switch on a motor.

"It's so stupid, I'm speechless," Cancellara told Agence France-Presse on Tuesday. "It's quite funny, but it's become a bigger story and is no longer so funny. It's a sad and really outrageous story."

The speculation in the cycling community is that the powered bicycle contains a [Gruber Assist motor](#) from Austria.

Monika Schweitzer, the chief executive of Gruber, said she was surprised by the suspicion that her product could be used for professional-level cheating. Her staff struggled to revive her company's overwhelmed Web site on Wednesday.

The company's product, which sells for 2,000 to 2,200 euros, or about \$2,400 to \$2,650, depending on the battery, was intended for the aged, the injured and the infirm, and for recreational cyclists who want the boost of an electric motor without the embarrassment that comes from riding an obvious electric bicycle.

"It's an old person's look," she said of other electric bikes.

The Gruber Assist boosts riders' efforts rather than transforming their bicycles into motorbikes. Schweitzer said the system supplements a rider's input by an additional 100 to 110 watts. Given that a pro cyclist might typically produce about 400 watts during the final 30 minutes of a race, the device offers a significant gain despite a weight gain of about four pounds for the stock system.

Cyclists speculated that it would be used only to provide a short boost during races.

To accommodate a Gruber Assist, Schweitzer said, a racer's bike would have to be modified to hide the batteries inside the frame (they normally rest in an obvious saddle pack) and to alter the motor's gearing to match a high pedaling rate.

When operating, the Gruber Assist emits a distinctive whir, although Schweitzer acknowledged that the sound could easily be overwhelmed by the noise from crowds, helicopters, motorbikes and team cars that surround riders in major races.

Bicycle inspections are rare. Sometimes before high mountain stages in major races like the Giro d'Italia, they will be checked for compliance with minimum weight rules. Time trial bicycles are also scrutinized for compliance with complex aerodynamic regulations.

[In a statement](#), Cancellara's employer, Team Saxo Bank, dismissed the accusations.

"We are confident that the majority of those people who have come across this video see it for exactly what it is: a creative amateur artist's attempt to express a purely hypothetical idea that has no basis of fact or truth," the team, which is based in Denmark, said. "We are confident that the public can see through the nonsense this myth has presented and respect Fabian for what he is."

The cycling union expects to issue a statement on its plans, if any, to look for motors within two weeks, Enrico Carpani, a spokesman, said from Switzerland.

"Maybe we are facing a general problem," he said. "You never know with technology."

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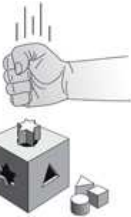


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