

Follow me!

In a sport where exposure is everything, can a rider's social media following be as important as their race wins? *Cyclist* finds out

Words **FELIXLOWE** Illustrations **ROB MILTON**

Sam Bewley has been cooking up a storm during the lockdown. The New Zealander, a pro with Mitchelton-Scott, has also been vacuuming, washing and cleaning, all while dishing out tips in a series of amusing online videos shared on his Twitter, Instagram and YouTube channels.

The idea originated on a team Zoom chat. 'He discussed how the riders recognised the importance of social media during this challenging period,' says Taryn Kirby, the team's communications director. 'He wanted to use our reputation of being an open and friendly team to create some individual, light-hearted content. We supported that and Bewley's lockdown videos were born.'

Make no mistake, the Kiwi is no Peter Sagan. With a combined 3.5 million followers across all platforms, the Slovakian showman is so popular he needs a social media manager to help juggle content. Sagan's take on staying safe at home saw him don a comedy helmet and perform squats on an exercise ball to 268,000 viewers on Twitter. Meanwhile, just 30-odd kindly souls from Bewley's 11,000 followers on Twitter 'liked' his lasagne cook-along. Still, you have to start somewhere - and it's not too late to join cycling's digital revolution.

There's gold in them thar clicks Twitter stage updates, Instagram live stories at races, behind-the-scenes footage on YouTube, Facebook Q&As... social media is fast becoming cycling's common currency. Videographers, designers and social media managers now rub shoulders with masseurs and soigneurs at races. The blue verification tick rules supreme; hashtags can win you contracts (as they did for Conor Dunne and Larry

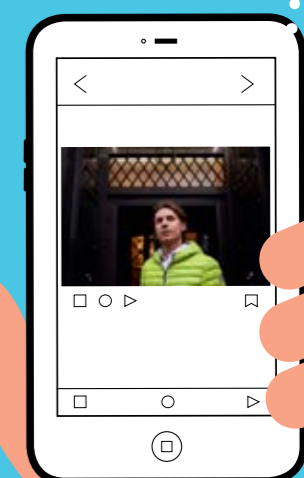
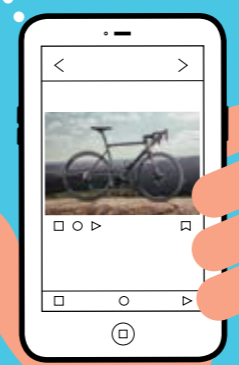
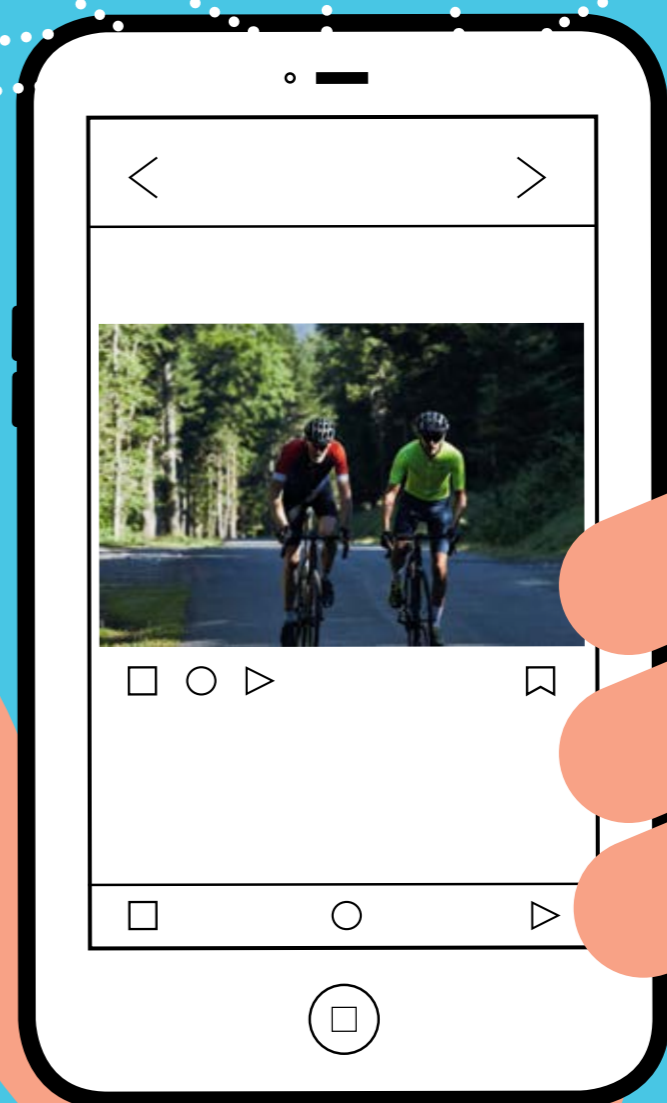
Mobile phones have revolutionised the sport of pro cycling - and not just because they make it easier for teams to communicate. Now it's all about riders engaging with fans

Warbasse after their #NoGoTour); and the mammoth Strava training ride almost rivals the Dauphiné as the pre-Tour de France psychological skirmish of choice.

'Social media has changed everything,' says Florent Poley, social media manager at Cofidis, the French team behind a sprawling catalogue of 500-plus rider and staff GIFs (animated images) that have amassed more than a billion views. 'Before, fans only saw riders in races on TV. Now they know what riders do before, during and after races - and what they get up to at home. Almost nothing is hidden.'

Riders have never been so engaged with fans, while helping their teams to build a community and keep sponsors happy.

'Without racing, we have to find other ways of giving something back,' says Sven Jonker, communications manager at Astana, one of the latest teams to jump on the social media bandwagon. Until recently, he says, 'Astana was really good with





the old-fashioned Russian way of communicating – to show nothing, to say nothing, to ignore everything.’

The Dutchman was brought in five years ago to help change the mindset and image of the team. Since then Astana has had viral hits for content as contrasting as Laurens De Vreese’s rap and a poignant tribute to the late Michele Scarponi, and is currently exploring possibilities in popular video-sharing service TikTok.

‘TikTok serves a much younger group, which isn’t directly relevant to

‘By giving fans what they want, riders can grow their following and therefore grow their own worth’

our sponsors, but who knows, they could develop over age,’ Jonker tells *Cyclist*. Social media is now fully integrated into Astana’s business model, with the team reporting back to investors each month on the reach generated with their name or logo. From this a media value can be equated and future contracts discussed.

Other teams should wise up to this, according to Xylon van Eyck, the founder of Believ Content Agency and former communications strategist with MTN-Qhubeka and Cervélo Bigla.

‘Teams should absolutely immediately start integrating social media in their business as a potential revenue stream and not a cost centre,’ says the South African. ‘This will take investment up front but can set you up for sustainability.’

For example, Astana are looking into selling products direct on Instagram, the fastest-growing social platform for cycling, with fans able

to click on photographs of clothing or equipment and be redirected to a centralised online store.

The Dutch Jumbo-Visma team has set up a subscription scheme allowing fans access to exclusive video content. Snippets are fed through their social channels, including the famous George Bennett quip about Chris Froome ‘doing a Landis’ in the 2018 Giro, and *directeur sportif* Addy Engels being caught short during last year’s race.

Perhaps the most stylish proponent of the video content craze to date is EF Education First, the American team that owes its very existence to an online crowdfunding campaign in 2018. Through its clothing sponsor Rapha, EF produce the dreamy *Gone Racing* series on YouTube (1.5 million views), catering for the pro racing market and the team’s alternative

racing calendar. Pouring resources and energy into non-racing activities is what sets EF apart, says Jonker.

King of Twitter

Not content with picking up stages in all three Grand Tours, Lotto-Soudal’s Thomas De Gendt has become the unofficial King of Twitter after being voted the Social Rider of 2019 in one online poll.

On Twitter, the Belgian breakaway artist leads the field with his blend of dry wit and self-deprecating humour. He gets what fans are after, whether that’s a photo of his race meals, a wry observation about off-season weight gain, or updates from his end-of-season bikepacking jaunts with teammate Tim Wellens (with its catchy hashtag #TheFinalBreakaway).

‘It’s nice to be voted most popular rider on Twitter,’ De Gendt tells us. ‘I just try to be genuine and tweet what’s on my mind and react to fans.’

According to Tom Copeland, a strategic sports communications specialist and director of PaceUp Media, De Gendt has successfully managed to use his social media channels to develop his identity.

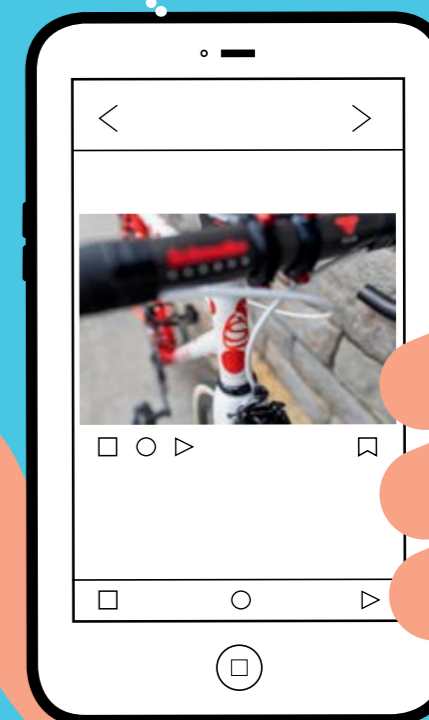
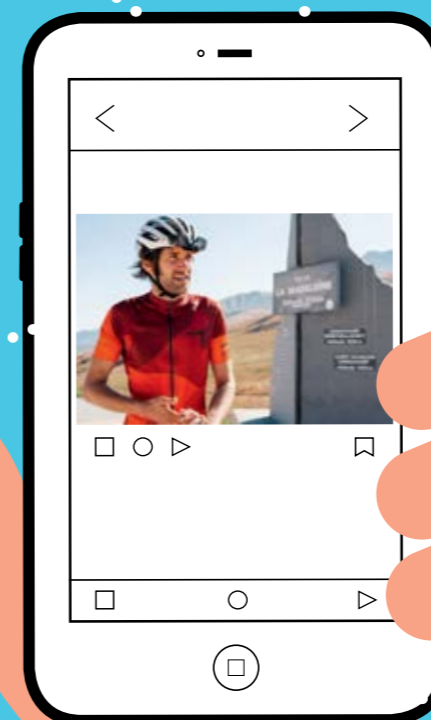
‘You can work out what he’s like to chat to just from looking at his social,’ says the former communications manager for Argos-Shimano. ‘His drive and sense of humour shines through, and that’s something a sponsor or brand can relate to.’

Copeland runs social media workshops for riders from a number of WorldTour teams, and believes the potential value of mastering the social game cannot be overestimated.

‘By giving fans what they want, riders can grow engagement, grow their following, and therefore grow their own worth for a potential new contract or for media opportunities post-racing. You can immediately put a pricetag on a million followers in a way you can’t do with 10,000.’

As well as Sagan, who has become a brand in himself, Copeland cites the likes of British duo Mark Cavendish and Alex Dowsett, Rigoberto Uran and De Gendt’s former teammate Adam Blythe as riders who have cottoned on to the potential rewards. With flair and a USP in loud shirts, Blythe (seen more in the Eurosport studio than in a Lotto jersey in his last year as a pro in 2019) is clearly toying with punditry.

No longer winning TTs or breaking the Hour record, Dowsett helps to keep himself relevant through a line in good humour on Twitter, cat photos on Instagram and a YouTube channel with his partner. ▶



Let’s social the hell out of it...

Three clear wins from the world of pro racing social media



CALL ME MAYBE

Orica-GreenEdge made hundreds of their Backstage Pass videos, but the most successful by far was the team’s version of the Carly Rae Jepsen song ‘Call Me Maybe’. With over 1.1m hits on YouTube and an airing on Eurosport, producer Dan Jones *definitely* received a few calls – no maybe about it.



#NOGOTOUR

When Larry Warbasse and Conor Dunne were left without a team following Aqua Blue’s mid-season fold in 2018 they went bikepacking in the Alps. Their #NoGo Tour took off, and both riders soon found new contracts – followed by podcasts, a film and, for Dunne, a presenting gig.



DOING A LANDIS

After Chris Froome pulled off an epic 80km breakaway on Stage 19 of the 2018 Giro d’Italia, Aussie George Bennett’s incredulous off-the-cuff remark that Froome ‘did a Landis’ went stratospheric. The snippet was heavily shared across all platforms to become one for the ages.

Mine's bigger than yours

Who's got the biggest following?

1.5m

Chris Froome Twitter

1m

Chris Froome Instagram

1.3m

Rigoberto Uran Twitter

1m

Rigoberto Uran Instagram

930,000

Peter Sagan Twitter

1.6m

Peter Sagan Instagram

90,000

Alex Dowsett Twitter

73,100

Alex Dowsett Instagram

75,000

Thomas De Gendt Twitter

70,500

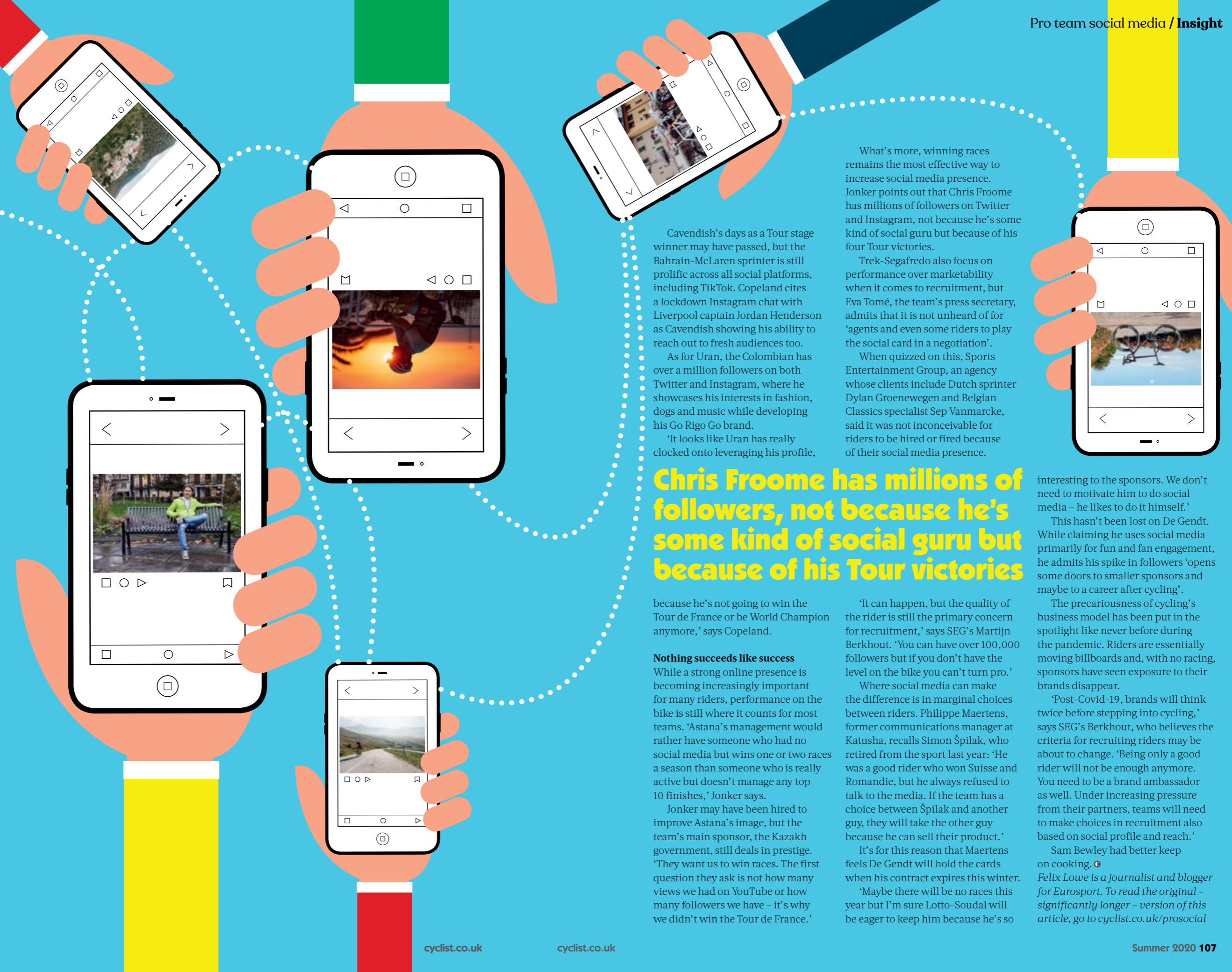
Thomas De Gendt Instagram

11,100

Sam Bewley Twitter

6,000

Sam Bewley Instagram



Cavendish's days as a Tour stage winner may have passed, but the Bahrain-McLaren sprinter is still prolific across all social platforms, including TikTok. Copeland cites a lockdown Instagram chat with Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson as Cavendish showing his ability to reach out to fresh audiences too.

As for Uran, the Colombian has over a million followers on both Twitter and Instagram, where he showcases his interests in fashion, dogs and music while developing his Go Rigo Go brand.

'It looks like Uran has really clocked onto leveraging his profile,

Chris Froome has millions of followers, not because he's some kind of social guru but because of his Tour victories

because he's not going to win the Tour de France or be World Champion anymore,' says Copeland.

Nothing succeeds like success

While a strong online presence is becoming increasingly important for many riders, performance on the bike is still where it counts for most teams. 'Astana's management would rather have someone who had no social media but wins one or two races a season than someone who is really active but doesn't manage any top 10 finishes,' Jonker says.

Jonker may have been hired to improve Astana's image, but the team's main sponsor, the Kazakh government, still deals in prestige. 'They want us to win races. The first question they ask is not how many views we had on YouTube or how many followers we have - it's why we didn't win the Tour de France.'

What's more, winning races remains the most effective way to increase social media presence. Jonker points out that Chris Froome has millions of followers on Twitter and Instagram, not because he's some kind of social guru but because of his four Tour victories.

Trek-Segafredo also focus on performance over marketability when it comes to recruitment, but Eva Tomé, the team's press secretary, admits that it is not unheard of for 'agents and even some riders to play the social card in a negotiation'.

When quizzed on this, Sports Entertainment Group, an agency whose clients include Dutch sprinter Dylan Groenewegen and Belgian Classics specialist Sep Vanmarcke, said it was not inconceivable for riders to be hired or fired because of their social media presence.

'It can happen, but the quality of the rider is still the primary concern for recruitment,' says SEG's Martijn Berkhout. 'You can have over 100,000 followers but if you don't have the level on the bike you can't turn pro.'

Where social media can make the difference is in marginal choices between riders. Philippe Maertens, former communications manager at Katusha, recalls Simon Špilak, who retired from the sport last year: 'He was a good rider who won Suisse and Romandie, but he always refused to talk to the media. If the team has a choice between Špilak and another guy, they will take the other guy because he can sell their product.'

It's for this reason that Maertens feels De Gendt will hold the cards when his contract expires this winter.

'Maybe there will be no races this year but I'm sure Lotto-Soudal will be eager to keep him because he's so

interesting to the sponsors. We don't need to motivate him to do social media - he likes to do it himself.'

This hasn't been lost on De Gendt. While claiming he uses social media primarily for fun and fan engagement, he admits his spike in followers 'opens some doors to smaller sponsors and maybe to a career after cycling'.

The precariousness of cycling's business model has been put in the spotlight like never before during the pandemic. Riders are essentially moving billboards and, with no racing, sponsors have seen exposure to their brands disappear.

'Post-Covid-19, brands will think twice before stepping into cycling,' says SEG's Berkhout, who believes the criteria for recruiting riders may be about to change. 'Being only a good rider will not be enough anymore. You need to be a brand ambassador as well. Under increasing pressure from their partners, teams will need to make choices in recruitment also based on social profile and reach.'

Sam Bewley had better keep on cooking. 🍲

Felix Lowe is a journalist and blogger for Eurosport. To read the original - significantly longer - version of this article, go to cyclist.co.uk/prosocial