

The Man Who Brought the Giro to Israel

HOW REAL-ESTATE MOGUL (AND FORMER WORLD TIME-TRIAL CHAMPION) SYLVAN ADAMS SECURED THE FIRST GRAND TOUR START OUTSIDE EUROPE

BY [ROY M. WALLACK](#) May 11, 2018



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Forget Chris Froome, attempting a [rare Giro-Tour double](#) this year. The biggest name in the first week of the 2018 Giro d'Italia was Sylvan Adams.

Adams, a Canadian real-estate billionaire and champion masters rider, was everywhere. He was on the Jumbotron framed by the ancient stone walls of Jerusalem, presenting the pink jersey to Stage 1 winner Tom Dumoulin. In Tel Aviv two days before, he unveiled the Middle East's first velodrome, which bore his name. On the bandstand after the Stage 3 finish on the Red Sea, he exhorted the crowd as the race's honorary president—a title he earned by single-handedly doing what had once been thought of as impossible: Staging the Giro's three-day Grande Partenza ("Big Start") in Israel, the first-ever Grand Tour start outside of Europe.

Though not without controversy that sparked [occasional protests](#), the Big Start went off without any violence or disruptions. Racers, organizers, and onlookers said they were impressed with the route and the crowds. For Israel, it was a three-day, two-wheeled celebration that turned Adams, unknown just a month before, into a household name. As Orly Genosar, an Israeli travel writer, told *Bicycling*, "He could run for prime minister and win."

Who is Sylvan Adams, and how did he pull this off?

The son of Quebec real-estate tycoon Marcel Adams, a Holocaust death camp escapee, Adams grew up a Zionist and visited Israel often. Now 59, he took up cycling in his 40s and became a multi-time Masters Category C national and world time-trial champion.



Spectators cheering on Stage 3 of the 2018 Giro d'Italia.

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On a trip four years ago, thinking about how he could promote cycling—a tiny and obscure sport in Israel, especially next to basketball and soccer—Adams had an idea: build a world-class velodrome in Tel Aviv, the country's business and population hub. Word spread fast. He was invited to ride with national champion Ran Margaliot, the first Israeli member of a pro European team and now the manager of Israel's only pro team, the Israel Cycling Academy (ICA). Adams decided to invest in the ICA, and two years later he and his wife unexpectedly moved to Israel.

Soon something even more unexpected happened. At a May 2016 dinner in Italy during that year's Giro, Adams was trying to persuade race director Mauro Vegni to commit to a future entry for his ICA team. He then made a crazy proposition: have the 2018 Big Start in Israel.

"I might have had a few drinks," Adams said. "Mauro thought I was joking."

But Vegni raised a tantalizing eyebrow. The Giro had previously started in France, Monaco, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia. The 2014 edition started in Belfast. In fact, the race starts in a non-Italian country every two years, and 2018 would be the Giro's 101th anniversary and Israel's 70th birthday.

In full pitch mode, Adams told him about Israel's roads and variety of mountains, desert, and seashore. That it had a growing cycling culture. That was safe—statistically safer, in fact, than some countries that had already hosted the Giro start.

And, of course, the heart of the argument: A Big Start in Israel would get lots of attention, and TV ratings.



Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldal, left, with Sylvan Adams at Israel's first velodrome.

Guy Wehler/Tel Aviv Municipality

Adams also mentioned a historic Italian-Israeli cycling connection. [Gino Bartali](#), Italy's legendary three-time Giro and two-time Tour de France champion, is a local hero. During the Holocaust, he saved about 800 Jews from Nazi gas chambers and risked his life dozens of times by pedaling through German lines with counterfeit documents hidden in his seat tube. Both men agreed to dedicate the 2018 Giro to Bartali's memory. (In a ceremony on May 2, Bartali's granddaughter, Guilia, received Gino's honorary Israeli citizenship—with Adams by her side, of course.)

Intrigued by the chance to expand the Giro brand, Vegni visited Adams in Israel to check out the infrastructure and topography. Negotiations lasted about a year, in which time Adams received an in-person blessing from Pope Francis, wooed the mayors of Jerusalem and his new hometown of Tel Aviv, and even got Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on a bike. He and Vegni shook hands at the last stage of the 2017 Giro in Milan.

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“It was a unique opportunity that was too big to turn down,” Vegni said. According to Amir Halevi, director general of Israel's Ministry of Tourism, the country paid \$4 million of the Giro's \$20 million price tag. Adams paid the rest.

“I want to develop the sport, which like all sports has the power to build bridges—between black and white, Arab and Jew,” Adams said. “Along with the Tel Aviv velodrome and bike paths, it can bring us together.”

Lior Federbusch, a Jerusalem print shop owner and longtime cyclist, hopes the race will have a unifying effect for spectators. “Whether they are Jews or Arabs, young, old, cyclist or no cyclist, they see the racers fly past and they think, ‘Someday I'm going to go get on a bike and go fast.’ Or maybe someday even do this race,” he said.

Roy Goldstein, 25, standing next to Federbusch on the Tel Aviv coast at the finishing chute of Stage 2, nodded. Goldstein is the third-best Israeli on the ICA, and just missed the Giro cut this year. “I was the next option,” he said. “But I'm signed for two years. I will make it next year. And someday, I will ride in Paris and in Rome.”

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