

boys to men

turning hopes into reality

Australian riders are a growing force in the pro peloton. One of the reasons for this recent boom is an interesting association between the national under-23 program and the Mapei-Quickstep team in Italy. **KATHIE STOVE** went to Reggio nell'Emilia last July to find out more.

The road world championships in October signalled a successful end to the Australian Institute of Sport under-23 cycling squad's season. It was also the end of a long stretch away from the comforts of their home and a normal social life. These young men, aged between 18 and 22, spend each year from mid-March until after the world championships with their coaches and support staff; living, breathing and eating cycling from a base at Reggio nell'Emilia in the north of Italy.

In 2001 up to nine riders made up the under-23 squad. The only non-Australian member was 18-year-old New Zealander, Jeremy Yates, who was there under a special arrangement to nurture the phenomenal talent he displayed in winning the junior road world championship in Plouay in 2000 as a team of one. Squad numbers were boosted by Australian cyclists visiting for shorter terms throughout the year, and for about six weeks when the junior (under-18) squad arrived just before the worlds.

Australia's head coach, Shayne Bannan, believes cycling requires a tough character and that the AIS program prepares these riders well for the rigours of the sport. Mapei-Quickstep agrees with this notion. The sponsor of the division-one team which won more races in the 2001 – despite losing their grip on the number-one ranking – is also a major sponsor of the under-23 team. In return for their support, one of the things they ask for is to have the first opportunity to discuss professional contracts with the riders from the AIS program. And they're taking advantage of this clause. Mapei have signed Allan Davis from the squad for 2002 when he will join former squad member Michael Rogers who has been with the team for a year.

When Bannan first joined the AIS in 1987 as a scholarship coach the Australian road program was based in Germany. Back then the roadies were used more as fodder for the track squad instead of being raised as future stars of the world's pelotons. The move to Italy was driven by racing and the need to survive.

"When the under-23 class was introduced in 1996 we examined the set-up in many places and decided on Italy," said Bannan of the squad which is under the guidance of Brian Stephens. "Italy has the best under-23 system and racing in Europe. To run a full program also costs a lot and the best chance of sponsorship is in Italy."

The squad originally settled in Tuscany where Bannan met Mapei talent scout and former team manager Valdemaro Bartolozzi on the roadside during a race. Bartolozzi had been watching the Australian cyclists and was impressed. The two met for dinner and discussed the Australian's philosophy of cycling. That discussion led to meetings with the Mapei team management and to the sponsorship.

Every six weeks, as part of the sponsorship deal during their time in Italy, the squad goes to the Mapei Centre in Castellanza, about two hours drive from Reggio Emilia. There they undergo a



doctor's physical check up and blood test, and VO2 max testing to chart the riders' physical progress throughout the season.

"Mapei functions on state of the art equipment and techniques, and is taking a line on being clean," Bannan said. "They have mandatory testing and random testing [of their riders for drugs], and are known for their training techniques and looking after their riders. Their facility is a great advantage for us."

The Mapei support is part of \$250,000 worth of in-kind sponsorship for the team including vehicles from Fiat, bikes from Bianchi, accommodation, bidons, pasta, oil and coffee – all of cycling's essentials. This matches the AIS contribution to the squad and the total gives the coaches what they need to get on with their jobs.

Two years ago the team moved north when a deal with Aqua Water System opened the way for sponsored accommodation in the Reggio Emilia area. Bannan and Brian Stephens are much happier now that their charges are away from 'touristy' Tuscany and that they no longer have to share accommodation with them. Each group has its own basic but roomy house; the under-23 men in the village of Campagnola and the Australian women's squad in the town of Novarela. Short-term visitors have to bunk in. >>

TESTING TIME | Allan Davis (above) is one of the latest Aussie riders to graduate to the pro ranks thanks to a contract with Mapei-Quickstep. Shayne Bannan and Brian Stephens (below) have established an infrastructure in Italy which allows Aussie hopefuls a better chance to turn pro.

