



#15 – The wheels are in motion!

Nacer Zorgani: We're back on the podcast to talk about the latest news from the Games! After the sailing events in Marseille, the triathlon and paratriathlon test event on the Pont Alexandre III in the heart of Paris, we're staying in the Ile-de-France region, because let's remember that these aren't just the Paris Games. We're going to focus on the mountain bike test event taking place at the Colline d'Élancourt, but that's not all as far as cycling is concerned. To tell us more, I've been joined by both Anne Murac, head of the Ile-de-France cluster, and Anne Le Page, cycling and paracycling manager for the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Thanks for being here!

I'll start with Anne Murac. Let's talk about the test event at the Colline d'Élancourt. So we're talking about mountain biking – what's it all about? What's going to happen?

Anne Murac: Since the start of the summer, Paris 2024 has wanted to test certain operations to ensure that the Games are delivered in the best possible conditions. And as the Colline d'Élancourt is a brand-new site, the mountain bike track needs to be tested, particularly with the athletes, to enable them to adapt, especially on their bikes. What type of bike, what type of technical skills will they need to perform at their best next summer? And so we took advantage of this test to organise a fully-fledged event, because as it's a fairly large new site, we need to be able to evaluate both the spectator flows and a number of other operations. And so, on 24 September, we will be welcoming 110 athletes, the best in the world, who'll be trying out the track for the first time. At the same time, Paris 2024 will be implementing security, public reception, food and entertainment operations, to see if everything we have planned actually works and how we can readapt immediately afterwards.

Nacer Zorgani: Geographically speaking, where is the site? Where is the Colline d'Élancourt located?

Anne Murac: Élancourt is located in the Yvelines department, in the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines conurbation, to be precise. When the town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines was built, all the soil and rubble was piled up there, making it the highest point in the Ile-de-France region, at 230 metres. So it's an artificial hill made of backfill on which three metres of topsoil was placed, and then nature took over. We were left with a green space that had to be revamped a bit in order to build this much-talked-about track.

Nacer Zorgani: The track that will host the mountain bike test events. So what is it all about?

Anne Le Page: So mountain biking, as the name suggests, is off-road biking with a significant elevation gain. The track we're going to have at Élancourt, and which will be tested on 24 September, is a little over 4.3 kilometres, almost 4.4 km to be precise, with a 100-metre climb. The track will be used by male and female athletes, each in turn, and the loop will be completed several times over a race time that will vary between 1 hour 20 minutes and 1 hour 40 minutes. The number of laps is announced before the start of the race.

Nacer Zorgani: And what exactly will happen during the test trials at Élancourt in September?

Anne Le Page: The athletes will arrive on site on 22 September. They'll have a chance to familiarise themselves with the track on foot before they start training. They'll spend two days training on their bikes, and they'll finish their weekend on the Colline d'Élancourt with two races, a women's race in the early afternoon and a men's race right after that. Honestly, on September 24, we're expecting to see the best athletes in the world, bearing in mind that we have athletes, without naming anyone in particular, who switch from one discipline to another, and in particular from road to mountain bike, on a regular basis. This is the only opportunity they'll have to ride the track and test themselves against other riders. So we're expecting a great line-up on September 24!

Nacer Zorgani: What are the dangers of mountain biking?

Anne Le Page: So I'm not going to talk about danger, but I'll talk about the technical zone, because we're on a track that is punctuated by ascents, descents, technical zones with rip-rap, jumps and vegetation that is incorporated into the construction of the track, so the athletes have to put all their technical skills to work to make the track their own and cross the finish line first.

Nacer Zorgani: And to be the best on this track...well, what's special about this track, Anne Murac?

Anne Murac: As I was saying, this hill was originally created from backfill, but vegetation has taken over and we had to mark out a track that avoided all the remarkable species and the wetlands that were found on this site. We carried out a kind of audit of the vegetation-related and environmental aspects of the hill, and then we worked with ecologists to mark out the track that would best fit into this site, to avoid having to remove trees and so on as much as possible.

Nacer Zorgani: And thereby preserving the biodiversity of the site. There are other sites not far from there and other events related to cycling, that great French passion. Can you tell us a bit more?

Anne Murac: Yes, just along the road, barely 10 kilometres away, we've also got a great epicentre of cycling activity, because there's the Vélodrome National, which will be hosting the track cycling events. And right next to the Vélodrome National, in the same complex, we have the BMX racing track, so within 10 kilometres of each other, we have a loop of Olympic and Paralympic cycling action that's going to be worth watching!

Nacer Zorgani: The Vélodrome National is home to the French Cycling Federation. Can you tell us a bit more about it for those of us who aren't familiar with track events?

Anne Le Page: We have two types of events: the so-called "sprint" events and "endurance" events. Within these two types of events, there will be individual events and team events. That's for the Olympic track cycling, and we have more or less the same thing in Paralympic track cycling, but there we have two types of bikes. There's the tandem for the visually impaired and the C category, which takes place with a conventional bike that has been adapted to meet the needs of certain types of disability.

Nacer Zorgani: Earlier, Anne Murac mentioned BMX racing. I think it's on the same site as the track events at the Vélodrome National.

Anne Le Page: Yes, we're lucky enough to have BMX racing right next to the Velodrome, a venue that has also hosted international competitions. What is BMX racing? It's eight athletes taking off from an eight-metre mound onto a track featuring bumps and bends. And once again, the aim is to finish first!

Nacer Zorgani: Can you tell us about the road cycling events, Anne Murac?

Anne Murac: In the Yvelines area, we'll also be hosting road races for both men and women, featuring some very symbolic locations, such as the Château de Versailles, the Château de Saint-Germain and areas where riders are used to racing, like the Vallée de Chevreuse, which is very well known in that domain. It's not a new thing to go to these areas because many races already exist. Nevertheless, I think that the uniqueness of the route will be evident in the centre of Paris, because we wanted to take the riders through some pretty unusual spots to both enhance the competition and offer viewers unprecedented images.

Nacer Zorgani: And that's what makes the Games so spectacular! We've been talking about the road events, but what road events specifically and what is the route like from a technical point of view?

Anne Le Page: We have several events. In road cycling, we have the road races, which are long mass races, particularly on the routes we'll have next summer. The women will cover 160 kilometres and the men around 280 kilometres, with a start and finish at the Trocadero, which is unique because it's never been done before. The routes will take in Yvelines, as Anne mentioned, on roads that are well known to amateur and professional cyclists alike, but above all there will be a loop around Montmartre and its surroundings, which is something new since no race has ever included the Butte de Montmartre, which promises to give us an exceptional climax since the last hurdle to overcome, the top of the Butte de Montmartre, is very close to the finish. We'll be just under 10 kilometres from the finish.

Nacer Zorgani: It promises to be a great finish, both for the Olympic and Paralympic events.

Anne Le Page: The Paralympic events will take place in Seine-Saint-Denis, in Clichy-sous-Bois. There we've got a loop that is just under 14 kilometres, which will be used several times depending on the class and type of bike. Earlier, we were talking about tandems and bikes for paracycling track events. Now, in the paracycling road events, we have two additional types of bikes: the handcycle and the tricycle.

Nacer Zorgani: I understand there are time trials as well...

Anne Le Page: Yes, we have Olympic and Paralympic time trials. I'm going to focus more on the Olympic events because we're on a different course. Unlike the Paralympic events, which will use the same loop as the Olympic time trials for the first time, we will have a course that is the same distance for both men and women. We'll be starting from an iconic site, Les Invalides, which we share with our archery colleagues, and we'll arrive at another iconic site, the Pont Alexandre III. Here too, it's a site that we share, but this time it's with our triathlon and paratriathlon colleagues.

Anne Murac: And that's not all – there will also be BMX freestyle at the Place de la Concorde! Just like we wanted to showcase the road events, the urban park at Place de la Concorde will also be showcasing BMX freestyle alongside 3x3 basketball, breaking and skateboarding.

Nacer Zorgani: So just to avoid any confusion, could you explain what BMX freestyle is, and how it is different from BMX racing?

Anne Le Page: Earlier, we were talking about BMX racing with eight athletes at the start. But BMX freestyle has nothing to do with that! It takes place in an urban park with features and ramps, and each athlete competes individually, with one minute to do as many tricks as possible, which are then judged.

Nacer Zorgani: Thank you very much for this introduction to the world of two-wheeled cycling. Let's go back to Élancourt. We've talked about the test event on 24 September and about what's going to happen during the Games. But what will become of the Colline d'Élancourt site after the Games?

Anne Murac: The work isn't finished because there's a legacy behind it, meaning that we weren't going to build a mountain bike track just for two days, obviously. And it's part of a programme that will leave the residents of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, as well as mountain bike fans, with a site that will enable them – if we can draw a parallel with a ski resort right in the heart of Élancourt and Trappes – to have both a family area and an introduction to cycling with a pump track and different mountain bike tracks, depending on their level. So there's a red track, a blue track, a green track and so on. And the Olympic black track, of course.

Nacer Zorgani: What is a pump track?

Anne Murac: A pump track is a fairly bumpy circuit that not only helps young kids to learn how to ride a bike but also enables teenagers to ride fairly quickly and also get a handle on skidding.

Nacer Zorgani: Thank you very much for joining us. See you on the 24th.

Both: Thank you, Nacer!