

When Did Sport Become So Unsporting?

The sporting summer of 2010: what will be the enduring memories of proceedings this year, I wonder? Will it be Mo Farah's momentous European Gold in the 10,000m? Maybe the Great Britain swimming team's best ever performance at the European Swimming Championships? I suspect not. My money's on this summer's sporting proceedings being remembered for all the wrong reasons.

The first sporting revelations of note came courtesy of cricket: England was playing host to Pakistan, as a potentially competitive series was about to be contested. Only a few days of glory were to be had, with fans celebrating the England men's team's 3-1 series victory. Little did we know that the actual explanation for England's apparent dominance was that Pakistan had other priorities, which didn't involve competitive cricket. As it transpires, four players from the Pakistan team were allegedly accepting money in return for deliberately bowling "no-balls"; information that could potentially be used in illegal betting scams. Cricket has been long cited as "the gentlemen's game" and held up historically as a sport with high moral and ethical standards. So how has an honest sport turned into a breeding ground for criminal activity?

There is an argument claiming that cricketers (especially on the Indian subcontinent) are easily enticed by financial "incentives" as they are paid a great deal less than footballers, golfers, Formula 1 drivers and tennis players. Whilst this is a tenable suggestion, the implications are wide-ranging. Are we, in effect, saying that low-paid athletes are more likely to cheat than those with fat pay packets? In 2009, Nelson Piquet Junior was found guilty of Formula 1 race fixing, so perhaps the question we should be considering is whether paying players to lose a couple of no-balls is viewed as a form of cheating in Pakistan. Maybe the acceptance and regularity of such events within the Pakistani cricketing community means that these actions are considered unremarkable. Fixed games, no matter to what degree, are meaningless. Sport is about the competition, the spectacle, the desire to win and arousing passion amongst players and spectators alike. What future then for a game that has deviated so widely from its original values?

The next question, indulged by the summer's "sporting" activities is: Where does one draw the line between one's professional and personal life? Not a difficult query to answer for the majority of us, unless of course you are a Premier League footballer. Being paid gargantuan sums of money a week for kicking a ball around a field apparently permits what you do in your spare time to be splashed all over the newspapers. We all enjoy the spectacle of



England's Ian Bell celebrates victory over Pakistan in the One Day International at Headingley

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the skill and technical prowess of our national sports stars, but should we really be worried about what they do off the pitch? Well, I suppose we should if it affects what they do on it. John Terry's alleged extramarital affair led to his unprecedented sacking as the national captain because the matter directly affected a teammate (Wayne Bridge). Yet, when Wayne Rooney allegedly decided to travel down the same route (in exchange for money), the exposure of said story actually improved his performance as he found the back of the net against the Swiss in the Euro 2012 qualifier in September.

It is widely recognized that Rooney put in mediocre displays in the earlier World Cup campaign, with speculation that his "extramarital" activities are to blame. Added to the rifflery are further examples of deplorable behaviour, observed this



Wayne Rooney became the winner at the World Cup

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year alone. Anecdotally, there have been reports of Rooney sweating 100 times in a 90-minute match. By my calculations, that's 1.1 observations per minute. Then there's the smoking, the drinking, the fixation with material wealth, the apparent vileness to message partners, the list goes on. It is no secret that professional footballers are widely recognised as having a positive impact on young people whether they like it or not. I have no doubt that Rooney would acknowledge this; however, this adulation does not come without responsibility. The clear distinctions between activities on and off the pitch are no longer mutually exclusive. What view of sport is he portraying to the young, a distasteful lesson in selfishness, immorality and cheating?

In my mind, the summer's proceedings heralded the destruction of the Confethan ideal that once characterised sport. It's time the relevant organisations took a stand before these sports are permanently scarred by players' intolerable actions. As sport and exercise professionals, the question we should be addressing is whether the demise of the true nature of sport may be putting our roles at risk or whether it is adding a new dimension. ■

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