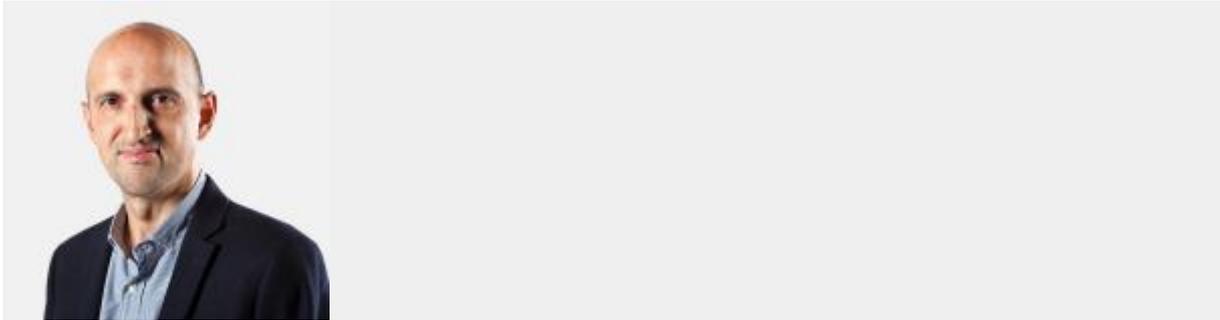


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Brownlees help to restore faith in sport

matthew syed, sports journalist of the year



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We know that human beings are inherently selfish. We are told that often enough. Isn't this the animating force that drove the evolution of our species (the selfish gene, and all that), the tendency that fuels capitalism, the basic spark that defines who we are?

Isn't it the thing, too, that explains our attraction to sport? These invented games seem to invoke and channel our innate selfishness. Wanting to win and seeking to deny one's opponent seem logically and emotionally synonymous. Capturing gold would have little meaning if every competitor received the prize too.

It took an instant for Alistair Brownlee to surrender his own ambitions to help his younger brother

Look a little deeper, however, and one begins to glimpse a more nuanced picture. We give to charities. Some donate blood. These are not selfish acts; they are altruistic ones. My first coach, Peter Charters, spent almost every afternoon for ten years helping a group of youngsters in suburban Reading to become better table tennis players, and better people.

Charters was not paid for his time, but that is what made his contribution so powerful. He inspired others to this spirit of sacrifice, sparked a sense of friendship that has lasted until this day. The club he created is still thriving, underpinned by unpaid volunteers. They remain one of the most impressive sports clubs in the country.

Self-interest is a key driver of human psychology, to be sure, but are there not other instincts too? Free markets gain much of their power from people trying to get ahead of each other, and a jolly good thing too. But they would not be able to operate, not for a second, were it not for a matrix of social instincts that are also quintessentially human.

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As Martin Wolf, the financial journalist, put it: “Society cannot function without a majority willing to play by the rules, without individuals demonstrating on a minute-by-minute basis their trustworthiness, reliability, courtesy and self-reliance.”

The same is true in sport. Watch a serious game of cricket and you see two teams competing fiercely, but you also see astonishing collaboration. For the match to take place at all requires the teams to adhere to a shared set of arbitrary laws (such as the lbw rule), a willingness to walk when given out, and conformity to a complex range of social conventions governing everything from the coin toss to tea.

You only have to imagine a group of chimpanzees attempting to play such an elaborate game to glimpse the scale of co-operation that enables a game of cricket to last for a few seconds, let alone five days. The chimps would walk away the moment it was in their self-interest to do so, not least to grab the food laid out for lunch.



Watch Alistair come to Jonny's aid

Sport evokes our prosocial and altruistic instincts in other ways too. Think of the role of the domestique in cycling. The sight of a professional cyclist riding ahead of a team-mate, punching a hole in the air, sprinting to the team car to fetch a bottle of water, is one of the most haunting in sport. Is it not a metaphor for co-operation and sacrifice?

Think, too, of a team such as the All Blacks, who take to the rugby pitch to defeat their opponents, but who also compete within a framework of loyalty and mutual support. The top players sweep the sheds after the matches to demonstrate that the greatest teams are not based upon individualism, but the willingness to subordinate self-interest to that of the collective.

And that brings me to one of the most powerful moments of the sporting year. It happened on Monday afternoon, on a volcanically hot day on the Mexican island of Cozumel. Two brothers from a village in West Yorkshire were competing in the final event of this year's world series triathlon, and the younger was leading as they neared the final dash to the line. It was then that his body started to shut down.

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The inner voice of Jonny Brownlee urged him to keep going. This young man, so proud and implacable, was now zigzagging across the road, head bouncing from side to side, eyes smarting in the haze, as the glycogen reserves finally ran dry. As he paused by a drinks station, and we wondered if the stewards might intervene, his brother suddenly loomed into shot.

It took an instant for Alistair Brownlee to surrender his own ambitions to help his younger brother. It was not a rational calculation, or a cost benefit analysis; it was an act of spontaneous humanity. Gently, he cradled Jonny, whispered something in his ear, and then started to coax him to the line. As they staggered forward, Jonny's legs still giddy, the crowd began to gasp, then applaud, then, fully encompassing the moment, to weep.



Alistair, left, surrendered his ambitions of winning the final world triathlon series event of 2016 to help his younger brother, Jonny, cross the finish line ELIZABETH RUIZ/GETTY IMAGES

In the aftermath people talked about a moment of “great sportsmanship”, and this, I think, is significant. In an age when sport has problems with cheating, doping, and bending the rules, we nevertheless continue to associate sport with something more than naked self-interest. We realise that there is an importance or value in competing in “the right way”, which transcends victory and defeat.

At the Rio Olympics, Nikki Hamblin, of New Zealand, stopped to assist America's Abbey D'Agostino after they fell to the ground in a 5,000m heat, jeopardising her chances of qualification. When Anton Gafarov, a Russian cross-country skier, was struggling to finish on a broken ski in the 2014 Winter Olympics, Justin Wadsworth, the Canadian coach, ran out to replace his damaged ski with a spare.

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We miss much about the meaning of sport when we position it as exclusively Darwinian, red in tooth and claw. Yes, competition and self-interest are central to the dynamic, but these intricate social institutions are also constructed upon a deeper spirit of collaboration and mutual respect. Cheating, we should remember, would have no meaning were it not for a critical mass of honest people willing to play by the rules.

When Alistair Brownlee stopped to help his brother (who later recovered in hospital), he evoked an instinct central to our species, one that, more than any other, distinguishes us from our fellow primates — and underpins civilisation. As Alistair put it so beautifully: “It was a natural human reaction to my brother but for anyone I would have done the same thing. I think it’s as close to death as you can be in sport.”

Wiggins is obliged to give us answers

There are a couple of things worth saying about the Sir Bradley Wiggins furore. The first is that the success of Team Sky is not constructed upon Therapeutic Use Exemptions (TUEs). The team have applied for 12 in seven years which, when you consider the number of races, doesn’t seem high, although it would be interesting to compare with rival teams.

Chris Froome has had two TUEs in his career — both known about well before the data hack — and none since 2014. In his Tour de France victory in 2015, when he was clearly ill during the last week (I saw this first-hand from within Team Sky), he refused to apply for a TUE precisely because he feared that it might overshadow his victory. He won the Tour again in 2016. That said, the three TUEs applied for by Wiggins do seem questionable. Why did these injections coincide with big races? Is it credible to justify his previous assertion that he didn’t have jabs by drawing a distinction between intravenous and intramuscular injections?

There are many other questions too. I understand Team Sky’s reluctance to comment on hacked data, but can there be any doubt that these issues are casting a shadow? The country remains behind them. The public recognise the jealousy their success has created (Froome had urine thrown in his face during the 2015 Tour) and abhor the Twitter trolls.

But they wish to hear answers to legitimate questions, and will continue to do so even if the sporting world, as it should on TUEs, moves to a system of complete transparency. It is in Team Sky’s own interests to explain the anomalies.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brownlees-help-to-restore-faith-in-sport-jhn3xdft6>