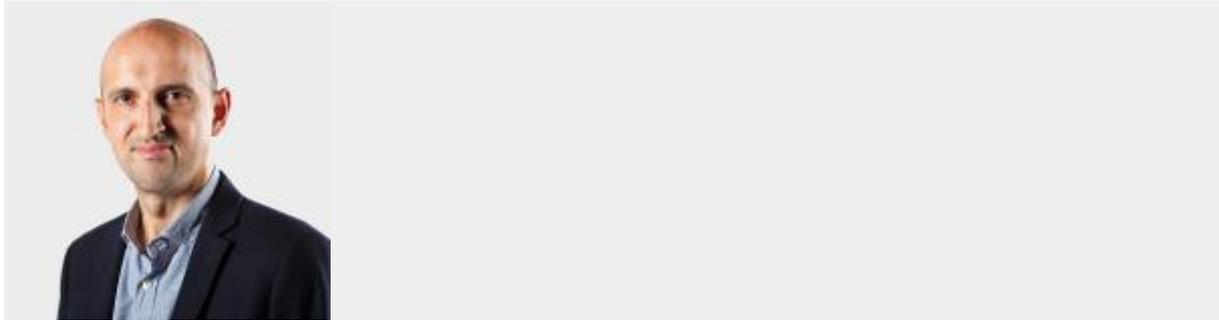


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Brazil's role model can't transform a nation on her own



Role models matter. When young people observe fantastic achievements of the kind delivered by our Olympians, they are inspired to do the same. They become more passionate, work harder and recover more readily from setbacks. It sounds almost miraculous, but it is true.

Consider the victory of Pak Se Ri, a 20-year-old South Korean, in the 1998 LPGA Championship. At that point South Korea had little history of female golfing success, and most experts considered the possibility of the Asian nation dominating the game rather fantastical.

And yet the number of South Koreans on the LPGA Tour began to grow. From only one in 1998 — Pak herself — it had risen to five by 2001, 16 by 2004 and a scarcely believable 33 by 2007. Her victory was like the flapping of the butterfly's wings, the stone that started an avalanche. She was, in terms of her sporting achievement, a role model.

As Inbee Park, the Olympic champion and seven-times major winner, put it: "I was very inspired by Pak Se Ri. At that time, not just me, but a lot of young girls like me picked up golf and wanted to be like her. It was very early in the morning, I was half asleep . . . there were a thousand replays after that. I liked what she did for the people of Korea."

Don't we see this cascade effect rather a lot in sport: an initial success inspiring others to reach for the same? It is implicated in the renaissance of British cycling, where the triumph of Chris Boardman was the first roll of the stone, the fillip given to British rowing by Sir Steve Redgrave and the momentum we see now in gymnastics. You can summarise it in the slogan: "If he (or she) can do it, we can too."

And this brings me to Rafaela Silva. She grew up in the City of God, a notorious favela in Rio de Janeiro, was introduced to judo at the age of seven, and became hooked. She started attending competitions, found herself improving, and was eventually selected for the national

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team. She won Brazil's first gold at the Rio Olympics, and yesterday rode back into the favela on top of a fire engine in a victory parade attended by thousands.

It is not surprising that commentators are hailing this as a watershed, a moment when a downtrodden community finally has an authentic role model. "This means so much," Adriele, a girl from the favela, said in a recent interview. "We are very proud, because it's someone who came from the same situation as we did . . . so then you think, 'Wow, I can get there, too.'" One commentator said: "This shows that people from the favelas can do anything if they put their minds to it. This could be a catalyst for real change."

But this is where I wish to sound a note of caution about role models. The success of Silva does indeed speak to the power of self-reliance and dedication, but it doesn't solve the structural injustices that disfigure Brazil. This is a nation where the richest 8 per cent have 50 per cent of the wealth. Education for the poor is a scandal. One report put it bottom for countries at the same stage of development. Perhaps the biggest problem is crime, where one survey showed that Brazil has 22 of the top 50 cities in the world by homicide rate.



Team GB arrive home

Discipline and dedication are marvellous qualities, to be sure, but it is difficult to make it to the top — even if you have the most inspirational role model — when you are fending off poverty and gangs, and where the schools are crumbling before your eyes.

And this is why high-profile success stories, while rather wonderful, have dual effects. On the one hand, they inspire the next generation; on the other, they can undermine the action required to provide people with opportunity.

It is this paradox that helps to explain why women's rights progressed so little under Margaret Thatcher. The former prime minister's indifference to the issue was clearly part of the problem, but the deeper catch was the assumption that her elevation revealed that British society was sufficiently meritocratic. If she could make it to the top, why not all women?

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This placed women in a curiously disadvantageous position, undermining the impetus to dismantle the subtle barriers that stood in their way.

The same has happened with Barack Obama. If a black man can make it to the White House, that shows that racism is all but defeated, doesn't it? It is no coincidence that civil rights have progressed so sluggishly over the past eight years, the inspirational effect of a black role model overwhelmed by the dynamic at play when people subconsciously assume that discrimination has been solved in the presence of a highly salient counterexample.

Silva, who was raised in the City of God favela, wins Brazil's first gold of Rio 2016
MARKUS SCHREIBER/AP

When it comes to role models, then, it pays to combat the most reductionist narrative. Max Whitlock is inspirational, but he would have got nowhere without outstanding coaches, state-of-the-art facilities and funding. Nicola Adams, who grew up on a council estate in Leeds, wouldn't have laced a glove, let alone made a podium, without an after-school club and Alwyn Belcher, a coach, who mentored her from the age of 15.

Similarly, who knows what would have happened to Silva without the opportunity of free lessons at a judo school created by Instituto Reacao, a charity set up by Flávio Canto, a Brazilian judoka who won bronze in Athens in 2004. As Silva put it: "Judo changed my life and became my life." She didn't just have Canto to look up to; she also had a meaningful pathway created by his generosity and commitment.

Look closely enough at the most individualistic story of success and you will see the subtle scaffolding that made it possible. And that is why role models don't show that "anyone can do it if they try hard enough". Rather, they show that success is created through the synthesis of individual dedication and collective action.

It is no coincidence that Team GB medallists — and, indeed, Silva — credited the amazing mentors, coaches and infrastructure that made their success possible. In a curious way, that made them the most powerful kind of role models of all.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brazils-role-model-cant-transform-a-nation-on-her-own-bn8z0sm15>