

Drugs in sport: a modest proposal

In the first of what we hope will become a regular feature for *The Leisure Review* we offer individuals working in sport, leisure and culture the opportunity to offer a way forward for the sector.

In his 1729 essay A Modest Proposal the lacerating satirist Jonathan Swift set forth a method of "preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country". His solution, closely and logically argued and based on complex and apparently scientific calculations, was to eat them.

We do not necessarily want you to propose something quite so extreme but we do suggest that a similar approach to the constrictions of convention might produce some interesting solutions to long-standing challenges in the sector.

To start everybody off our managing editor, Mick Owen, has put his mind to solving, once and for all, the problem of drugs in British sport.

Drugs in sport: a modest proposal

Before swimming imploded over the issue of performance-enhancing bathing suits and rugby union went into meltdown over blood capsules the toughest nut British sport had to solve was the perennial problem of performers taking drugs to help them run faster, jump higher or cycle up steeper hills.

And cycling is a good place to start on the solution. Much has been made of Bradley Wiggins' performance in this year's Tour de France – an event that has been rehabilitated in recent years as continental police forces have taken it upon themselves to track down and stop not only users but also suppliers and facilitators. Mechanics, physiotherapists and even parents have found themselves stopped at borders or roused out of their hotel in the early hours.

Bradley, of course, is clean. His success has not come out of the blue and a quick check on his CV shows the thing he did differently this year was simply to focus on the very singular challenge of making himself a contender for the general classification (GC) or overall title. Let's face it, when a treble Olympic gold medallist puts his mind to something the chances of success are slightly higher than when Jade Goody decided to give the London Marathon a go. Another cycling Brit who reaped the rewards of some specific preparation was sprint king Mark Cavendish, our own Mardy Manxman. His six stage victories – more than any single country managed to record – were the result of Team Columbia selecting eight men whose only role in life was to deliver Cav to the line and then release him. They did this with ruthless efficiency six times. And drugs don't help with the planning, mental toughness and sheer unbridled egomania that those big bunch sprints demand.

Interestingly, one of the many men in the peloton who has used performance enhancing drugs in the past is the Scot David Miller. He was caught, was contrite and was punished. He now leads the line when it comes to combating drug use in the sport he clearly loves. Happy to bury himself for his team in lone breakaways, on the approach to massive climbs and even in his own team's equivalent of Columbia's sprint train, he will never do it for his country. Because British Cycling will have nothing to do with drugs cheats, reformed or not, proven or not. Everybody in world cycling knows that Team GB don't cheat, at least not by using drugs. Cav would have won the green jersey if he hadn't cut across Norwegian sprinter Thor Hushovd in one town centre finish and lost 14 points, so 'holier than thou' is not a position we can espouse. But when it comes to drugs David Brailsford and his team "just say no".

While Wiggins, Cavendish, Miller and Charlie Wegelius – the mysterious 'Fourth Briton' on this year's Tour – were dragging themselves round France on two wheels, the man behind the medals in Beijing was also there. Director

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Brailsford: who would pass the test?

“It is this test that forms the basis of this modest proposal, which is that David Brailsford should be put in front of a TV camera and he alone should be asked who should be allowed to wear a British shirt, vest or swimsuit.”

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Brailsford, as is his wont, was making plans, increasingly detailed plans apparently, to put together a British road racing team capable of competing in the Grand Boucle thanks to Sky television's very deep pockets; and doing the odd piece to camera for ITV along the way. Over the three weeks, he made it clear that Team Sky will mix young, aspiring British riders with some old, foreign heads. Sadly, while it would be lovely to see all four of this year's complement in one team, it just won't happen, for a variety of reasons. Wegelius blotted his copy book some years ago by allegedly assisting an Italian team when he was wearing a British jersey; Cavendish's talent demands a team dedicated to sprint wins and 'we' are looking for GC success; Wiggins is contracted to Garmin-Slipstream; and Miller has the drugs skeleton in his closet. Which is a shame, because he is forthright, honourable, the epitome of the team player and has masses of experience to pass on. But he used drugs and so he fails the Brailsford Test.

And it is this test that forms the basis of this modest proposal, which is that David Brailsford should be put in front of a TV camera and he alone should be asked who should be allowed to wear a British shirt, vest or swimsuit. Any sport, any level, any time that the British flag is involved – or England lions or Scottish saltires or Welsh feathers or Irish harps (?) – that should be the only test. No ifs, buts or lawyers injunctions; just Brailsford's estimation of where you stand on drugs. In the first week of the Le Tour Brailsford was quizzed about his test. He explained it and the interviewer asked if Alberto Contador – the eventual winner and a man about whom suspicion is rife where doping is concerned – were to become available would Brailsford hire him. "No," he replied.

It's a simple response but then it's a simple test. Let's try it. Mr B, would you let David Miller wear a British cycling jersey? No. Can Tom Daley wear GB trunks? Yes. Rio Ferdinand? No. Dwayne Chambers? No. Paula Radcliffe? Yes. Christine Ohuruogo? No. At which point the marketing men who run UK Athletics, London 2012 and Boris Johnson's mayoral administration would show their true colours. The golden girl rejected? The face of the London Olympics expunged? The poster girl for a multi-racial, legacy-rich society disallowed from wearing the Union Jack on the little triangles of lycra they now call running vests? Yes. Yes. And Yes. You cheat using drugs, or you behave like a cheat, you go; whatever the lawyers and the marketeers and the media apologists say. Just like his would-be nemesis, Lance Armstrong, Contador has never failed a standard drugs test but in both cases the case against is damning. Like four Bath rugby players, countless rugby league players, Linford Christie and sadly triathlete Tim Don, whose response to a positive dope test was laudably Miileresque, if someone fails the Brailsford Test they should be ineligible to represent this country.

If you have a Modest Proposal that would solve a problem that the sport, leisure and culture sector is currently facing, please send your contribution to the editor, who can be contacted via the 'contact us' page.

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