

Fair play: right or wrong?

Thierry uses his hand, Deano uses a blood capsule and Lalit Modi allegedly uses some nefarious business practices while throughout the sporting world people cry “That’s not fair!” A new report, a forthcoming conference, some campaigns and a lot of column inches are being directed at the challenge of playing sport fairly. Mick Owen joins in with a review of the latest statistics.

“Sport cheats are bottom of the class in pupil poll” shouts the headline on the media release launching the Cricket Foundation’s research into cheating in sport, research which has been conducted among over 1,000 school children between the ages of eight and 16 from 17 population centres from Belfast to Norwich. The statistics are interesting – although much is made of answers to only six questions – but of more import is the use they are being put to and what that tells us about the state of British sport.

The research is being promulgated under the Chance to Shine brand, which, according to them, is “the single biggest school sport development initiative ever undertaken in Britain” and harnesses “the power of cricket to help young people acquire important skills, values and attitudes for their future lives”. Chance to Shine is supported by the MCC Spirit of Cricket campaign which worryingly is using the publication of the research to “re-launch” itself. Quite why the Marylebone Cricket Club’s campaign to “encourage young people – particularly schoolchildren – to get involved in cricket” and do so in line with the “Spirit of Cricket Preamble” to the “2000 Code 3rd Edition 2008” version of the Laws of Cricket would need to be re-launched begs questions about the relevance of cricket’s hierarchical structures to the “young people” they so wish to “engage”. And beyond cricket, the same questions must also be asked of any and all of sport’s guardians. Among those questions we would offer: “Is your pernickety regard for the nuances of your game driving young people away?” and “Is fair play one of the anachronisms that holds you back?”

Fair play is, it seems, flavour of the month with people who do everything for sport bar actually playing it. The CCPR, an “independent umbrella organisation for national governing and representative bodies of sport and recreation in the UK” have strap-lined their annual conference “Fair Play in Sport – Fact of Fantasy?” and will hope to fill the hall to debate it. Whether anyone will challenge Gordon Taylor of the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA) on the definition of ‘fair’ is moot. Is it fair for creditors of failing football clubs – and in Portsmouth FC’s case this includes the local butcher, a florist and the St John’s Ambulance brigade – to be left hanging while millionaire footballers are paid in full. Is it fair for one professional to feign injury in order to bring down retribution on another? And is it fair that an FA anti-homophobia video was scotched because PFA members refused to support it? Will Mr Taylor explain why “the Premier League didn’t think it was a big enough issue” to John Amaechi, a man who describes himself as a gay activist and with whom Taylor shares the CCPR platform? We would like to be there to find out.

Not that Premier League footballers decrying homophobia would have much effect, according to the Cricket Foundation figures which suggest that children are not influenced by role models. Question four on the survey was: “If a sportsperson you like does something unfair in a game to help them win, does that mean you are more likely to do it yourself?” With only 6.7% ticking the ‘yes’ box and 26.1% ‘maybe’, the suggestion is that all the work done with role models and champions is redundant. If so it would put Dame Kelly Holmes out of work but perhaps the truth is that most young people have fairly clear ideas of right and wrong, and even Thierry Henry cannot persuade most of them that deliberate handball is acceptable. This supposition is given substance by the answers to the fifth question: “When you see a sportsperson do something unfair in a game that helps them do better, which of these words are you most likely to use when talking about them?” Asked to choose between paired words, the respondents indicated clearly that cheating in professional sport is held to be wrong. Compare how many said “fake” (23.9%) rather than “cool” (3.6%); “stupid” (33%) not “clever” (3%); “wrong” (41.5%) not “excellent” (0.6%); and the most quoted of them all, “skilful” (1.6%) juxtaposed with “cheat” (72.2%). Does this say that children deplore cheating or that children can work out that “do something unfair” means “cheat”?

But picking holes in the language of surveys is not productive and the response to some of the earlier survey questions are salutary. When asked why they play sport 50.4% said “have fun”, 18.5% said “doing my best” and only 9.9% cited “winning” as their prime motivator. Curiously, the most important thing when playing sport for www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Fair play: the flavour of the month or an increasingly rare element of modern sport?

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2.5% of the young people was “not getting hurt” and 3% worried about “not losing”. Which means in a class of 36 children doing sport two of them are taking part but hating it. But the most worrisome of the outcomes is that reported with the words “unfair play is rife in school playing fields”. To the question “How often do you see someone doing something unfair in a team or individual sport you are playing in?” 37.3% ticked “a few times in a game” and 24.1% reckoned “some times, every other game or so”. Which is a lot of perceived cheating.

On the positive side the MCC’s head of cricket, John Stephenson, points to evidence that “lessons on MCC Spirit of Cricket can and do have a positive effect on how children play sport”. And the statistics back this up with a “like-for-like survey of two hundred eight to 11 year olds involved in the MCC Spirit of Cricket scheme” where “the number of children who witness unfair play in every game drops significantly to 37%. Equally, the number of children who say they ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ see unfair play (41%) is twice that of children who are not part of the fair play scheme (21%).”

Helping children understand the difference between good behaviour and bad is one of the main selling points of sport, alongside learning about competition and co-operation and giving them the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. Without these components our children may as well do some other form of active recreation in their ‘games’ lessons. The fact that children experience cheating, or perceive that they do, should be regarded as a positive because at some point they are going to have to learn how to deal with cheats in real life. Significantly, the number of respondents who take issue with the cheat – as opposed to ignoring the behaviour or telling an adult – leaps in the upper age groups, when young people have learned that this is the best way to deal with it. Letting cheats, liars and apologists know that you know them for what they are is a very adult approach and one we would commend to anyone who is going to be at the CCPR conference when Gordon Taylor gets on his feet.

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The Leisure Review, May 2010

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