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Blinding success: is winning worth the cost?

In recent years British sport has amassed medals, trophies and titles at an unprecedented rate but with the gleaming light of reflected glory now being used to read reports of falling participation rates, Jonathan Ives has begun to wonder it may be time to think the unthinkable: is winning all it's cracked up to be?

Bradley Wiggins' announcement that his time at Team Sky would be drawing to some sort of a close marked the end of an era for one of Britain's most celebrated sportsmen. It also marked the end of an era for Sky, British Cycling and perhaps for British sport.

Wiggins has always been an interesting character and something of a problem for many who follow sport, not least because calling him 'Wiggo' seems rather over familiar and, in common with many other prematurely ennobled athletes, 'Sir Bradley' seems a little overblown for someone who still rides a bike in the rain for a living. But however you refer to him and however you might perceive him (he has been variously charged with being both unnecessarily spiky and refreshingly down to earth, often at the same time), Wiggins' career in the professional peloton coincided with, and of course contributed to, a remarkable period of success in British sport.

"The suspicion remains that if success is only defined in terms of victory, so much of sport is lost."

The achievements of the past decade or so have been unprecedented, certainly for British Cycling but also for performers in so many other sports. With our national sporting expectations now recalibrated to make success the default position, the questions of how this success has been achieved and how it can be sustained are high on the agendas of agencies, organisations and governing bodies involved in all aspects of sport. UK Sport, the agency that has done so much to instigate, support and fund this success, is currently working on a consultation addressing just these issues [qv Wayne Allsopp's article elsewhere in the Leisure Review].

However, with sporting glory now in danger of becoming part of the British psyche (and how odd that feels for anyone over the age of 30), it might be an appropriate time to reflect on what has been gained in the process and at what cost. With the memories of London 2012 still fresh, such questions might seem an impertinence, anathema to the competitive spirit that has allowed us all to bask in this golden glow. With so many of our sports people, both in the arena and behind the scenes, setting the proverbial agenda or raising the metaphorical bar, how could anyone look askance?

Whisper it then, but is success all it's cracked up to be? Or, to put it another way, what is the point of winning? And if sport is all about winning, what is the point of sport?

Let's stay with Bradley for a moment. Even in the context of the London Olympics, the Grand Depart of the Tour de France was one of the biggest sporting events ever to be held in Britain and the arrival of the Tour in the UK was an acknowledgement by the Tour's organisers of the remarkable achievements of British Cycling (the national governing body) in transforming British cycling (the two-wheeled pursuit). From their status as occasional participants with occasional victories, British

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riders had taken their place among the most successful in the peloton and achieved such dominance on the track that the UCI, the world governing body, felt obliged to change the rules to let everyone else have a go. In the spring and early summer of 2014 as Yorkshire covered itself in Tour-themed knitting, significant space in the sports pages were given over to guessing how many British Tour professionals would be enjoying the rare privilege of riding over their own names on their own roads.

At Team Sky, the professional road racing arm of British Cycling, the debate was even further elevated, focusing on how many former winners of the Tour de France would be in the team. However, it soon became clear that the debate over which Tour victor was the most British (a Belgium-born son of an Australian father or an African-born son of a British mother meant it was a thornier problem than their accents might have suggested) was secondary to whether Wiggins, the UK's first winner of the Tour, would be allowed to ride at all.

To the non-cycling obsessed observer it seemed inconceivable that one of the most celebrated and successful riders ever to have taken out a British racing licence would not be taking his place on the start line. For the cycling aficionado it seemed inconceivable that a team established with the clear aim of developing British riders to take their place among the elite would not include the embodiment of their achievement: a lad from Camden Town brought through their development process to success on the track, a place in the European pro ranks and ultimately to cycling's biggest prize, the maillot jaune of the Tour de France.

The Wiggins-versus-Froome debate became increasingly unedifying for everyone involved. Froome, the title holder and acknowledged team leader, was obliged to deny that he had refused to have Wiggins in his team. Wiggins was obliged to try to hide his frustration and publicly pledge his efforts to a Froome victory. Dave Brailsford, head of Team Sky and the talisman of the British Cycling organisation, framed the whole debate in terms of picking a team that stood the best chance of winning the Tour. Everything on the Team Sky agenda was to be subordinated to the achievement of victory. If the question of what impact Wiggins' presence might have on the profile of the race among the British media and an increasingly cycling-savvy public was considered at all within the Team Sky management, it was a distant second to Team Sky's need to deliver their definition of success, which was simply to put Chris Froome on top of the podium in Paris.

Wiggins was not alone in being frustrated by the vagaries of selection – David Millar of Garmin-Sharp was denied the opportunity to ride in what he hoped was to have been his final Tour by team selection – and in the end only four British riders – Chris Froome, Mark Cavendish, Geraint Thomas and Simon Yates – rolled out at the Grand Depart and on to the roads of Yorkshire. Some commentators suggested that this reflected poorly on British Cycling's undoubted success in developing British talent and some even hinted that in not allowing a former winner to take his place in the peloton Team Sky had not show an appropriate level of respect for the race itself.

In the end, of course, Cavendish did not make it to France, Froome did not make it beyond stage five and Team Sky floundered as plans B, C and D were found wanting even as they were being hastily formulated. As Brailsford became cheerily resigned to simply enjoying the spectacle of a bike race, at least in front of the cameras, the question of whether Wiggins might have been better employed in France rather than training on his own in another country became the mootiest of moot points.

But so what? This may be of interest to the peloton fanboys and fangirls but what does it matter to British sport? The point is, we dare to suggest, is how we choose to define success. Brailsford's definition of success for Team Sky was simply to ensure that Chris Froome won the

Tour de France. At the outset, this vision of success, as a few Gauloises-infused traditionalists sagely noted, did not even extend to Team Sky winning the Tour; otherwise having a former winner on the team just in case might have seemed like a good idea. As Brailsford explained in the sorry aftermath of the race, nothing beyond victory was in his remit and Froome represented the best chance. Thus all the Sky-branded eggs were put in Chris Froome's basket; and all were broken before his bike even reached the cobbled roads of north-east France, where thought they would have been broken anyway.

Another definition of success for Team Sky would have been for this most professionally focused of professional sports teams to be mindful of its place at the pinnacle of British Cycling's development pyramid. In these terms, going into what was as close to a British Tour de France as we are likely to see with two British riders, only one of whom, Welshman Geraint Thomas, has come through the British Cycling ranks, could be seen as something approaching a dereliction of duty, an undermining of the entire principle and process that had enticed Rupert Murdoch's media behemoth to part with its unsentimental millions in the first place.

Wiggins' persona is not to everyone's taste but it seems likely that the story of Britain's first Tour winner riding in Britain's own Tour Grand Depart would have been irresistible to a sizeable proportion of the media, which would in turn have taken a sizeable proportion of the public with it. The profile of cycling, whether as transport or sport, could not help but have been raised, in line with the ambitions of British Cycling (upper-case C) as a national governing body and British cycling (lower-case C) as a positive contribution to the physical and cultural health and wellbeing of the nation. That the pre-eminent British road racing team had but two British riders and the whole of the peleton supplied only another two was a poor reflection on the transformational achievements of British Cycling and a massive promotional opportunity missed.

Putting the wheels to one side for a moment, the question of a what might be termed a misinterpretation of success is not confined to cycling. Take cricket as another example. The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) is very proud of its achievements in placing the England cricket team among those contesting the competitive peak. There have been Ashes wins, a tournament victory and ongoing success, all of which is underwritten by lucrative deals with subscription broadcasters. The ECB is more than happy to explain the importance of securing the highest bids for its broadcast rights and the contribution that these funds make to the success of the England team. It is less loquacious when discussing the declining participation figures and the impact that removing cricket from free-to-air television might have had on those considering their sporting options; or indeed the market rate for Test match tickets, which excludes all but the most well-heeled (some might say 'successful') of cricket supporters.

As so often in any discussion of sporting good sense and decency, the example of football need not detain us long but football's ubiquity requires that it is given at least a passing glance. In England the pinnacle of the game is the Premier League, which revels in its success as a supplier of hyperbole and superlatives, whether in terms of the success of its teams in Europe, the revenue-generating interest shown in the competition around the world, or the quality and cost of its players. Meanwhile, participation figures fall, pitches disappear, whether under mud or out of financial reach, and facilities continue their decline. In Scotland, the concept of an elite league demonstrated how quickly and totally the concentration of wealth could undermine a sport. In England, the once-unimaginable riches generated by their version of the elite continue to define success and, despite the Football Association, still notionally the national governing body of the sport, occasionally raising a polite cough of an alternative approach, the prevailing attitude

in the upper reaches of the professional game is that Nothing Can Go Wrong.

And what of the personification of the Premier League, the sine qua non of footballing success, Alex Ferguson? He is widely celebrated and feted as the most successful manager of all time but perhaps we should be wary of gauging his achievements in terms of his legacy to the club that was his fiefdom; it would not reflect well on his leadership credentials.

Having put football hastily back in its tarnished box, perhaps we can take a broader view of what success means. The suggestion that we have been witnesses to a golden age of British competitive success, a time of sporting legend, still seems defensible, and surely far from hyperbole. The achievements of British sport, in the shape of the sportsmen and women who have won medals and in terms of the organisations that have shaped their sports to make it possible, have been unprecedented and, quite properly, acknowledged, celebrated and rewarded. But the suspicion remains that if success is only defined in terms of victory, so much of sport is lost. As we continue to wonder at the declining interest in taking part in sport even as the interest in watching it drives ever-bigger broadcast deals, is it time to remind ourselves that winning is transient but the game and its playing is timeless.

Faced with the prospect of immediate riches, which of us would be able to remain steadfast in pursuit of the measured principles of the greater good? Perhaps "All that glisters is not gold" should be inscribed on every shirt and every door in British sport.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review.

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