

How character traits influence cheating in organized sports

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What drives professional sportspeople to break the rules of their sport in the hope that they won't get caught – and in the hope that it will bring glory to them and their team?

It's all down to character type, according to researchers at Bangor University's Institute for the Psychology of Elite Performance (IPEP).

Researching his final-year project at the University's School of Sport Health & Exercise Sciences, Ben Jones was surprised at how little research had been published on character traits and how they influence people's attitudes and behaviours within team sport environments. In particular, he was interested in how people with narcissistic character traits behave within teams.

Now studying for a PhD, the fruits of Ben's undergraduate work have just been published in an academic paper he has co-authored with academics at the School (Jones, B.D., Woodman, T., Barlow, M., & Roberts, R. (in press). The darker side of personality: Narcissism predicts moral disengagement and anti-social behaviour. *The Sport Psychologist*).

The research confirmed that people with narcissistic character traits become detached from morality and are prone to anti-sporting behaviours in team sports, which are likely to risk jeopardise the success of the team.

Ben explains: "Narcissists are highly ambitious individuals and have unusually high self-expectations. One might consider these to be essential ingredients for reaching and performing at the highest level in sport. However, it's the combination of a lack of empathy for others and self-obsession that gives them an edge which often means they will risk breaking the rules to achieve their own personal goals, ahead of the team's needs, because winning to them means so much. They seemingly convince themselves that moral standards do not apply to them and are able to justify their actions beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour, because these actions, however unacceptable, will assist them in achieving their overriding personal goal of appearing glorious in the eyes of others."

How damaging are narcissists in team sports?

Ben added: "Sometimes the people with narcissistic tendencies get away with this behaviour in teams. For example, many will remember Maradona and the infamous 'Hand of God' goal during the World Cup all those years ago.

"We're not suggesting that Maradona is a narcissist, but you could say that this is an example of an antisocial act which benefits a team, so why would you want to discourage it? Well, at other times, such behaviours have costed teams dearly. 30 years on, during the same tournament, the world observed an antisocial act on an unprecedented scale where Luis Suarez appeared to bite Italian player Giorgio Chiellini while playing for Uruguay. The incident went unpunished during the match, but Suarez was retrospectively banned for the rest of the tournament, and many say that this scuppered Uruguay's World Cup chances. So there are clearly different outcomes to such controversial and antisocial acts, and advancements in technology mean that there is no longer any hiding place for such actions."

Can we change people's behaviours?

Professor Tim Woodman, who also co-authored the article, explains:

"It is obviously very difficult to change people's personality fundamentally—and successful sports men and women undoubtedly require drive and self-belief in order to perform at such high levels. The challenge now, having established the facts, is to devise strategies for team coaches to encourage the positive behaviour from team members who may have this character trait. One idea we have is to focus on sharing responsibility across teams. Sharing the role of team captaincy, for example, would encourage players to assume responsibility for their actions and they would be setting an example for their teammates follow. Such an exercise would emphasise individuals' need to take responsibility for their actions and how it can contribute to the good of the team; we already know from previous research in sport that narcissists don't make the best leaders over a prolonged period, and so sharing that leadership duty is probably best."

Provided by Bangor University

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