

Sportspersonship – not just for a man

FAITH IN SPORT

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Examples of good sportspersonship are shaking hands (before and after the game), honesty, kindness, respect and sympathy. In sport, as across life itself, there are some outstanding examples to inspire the young. Here are a few.

While the Premier League is not always a great advert for sportspersonship, the Saudi Premier League made the headlines for all the right reasons with a heart-warming moment in 2013 between Al-Nahdha and Al-Ittihad.

There isn't much a goalkeeper can do if, wearing gloves, he finds his shoelace undone. However, instead of taking advantage, an opposing player knelt down and tied that shoelace. This lovely gesture was almost ruined by the referee, who penalised the goalkeeper for holding onto the ball for too long. Nevertheless, sportspersonship prevailed when the team awarded the free kick protested and kicked the ball into touch so that that goalkeeper's team would retain possession. Would that be replicated in our UK Premier League?

It's not just the boys that are fine sportsmen; hence the neologism of sportspersonship. In the women's team sprint cross-country skiing final at Turin 2006, the four powerhouse squads of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Canada were battling for gold. On the third lap of the six-lap race, the Canadian Sara Renner broke her ski pole and fell from first to fourth. The first person to react was Bjørnar, the coach of the Norwegian team that had just passed her. Håkensmoen rushed to Renner and handed her his team's spare pole, allowing Renner to remain in the race and finish second, while the Norwegian duo of Ella Gjømle and Marit Bjørgen finished fourth.

Following the race, Håkensmoen said: "The Olympic spirit is the way we try to follow. Without that, we are in big trouble. Every skier, every staff member from Norway follows that. If you win, but don't help somebody when you should have, what win is that?"

Håkensmoen received universal praise for his actions, while the Norwegian embassy in Canada received over 600 letters, telephone calls and e-mails of thanks. Canadian businessman Michael Page donated 7400 cans of maple syrup to the Norwegian Olympic Committee, and Renner herself sent Håkensmoen a bottle of wine as a token of her gratitude.

Back to the boys. When Anton Gafarov, an acclaimed Russian skier, found himself with a broken

Paolo Di Canio holds the ball so Everton keeper Gerrard can receive treatment.



ski at the 2018 Winter Olympic Games, he didn't give up. There was no way he could earn a medal in the event, but he continued to walk toward the goal with his remaining ski. This, on its own, would have been a great example of perseverance: But Canadian ski coach Justin Wadsworth took it a step further. His team, already out of the race, had a ski to spare. He gave it to Gafarov so the latter could continue on and was placed second in the quarter-finals.

"Lutz Long makes history with Jesse Owens" ran the 1936 headlines during the Berlin Olympics. The story behind this, as the Italians would say: *Se non è vero, è molto ben trovato* – if it is not true, it is a happy invention.

The competition between American Owens and the German Long resulted in a mythological story of friendship. Both men were accomplished long jumpers, with Owens holding the world record and Long holding the European one. Owens, however, fouled in his first two jumps in the qualifying round. He needed a successful jump, of at least 7.15 metres, to advance to the semi-final round.

Owens later said that Long came over to him with advice. Owens should jump from a few inches before the take-off board to avoid the risk of another fault. The theory was that Owens would still clear the required distance even with the handicap of jumping early.

In any case, Owens successfully made his third jump at 7.64 metres, advancing to the semi-final round. He and Long each beat the old Olympic record of 7.765 metres multiple times in the semi-final and final rounds. Owens finished with a best jump of 8.06 metres to Long's 7.87 metres. Now, if not before, the two met and became friends. Long was the first to congratulate Owens, embracing the African-American in front of Adolf

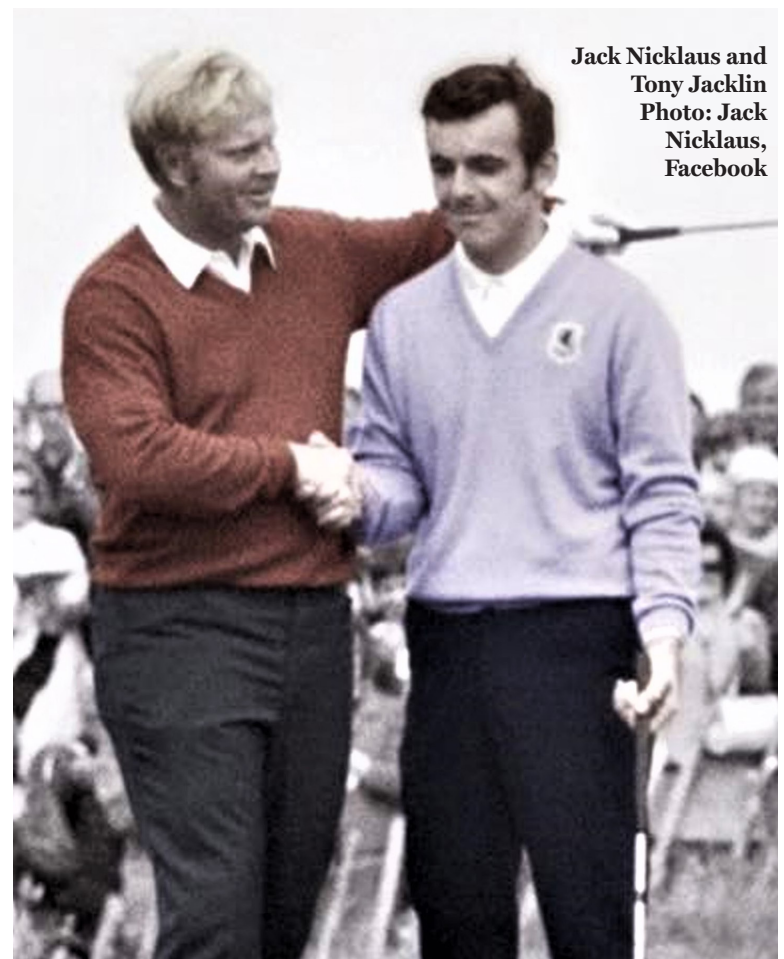
Hitler. That night, Jesse walked over to Long's room to thank him. They sat and talked for two hours.

The two men corresponded after the Games until the Biscari massacre: a war crime committed by members of the United States Army at the Regia Aeronautica's 504 air base in Santo Pietro, a small village near Caltagirone, southern Sicily, Italy on 14th July 1943. There, US soldiers killed 71 unarmed Italians and two German prisoners of war, one of whom was Lutz Long.

However, this 'documentary Jesse Owens returns to Berlin' was apocryphal. Legendary sportswriter Grantland Rice was watching Owens the entirety of the qualifying round and did not see him speak to Long. Olympic Historian Tom Ecker relates that he asked Owens about the story in 1965 and Owens admitted that, though not true, it was a jolly good story. In the event, years later, Owens was the best man at the wedding of Long's son. That serious, trans-racial friendship was enduringly real.

John Landy of Australia is known as the second man to ever break the four-minute mile. It was an achievement most people believed was not possible, but he did it, 46 days after Englishman Roger Bannister. During the 1956 Australian National Championships, Landy was in a race when a competitor, 19-year old Ron Clarke, fell before him. Landy initially jumped over Clarke but scraped him with his cleats while doing so. Landy stopped to make sure Clarke was okay before re-joining the race – and still managed to finish first, in 4 minutes, 4 seconds.

Jack Nicklaus was known as a personable and professional figure throughout his golf career. In 1969, while representing the United States in the Ryder Cup, he was tied with Englishman Tony Jacklin on the 18th hole, in the last match



Jack Nicklaus and Tony Jacklin
Photo: Jack Nicklaus, Facebook

of the competition. Nicklaus sank his four-foot putt to make par, leaving Jacklin to make one of a similar length to force a tie – the first time GB & Ireland would have prevented the Americans from winning the cup for some time. But before his rival could take his own putt, Nicklaus conceded it, ensuring the competition was tied. Nothing like that had happened in the 42-year history of the Cup.

Back to the football. In an otherwise forgettable Premier League game between Everton and West Ham, Everton goalkeeper Paul Gerrard hurt his knee. It was unclear how serious the injury was, but Gerrard was lying on the field in obvious pain. As play continued, West Ham's Paolo di Canio caught a pass and kept the ball so there would be sufficient time for Gerrard to receive treatment.

Di Canio's selflessness may have cost his team an easy goal, but it provoked a standing ovation from the crowd – and he was honoured with FIFA's Fair Play Award of 2001.

Not every sport gives athletes the chance to interact with the outside world during play. For Pete Goss, it made all the difference. It was Christmas Day 1996, and Goss was in the middle of the Vendee Globe yacht race – a competition that sent racers all around the world. It looked like an ordinary day of racing until Goss received a mayday from competitor Raphael Dinelli. Dinelli, a Frenchman, had wrecked during a storm in the Southern Ocean. Goss detoured from the race to mount a rescue effort, sailing into hurricane-force winds

in the process.

Let's end this first instalment with the girls.

A New Zealand and US athlete was praised for embodying the Olympic spirit after they stopped to help each other up after falling together midway through their race. New Zealand Distance runner Nikki Hamblin and US runner Abbey D'Agostino were four laps from the end of the 5,000m in Rio when they collided. Hamblin, bunched tightly in the mass of running women, stumbled and fell face forwards, causing her US competitor D'Agostino – who was running directly behind her – to hit the track as well, falling on the side of her body.

As Hamblin lay in the foetal position on the track D'Agostino jumped up quickly and pulled the New Zealander to her feet.

Moments after the two athletes had started running again, D'Agostino began faltering, her right leg injured as a result of the fall. In severe pain, D'Agostino fell again to the ground, crouching on all fours on the Olympic track, her face showing she was in pain. Hamblin stopped running and turned to D'Agostino, reaching for her with two open arms – the race and Olympic glory now forgotten.

"When I went down it was like, 'what's happening? Why am I on the ground?' Hamblin said after the race. "And suddenly there's this hand on my shoulder, like 'get up, get up, we have to finish this!' I'm so grateful for Abbey for doing that for me. That girl is the Olympic spirit right there." "I've never met her before. Isn't that so amazing?"