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**SPORT &
COMPETITION**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“IN SPORT, WINNING
IS EVERYTHING”**

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INTRODUCTION

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Even if not everyone is familiar with the name Bishop Ethelbert Talbot, they are familiar with his sentiment that ‘The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part.’ This was adopted as part of the Olympic creed by the founder of the modern Olympiad, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. But try telling that to those celebrating Team GB’s success in the Beijing Olympics. Everyone from footballers to tennis players and even equestrianists are being told to show more competitive ruthlessness as the rest of British sport suffers under a weight of comparative failure. Yet at the same time footballers and cricketers are under fire for showing bad sportsmanship and there are general laments for the loss of fun and decency, which are now a rarity in sport. Ed Smith puts the blame on the rise of professionalism and the loss of amateur principles, but Stephen Jones sees the benefit professionalism has had on rugby union. Behind these debates lurks a lingering tension – what is sport for? Some suggest it is a spectacle, either for entertainment or admiring excellence. Others find its purpose in the transcendence of boundaries and the limits of human potential. The Victorians held it to have a civilising purpose teaching moral principles, and some feel this still has relevance. Today the government chiefly promotes its benefits in terms of tackling obesity, social exclusion and youth crime. Tim Black argues that in using sport as a tool for social engineering we are losing many of the positive inspirational attributes associated with competition, while David Mitchell wonders whether this is a price worth paying. Is winning (and losing) integral to the purpose and pleasure of sport, or can we still get those benefits through non-competition?

What does sporting success mean to us?

The 2003 Rugby World Cup, the 2005 Ashes...Beijing 2008? Despite one-off successes, national teams and performers have had little sustained sporting success recently – Andrew Anthony bemoans the English acceptance of failure and celebration of losers instead of their outrage at national mismanagement and collective lack of ambition. But Richard Beard argues that it is only arrogance which leads us to demand victories we have no right to expect. Does Britain really want winners? In swimming, the ‘tough-guy’ coach Bill Sweetenham faced criticism for his severe methods. But the performance of the GB team in 2008 shows he got results. Nicky Campbell bemoaned the lack of emphasis on competitive sport in schools, but Clint Witchalls feels that elitism prevents all but the best from enjoying and maintaining an interest in sport. Do we have to choose between cultivating victorious sports teams and trying to make sure every child takes part in regular exercise? Ariel Leve points out that even top Olympians invariably lose, but they still go out and compete. Can competition actually inspire broader participation?

Everyone loves a winner?

If sport were simply about winning, then the most successful figures would surely be cherished icons. But despite his status as the most successful Olympian of all time, Simon Barnes had to defend Michael Phelps against charges of being boring – and that nearly every great champion is hated as much as they’re respected. In almost every case they defeated beloved English icons frequently praised for their decency and fair play: Tim Henman (Sampras), Gary Lineker (Maradona) and English cricketers (West Indies). Duleep Allirajah makes the point that

only losers are concerned with sportsmanship – which is why the British fetishise it. But Barnes could counter that there have been many ‘nice guys’ who also finished first. Do we want sport stars who seek to win at almost any price, including bending if not breaking the rules, or is there something less satisfying about a victory that hasn’t been won in the ‘right’ way? If she had knocked her rival off as well at Beijing would Gordon Brown be praising Shanaze Reade’s ‘gold or nothing’ approach?

To cheat or not to cheat?

Cheating has already ruined many sports, says Martin Jacques, and will only get worse as more money becomes involved. Drugs scandals and blatant illegality ruin the ethos and spectacle of competition. But David Lacey observes that the rules of sport can be arbitrary and transitory, and there is a difference between cheating and bending them to the absolute limit – the former spoils the game, while the latter is as much a sporting skill as technical ability or stamina. The economist Stephen J. Dubner wonders whether the ‘cat-and-mouse’ element to cheating rows actually complements the drama of sport – in which case we need cheats as much as honest competitors. David Hopps observes that gamesmanship can often inspire the opposition as much as it benefits you. Chei Amlani feels that rule-bending has always had a place in sport, that we should expect professional sportspeople to do everything to win, and that it is the authorities’ job to stop them. But can it go too far? While Harbhajan Singh was cleared of using racist language, can we distinguish between ‘mental attrition’ and offensive abuse? What kind of example are the professionals setting to impressionable youngsters?

ESSENTIAL READING

Born to lose

Andrew Anthony *Observer Sport Monthly* 25 November 2007

Knocking school sports for six

Tim Black *spiked* 23 October 2007

Rooney or Saha? Why sporting excellence should be celebrated

Martin Samuel *The Times* 6 July 2005

FOR

The joy of Michael Phelps' epic journey

Simon Barnes *The Times* 14 August 2008

Forget sportsmanship – it's all about winning

Duleep Allirajah *spiked* 11 July 2008

Winners don't always play by the rules

Terence Blacker *Independent* 11 April 2008

The joy of winning is nothing without the trauma of losing

Nicky Campbell *Guardian* 19 July 2007

AGAINST

Cassandra: Losers are the unsung heroes of sport

Ariel Leve *The Sunday Times* 17 August 2008

Britain is not ghastly enough to spawn winners

David Mitchell *Guardian* 26 June 2008

Death of madcap age and mentality of win at all costs leaves
football bereft of fun and games

Simon Barnes *The Times* 3 March 2006

Why I want to ban sports day

Clint Witchalls *Guardian* 14 July 2004

IN DEPTH

Amateurism in its best sense can still serve as an inspiration

Ed Smith *The Times* 3 March 2008

Sledging reaches a tipping point

Mike Atherton *Telegraph* 13 January 2008

The mysterious unfairness of grace

Catherine Fox *The Times* 28 July 2007

Is it only cheating if you get caught?

Chei Amlani *Telegraph.co.uk Blog* 26 August 2006

Why a sliver of sportsmanship tastes just as good as feud,
glorious feud

Simon Barnes *The Times* 23 December 2005

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BACKGROUNDEERS

The English: Sports mad or daft losers?

Matt Dickinson *The Times* 8 July 2008

Freakonomics: Is cheating good for sports?

Stephen J. Dubner *The New York Times Blog* 21 February 2008

Size matters in international rugby

Stephen Jones *The Sunday Times* 3 February 2008

Keep class out of it. In sport, you are either good enough or you're not

Simon Barnes *The Times* 25 January 2008

Nice guys can finish first, but not if you play for Australia

Simon Barnes *The Times* 21 January 2008

Is Britain a nation of sporting losers?

Richard Beard *Battles in Print* 1 September 2007

Time to clamp down on the gamesmanship

David Hopps *Guardian Sport Blog* 31 July 2007

The Olympic Symbols

Olympic Museum 2007

Ubiquitous cheating means sport is no longer a level playing field

Martin Jacques *Guardian* 19 August 2006

Deceived by a glimpse of greatness

Simon Barnes *The Times* 16 March 2006

The difference between cheating and cunning: always blurred

David Lacey *Guardian* 13 November 2004

The Athens Olympics

BBC November 2004

Should champions be hated? The eyes have it

Simon Barnes *The Times* 30 April 2004

Boyz with bats

Edward Smith *Prospect* March 1999

Beijing Blog

Simon Barnes *The Times*

Extra Time

The Independent

Competitive Copy: Dan Travis

Olympic blog

Geoff Kidder *Culture Wars*

The inside line on sport

Mihir Bose *BBC Sport*

ORGANISATIONS

British Olympic Association

Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR)

Department for Culture, Media and Sport

International Olympic Committee

Manifesto Club: Campaign for Competitive Sport

Sport England

Sports Coach UK

The FA ban on competitive league games for under-8s

The FA Respect campaign

UK Athletics

Youth Sport Trust

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IN THE NEWS

British athletes 'to get honours'

BBC News 23 August 2008

Reade crashes out of BMX finals

BBC Sport 22 August 2008

Time to show ref some respect

Paul Wilson *Observer* 10 August 2008

Cheats may kill off sport, says WADA chief

Simon Turnbull *Independent* 8 August 2008

Thompson: 'Cheating bastard' Chambers should never be allowed to run again

Guardian 14 July 2008

Collingwood apologises for 'error of judgement'

BBC News 26 June 2008

Murray looks to improve behaviour

BBC Sport 20 May 2008

Wenger insists that 'winning is not everything'

Jason Burt *Independent* 8 March 2008

Harbhajan was lucky, says judge

BBC News 30 January 2008

'Bullying' casts shadow over cricket

Rohit Brijnath *BBC News* 11 January 2008

Show bad sports the red card

Independent 22 April 2007

Competitive sport is 'essential'

BBC News 1 February 2007

Rusedski: British tennis must develop a winning mentality

Guardian 9 December 2006

School sports day puts children off sport – MP

Daily Echo 11 October 2006

Davies backs Sweetenham

BBC Sport 10 January 2006

Sweetenham is cleared of bullying

BBC Sport 4 January 2006

Sport cheats 'set bad example'

BBC News 22 September 2005

Olympics 'to boost school sports'

BBC News 7 July 2005

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ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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Professional role
(if applicable)

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Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“DEBATING MATTERS
TEACHES A WAY
OF THINKING.
INTELLECTUAL
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TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER

