

So, what do

Norwich Union has published a survey entitled Listening to Tomorrow's Athletes, which investigates young people's attitudes towards sporting activity. Here's what it revealed

It is no secret that activity levels among today's youngsters are on the decline. According to Sport England's own research, the number of young people not taking part in any sport at school on a regular basis increased from 15 per cent in 1994 to 18 per cent in 2002. Countless medical studies have shown that, in the UK, a combination of dwindling exercise levels and high-fat junk food diets have led to a generation of children with waistlines expanding faster than those in any other European country.

Many of the statistics are concerning. Compared with the 1980s, four times as many British children are now clinically obese, and almost a third are either overweight or obese. By the age of 15, it is estimated that around half of all children born in 1991 will be overweight or clinically obese. Experts have warned that their couch-potato lifestyle is a ticking time bomb, and that such children face an unhealthy adulthood. Strokes, heart disease and diabetes are all linked to early onset obesity. The cost to the nation is also huge. The UK National Audit Office predicts that, unless there is significant change, disease brought on early by obesity will be costing the country more than £3.6 billion by 2010. What is clear from this report is that both parents and young people are in denial on the issue of obesity.

While there has been much investigative interest in the health consequences of the 'teletubby' generation, there is relatively little evidence as to why the trend for inactivity and calorific diets is continuing to rise. Why is it that children spend so little time exercising? Is it just that they can't be bothered? Or are computer games, television programmes and burgeoning amounts of homework eating into their free time to such an extent that they are too time-crunched to get fit?

Norwich Union has a unique platform from which to explore these reasons, and to find out why so few children appear reluctant to break into a sweat,



and why so many are turning their backs on sport. As the principal sponsor of athletics in the UK, Norwich Union is involved at every level of sport from grass roots through to the elite athletes of the Great Britain team.

As an insurance company with a vested interest in preserving the health of the nation, it is in an ideal position to provide an in-depth analysis of where things are going wrong – as well as how they might be improved. In the *Listening to Tomorrow's Athletes* survey, Norwich Union's aim is to uncover the underlying reasons behind the plummeting activity levels. Through interviews conducted by Kids and Youth, a research company with a specialist

knowledge of the youth market, Norwich Union hoped to gain a thorough understanding of every aspect influencing children's exercise levels in the UK.

For qualitative findings, eight discussion groups were held in cities around the UK, with both boys and girls aged from nine to 14 represented, along with mothers of children of similar ages. All were asked about their interests outside sport, their perceptions of physical activity and the influence of sporting role models.

In the quantitative research, eight- to 14-year-old kids and parents of differing backgrounds and from different parts of the UK were surveyed by email.

kids want?



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More than 1,000 children aged from eight to 14 and more than 500 parents from across the UK were questioned extensively about their opinions, attitudes and motivation for children's sport, as well as their current activity levels and the amount of time dedicated to exercise, both in and out of school.

Encouragingly, buried beneath the national statistics of children being fatter and lazier than ever, there exists a real sense of enthusiasm for sport. The majority of young people still think sport is fun and are acutely aware that it is good for them – 94 per cent said that one of the most important things about sport is having fun, and 86 per cent felt that sport is important because it helps you to keep healthy.

This report is a reaction to these and other findings in the Norwich Union *Listening to Tomorrow's Athletes* survey. It aims to address both the positive and negative attitudes towards physical activity and exercise, and to recommend how to enhance and improve the existing situation.

It is by no means an attempt to solve a lingering and growing problem overnight. But with Norwich Union's expertise and backing, there is the hope that this survey will provide a call to action and a springboard forward to a healthier, fitter and happier generation of children.

Hanging out versus shaping up

In recent years there has been a growing sense that today's children are simply inundated with too many more appealing distractions to even think about

taking up sport. Once children had few options other than to play sport and physical games when they were bored. But, more so than in any other decade, the 'Noughties' appear to present opportunities for children to avoid boredom without even breaking into a sweat.

Computers, mobile phones, music, television – and a growing interest in fashion and shopping – have all been suggested as factors that are leaching children from sport and preventing them from maintaining healthy levels of physical activity. And findings from the Norwich Union *Listening to Tomorrow's Athletes* survey confirm this to be the case. A staggering 77 per cent of children have televisions in their bedroom and over one quarter have a computer or laptop for their own use.

Consequently, it is little surprise that playing computer games was a top five activity among both primary (72 per cent) and secondary (75 per cent) school boys. Girls preferred listening to music (66 per cent of secondary school girls), reading (42 per cent of primary school girls) and shopping (almost half of secondary school girls).

The survey results were not all bad news for sport. One in 10 of all children questioned said their number one choice was playing sport for fun, ahead of watching television (the favourite pastime of nine per cent). However, only seven per cent admitted that they preferred playing sport for their school. Watching sport was a favourite pastime for only two per cent of all children questioned.

According to Dearbhla McCullough, a sport psychologist based at Roehampton, University of

Surrey, a large majority of young people still think sport is fun, but levels of activity among young people have declined dramatically over the past two decades.

'Caloric intake has actually declined in young people over this period, but we are facing a calorie conundrum,' she says. 'While young people are eating fewer calories than they were, they are taking false credit as they are more likely than ever to be overweight and unfit, due to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. It's no good having young people thinking sport is fun, if they still don't feel motivated to participate and ultimately to raise their levels of personal fitness.'

The pull of interests other than sport is compounded by the corresponding rise in parent paranoia. In one area of Leeds, mums were using a telephone surveillance method to keep tabs on their 10- and 11-year-old daughters.

Such widespread worry about children's safety has filtered through to youngsters' minds too. One of the 12 and 13-year-old girls questioned in Cardiff said: 'Sometimes me and my friends are paranoid about men. Especially around pubs, if they are drunk and stuff. If I see a man on the other side of the road, we would always cross over; we always think they are looking at us.'

Although most over-12s said they liked 'hanging out' in local parks, many confessed that they thought it presented very real risks to their safety. For all boys and some girls, bullying by older gangs was perceived as a threat. 'If they don't like you they start chasing you, if you see them do something they don't want you to see,' said one 10- or 11-year-old boy from Cardiff about the gangs in his local park. Another 12-year-old boy from Hertfordshire said that he feared going to the park because 'people come up and offer you drugs'.

In combination, the changing lifestyle habits of today's youngsters, their growing fears about 'hanging out' in what they perceive to be 'dangerous' environments and the escalating fears of their parents are creating a huge gulf between acceptable recreational activity and sport. The danger is that the gulf will become too big to close as more children plump for the safer option; the challenge is to optimise and encourage children's enthusiasm for sport by creating a secure environment in which they can play.

Winners and losers

By and large, parents are convinced that their children would benefit from greater levels of involvement in sport. Most mums agreed that sport enhances their children's lives, increases their levels of self-confidence, and reduces stress.

Competition, too, was considered a good thing by parents, mainly because it introduces children to losing as well as winning; a chance to experience the lows as well as the highs in life, and to develop coping strategies for success and failure in adulthood.

Unfortunately, according to Ms McCullough, our whole approach to winning and losing is far too simple. 'We talk about winning and losing without really looking at what we mean by these concepts. When it is clear that more than 90 per cent of young people surveyed see sport as fun, and more than 85 per cent see it as a way to stay healthy, why are we so focused on winning and losing in how we talk about sport?'

Ms McCullough argues that influencers in sport – parents, teachers and coaches – tend to focus on talent and ability, rather than effort, from an early age. 'If we were to reward more young people for improvement and achievement against personal goals, rather than just winning, we'd be helping to create a much larger pool of enthusiastic youngsters,' she says.

She also points out that, while a majority of parents (54 per cent, versus 22 per cent of young people) saw learning to lose as an important element of playing sport, there is a subtle, yet critical difference between learning to lose and learning from losing.

'One is about resignation to defeat, the other is about constant improvement and setting out new opportunities to achieve against personal goals,' she added.

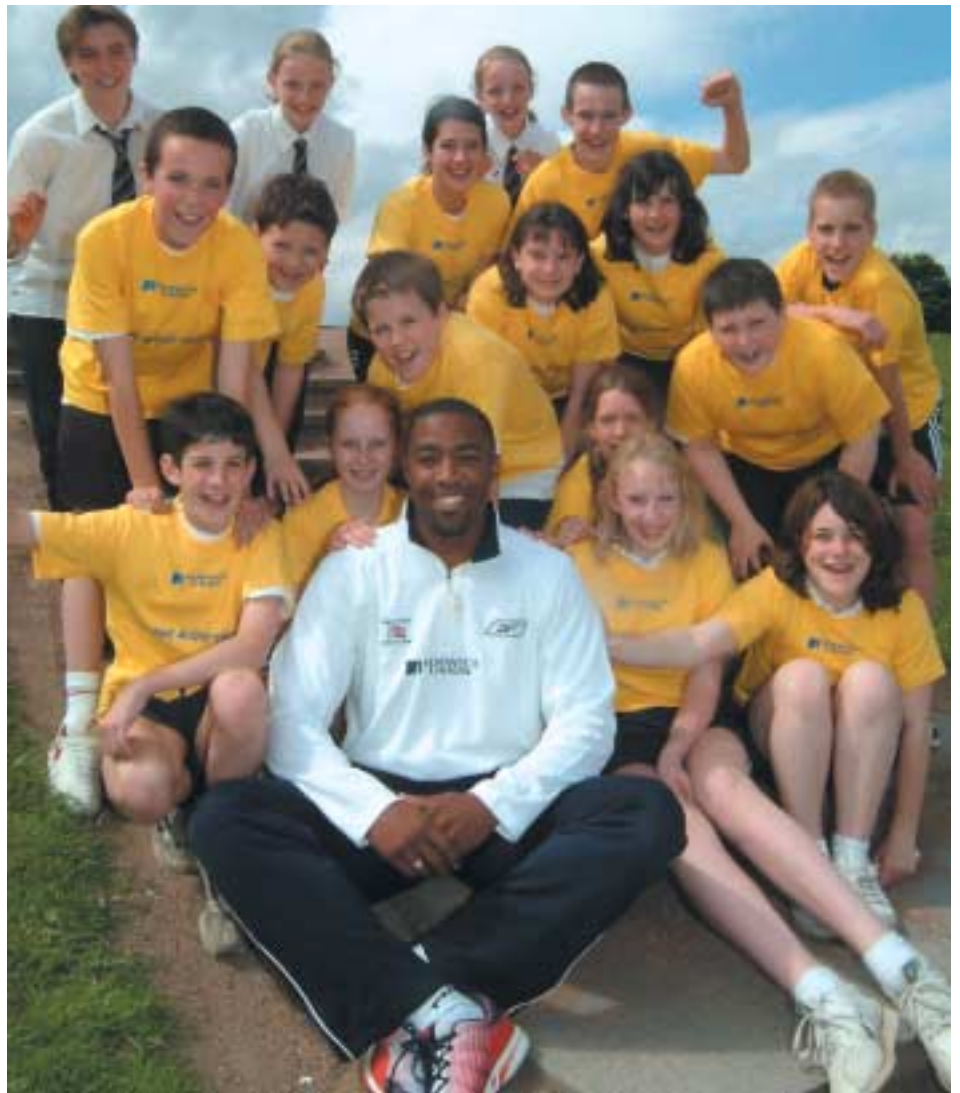
Responses from parents also highlighted feelings that active children were less likely to pick up unhealthy habits. Said the mother of one 11-year-old girl in Leeds: 'While they are keeping fit or playing a sport, it stops them smoking. If they are keen on sport, they won't smoke.'

Children were not entirely convinced that being a winner at sport was a good thing. Remarkably, those who showed promise at sport said they felt winning, or being better than their classmates and friends, could incite jealousy and lead to them being ostracised. At an age when being different is unacceptable among your peers, winning, as much as losing, could result in them losing friends and becoming less popular.

If winning is perceived as such a psychological burden by children, could it be yet another barrier to their involvement? Is part of the problem that adults speak about sport in such a way that the pressures of winning or losing become grossly distorted? Almost certainly, this reluctance to win is not something that is mirrored in countries like Australia, where sports success is a source of immense national pride.

Media messages so often focus on winning and losing; we publicly and openly criticise our leading sports people as much as we praise them. Perhaps unwittingly, we have created a culture in which winning and losing in sport have an exaggerated status and level of importance at the expense of children taking part.

One of our key learnings from this survey is that it is time to redefine the way we think about winning – and losing. Young people are telling us clearly that we need to have a fresh look at how we



communicate the value of competition through sport, and how we reward achievement.

Healthy body, healthy mind?

Why do children think sport is healthy? 'It's good for your body,' said a 10-year-old girl from Hertfordshire. But there is little doubt that regular physical activity is as good for the mind as well. Research in the US, referenced by the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport in its December 2002 strategy document, has confirmed that teenagers who take part in sport are more self-confident than others of the same age. Much of the positive impact derives from associated adults (parents, coaches etc) paying more attention to young people because of their sports participation at an age when parental / adult influence is critical to development.

It has also been shown that girls who take part in sport have a better body image, eat more healthily and are less likely to smoke and drink excessively than their couch-potato peers. In adults, exercise is now on prescription as a deterrent against stress and depression with the NHS. Children have undoubtedly experienced similar effects:

'It takes all your worries away,' said one boy, 11, from Hertfordshire; 'It releases stress,' said another.

It's not just for its spirit-soothing effects that more

exercise is useful. It could also be worthwhile for the knock-on benefits. There is a confirmed link between sport and academic success. Previously, in schools where sport is taken seriously, the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA) that oversees examinations in this country, has reported that pupils achieve higher grades and are better behaved.

According to the QCA, schools that have taken a leap of faith in investing in physical education and sport have seen remarkable improvements in everything from attendance and behaviour, to attainment and attitudes to learning. Yet, somewhere along the line, the messages about sport's positive psychological effects have become misinterpreted. A worrying 10 per cent of children, and only seven per cent of parents in the *Listening to Tomorrow's Athletes* survey, agreed with the statement that 'kids who are good at sport are also good at school work'.

An increased focus on the academic side of schooling is not just seen as squeezing out sport; it is increasingly becoming accepted by both parents and children that it is no longer possible to be an achiever on both the academic and sporting fronts. Challenging this misconception is not going to be easy. It will involve a shift in the mindsets of parents, teachers and children to help them realise that regular physical activity is the most appropriate and

effective medicine for today's lifestyle. Clearly there are more psychological and practical barriers than ever to overcome – and both resources and imagination will be required to make a difference.

The big outdoors

In a world which has been dominated by media coverage of tragedies involving children, it's not surprising that children are being encouraged – and themselves prefer – to play in the safety of their own bedrooms. Nearly three quarters of parents are worried about the dangers facing their children from today's society.

As children's bedrooms become the new playground, and technology the new sport for the mind, physical activity is becoming less and less necessary, except for climbing the stairs.

'This would be fine if we didn't need a healthy body to get us through an active life,' according to the University of Surrey's Ms McCullough. 'We are increasingly finding children who are both frustrated and lacking in confidence, because they spend so little time outdoors enjoying group activity. They see going outside as a necessary evil to enable them to get from one playroom to another.'

When 86 per cent of young people agree that sport is good for their health and 94 per cent see sport as an opportunity for fun, it appears that the bedroom is certainly not most young people's first choice when they are thinking of having fun and playing with their friends.

The challenge is to create safe environments where children can enjoy the benefits of active sport. By creating more opportunities to participate, the inevitable follow-on is that there will be more young people who relish the experience and want to take it further in a competitive sense. What young people are saying is: 'We want to have the choice.'

Influence of parents and teachers

Undoubtedly, a decline in curriculum time devoted to PE hasn't helped when it comes to introducing children to a broad range of sports. Many schools fall short of providing even the target two hours of PE a week, which Prime Minister Tony Blair confirmed as 'an enticement' last year.

It is a situation that is not mirrored anywhere else in Europe. In Germany the school day lasts from 8

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am until 1pm or 2 pm. From there the children go to the local sports club where they play football, basketball or other sports in excellent facilities funded by the town council and with good supervision.

There is a stark difference in the UK. Despite 37 per cent of children saying they had represented their school in a particular sport, 16 per cent of primary and four per cent of secondary pupils said their school offered no opportunities at all for pupils to compete against others at sport.

But the burgeoning number of exams also influences the amount of time children have to do sport. During their days at school, youngsters now sit an average 75 external tests designed to assess their academic aptitude, a figure which has led some teaching unions to warn that pupils are being tested to destruction. Among girls under the age of 12, many found that SATS exams got in the way of playing games at school.

One area where parents have a critical influence is on diet and the issue of obesity. Here, the survey throws up a situation of almost total denial among parents that obesity is an issue for their children. While figures published in the British Medical Journal show levels of obesity currently running at between 11 and 12 per cent among school age children, with an additional 22 per cent overweight, just 14 per cent of parents in the Norwich Union survey admitted that they thought their children were overweight.

Parents seem to be in almost complete denial on the issue of obesity. They appear only to be

acknowledging obesity in their own children as an admission that they are overweight. If this is the case, then there is still a massive uphill struggle ahead before the issue becomes accepted, absorbed and actions are taken by parents to help young people address the reality of an increasing incidence of obesity among their friends – and within their own families.

Having said this, both parents and children questioned in the research think that a lack of sport in schools has a direct influence on diminishing activity levels. Currently, many schools offer little more than an hour of compulsory physical education a week. At least 30 per cent of secondary school girls and 56 per cent of boys said they wanted to do more sport. Add to this the 40 per cent of girls and a further 30 per cent of boys who were happy with the amount of sport they play, and there is clearly a strong vote in favour of maintaining, if not increasing, the amount of time given over to sport in the curriculum.

Parents clearly believe that schools should take the lead. Almost 75 per cent of parents thought it was the school's responsibility to encourage their children to do more sport, and that teachers could be influential in getting them to exercise more.

Inevitably, support from parents, teachers and coaches is seen as critical in building and maintaining young people's enthusiasm for sport.

Voluntary activity has taken the strain to some degree, with more than 110,000 amateur and community sports clubs run by more than 1.5 million volunteers according to *Where Are We Now: The State of Sport Today*, a strategy document published by the Department for Culture Media and Sport and the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit in December 2002. However, the impact of both the voluntary sector and private health and fitness clubs is not well understood in terms of their impact on young people's access to facilities, and their ability to enjoy sport.

The Norwich Union survey shows that 44 per cent of boys and 35 per cent of girls attend organised sports clubs outside school hours, with football clubs, swimming, martial arts, dance and athletics all mentioned, but minimal reference to health and fitness clubs.

Parents are a dominant influence here with more than 77 per cent of young people reliant on their parents to take them to these venues. Almost 65 per cent of parents say they regularly watch their children participate in sport, while just 19 per cent say they take their children to see live sporting events vs 62 per cent who regularly watch sport on TV with their children.

This survey carries a clear message for teachers. Most young people want to have more opportunities to play sport. They, as much as anyone, feel that a whole range of issues from exam stress to tensions created by the increasing workload in the classroom can effectively be relieved through regular exercise. There are many great examples of teachers coming up with new and interesting ways to create opportunities to enjoy sport. At one primary school in Birmingham, a teacher has introduced weekly fun runs and daily exercise and aerobic sessions for his



pupils. The result has been staggering: children clamour to take part and claim that the fun factor is the biggest attraction. Norwich Union is keen to help find more examples and to enable great opportunities like this to be shared by all.

To support this type of activity, Norwich Union launched new programmes this summer, under its Do the Right Thing campaign, focused on tracking and rewarding volunteering and creating new opportunities for sporting activity for young people.

Ongoing programmes such as Norwich Union sports:hall aim to fill the gaps created by both schools and society in general. But, could a daily dose of aerobic activity in the classroom be the way forward? Through all of Norwich Union's support for athletics in future, the company will be working on giving young people the opportunity to answer questions like this for themselves.

The role model

Sports heroes and heroines have traditionally been powerful role models for primary and secondary school children. But does this hold true for today's generation?

When asked to pick their favourite sports stars, 58 per cent selected someone on the basis that they were 'the best at their sport'. Encouragingly, one in five children 'wanted to be like' a sports star. But more than a quarter of the children (27 per cent) chose a sports star role model for non-sporting reasons. They chose them simply because they 'are cool'. Nearly one third of all girls believed that models had better bodies than athletes. While high-profile footballers and athletes were listed as the favourite role models for boys, girls chose singers, models and tennis stars.

Perhaps the reluctance of children to be labelled a winner was best illustrated by the fact that only four per cent of girls aspire to becoming a professional sports person themselves. Many (22 per cent) preferred the idea of becoming a pop star.

Psychologists and sociologists have long known that positive role models have a huge influence on children's lives. The Government has encouraged the use of role models to steer children towards greater things and successful careers.

There seems to be a strong sense that children perceive today's role models as unattainable, virtual heroes or heroines, not realistic ones. Almost certainly this feeling is not aided by the marketing, publicity and advertising hype that creates the illusion of top sports people being out of reach.

This is supported by the observation that, although body builders such as The Rock (33 per cent of boys),

The survey

The Norwich Union *Listening to Tomorrow's Athletes* survey was conducted by specialist research team Kids and Youth, who conducted surveys online with 1,051 young people between the ages of 8-14 and with 544 parents of children in the same age group. In addition, eight focus groups were conducted across the country; six with children aged 9-14 and two with mothers of children within the same age group.



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and pop stars such as Kylie Minogue (24 per cent of girls), were admired for having the best body, just nine per cent of boys and seven per cent of girls dreamed of having the body shape of their role models when they were older.

In order to capitalise on the achievements of role models, children need tangible evidence that they can aspire to the same goals and opportunities as those who helped elevate their heroes to celebrity status. Perhaps this is the reason why so many said it is much easier for them to identify with role models who come from their area. In addition, it could explain why certain role models, such as footballers David Beckham and Michael Owen, have been able to break through and become role model super brands – they may be both successful and extraordinarily wealthy at a young age, but they have managed to maintain a sense of proximity in spite of their status.

Boys and girls

It may be a sweeping generalisation to say boys will be boys and girls will be girls, but therein lies the value of research. The statistics – not to mention the practical experience of parents and teachers everywhere – tell us that boys and girls, brothers and sisters, have very different motivations and interests from one another, particularly by the time they reach secondary school age. The big question, as always, is how much to feed these differences and how much to encourage shared interests for wider social and developmental reasons.

While still in primary school, there is little difference between the attitudes of boys and girls towards active sport, but this grows as they move into their teens. Although the percentage of boys wanting to do more sport at school drops from 68 per cent in primary

school to 56 per cent in secondary school, the percentage for girls plummets from 56 per cent to 30 per cent.

Role models also differ significantly between boys and girls, with boys more likely to want to be like their sports star icons, while girls favour pop stars, actors or actresses and teachers.

For young people, almost all sporting role models appear to be male, with the likes of Beckham and Owen proving their own massive personal brand value. Female sporting heroes were few and far between for both boys and girls. Some girls went as far as to say that they felt it 'unfeminine' to be sporty, and noted that sporty girls had had their sexuality questioned by commentators writing in the media.

Clearly, girls have a different attitude to sport from boys. And this becomes increasingly polar as young people move into their teenage years. However, overall the Norwich Union survey responses say that 71 per cent of girls in secondary school, and 86 per cent of boys, still want to play sport more often or are content with the amount of sport they play. It's how they want to play, the level of involvement and type of support they want which is critical to the future of play. And that is dealt with elsewhere in this report.

What is clear is that, girl or boy, young people are crying out for opportunities to be more active and to have more support and security for the occasions when they do have the chance to play.

Conclusion

It is easy to dismiss today's generation of children as lazy and inactive. Paradoxically, though, clear evidence exists that they want things to change. This research has aimed to give them the opportunity to have their say. Most youngsters believe that they should be doing more sport, not less.

The majority are aware of its benefits for body and mind but lack the confidence and the power to reverse the trends. They know that sport is an ideal environment for making friends and socialising. Children want to enjoy sport, not be forced into doing it. They want the benefits without added pressure from their parents, teachers and coaches.

The challenge now is to put their wishes and ideals into practice.

Norwich Union is launching its Do the Right Thing campaign to help young people have a say and to find more ways for young people to enjoy participating in active sports. There's some more listening to do to enable the levels of participation we are all hoping for and which young people clearly want. However, Norwich Union is committed to enabling young people to play in the fun and secure environments they hope for.

In addition to maintaining support for elite and grassroots athletics, Norwich Union will be working over the next three years, with its partners at UK Athletics and with the young people of this country, to find more effective ways to facilitate their enjoyment of active sport. Doing this is in all of our interests. Enjoyment leads to passion and – for some – passion leads to winning. For those of us who don't make it to the top, if we play it right, there's still so much fun to be had along the way, here, now and forever. ●

For further information on the Do The Right Thing campaign, please visit www.dtrt.info