

Rugger buggers tackle Aristotle

Front-rowers get their heads into a spot of philosophy

JULES EVANS

FOR a year I've been running a philosophy group at Saracens rugby club in London. Once a month I give a brief talk about an idea from ancient philosophy that can be applied to our lives today.

The group — players and staff — use that as a starting point to discuss how to live and play well.

We've covered everything from "accepting adversity" to "what makes a good friend", and have explored ideas from many wisdom traditions — Epicurus, the Stoics, Taoism, Buddhism.

It came from my latest project to see if philosophy can be useful beyond academia.

I went to Saracens with zero expectation, and still find it strange to sit discussing Aristotle's idea of the Golden Mean with front-rowers.

But, it was "the most popular thing we did last season", said defence coach Paul Gustard.

A career in professional sport has incredible highs. "Winning a big game is an ecstatic experience," one player said. "I don't think people

outside sport ever feel like that."

But there are real lows too.

We might think of athletes as supermen, but areas of their lives are beyond their control. Are they fit? Does the coach pick them? How do the media treat them? How does the rest of the team play? When those external factors are in their favour, they're gods. When fortune

Men tend to numb their pain with booze

shifts, they're nobody. Transition to life after sport is particularly hard.

I'm surprised by how little attention is paid to the mental and emotional wellbeing of players.

Men are not good at taking care of themselves or each other, and numb their pain with booze. Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50. The values of professional sports teams can also be quite toxic. "It's a fear-driven industry, focused on short-term success," said Neil Burns who

has worked with top cricketers. "Athletes often get used up and tossed aside. Values and wellbeing don't usually get a look in."

In cricket, after high-profile burnouts, English bosses acknowledge that "inner fitness is a foundation for long-term success", as former coach Andy Flower puts it.

There is not one philosophical or scientific answer to the question of how to live well. The challenge is to offer useful ideas and techniques, while enabling employees to find what works for them. If that sounds soft and fluffy to you, watch Saracens play this season.

Topics of discussion included:

Epictetus taught that "it's not events, but our opinion about events, that causes us suffering".

The Buddha said: "We are what we think. All that we are is created by our thoughts."

Aristotle thought happiness comes when we fulfil the drives of our nature for learning, connectedness, freedom and work. — © *The Telegraph*

● Jules Evans is author of *'Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations'*

Murky world of doping

SOUTH African cyclist Daryl Impey was cleared of doping two weeks ago. His case is the latest in an ongoing saga within cycling, and asks some critical questions, not only of the South African anti-doping body that cleared him, but of the sport's global struggle to win back the confidence of former fans.

Some background: Impey, the first South African to wear the Tour de France's leader's yellow jersey in 2013, tested positive for the drug probenecid in February this year. Probenecid is not itself performance-enhancing, but masks other drugs which are.

It does this by blocking the excretion of the drug in question from the kidneys, so that when laboratories examine the athlete's urine, they cannot detect it. The other benefit to the athlete is that by blocking the excretion in the urine, probenecid keeps the drug level in their body higher for longer, giving greater benefits.

Impey's defence, introduced in detail at a hearing in Johannesburg was that he had accidentally ingested probenecid through no fault of his own. Hardly a new defence, Impey's was significantly more advanced than many before him. Specifically, he claimed that the probenecid in his body came from contamination of a pill counter at a pharmacy in Durban. This would have required the pharmacist in question to have dispensed probenecid in an uncoated form, because otherwise traces of it would not have remained behind, immediately prior to using the same pill counter to give Impey empty gelatin capsules.

Impey convinced the hearing of this by bringing in experts who testified that it was possible for the levels in his urine to have come from contamination this way. He also presented the pharmacist and receipts to establish a testimony and timeline of sales of the products



CLEARED: Orica Greenedge team rider Daryl Impey, pictured when he became the first South African to wear the Tour de France yellow jersey. Picture: REUTERS

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in question. The hearing accepted this, without challenge.

Thus begins the controversy. On this matter, your position depends on which side of the fence you sat long before the name "Daryl Impey" ever entered the discussion. If you believe that cycling is dirty beyond salvation, and that "they all dope", then this decision is merely confirmation and entrenches your cynicism.

On the other hand, if you believe in Impey, then you're relieved and ready to condemn the SA Institute for Drug-Free Sport (SAIDS) for incompetence. You are like Robbie Hunter, former SA pro, who condemned SAIDS and accused them of a witch-hunt targeting cycling, which is, in my opinion, the stupidest thing you can do from within a sport that so desperately needs to regain trust after years of deceit. Impey himself spoke about legal action against SAIDS for loss of earnings as a result of delays. I'd have thought the pharmacist might

be the more appropriate target for such recourse.

In any event, the problem with the Impey story is that, no matter which side you view it from, there are spaces into which you can insert scepticism. There are a series of coincidences in Impey's story, each of which alone would be plausible, but in sequence create a very small possibility (but, crucially, not a zero possibility). And there are procedural concerns on the other side, including the lengthy delay in dealing with a test that happened in February. Dr Shuiab Manjra last week wrote a compelling piece about the "cynical calculus" that SAIDS may have been pushed into by previous procedural errors — Ludwick Mamabolo, Comrades champion in 2012, was cleared after 14 errors in testing were discovered.

Ultimately, the source of the controversy is the lack of transparency around the entire process.

I would love to provide some insight into the specific details, but it's all conjecture, because so little is known. Where questions outnumber answers, people will always force their own "truths" into the vacuum.

For cycling, with its history of lies and deceit, those answers will rarely be favourable, and the Impey case does little to convince either side of progress.

The anti-doping struggle just got murkier.