



When kids' heroes fall

The recent ball tampering scandal involving the Australian cricket team has been front and centre in the media in recent days. The condemnation of the actions of Steve Smith, David Warner and Cameron Bancroft, the main protagonists in this ongoing drama has been swift, vigorous and harsh.

While much has been written about the toxic culture of the Australian team itself, it's the sudden fall from grace by sporting heroes that's perhaps hardest to comprehend. In particular, deposed captain Steve Smith has gone from hero to villain, icon to demon, idol to devil in the matter of a few days. In a country that routinely holds up sporting heroes as figures for the next generation to aspire to there's now a need to help young people makes sense of what's going on.

These events provide rich fodder for family conversations about many issues that are very pertinent to children and young people. Here are some possible starting points:

When heroes reveal their feet of clay

Fair play is something that is drummed into kids from an early age so when your hero freely admits to breaking the rules to get an advantage it's hard to feel anything else but shock and disappointment. These are legitimate emotions yet they don't justify further vilification that is seems to be occurring in the media at the moment. Conversations that focus on the pressure that these young men can experience; a win at all costs attitude that can lead to such actions and the impact that group pressure can have on individuals.

When good people make bad decisions

Much of the current commentary is polarising and unforgiving. Smith, Warner and Bancroft have been roundly pilloried for their actions. They've been labelled many things including 'cheats', 'idiots' and 'arrogant'. The language used has been black not white, rarely have there been any shades of grey used. It's easy to forget that these are young men who under intense pressure made poor choices. Good people make bad decisions every day that don't make front page news. Doing the right things can be hard sometimes. Label the deed, not the dude. These are important messages to impress upon children and young people.

There's no shame in losing

We all love a winner. No one wants to be a loser. In fact, being labelled a loser is perhaps the biggest ignominy of all for a young person these days. When did losing become shameful? There is a tremendous need to impress upon kids that there is no shame in losing and that a win at all costs attitude generally has its own price.

Cheats, fair play and bending the rules

It's been noted that Cricket Australia's CEO James Sutherland has avoided using the word cheat at all costs while fronting the media on South Africa. Most likely he avoids the word for legal reasons but it's also evident that it's a value-laden, emotive word. Labelling someone a cheat is perhaps one of the biggest slurs of all. Yet, we condone bending rules; going close to the line of fair play and getting a mental edge over an opponent. This is great time for family conversations about fair play, spirit of sport and bending rules which can be commonplace in everything from backyard cricket to a simple game of cards.

There by the grace of God go I

We live in a society that's quick to judge others. Reality TV relies on viewers passing judgement on contestants, in voyeuristic ways. We risk raising a generation with an empathy deficit that is quick to judge other's harshly and slow to forgive. At present a little empathy wouldn't go astray. A comment such as "I wonder how these guys are feeling right now?" can help kids see things from other perspectives. It's easy to be judgemental, hard to be empathetic; harder still to be forgiving and allow them to come back into the fold. It's also useful to discuss the fact that we are all be capable of acting outside our values and beliefs at times. Yep, we're all human.

The ball tampering incident is highly emotive as it's hit at the core of many values that we hold sacred. But it's also useful to remember that front and centre are young men who are fallible like the rest of us, and while they deserve to experience the consequences of their choices, they don't deserve to be personally vilified for doing something that we encourage them to do that is, to win. It's sport, not war. Kids need to understand that too!