

Cheating: reading

Everybody cheats. Whether it's the taxi driver who tricks a visitor and takes them the long way round, or the shop assistant who doesn't give the correct change, or the police officer who accepts a bribe – everybody's at it. Cheats in the news include the scientist whose research was based on fake data, the game show contestant who collaborated with a friend in the audience to win a million pounds, and the doctor who forged his qualifications and wasn't really a doctor at all. Everybody cheats; nobody's playing the game.



Is cheating acceptable, a natural way of surviving and being successful? Or is it something that should be frowned on, and young people discouraged from doing? If it's the latter how can we explain to children why so many bend the rules?

Take sport for example. The pinnacle of football, the World Cup, was rife with cheating. Whether diving, pretending to be hurt or denying a handball, footballers will do anything for a free-kick or a penalty shot. France striker Henry denied cheating to win the free-kick which led to his side's second goal in their 3-1 victory over Spain. Many footballers, however, are often putting it on. Whatever the nationality there's one common ploy: the player rolls over holding their leg, ankle or head seeming to be in great pain. As a result a yellow card and/or free-kick is given for the foul and then, a few seconds later, the player is up and about as if nothing had happened! The ref may be taken in by it but youngsters watching the game aren't. They also see their heroes getting away with it.

It's not just the footballers. In June 2006 Fifa suspended Greece and its member clubs from International competition. As a result Greek clubs and officials are banned from European competition, including the Champions League and the UEFA cup. Meanwhile four leading Italian clubs are on trial for match-fixing. If found guilty the clubs could also be banned from European competition. Whatever, football suffers from unsportsmanship and it sets a bad example to children.

Of course it's not just football either. In 1998 the Tour de France, the world's greatest cycling event, was hit by a drug-taking scandal. The 40 bottles of doping products found with the Festina team triggered a massive investigation that almost caused the Tour to be abandoned. One rider, Virenque, was banned for 9 months. He claimed: "You have cheats in sport, just as you do in business - there will always be people trying to take a short cut. At least we're not turning a blind eye to the problem, which other sports are."

Cycling certainly does test more than others but whether it's now cleaner than the '98 fiasco remains to be seen. The day before the 2006 Tour started 13 riders were withdrawn by their teams under suspicion of doping. A climate of mistrust surrounds everyone and anyone connected with the sport.

Is it all inevitable? There's tremendous pressure on all athletes to perform for their fans and for their sponsors. It's success, money and power that rule professional sport rather than an honest attempt to do the best one can.

As for business, Virenque certainly has a point. The former bosses of Enron were convicted on fraud charges following one of the most infamous scandals in corporate history. Enron, which was America's seventh-largest company, collapsed in 2001 causing thousands of people to lose their jobs and life savings. They had fooled investors into believing the company was healthier than it really was. One boss now faces the rest of his life in prison.

Meanwhile companies around the world are losing billions of dollars to the counterfeit trade. From cut-price CDs and DVDs to sportswear and cosmetics, cheap fake products are everywhere. The piracy business has never been so lucrative for the high street cheat. It has become socially acceptable to buy phoney Gucci bags and illegal copies of films. If parents are doing this, their children will follow.

So perhaps it's not surprising that around the world more pupils than ever are caught cheating during exams. In one case missing exam papers were put up for sale on the Internet. In another, widespread cheating took place by pupils using their mobile phones to receive texted answers. In a third case pupils admitted to candidate substitution. They blame the pressure put on them to do well in exams. It doesn't help that their role models are also cheats. Surely we can't complain when we're setting such a bad example?