

This sporting life

Continuing our series of round-table discussions, *Royal Wings* invites people from across the globe to participate in a live, online talk about a single topic. In this issue, a columnist from London and a sport enthusiast from Stockholm join our host, a Canadian ice-hockey fan, to discuss why sport matters

Hosted by Ava Chisling

The experts:

Jim White is an English journalist specialising in sport. He has a column in *The Daily Telegraph* and has written and presented numerous documentaries for Sky TV in Britain on sporting issues. He has written five books on Manchester United and is currently contributing to the world's most expensive sports book, the *Manchester United Opus*, retailing at US\$5,500.

Anders Karlsson is an amateur athlete from Stockholm. By the age of 15, he had already placed third in the Swedish Race Walking Championships. He also participated in the famous Vasalopp race, where 20,000 people follow in the footsteps of King Gustav Vasa and ski 90 kilometres in difficult terrain. A competitive triathlete, rock climber and downhill skier, Anders is also an avid fan of yoga. He dislikes playing team sports but will stoop to watching them on TV.



Ava Chisling: Welcome Jim and Anders. The first question is simple: What makes a sport a sport? Is synchronised swimming a sport?

Jim White: For me, a sport should involve some sort of physical input. And believe me, having tried to hold my breath for more than 10 seconds under water, synchronised swimming does that.

Anders Karlsson: Anything we want to be a sport should be one. The question is: Who will want to watch it? Maybe spectators aren't even necessary, like rock climbing or yoga. Yoga should be a sport, as it's super hard.

Jim: Rock climbing is competitive. Climbers try to go places others have not and at speeds not attempted before. Is there such a thing as competitive yoga?

Anders: Yoga can be competitive. I try to be better than the person next to me in class, which is funny because the whole philosophy behind yoga is non-competitiveness.

Jim: We should encourage all new sports. In a village in Wales they have the annual world championships in Bog Snorkelling. You have to swim through a muddy ditch under water. Competitors take it very seriously.

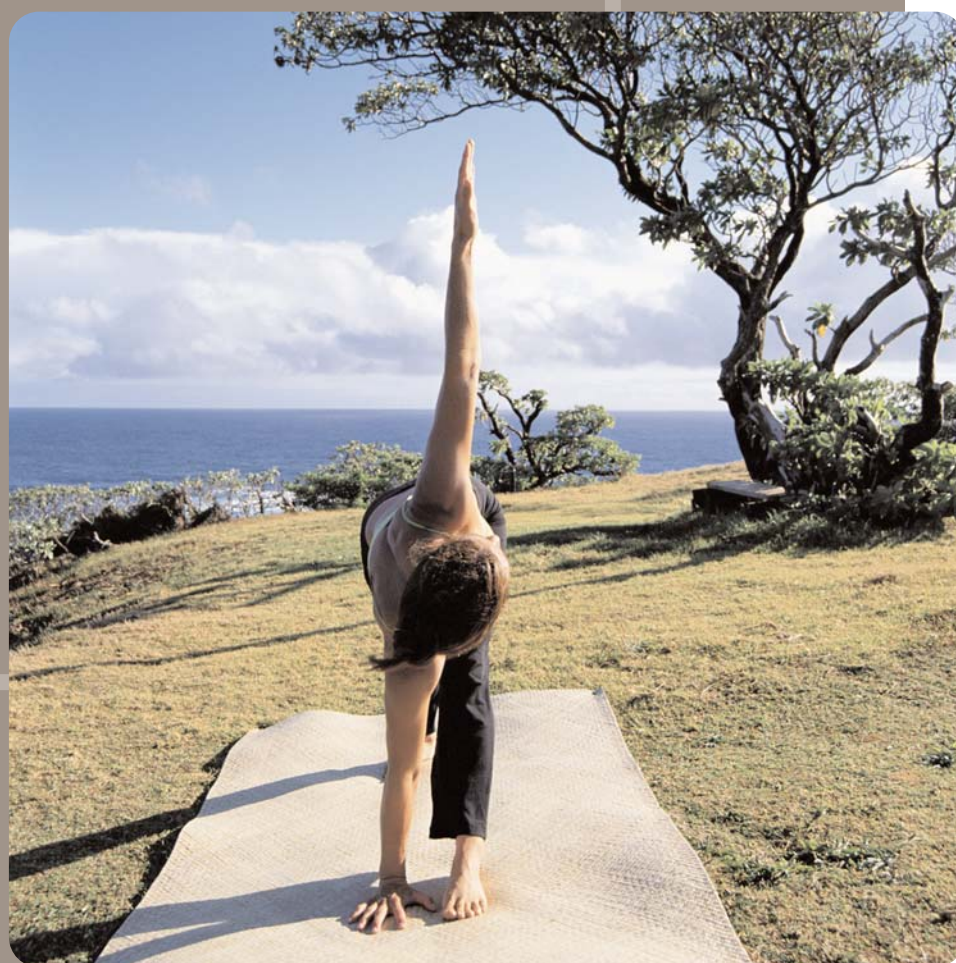
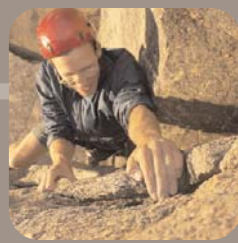
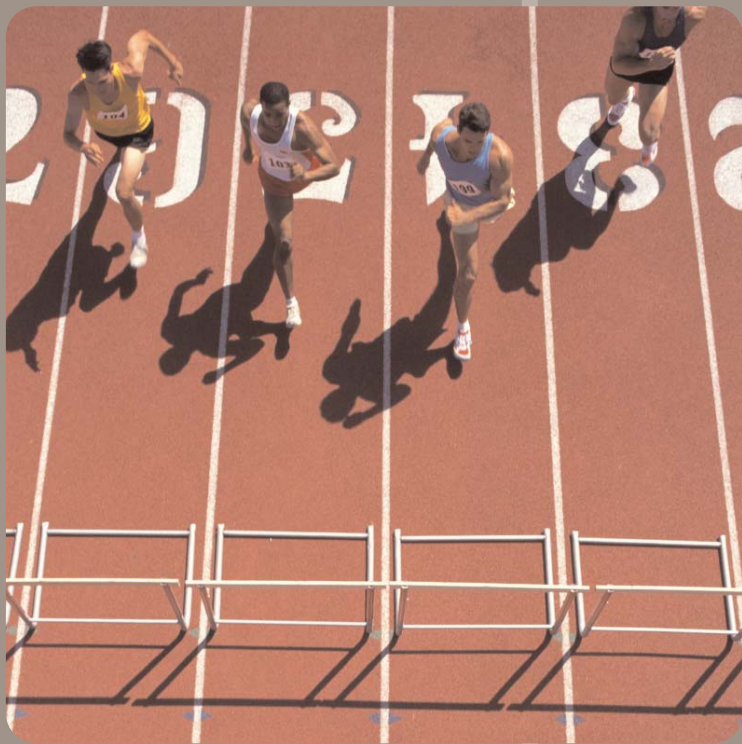
Ava: Anders mentioned philosophy and sport, yet most people think athletes are barely bright enough to tie up their own bootlaces.

Jim: Some of them are bright enough. They just prefer to channel their energies into physical activity – such as snorkelling the bogs. Although on second thought, I'm not sure if that's evidence of huge brain activity.

Ava: You're a professional sports journalist, Jim. Defend the brains of athletes!

Jim: In any team dressing room there is overwhelming anti-intellectualism. Anyone showing any interest in cerebral matters is dismissed as deviant. There was a chap who played football as a pro in the UK called Graeme Le Saux. He read books and serious newspapers and was widely criticised as a result.

Anders: I heard about a woman who thought Anja Pärson, the world's best female downhill skier, was fat and therefore couldn't be strong!



Jim: I think if you could study the brain of someone like Wayne Rooney (a young football prodigy in the UK who is widely dismissed as dim-witted), you would discover he has amazing spatial intelligence.

Ava: Is sport entertainment or competition?

Jim: For the players it's competition. For the observers it's both. Oddly, it's rare to find athletes who enjoy their sport at the very highest level. They like winning, but that's different.

Anders: I think it depends on the kind of sport we are talking about. Rock climbers want to do nothing else but climb. Same for downhill skiers. For them, it's all about love and fear.

Jim: But don't mistake the adrenaline buzz for enjoyment.

Ava: If you get right down to it, lots of sports involve grown men chasing a ball around in short trousers or trying to go fast in shiny pants. Why do so many people care?

Jim: As George Orwell wrote, 'It's war without the shooting.' At the [football] World Cup, a lot of nations are channelling their national identity into their teams. Brazilians walk taller as a result of the prowess of their players on the international field.

Ava: When our ice hockey team wins, Montréal has a certain buzz to it. When they lose, people are openly sad and upset. But we haven't answered why people care?

Jim: They care because sport is the one area of modern life that provides immediate black and white conclusions: you win or you lose. The rest of modern life is about compromise. Spend a day in the office: have you won? No. So you go home full of frustration and watch the hockey game. They win and you feel at least someone has achieved something on your behalf.

Anders: Maybe you have to turn to philosophy again to answer that question. Religion originally served to keep the population in check.

Nowadays we need something to brighten up our restricted lives and sport serves a good purpose for that. Maybe that's why we play computer games, to lose ourselves – at least for a while – in a reality different from our regular days.

Jim: Modern society supplies very few physical or emotional outlets. Modern life is easy especially compared to our forefathers. Every day for them was a matter of life or death. Adrenaline coursed through their bodies on an hourly basis. We get it vicariously once a week at the ball game.

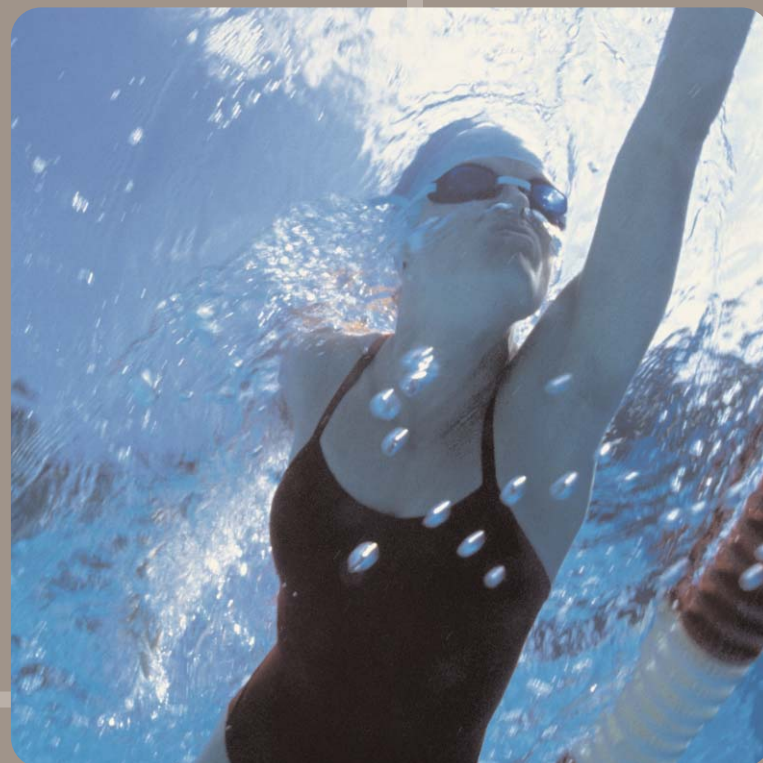
Anders: Our forefathers had purpose, to survive, and we do not. What we want is to become famous and make a lot of money.

Ava: True. But deep in Africa, men are running...

Jim: Sure, in Africa they run. But often out of necessity. Know why Haile Gebresalassie is the greatest distance runner in history? Because as a kid he ran 10 miles to school and back every day. And, in the rainy season, he ran 12 miles because he couldn't take a detour over the riverbed!

Ava: Can we still learn something about a country by the sport it follows or the team it fields?

Jim: If you talk to an American they'll tell you that baseball absolutely fits the national characteristics of the American. The funny thing is, a Cuban ▶



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will tell you exactly the same thing. English people define themselves through football, but so do Brazilians. That's the glory of sport.

Ava: So we can find lots of commonalities between us. Can sport bring about peace?

Jim: Sport can teach politicians a lot. India can play Pakistan at cricket and manage to shake hands at the end of five days of intense competition in a way their leaders can never manage.

Anders: But can a game between enemies actually bring about peace between them?

Ava: The only way to achieve peace is to put the politicians on the field to play. Then they will care more about winning than fighting.

Jim: I think there's a mutual respect between sports people that is really good to see. I love the way footballers always shake hands after a game...

Ava: On another topic, what about women in sport?

Anders: Why shouldn't women compete in all sports? When brute strength is not the main issue, they should compete on equal terms.

Jim: Women are better at real distance events. The UK's Paula Radcliffe runs the marathon quicker than any man in Britain. And the holder of the record for the cross-English channel swim is a woman.

Anders: You have to give women credit. How long has there been any real effort put into female soccer for example? Fifteen years? And how many years have men played for? It takes time to change the socialisation

process. Women the world over need to see sport as something they can participate in.

Ava: Who is the greatest athlete you've ever seen, in any sport, Jim?

Jim: In the flesh, Diego Maradona. On the screen: Mohammed Ali winning the 'Rumble in the Jungle'.

Ava: Ali is an interesting character because he had no education, is barely literate, but is an absolute genius all the same. How often does that happen? Is there someone out there like that today?

Jim: This guy Ronaldinho (Brazilian football star) is incredible. He lights up the international stage when he is on the pitch. And to take the conversation back to the start – he plays with a smile on his face as if he is having the time of his life.

Ava: Anders, do you see a difference in how Scandinavians view their sports versus the British, for example?

Anders: There are differences in the kind of sports we focus on, and climate has a big role to play in that respect. But if you look at the World Cup, most countries on the planet go crazy over their teams in similar ways – at least when they're winning.

Ava: Thank you both very much for this entertaining chat. I look forward to the time when Canada can field a winning football team. Until then, it is all about the ice for me! ■

