



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

He ain't heavy, he's my brother

I am sure you have seen the clip by now, either on TV or Book Face, the sporting clip that has stormed, not only the Sporting World but also the whole world – it shows two brothers in arms, desperately trying to get to the Finish Line, not as individuals, but as a team.

In case you haven't, it's the epic unforgettable image of one brother, Alistair Brownlee (double Olympic champion) helping his brother, Johnny Brownlee (former World champion) in a desperate attempt to finish before any other competitors.....How did this emotional heart rending scene come about?

Let us set the scene. It was Cozumel, Mexico last weekend, the temperature was 33 degrees and worse still, the humidity was 90 percent. It would make you thirsty to even think about walking, let alone attempting what these boys were doing. They had already swum 1.5K in the beautiful blue ocean off the coast of Eastern Mexico then biked 40K in the space of 1 hour 15 minutes. This was the last in an eight race series which took athletes from North America to Australia, Japan, South Africa, Europe etc. and here they were for the last event of the season. The Brownlees had had their usual poor start to the season due to injury.

Mario Mola, the Spanish athlete, had won four early races and seemed to be a shoe in for the world title but the Brownlees started to chip away at what had seemed an insurmountable lead. I was privileged to be in a grandstand in Leeds in July to watch a Brownlee 1-2, their last race before the Olympics but Mario Mola wasn't in that race, he was keeping his powder dry until the start in Rio. At the Olympics, the two brothers drew the sting out of Mola's famous fast last discipline, ie, the run. They hammered the swim, pushed hard on the vicious hilly bike course and had a gap which Alistair, Johnny and a few others got away from what remained of the pack. With 4K to go in Rio, however, Johnny said the most unwise thing to his brother, "Alistair, relax". Alistair took that as a sign that his brother was on his limit and took off like a shark scenting blood. He put the foot down and all Johnny saw for the rest of the race was Alistair's tri suit stretching ever further away into the distance. It ended up a GB 1-2,

a Yorkshire 1-2 and a Brotherly 1-2.

The Finish Line shot of both of them on the floor reaching out for each other was a classic and a sign of things to come.

BEAT DECISIVELY

Two weeks later, Johnny was in Edmonton in Canada in 12 degrees air temperature where he beat Mola decisively, (Alistair wasn't there, he flew from South Africa to China to win the Beijing International Triathlon before flying back to Mexico – as you do).

The maths were now simple, if Johnny won in Mexico and Mola finished 4th or worse, Johnny would be the world champion for the second time. Alistair's job was to help Johnny in the swim and the bike (where you are allowed to draft) then get behind Johnny but in front of Mola.

Everything was going according to plan – great swim (Mola was 45 seconds down), great bike (the boys and seven others who were desperately trying to hang on to the Brownlees' back wheels), now for the 10K run. The organisers had had some of the female competitors the day before in their race suffering from heat stroke and dehydration and they had the option to make the race a

sprint, ie, half distance.

The International Triathlon Union decided to keep the race as scheduled.

A total of nine guys got off their bikes and hit the run course like men possessed. They had a lead of 1 minute 30 over Mola and a swarm of 40 athletes, (including our very own Bryan Keane and Russell White who were to finish 30th and 36th in their hardest ever race). The 9 became 8, then 7....then 3. It was Yorkshire's finest and Henry Schoeman, a diminutive school boy type figure from South Africa.

Schoeman had won the bronze medal in Rio and was a serious threat, particularly as he had done very little work on the bike section, preferring to take shelter at the back rather than pushing at the front.

With 2K to go, Johnny made a move, a decisive move he hoped. He decided to be the hammer and make Schoeman the nail.

Alistair sat on the heels of Schoeman not wanting to help drag up the South African to his brother. Johnny's lead became 10 metres, then 50, then 100. The 10K was in the last lap of four and Johnny passed the 1K to go mark. There were plenty of water stations on the course but

Johnny merely poured water over his head rather than drinking any (have you ever tried to swallow anything when you are running 1K every 3 minute pace?).

All Johnny had to do was to stay upright and the race win was his – and the world championship. What could possibly go wrong?

WATCHING THE ACTION

It was 00.20 Limavady time, Sharon and I were watching the action unfold live on the red button (the race wasn't deemed important enough to be shown on BBC2, the next day, of course, the highlights were on every channel and every news bulletin).

I had an awful feeling, I kept saying: "Johnny, slow down, there is no need to be going so hard. You only have to beat Schoeman by 1 metre, not 400 metres."

The screen gave us a close up of his face and I realised how sunken his eyes looked. He was of this world but not in this world. He was physically present but mentally absent. Johnny started to slow and I shouted "He's gone!" He looked like Bambi on ice, his desperately dehydrated body was trying to respond to signals from his brain but it was too late.

He started to falter as if he was on quick sand. His legs had turned to cement, his ability to move coherently had disappeared.

He started to look behind him as if hoping that Schoeman would slow down also. By this stage, he was out of sight of his pursuers but when his brother and Schoeman came round the corner, Schoeman saw Johnny in distress and began to run like a man possessed. The South African saw that he had a chance for his first ever WTS victory.

Johnny basically staggered like a drunk into the helpers who were handing out water. He couldn't stand up on his own at this stage.

The next minute will be forever etched in my memory banks.

By this stage, I was shouting at the screen: "Get him help! Get him a doctor!" (I have ended up in a similar bad way twice in races so I have an inkling of what Johnny was going through. Once in Belfast, I ended up in the back of an ambulance when I pushed too hard and couldn't remember finishing and

once at Benone, I ended up under an oxygen mask after I went over the red line for too long).

What did Alistair Brownlee do? He didn't hesitate, he didn't deviate, he ran straight to his stricken brother, put an arm under his left shoulder and started to run with him as if they were in a Primary 1 three legged race.

Well, Alistair was running while Johnny was stumbling blindly, trying to put one foot in front of another. By this stage, Schoeman was on the blue carpet in the Finish Line chute about to bask in glory but behind him, there was a desperate, pathetic already doomed struggle.

Alistair was doing two things, Getting his brother to medical attention as soon as possible (there were plenty of medics on the Finish Line but none at the last water stop) and trying to help Johnny win as many points as possible.

The guys would have worked out all the permutations beforehand. Alistair knew that Johnny would still win the world title if Mola finished 6th, so every place was vital.

CLOUD CUCKOO LAND

Johnny was still in Cloud Cuckoo Land with his body shutting down while Alistair down while Alistair oxted cugged him and shoved him over the Finish Line with one last desperate push where Johnny fell like a sack of spuds. His eyes were closed and three long seconds later, his eyes opened – what a relief, he was still alive!

The doctors and medics swarmed around him and soon

had the young man in a wheelchair and whisked him off for urgent treatment.

He was taken to hospital after an IV drip was inserted to replace those vital loss fluids. Alistair, who had collapsed in a similar state in Hyde Park in London in 2011, had been studying Medicine at Cambridge University (they are both bright boys) so he knew what Johnny's problem was.

Johnny was later seen tweeting a photo from hospital with a thumbs up sign. He looked skeletally thin in his hospital gown.

His parents are both doctors and they knew that their son would soon be on the mend. Alistair, by the way, could have out sprinted Schoeman but he sacrificed a win for his brother without even thinking about it.

Meanwhile, Mola had heard the news and he jumped over the Finish Line in 5th place. He had won the title by four point (out of more than 4,000).

Thankfully, he paid tribute to the bravest man in Yorkshire in his victory speech, a man who had pushed himself to his limits – and beyond.

Schoeman lapped up the applause bestowed on the race victor but can you imagine the world's reaction, if he, too, had stopped, thought about others and put one arm around Johnny and helped him to the Finish Line? What a story that would have been!

Instead, it's Alistair whom people are now nominating for BBC Sports Personality of the Year. In a year of 36 Olympic gold medalists, how do you distinguish them? Maybe by an act of brotherly love, an act

of compassion, an act of altruism an act of generosity of spirit and one that separates a true sportsman from a mere athlete.

Both Alistair and Johnny are stars on the field of play and off it too.

FORCES OF NATURE

I have been privileged enough to have met the forces of nature that are the Brownlee boys on several occasions.

Once, when I was commentator at the European Triathlon Championships in Athlone (which Alistair won) and once, when I was MC at the Triathlon Ireland annual dinner in Dublin.

For the latter occasion, the boys had flown into help a charity by competing in a duathlon in Dundalk.

They started 30 minutes behind everybody and still won by a street. Later that night, as 250 of us sat down to our dinner, we would hear a polite Yorkshire accent enquire: "Excuse me, would you like to buy a raffle ticket for the Crumlin Children's Hospice?"

Alistair and Johnny are the real deal. They really are as nice as they seem. They have Yorkshire grit in their DNA but they are also full of selflessness. Johnny would have done the same for Alistair. Johnny's courage and Alistair's compassion shone out like beacons last week in an otherwise soulless mercenary sporting market place.

Alistair may well have replied, in the words of Neil Diamond, when asked why he gave up victory to carry his brother, 'He Ain't Heavy – He's My Brother'.



Alistair Brownlee helps brother Johnny over the finish line at the Triathlon World Series in Mexico. NCL39-20s



PJ pictured with Johnny Brownlee. NCL39-21s