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'I wanna be like Mike (or Gary, or Fiona)!'

Back when Michael Jordan ruled the world of basketball, and everything else, a TV advertisement showed him effortlessly whirling around other players, gliding through the air and dunking the basketball. He then sat down and started guzzling an artificially colored saline solution. He was surrounded by young boys who looked up at him with rapture. Then, each of the boys promptly started to guzzle the same drink and cheerfully chanted in a mantra-style, ‘I wanna be like Mike! I wanna be like Mike!’

Society loves the cult hero, someone who is, or is packaged to appear, more intelligent, faster, taller, more beautiful and exciting, and funnier than you. Here is someone to look up to from your miserable, lowly rung on society’s ladder - someone whose talents you can try to emulate, even if it is only in the soft drink that you buy. What better way to get through another grinding day at work than the knowledge that you are at least guzzling the same drink as Michael Jordan!

And so it is in science. Young scientists today define science in terms of personalities, cult heroes and controversy between laboratories. In a discussion group for a class that I teach, students and faculty leaders critique papers that parallel the more didactic parts of the class. The discussion of each paper is started with a brief (historical) background and overview of the biological problem by one of the students. I noticed that the students presented the background by date and personality (as encouraged by one faculty leader!), and often highlighted personality conflicts: ‘In 1987, Phlemspengler showed that pigs could become airborne for short distances if they first leapt out of a first-floor window. Then, in 1988, Phlemspengler’s rival, Snotely, reported that Phlemspengler’s work was flawed because he had in fact tossed the pigs out of the window. Nevertheless, Snotely was intrigued with the possibility that pigs might fly. In 1989, she found that excess rolls of fat underneath the forelimbs of pigs could produce lift if splints were used to extend the forelimbs laterally from the body, and the pigs were then tossed out of a first-floor window. The big breakthrough came in 1992, when Phlemspengler’s former graduate student Arsenmuth engineered a transgenic pig that had an enlarged sternum, a project that he was not allowed to work on as Phlemspengler’s
student. Arsenmuth showed that extensive exercise and pectoral muscle development, together with the forelimb fat rolls, provided sufficient strength and lift to enable the pigs to fly for short distances. At a recent meeting, Phlemspengler noted that Arsenmuth still had to toss the pigs from a first floor window in order to get them airborne and, therefore, he, Phlemspengler, was still the first discoverer of pig flight.

It would be considerably more scholarly to summarize the evolution of ideas (one came from the other), to which each person contributed, and leave out names and anecdotal personality conflicts. The evolution of pig flight came about through a series of body adaptations, starting with the use of splints to support the forearms and surrounding adipose tissue, and then the development of the sternum and pectoral muscles. However, it remains to be shown whether these pigs can sustain powered flight or simply glide after an assisted launch. Who said that the recitation of science should be exciting or presented in the format of an exclusive for the News of the World, National Enquirer or Das Bild?

Unfortunately, the science cult figure looms large, and in some cases very large. Students want to grow up to be like… pick a star of genetics, cell or developmental biology - someone famous at a prize university, who gets the rock-star billing at meetings and has the greased pipeline into the top journals. And why not? Isn’t this the way to get to the top (the top in terms of visibility, not necessarily scientific contribution), to emulate the success of someone else, to mould yourself to their pedigree and personality? Do not succumb to this form of societal inbreeding! It is not that Mike (or Gary, or Fiona) is not worth looking up to. However, it is better to be yourself and to develop your own set of principles, your own way of thinking and performing experiments, your own writing and presentation styles. Face it: in the end, you will never have the ability to perform the experimental equivalent of a gravity-defying, 360° spin tomahawk dunk, and you will definitely not look good in vest and shorts!

Caveman

Cell Science at a Glance

Cell Science at a Glance is included as a poster in the paper copy of the journal and available in several downloadable formats in the online version, which we encourage readers to download and use as slides. Future contributions to this section will include signalling pathways, phylogenetic trees, multiprotein complexes, useful reagents… and much more.

We would like to encourage readers to submit ideas for future contributions to this section.

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