



Emma Raducanu's ditching of her social media account should be copied by more than just elite-level athletes for major gain, argues Rob Stephen

It is significant that Emma Raducanu has deleted Instagram from her phone: presumably she worked out that worrying about how her last post was received and what her next post would be is not compatible with creating the space she needs to lose herself in her tennis. If Raducanu felt the lure of a social media site distracting her from her brilliance on the court, what is the ceaseless advance of meaningless online junk doing to everyone else?

There is now an unavoidable struggle between the real and online worlds, between physical and virtual games, and so between real sport and the addictive but unfulfilling distractions permanently available on our smartphones. It's time to fight back.

We need actively to push back against the creeping, purposeless and [literally] depressing march of smartphone addiction. Help is at hand because sport is our best ally. Not so long ago it sounded a bit old-fashioned to argue that playing sport is good for you. But, in the midst of an epidemic of digital addiction, we need sport today more than ever.

There is an unavoidable struggle between real and online worlds

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Put the phone away and get the trainers on

whatever is being pushed at you by the algorithm: another dopamine hit, though even duller than the last one. It's comparable to how junk food makes us crave more of it despite providing us with very little real nutritional value.

Parents and teachers can feel themselves in a bind: if we treat smartphones and social media as the forbidden fruit and ban them, we are in danger of creating an environment where young people may feel less empowered over their lives and ultimately crave time on their smartphones even more.

So we should focus on making the case for the "pull" of the real world, alongside subtly limiting the excesses of the virtual one. A grounding in sport can offer a route out, a kind of sanctuary. Sport, of course, is far from the only solution. Many of sport's feel-

good factors are present in other settings – a choir or a theatre company is just as collaborative as a sports team. But, given the particular entwined problems caused by digital addiction – declining levels of mental and physical fitness – sport offers the rare combination of physical expressiveness combined with focus and concentration, as well as individual skill acquisition within a collaborative setting.

As a teacher, I see how young people gain confidence and expressiveness from immersion in sport. That observation is aligned with academic research suggesting that sport is the activity which has the highest correlation with fulfilment. Conversely, 'passive leisure' – such as social media and the internet – is being linked more and more with unhappiness.

The anthropologist Melvin Konner argues that "play is the central paradox of evolution". Despite serving no

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definitive purpose, play is natural, instinctive and existence-affirming, with physical, social and emotional benefits as happy by-products further down the line. Do we really want that play instinct to be squashed by a flat glass screen?

Early exposure to sport can ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fall in love with something positively real from a young age. A rounded education supports healthy, balanced lives, and that includes preparing people not just for a life of work but

The underlying problem is already severe and getting worse. Young people are now 'playing' far less than they used to, engaging in less sport and being less physically active. A study last year suggested that only 27% of children play outside today, down from an estimated 80% for older generations.

If fear of injuries and accidents are squeezing outdoor play then it's another example of humans being bad risk-assessors. The far greater risk is staying home parked on the opiates of social media. The online world might be free from obvious physical and 'healthy' risks but it is laden with hidden and unhealthy ones.

The coroner's report at the Molly Russell inquest added harrowing testimony to the increasingly obvious fact that social media can lead young people towards loneliness and self-loathing: "It is likely that the material viewed [on various online sites] by Molly contributed to her death in a more than minimal way."

The Times recently reported that, over the course of a month, the average person is scrolling through online content equivalent to the height of the Shard; this aligns with a study by the psychologist Jean Twenge which suggested that new media were taking up an average of six hours a day of young people's leisure time. Were that time spent in the deliberate practice of a skill, in accordance with Anders Ericsson's "10,000 hours" hypothesis, a world-class level could be attained in roughly four and a half years.

Twenge's research also explores the contributing factors to young people getting fewer than seven hours of sleep and found that the two most significant negative factors were the use of social media and spending more than three hours a day on electronic devices. And the activities most likely to result in good sleep? Sport and exercise.

Persistent fatigue leads us to choose the path of least resistance – and hence another lazy scroll through

also a life of play – indeed the two are connected as the highest achievers often retain a spirit of play within their work. Mike Brearley once reflected that he "needed to be more of a child in order to be more of an adult".

Above all, the key differentiator among fulfilled and successful people in the future is likely to be their ability to become genuinely and positively absorbed in an activity, a state which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined as the "flow experience" or "the zone". He described it as when "attention becomes ordered, there is no space for irrelevant feelings, self-consciousness disappears and any sense of time is distorted." Those who can freely enter this space will be the winners of tomorrow.

By this point, you'll be unsurprised to read that Csikszentmihalyi found sport and games to be at the top of the list for flow-inducing activities.