# RED IS FOR WINNERS

**When competitors in sport are equally matched, the team dressed in red is more likely to win, according to a new study**

That is the conclusion of British anthropologists Russell Hill and Robert Barton of the University of Durham, after studying the results of one-on-one boxing, tae kwon do, Greco-Roman wrestling and freestyle wrestling matches at the Olympic Games. Their study shows that when a competitor is equally matched with an opponent in fitness and skill, the athlete wearing red is more likely to win.

Hill and Barton report that when one contestant is much better than the other, colour has no effect on the result. However, when there is only a small difference between them, the effect of colour is sufficient to tip the balance. The anthropologists say that the number of times red wins is not simply by chance, but that these results are statistically significant.

Joanna Setchell, a primate researcher at the University of Cambridge, has found similar results in nature. She studies the large African monkeys known as mandrills. Mandrills have bright red noses that stand out against their white faces. Setchell's work shows that the dominant males – the ones who are more successful with females – have a brighter red nose than other males.

Setchell says that the finding that red also has an advantage in human sporting events does not surprise her and she adds that 'the idea of the study is very clever.'

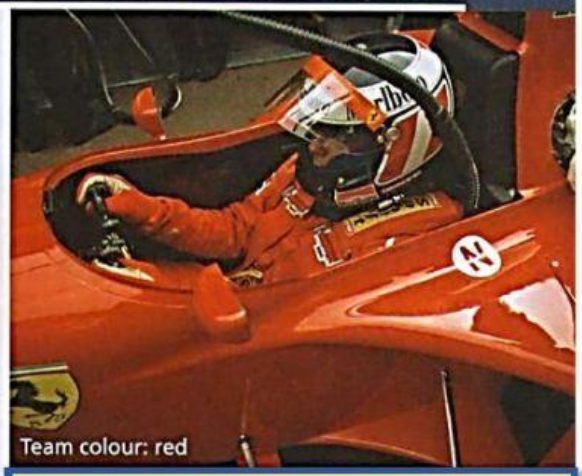
Hill and Barton got the idea for their research because of the role that the colour red plays in the animal world. 'Red seems to be the colour, across species, that signals male dominance,' Barton says. They thought that 'there might be a similar effect in humans.' Setchell, the primatologist, agrees: 'As Hill and Barton say, humans redden when we are angry and go pale when we're scared. These are very important signals to other individuals.'

**Red seems to be the colour … that signals male dominance**

As well as the studies on primates by Setchell, another study demonstrates the effect of red among birds. In an experiment, scientists put red plastic rings on the legs of male zebra finches and this increased the birds' success with female zebra finches. Zebra finches already have bright red beaks, so this study suggests that, as with Olympic athletes, an extra flash of red is significant. In fact, researchers from the University of Glasgow say that the birds' brightly coloured beaks are an indicator of health. Jonathan Blount, a biologist, says that females of many species choose to mate with the flashiest males. Now, Blount and his colleagues think they have found proof that bright red or orange beaks attract females because they mean that the males are healthier. Nothing in nature is simple, however, because in species such as the blue footed booby, a completely different colour seems to give the male birds the same advantage with females.

**… bright red or orange beaks attract females because they mean that the males are healthier**

Meanwhile, what about those athletes who win in their events while wearing red? Do their clothes give them an unintentional advantage? Robert Barton accepts that 'that is the implication' of their findings. Is it time for sports authorities to consider new regulations on sports clothing?

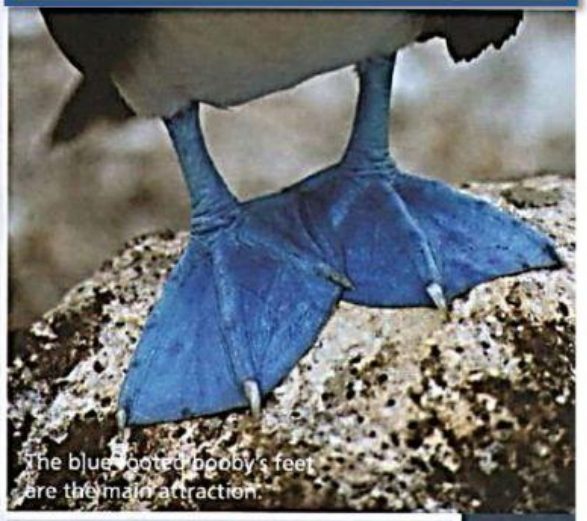


Team colour: red

**5** Match the research topics (1–4) with the scientists' conclusions (a–d).

1 Results at the Olympic Games
2 African mandrills' success with the opposite sex
3 Male and female zebra finches
4 The colour of birds' beaks

a The colour red gives some male monkeys an advantage.
b The colour red makes some male birds more successful.
c Brightly coloured beaks are indicators of healthier birds.
d The colour red can give some athletes an advantage.



The blue footed booby's feet are the main attraction.

**fitness** (n) /'fɪtnəs/ health and strength
**flash** (n) /flæʃ/ light or bright colour on a dark background
**indicator** (n) /'ɪndɪkeɪtə/ sign
**regulations** (n) /,regju'leɪʃənz/ rules
**significant** (adj) /sɪg'nɪfɪkənt/ 1 not by chance 2 with an important meaning
**unintentional** (adj) /,ʌnɪn'tenʃənəl/ not planned

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