

Friendly RIVALRY

Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer, goes the saying. But how well does this strategy apply in practice when long-time pals have to vie against each other in the sporting arena or at work? Annette Binger investigates.

Photography Eamon Gallagher

The two Italian-built, mahogany dinghies appear identical as they skate across the bay near Sandringham Yacht Club in Melbourne. Their varnished hulls and taut white sails are only differentiated by their numbers – 2296 and 2323 – and the profiles of the sailors at their helms, Marcus Hamilton and Matt Hosie. On land, Hamilton and Hosie work together as carpenters during the week and often have a meal together with mutual friends on weekends. But once the wind fills the sails of their 16-foot International Contender-class boats, these friends become fierce rivals who, at the world championships in Perth in January, gained second and fifth world rankings respectively.

“I admit that I loathe losing to him,” says 23-year-old Hamilton, who has also won first place at two Australian and two European titles in the past 15 months. “He is always very gracious when I win and I think I’ve been sportsmanlike when he wins. But if I do lose to him, which doesn’t happen often these days, I can be a bit of a foot-stamper in private and go inside myself for a while.”

“Humans are naturally social beings; we thrive on our sense of belonging to a community and our social connections with family, colleagues and friends are what help keep us healthy and happy,” says Dr Bob Montgomery, director of communications for the Australian Psychological Society (APS). “But rivalry is equally a fact of everyday life and has the potential to unhinge relationships with people we care about.” Achieving balance between these two opposing forces relies on emotional self-awareness. Yet even the best of us are guilty of occasionally wishing a sibling would disappear or invoking a curse against an envied, high-achieving friend.

Comparative psychology, which uses Darwin’s theory of natural selection to decipher the way we choose our mates according to traits that will enhance reproduction, helps explain our urge to outperform the people around us. Competitive behaviour, it seems, is our genetic predisposition

dating from the prehistoric struggle for survival.

“It’s natural for relationships to be forged in any arena where people consistently spend time together,” says Quentin Jones, a specialist in organisational development and Australian director of Human Synergistics. “As a matter of course, humans seek out people with common visions, morals and passions. But it’s also human nature for rivalries and jealousies to crop up, even among friends. The people who overcome those feelings are able to imagine abundance rather than scarcity and don’t allow the negative feelings to diminish them.”

For Hamilton and 25-year-old Hosie, whose meeting at the Victorian state titles in 2001 led them to begin training and working together in 2003, friendship and rivalry are not mutually exclusive. “[Olympic coach] Arthur Brett knew we were mates when he took us under his wing,” says Hamilton, who first took to the water under a sail as a six-year-old. “A bit of healthy competition between us was his strategy to keep us both doing our best – and it’s worked. Matt definitely keeps me on my toes; if I make a mistake he’s right there, not giving an inch.”

It’s tough to fathom how they do it but they can happily spend all day together, tune up against one another on the water before a regatta and drift apart only 10 minutes before a race to mentally prepare. “It used to really annoy me that I couldn’t beat him,” says Hosie. “And I know that Marcus was shattered when he didn’t win in Perth – he sets such high standards for himself. But I am rapt to have come fifth in the world and am always planning how I’m going to beat him next time.”

The rivalry between them is a ripe topic for teasing on the building sites where they work. Even their boss took to calling Hosie “No. 2”. But when Hamilton’s father died in February 2004, closely followed by his stepmother in January last year, Hosie was right there by his side. On both occasions Hosie took care of the “stuff that was just too hard”, letting mutual friends know what had happened. And for his part, Hosie →



Australian Ballet soloists Jane Casson (left) and Lana Jones. “We often ask each other’s advice,” says Jones.



Ballet bonds

“Belonging to the Australian Ballet is kind of like living on an island,” says the ballet’s artistic director, David McAllister, 42. “We’re all thrust together – rehearsing, touring and performing – so, of course, we form longstanding friendships with people that we’re constantly competing against for roles. It’s a long day if you don’t.”

The friendship between fellow soloists Jane Casson, 28, and Lana Jones, 23, has grown beyond Casson’s expectations. “I always thought Lana was an incredible dancer, even when she first joined the company as a 19-year-old, but I’ve seen her develop even further. In the past few years, I’ve watched the way she’s always wanted to be a better dancer and a better person.”

The ballet world can be a critical, competitive environment where people’s self-confidence is fragile. To counter that, the Australian Ballet School holds sessions with its young dancers to discuss healthy competition. Students are taught to accept that it’s impossible to control your rivals but possible to manage yourself by setting personal goals and competing against your own past achievements, not someone else’s. Learning to understand that someone else may be more suited to a particular role than you is also part of the training.

“We’re both up for the same roles a lot,” says Jones. “But I know Jane would be rapt for me if I won a role she’d been hoping for and vice versa.”

Every dancer has her own strengths and Jones says she has a lot to learn from Casson’s ability to make a role her own. “We often ask each other’s advice on things and I know I can rely on her to be an honest judge.”

And, she adds, “If Jane were promoted to principal artist before me, I’d be thrilled *and* still have a moment of envy. It would make perfect sense, though, and I know that. She’s been in the company longer than me. I think that being down-to-earth about things is what we like about each other; we don’t get caught up in the nonsense!”

describes Hamilton as one of the most generous people he knows. But in the water, the pair agree that friendly rivalry is the tonic that spurs them on to achieve their personal bests.

“It’s a smart person who can prepare for a competitive situation by behaving co-operatively,” says Bob Montgomery. “Co-operators will focus on achieving their task, whereas competitors become distracted from the task because they’re more focused on beating someone else. Co-operators will always do better than competitors and judging your own success by comparing yourself with others is an enemy to good relationships.”

Jeff Bond, former head of sports psychology at the Australian Institute of Sport, believes that Australia’s female swimmers at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games successfully learned those same lessons. “They seemed to embrace the notion that the better your competition, the higher your own achievement will be. And they pushed each other to great heights. Seeing their heartfelt congratulations and warm embraces in the pool showed how positively they dealt with what must be conflicting emotions.”

Ready, set, catfight was more the order of proceedings between 400-metre running rivals Jana Pittman and Tamsyn Lewis after Lewis supposedly gloated after beating an out-of-form Pittman at this year’s Commonwealth Games trials. The two were best friends until February last year when Lewis publicly suggested that Pittman had enjoyed her role of drama queen leading up to the Athens Olympics in August 2004. Pittman retorted with snide comments about Lewis’s appearance as a “bikini babe” in *Ralph* magazine. “When two people are performing well or on par, then it’s easy for relationships to work,” says Bond. “But when one person leapfrogs the other – or, in this situation, one performs poorly – egos get in the way and friendships are tested.”

For most of us, though, rivalry doesn’t rear its head in an elite sporting arena. It’s more likely to hit when a friend rings to announce a work promotion or a new, glamorous-sounding job. And with workplaces increasingly becoming the basis of our social networks, this often takes place at the office.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics tell us that the hours we work are steadily climbing: between 1994 and 2004, full-time workers added 2.5 hours a week to the time they spent on the job, slogging away an average of 40.4 hours a week. A survey report published by the APS in 2005 into why people live where they do, found that people are more concerned with environment and practicality than proximity to loved ones. Why? Largely because our work colleagues are becoming our friends and workplaces are satisfying our need for relationships.

For creative directors Pete Ford and Paul Kenny, common interests fostered friendship between them from their first meeting at a communication industry awards night in 1994. “Emotions and values are often at the core of what we do in corporate events and communications,” says Kenny, 50, whose most recent association was with Jack Morton Worldwide, the producers of the opening and closing ceremonies →



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Matt Hosie (left) and Marcus Hamilton: the two carpenters are firm friends on land and fierce rivals on the water.



Creative director Paul Kenny (left) has been an “influential mentor” to Pete Ford.

Below Barristers Noel Ackman and Olyvia Nikou value each other’s successes though both aim to win in court.



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at this year’s Commonwealth Games. “That, plus the hours and commitment involved ... you either find real friendship, like Pete and I have, or real enmity.”

Over the course of their 12-year-friendship, Ford, 39, has worked for Kenny but subsequently formed his own company, Think! OTS, in direct competition with his friend. Their most recent competitive bout was vying to build the Australian pavilion for last year’s World Expo in Japan. “Paul was an influential mentor,” says Ford. “I see the competition between us as healthy and I think it’s smart business to be friends with people in your own industry. Paul and I often come up against each other for contracts. Respecting his work means I never underestimate the potential of what he’ll come up with and I believe I’m a good creative director because he is.”

When Think! OTS won the contract for the Australian pavilion, Kenny was the first person to ring and congratulate Ford. “I have absolutely felt competitive with him,” says Kenny. “But that doesn’t stop me feeling happy for him and admiring the different view that won him the business.”

“Accepting other people’s abilities and controlling your own ego and jealousies can keep you sharp, motivated and challenged,” says clinical and organisational psychologist Grant Brecht. “You’ve got to expect that no relationship will run smoothly. Enjoying the journey, not just the outcome, and keeping things in perspective – knowing that coming second is not the end of the world – gives people the ability to deal with the frustration of losing.”

Friendships that develop between colleagues

in the same organisation are susceptible to their own pressures, says clinical and organisational psychologist Dr Peter Cotton, who has cared for workers’ mental health in the public and private sectors for 20 years. “Friendships commonly come unstuck when one individual is promoted into a leadership role and demarcations get fluffy.” But, he adds, “If the emphasis is on being professional and the promoted person keeps their eye on the main game, relationships will survive.”

After 17 years as a dancer with the Australian Ballet, David McAllister was promoted to artistic director in 2001. He admits that it was a “head-space flip-out” when he first took over. “My only real peer here was Steven Heathcote, who, fortunately, was enormously supportive of my promotion. I initially had terrible trouble telling people what to do – I often asked them what they thought of a decision. It took about 18 months for me to feel comfortable in the role.”

“A person needs self-confidence,” says Cotton. “If a promoted person holds onto their nerve, then they will gain people’s respect over time.”

Emotions can run high in the family law court where Noel Ackman QC and Olyvia Nikou SC match wits on behalf of their opposing clients. “We both like to win,” says Nikou. “But we value the other’s successes. The trick for us is never taking anything personally and not getting emotional about our work.”

Ackman and Nikou share the same clerk in chambers, are chairman and vice-chairman respectively of Victoria’s Family Law Bar Association and regularly come up against each other in court. They’ve also been friends for some 10 years, since meeting in chambers. “I think our friendship remains strong because we’re able to compartmentalise and quarantine off different parts of our lives,” adds Nikou. “Sure, we can have a laugh – that’s what friends do. But we’re dealing with serious issues here and our practices depend on our reputations, which means behaving professionally.”

“It does sometimes happen that barristers will appeal to each other as friends [at work] but not Olyvia,” says Ackman, 60. “It’s why we remain friends – I know I can rely on her to behave ethically. If you join a club with strict ethical rules, you accept them. Olyvia agrees with me on that.”

As Ackman is quick to point out, the work of a barrister is helping other people and in the chamber’s collegiate atmosphere, friendships are common. “Behaving professionally as a barrister allows you to approach the other side to try to reach an agreeable outcome. It means we’re sometimes accused of being too familiar by people who think our work is simply about winning and losing but in this field, familiarity should breed respect, not contempt.”

In previous decades, says Brecht, “people used to advise against work friendships because it reduced the kind of ruthless competition that was supposed to breed success. That’s crazy when we spend so much time at work. We now know that staying achievement-focused in a co-operative manner will always outperform individual competition.” ●

