Net gain at the Halbergs

The Silver Ferns won the supreme award this year, but Israel Adesanya hogged the spotlight.

Women very nearly scooped the pool at this year’s Halberg Awards.

The emerging talent award went to Alice Robinson, the first New Zealander to win a gold medal in the 38-year history of the World Junior Alpine Skiing Championships and the first since Claudia Riegler in 1997 to win a World Cup event. Last weekend in Slovenia, the 18-year-old won her second World Cup giant slalom of the season and is now fifth in the World Cup standings. Since ski racers usually don’t peak until their mid-20s, Robinson seems destined for superstardom.

Canoeist Lisa Carrington was sportswoman of the year for the fourth time in a row. Sophie Pascoe, who won four gold medals at the World Para Swimming Championships, won the para athlete/team award for the sixth time since the category was introduced in 2011.

The Silver Ferns won the supreme award and team of the year, and their victory over Australia in the pulsating Netball World Cup final was voted sporting moment of the year. Ferns coach Noeline Taurua was coach of the year and took out the leadership award, while former Ferns player and coach Yvonne Willering won the lifetime achievement award.

But in a decision that smacked of tokenism, the sportsman of the year award was given to an actual man: UFC middleweight world champion Israel Adesanya, who thus became the first combat athlete to win a Halberg. Typically, he proceeded to hog the spotlight by delivering a mildly sweary speech deploring tall poppy syndrome.

Net gain at the Halbergs

A few observations about tall poppy syndrome. First, if you’re going to denounce it, where better than at a gathering of the nation’s elite athletes? Second, isn’t it the case that the syndrome is part and parcel, admittedly not always for the better, of the “Jack is as good as his master” egalitarianism on which we Kiwis pride ourselves?

Third, isn’t the media applauding an athlete for attacking tall poppy syndrome a little like oil companies applauding Greta Thunberg for...
Isn't the media applauding an athlete for attacking tall poppy syndrome a little like oil companies applauding Greta Thunberg?

slagging off those who contribute to and deny climate change? Where would the syndrome be without the media's enthusiastic participation?

Endorsing Adesanya’s sentiments, a Stuff columnist cited “all round nice guy” Sonny Bill Williams, referencing his empathy after the Christchurch mosque shootings and campaigning on behalf of victims of the Syrian civil war and China’s repressed Uighur community. But when Williams suggested last year that the media should keep sport in perspective given what’s going on in the real world, columnists lined up to tell him to “shove his sermon” and “get a life”.

That said, although some in the sports media give every impression of subscribing to press baron Lord Beaverbrook’s attitude to tall poppies – “Kiss ’em one day, kick ’em the next” – few sports journalists see their roles as ensuring stars don’t get too big for their boots. However, professional sport is a results-driven, highly rewarded industry in which successes and failures are public, precisely measured, recorded for posterity and analysed to death: for both athlete and paid observer, criticism goes with the territory. The Black Caps were showered with media and public praise for their performances at the Cricket World Cup, but they must have expected the brickbats that came their way when they crumbled in Australia.

Although Adesanya’s fusillade was more sawn-off shotgun than sniper’s rifle, I’d like to think the point he really wanted to get across was this: “Understand this, if you see one of us shining – whether it be the netball team, the Black Caps, the sailors – pump them up, embrace them, because, if they win, you win. If I win, you win.”

And I’d like to think most Kiwis would agree with him. 

---

A conspicuous absentee from the line-up of trophy-wielding women was golfer Lydia Ko, once upon a time a Halbergs fixture. She won the supreme award in 2013 and was a finalist in 2014 and 2015; she was sportswoman of the year three times in a row between 2013 and 2015 and a finalist the following two years.

That Ko wasn’t in the running reflects a decline that has gone from slight to significant to precipitous in little over two years. When I discussed her struggles in 2018 (Sport, April 21), she was ranked 15th in the world, a no doubt galling position for a prodigy who’d spent 104 weeks in top spot. But fluctuations of that order aren’t all that unusual and time was on her side: she was about to turn 21. Ko went into last weekend’s Women’s Australian Open ranked 46th. She failed to make the cut, something she didn’t do in her first 53 LPGA tournaments.

It could be argued that dwelling on Ko’s struggles is tall poppy syndrome, but what are we meant to do: pretend not to notice? Bear in mind, we’re not talking about a decent player having a bad trot; we’re talking about someone who, at 17, was on the fast track to being the greatest female golfer the world has ever seen. Despite her extraordinary achievements as a teenager, she’s now in danger of joining the cohort of battlers who, week-in week-out, make up the numbers, rarely featuring on the broadcasters’ abbreviated leaderboards.

Ko has 20 professional wins, but only one since late 2016. That came embarrassingly soon after the column referred to above appeared. Hopefully, the reverse commentator’s curse will strike again.

---

Strike two, hopefully

Former world No 1 Lydia Ko’s decline in the golf rankings is baffling.