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Dwain Chambers speaks at the Cambridge Union

*A man asked Dwain if he wanted to run faster. Dwain said yes. The man said: ‘you need pharmacology.’*

Dwain began by dedicating his presentation to Teens Unite, an organisation which helps young people suffering from cancer. The audience was shown a video clip which introduced the work of Teens Unite. Seven teenagers every day are told they have cancer.

*When and how did you start athletics?* Around 11-12 at junior school. He was encouraged by his primary school to go to a local track in 1993-4.

*What was it like being famous at school and as a young athlete?* ‘Loads of girls’, Dwain whispered. It made him very popular. But on the flip side, he had to spend a lot of time training, missing out on other leisure activities his friends were doing. He had contractual obligations to Puma. As he became more high profile in his later teenage years, he was drawn further away from his friends, having to train and fulfil contract criteria.

*Why did you go to America?* When he was 22, Dwain went to America. At Sydney Olympics 2000, he finished fourth. He was running under 10 seconds quite frequently. But he wanted to achieve more, fourth wasn’t good enough. He wanted to know what was making the American athletes superior. So he went to America in 2001-02 season. He went to train in Miami, surrounded by world and Olympic champions.

*What happened next?* He had been in America for about a week. He was walking down the track, and a man came out of nowhere with a brown paper bag and said ‘I know what you need’. He asked Dwain if he wanted to run faster. Dwain said yes. The man said ‘you need pharmacology.’ He said that was what would raise Dwain to number 1 in the world. Dwain then made a decision which he regrets, which ruined his career for 12 years. He never realised that ‘once I got on that train, I would never be able to get off’. On a daily basis, he was in hospital 4-5 times a week to make sure he didn’t have blood-clots. He wanted to stop, but he kept doing because he was worried that everyone else was doing it, and thus would have an advantage.

*What was it like winning during this period?* The winning was great. But the problems came with feeling bad in myself. The toughest thing was knowing he was competing against people who were clean, such as his friend Christian Malcolm. But in Dwain’s mind, he thought his other top competitors were all taking the same things. It ruined his friendships He had all this equipment and medication in special fridges around the house, so he couldn’t have his friends around. He stopped seeing friends, even family.

*He tested positive in 2003. How did this feel?* Initially Dwain was in shock. But at the same time, he was happy it had happened, because it was the only way to stop the performance-enhancing programme. Every time he had tried to stop he couldn’t, because of the fear of how it would affect his running in competitions. Being caught was the only way to stop.

*How did you feel when you admitted doping to the press?* Dwain wanted to continue in sport, and he wanted to go out and tell the truth, for his conscience to be clear. He felt he had to come clean publicly. However, he never imagined the ‘mushroom effect’ it would have on sport. He is sorry about the way he delivered it because it put sport into disrepute. He felt compelled to tell the truth.

*Was telling the truth the right thing to do?* ‘I had to do what I felt was best in order for me to move on’. But he regrets contributing to the ruining of the image of sport. We ‘learn from mistakes’, and now ‘I can still go out there and compete, and hold my head up high’.

*What was the response of athletics?* Divided. There was a lot of criticism, but Dwain had support from family and friends. Now many athletes were friendly, however, which Dwain understands, as he had cheated other people out of medals. For example, the other medal winners in his relay team were stripped of their medals. Every time
he went to a track and competed, there was animosity towards him.

*He left athletics for American football.* American football took him on board without judging him. There were a couple of games when he took so many hits that he was crying. ‘Those guys are conditioned to take hits; I’m conditioned to run in a straight line.’ So he realised he wasn’t made for NLF.

*He made a return to track in 2008, but then went to rugby.* The atmosphere around him was still a bit shaky. So he went to go and play rugby. He felt so exposed. He remembers taking a hit that was ‘so hard, I felt my bones click inside’. He has the utmost respect for rugby and American football, but he realised that what he was good at was running. He thought ‘Dwain, why are you avoiding what you’re really good at’.

*Success followed in running.* He won medals in 2009 and 2010. In 2010 Doha, he won his first world title. However, he still felt a lot of animosity surrounding him, so he couldn’t really enjoy the feeling of winning a world title.

*Dwain climbed Mont Blanc for teens Unite.* Dwain is a patron of Teens Unite, and takes every opportunity to promote it. He climbed Mont Blanc. Everything in his life has been fast, but when climbing Mont Blanc, 250m took him an hour. They had to climb 3-4 hours every day. Every night ‘I cried, out of sheer pain and frustration.’ The reason he did it was to raise awareness for Teens Unite. The process was awful, but he’s proud he has done it. Doing that excursion taught him that you can achieve anything. He had had no preparation. It gave him a lot of belief in himself. Being at the top was ‘the coolest feeling ever’.

*The 2012 Olympics.* This was a ‘scary time’, due to the huge controversy surrounding his appearance. The prospect of competing at the Olympics, he had previously been told by the British Olympics Association, was an ‘impossibility’. In May 2012 a by-law which had prevented his appeal against his ban was overturned. When he got the news he was in Jamaica. All the British press came flooding out to Jamaica, so he went to Barbados to be shielded from the press. He was ‘knackered’ after the judgement, because he had been fighting for that judgement for 10 years. He now had to try and qualify for the team, he was in a bad position, he was a ‘shambles’. But when he got to the national trials, ‘something switched on’. He won the trials and competed in the Olympics.

*He won the British Championships in 2014.* He was 36 years old. He had been running badly beforehand, but he performs well under pressure.

*Questions from the floor*

*Have you managed to build bridges with your fellow athletes?* It was difficult at first. But now, when I do interact with them on a professional level, we are ‘cool’. I saw Darren Campbell recently and we ‘got on right as rain’.

*Are drugs still rife in top-level athletics?* I can only comment on what I did. Over the past few years I’ve taken a backseat in sport, working with Teens United, so I’ve largely turned a blind eye to what’s going on in sport.

*Would you have come clean if you hadn’t been caught?* At that time I wasn’t comfortable in front of other people. I’m glad I got caught, as painful as it was. ‘God knows what would have happened’ if I hadn’t been caught.

*What did your mum say?* That was the hardest thing for me, to see her disappointment. Since then, we’ve had a fantastic relationship. That incident brought us together.

By Max Twivy
Head of Press, Lent 2015