

Tall, Short, and Peter Crouch

Does height matter?

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In the dim and trivial past, when some of us on this fragile planet still gave a moment's thought to the marriage of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, the big issue was not the prenup, the dress or the party guests, but elevation. In his real life and his film life, Cruise had always appeared inches shorter than his new partner, but in the official wedding photos, there was a remarkable transformation: they were suddenly of equal height. Those who believed in fairy tales were inclined to put this down to the magic of Hollywood. The rest of us would have to contend with the medical miracle of a very late midlife growth spurt, or the humiliating spectacle of a hunching and barefoot bride, or the continued transformative possibilities of stacked heels. The world has moved on in so many ways since then, but few mysteries have proved so intractable.

Height is big news these days. Tall people are reported as wealthier, happier, more confident; they complain less, they are less uptight. But short people...just look at Martin Sorrell, if you can spot him among the giraffes in Court 13 at the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand. Sorrell, the hugely successful advertising/marketing/public-relations executive, recently became known beyond his professional circles for another thing: his shortness.

Last week, he was suing former colleagues for libel and invasion of privacy, a case in which forensics specialists had uncovered 'vicious' images, allegations of criminal activity, the possibility of malicious character assassination and the one that really pushed the quote-of-the-week button: the prospect that he may or may not be 'a mad dwarf'.

With his friend and business partner Daniela Weber (who objected to being referred to in the same email as 'the nympho schizo'), Sorrell was fighting a battle of reputation, repudiation and decency; his barrister claimed that the slur on his height was the least of his worries. But the spin from his court battle was beyond his control. Here was a chance to talk about a successful short man in legal circumstances, and damn if we weren't going to make a meal out of it. Reports were mixed: he was somewhere between 5ft 4in and 5ft 6½in, certainly small enough to suggest that here was a boardroom Napoleon, a man in need of proving himself.

Then last week in Israel, there was talk of the lack of height in the box caused by the absence from the England football team of Peter Crouch, sidelined after a broken nose. Seemingly at least three times Sorrell's height, it has become a cliché of Crouch reporting to say, on those occasions when he actually takes the field, that he is really not too bad at controlling the ball with his feet. Ball

control is often taken for granted among international footballers, but with Crouch, it is seen as an added bonus, as if he was also good at three card brag.

For what he is really good at is taking mild abuse. It never actually gets very funny: 'He's big/He's Red/His feet stick out the bed/Peter Crouch, Peter Crouch,' his Liverpool fans serenade. His response? 'Everyone's entitled to their opinion...' Analysts and managers and fellow players have judged him 'the 6ft 7in striker who does not score', 'a lovely big bag of bones', a 'clumsy beanpole'. His former team-mate Matthew Rose remembered that, 'when Peter turned up, we just saw him as a head on a stick'. Former England manager Graham Taylor said: 'You will never read just "Peter Crouch" - it will always be "Beanpole Peter Crouch".' Or, as opposing fans like to chant: 'Freak! Freak! Freak!'

Our height may be the most underestimated and under-reported determinant of our physical and mental well-being. We are comparative souls and we judge ourselves against others in endless ways, many of which we can conceal, inflate or improve. Being short or tall in a world that values conformity can be a difficult thing to live with and is not an easy thing to disguise or change. The average person, defined most often as men between 5ft 7in and 5ft 11in and women between 5ft 5in and 5ft 9in, may deny prejudice and embrace diversity, but society is less forgiving. Beyond the casual dilemmas of transport, clothes shopping and seeing nothing/blocking everything at pop concerts, there is something else at play for the short and tall: heightism, a prism through which a general fear of the strange finds a new and legitimate voice.

For the past 10 years, this has become rather apparent to Tulsi Patel, an elegant 17-year-old living in Elstree with her tall father, tall brother and average-height mother. Tulsi is 6ft 2in, which does not qualify for a role in the circus, but has none the less set her apart among her schoolfriends. She is a confident young woman with a good sense of humour and she has needed it. 'I only became really aware of it in my teens,' she says. 'When I was 14, I was walking for a check-up to the dentist, and these men came by in a van, and they were shouting, "Go and find your basketball team back home. Go back home to Giant Land." I thought, "God, what have I done wrong?" and I just ran.' There is a video of her at the age of three, this big girl going down a slide, twice as tall as the others. 'When I was younger, I began to hate being so noticeable. I was always put in charge of kids my age and, if anything went wrong, it was automatically my fault. I used to hunch, which was not a good thing and my mum always tells me not to do it.'

In the playground, her mother Mira, faced similar hurdles: 'They would say, "What are you feeding her?" as if she was a plant. [Oddly, Tulsi was named after an Indian plant with a propensity to grow high.] They thought they were being funny. I didn't say much, but I was really cross. So after a while, I would give something back to them: "You're very small, actually. Don't you find it hard to buy clothes?"'

Her life has become easier since leaving a girls' school for a mixed one, where one of her best friends is now a girl of 5ft 10in who says she will be forever

grateful to Tulsi for taking the pressure off. She has stopped growing now and faces a barrage of advice about becoming a model. 'Actually, what I'd like to do is be normal in a crowd. Even now people always ask these annoying questions, such as, "How did you get so tall?"'

'The question I always get,' says Ben Summerskill, 6ft 3½in, chairman of gay equality pressure group Stonewall, 'is, "What's the weather like up there?"'

Anything else?

'No, they're usually about the weather.'

Summerskill doubts whether his height has given him many advantages, but there are a few negatives. 'People who only know you casually don't recognise you if you're sitting down. Your height may be the main thing they've registered about you, so when you're sitting, they tend to get a bit lost as to who you are. The other thing about being tall is that you have to remember to stay ramrod straight when meeting royalty. You don't necessarily want to catch what they're mumbling and you certainly don't want to look as if you're bowing.'

Summerskill is invariably taller than most people he meets. Of the very short he says: 'They do go around being resentful of their height. I do sense a feeling of resentment for the wider and taller world.'

Lucy Porter, stand-up comedian and actor, does not come across this way. 'I wonder if that's not mostly men, whereas small women are usually thought of as shy, demure, sweet.' Porter thinks she is 5ft, 'but I haven't been measured for many years. I can't bear to imagine that I'm less and the thought of being 4ft 11in would be too horrible'.

Porter uses her height as her unique selling point, as does her agent. On her website, the selected reviews highlight her shortness, with frequent appearances of the words 'pixie', 'elfin' and 'tiny'. 'When you're starting out as a stand-up, you need something to set you apart,' she says, 'so I was happy with "the little woman with the big mouth". It was something I felt I had to address, as you have to arm yourself against the people who shout, "Stand up, I can't see you" and think they're being very funny. Being on stage makes you look taller anyway, but then people come up afterwards and say, "My God, you really are tiny!"'

Her two longest relationships have been with one short man and one tall, but she says she finds it hard to distinguish between someone who's 5ft 8in and someone who's 6ft 2in. 'It's just a world full of tall people out there.'

One of the tallest is Terry Waite, 6ft 7in, now a writer and charity worker after his time as a hostage negotiator and captive for almost five years in Beirut from 1987. As a negotiator, he was aware how intimidating he might seem and consciously sat down or leaned whenever he could.

'All my life I've been conscious of the fact that I could use height in a way that was almost unfair. In Lambeth Palace, someone came to interview me and, quite unconsciously, I sat in my normal chair and asked the interviewer to sit down in a chair that was available, which just happened to be lower. When the

article appeared, the person made great play of this and wrote that I had set myself even higher above him. That reflected to me something of his feelings in his relationship to height. But I never did it again.'

As a hostage, Waite's height was not something his captors had researched thoroughly. They tried to move him in a trunk, but his knees prevented the closure of the lid. So they tried an American refrigerator. 'It was absolute agony, the most uncomfortable journey,' he says. 'It must have been about an hour and I said to them, "If you move me in here, I'll suffocate" and they said, "Don't worry, it won't be too long."

He was bound with masking tape, but managed to free himself to press the seal and let air in. 'The one thing I learnt,' Waite says, probably not for the first time, 'is that the light does go out when you close the door. I may be one of the few people who knows that for sure.'

Waite's wife is 5ft 4in, which qualifies them as a comedy couple. Do people make jokes when they see them out together? 'They don't actually, maybe out of politeness. Sometimes when you're having your photographs taken, you get the obvious comments.' The pair do not usually buy clothes from the same outfitters. Waite goes to High and Mighty, but gets most of his clothes from America and South Africa. 'And shoes,' he says. 'Try to find a comfortable pair...that's another damn thing: shirts, too damn short; they're always coming out of my trousers.'

And then there's transport: 'An absolute nightmare - it's virtually impossible to travel economy on a long-haul flight. I can remember the most miserable journey of my life coming back with British Airways from Hong Kong. The only seat available was economy in the middle, and my knees... I just practised what I did in extremely difficult situations in captivity, which is that I went into a sort of trance, and didn't eat or drink for the whole 12 hours.'

Most people want to be taller. It's an inclination we have from childhood, not least because we associate shortness with limitations. As a child, we see that taller people decide on the big issues of spending and bedtimes. Most authority figures have traditionally been tall men. The impact of height on health and happiness has not generally been considered a legitimate subject for scientific research, and partly this is because we wish it wasn't important.

Beyond the anecdotal evidence, and beyond our seemingly irrational fears of extremes, there is an increasingly sophisticated body of work suggesting that height can be a key feature in our successful progress through life.

Last August, Anne Case and Christina Paxson, two economists at the Centre for Health and Wellbeing at Princeton University published a paper with a blunt and arresting conclusion: 'On average, taller people earn more because they are smarter.' Despite the paper's wide circulation, and coverage in the New York Times, this did not occasion as much furore as the authors may have expected.

Their research was based on data from the United States and Britain, and substantiated findings from other studies that tall men and women earned 10 per cent more than those in the same jobs who were four inches shorter. In

addition, graphs based on census reports suggest that American men of 6ft 2in are 3 per cent more likely to hold executive positions than those of 5ft 10in.

There are many explanations for this, but most of them are rooted in adolescence and social status. A child who experiences an early growth spurt in their early teens is more likely to be confident and have greater cognitive ability than one who develops later or less. This will have a direct correlation to the choice of jobs, and how they are perceived in the workforce.

'As early as age three - before schooling has had a chance to play a role - and throughout childhood, taller children perform significantly better on cognitive tests,' Case and Paxson concluded. 'Tall children are much more likely to become tall adults. As adults, taller individuals are more likely to select into higher-paying occupations that require more advanced verbal and numerical skills and greater intelligence, for which they earn handsome returns. Furthermore, we show that taller adults select into occupations that have higher cognitive skill requirements and lower physical skill demands.'

How best to explain this? It is increasingly likely that all of these factors are influenced by the most obvious and controllable variable of all: nutrition. The science of height is far from a new discipline, but its link with eugenics has secured it a dark reputation. In a world of DNA profiling and genetic engineering, it is still something of a maverick study, and one dependent on longitudinal research conducted over many years. But there are a few thorough studies many decades old that are now proving invaluable; one of the most reliable is British. In the early 1950s, a man called James Tanner and his colleague Reginald Whitehouse spent a lot of time measuring the height and weight of children in an orphanage in Harpenden, Hertfordshire.

This study is cited as the first comprehensive example of the modern growth chart, and their survey of the stages of pubertal development is still a key factor in our understanding of adolescent health. Above all, it planted two vital suggestions in our minds. Although our height is largely dependent on genetic factors (as reflected in the height of our parents and grandparents), there is also an environmental element at play; the malnutrition experienced by the orphans in Harpenden had a marked effect on their growth.

It would be less easy to explain why other societies grow at different rates - why, for example, the average height of Japanese men increased after the Second World War, or why the average height of Americans has remained the same in the last 50 years, unlike the experience in Britain and much of Europe. But James Tanner, who has published many studies and several books since the Harpenden study, concludes: 'If you are asking what determines the height of a particular individual, it's 90 per cent genetics. Forget the environment. But if you're asking what determines the mean height of 100,000 individuals, forget the genetics, because that doesn't change. It's the environment. As the population as a whole gets taller, it's an environmental change.'

Tanner and Whitehouse's work from the late 1940s to the early 1970s produced a fascinating photographic record still used by current researchers. It showed the varying stages in puberty and examined how individuals

developed at different ages; in subsequent years, Tanner and other growth scientists would examine the profound psychological effects that an early or late puberty could have on an individual's subsequent life.

An extensive survey of height science has been gathered in the recent American book *Size Matters* by Stephen S Hall, an author familiar with the issues since his childhood: he stopped growing at 5ft 5½ins. His book reaches some broad but convincing conclusions. The average height of a society can tell us a great deal about the environment in which people live, not least in terms of healthcare provision and working conditions.

That said, the gauge of a healthy society may be far better measured in terms of healthy growth rather than height; there is far too much irrational value placed on being tall; and being short has its own psychological compensations - it may make one a better communicator, and a more empathetic person. Hall quotes the musician Paul Simon's response to a question about the impact that being short (5ft 2in) had on his early life. 'I think it had the most significant single effect on my existence, aside from my brain. In fact, it's part of an inferior-superior syndrome. I think I have an inferior brain and an inferior stature, if you really want to get brutal about it.'

Hall also notes a survey conducted by the Economist in 1995 on the prejudicial and discriminating factors of being short. This used some unnerving data: in all but three American presidential elections of the 20th century, the taller man won. It reported that more than half of the chief executive officers at Fortune 500 companies were at least 6ft.

It all made depressing reading for the short, not least the Economist's summary of the psychological research done in the book *Stature and Stigma* by Henry Biller and Leslie Martel, which concluded that short people were 'less mature, less positive, less secure, less masculine; less successful, less capable, less confident, less outgoing; more inhibited, more timid, more passive'.

But psychology is interpretive: all the short people analysed had already made it to Brown University, one of America's finest. Hall, a regular contributor to the New York Times, traces the modern cultural value we attach to height back to the early 18th century and the Prussian army of King Frederick William I, a man who possessed, according to his biographer, 'an almost pathological love for tall soldiers'. He scoured Europe for them and paid them fortunes; it was the zenith and, equally, the nadir of 'gigantomania' and the altocracy.

'But the Prussians themselves credited classical sources for this sentiment,' Hall notes. 'In the annals of the Roman Empire, for example, tallness is associated not only with strength but also with a kind of moral virtue.' The line may be traced through the British Grenadier Guards and, until the relatively recent reduction in the strict height requirements, the British police. Authoritarian and military heightism survives in civilian life through the 'Napoleon complex', the notion that a short person will attempt to compensate for their perceived inferiority by acting out in enormously combative ways. 'I don't think there have been very good studies that pin that down,' Hall told me. 'And I'd like to point out that the terms that are used to describe this

perception - aggressive, overbearing - could just as easily be described as assertive or passionate or determined. The same thing happened in the women's movement when women became more self-assertive and were described as pushy and hysterical. Cultural hierarchies tend to use a vocabulary that keep the minorities in place.'

Hall is also cautious about how we gauge success in the adult world. Is money the best measure? And how do we quantify 'self-esteem' and 'confidence', two attributes frequently credited to the tall? We do tend to pay tall sportsmen more, but are they happier than shorter runners, swimmers or gymnasts? And 'human capital in the form of psychological insight, empathetic human interaction and aesthetic achievement might be just as socially bankable'. Otherwise, 'someone like van Gogh, who barely made a penny in his lifetime, possessed no human capital whatsoever'.

I asked Hall about the most surprising elements of his research. 'Having all survived it,' he said, 'we all appreciate that adolescence is a very difficult psychological passage. But until very recently, there has been very little attention paid to the very tight relationship between physical development during puberty and psychological development during puberty. The timing of puberty, whether you have it early or late, for both boys and girls, really seems to have a big impact, and not only during adolescence, but on the psychological self-perception that people have as they enter adulthood.

'The other area that I think will be of greater and greater scientific significance in the next decades is how very early events of growth - even prenatally, possibly even in the week of conception - can have a long-term impact on subsequent growth and development. It's both fascinating and a little daunting to think that what a mother consumes in that period [directly after conception] can be the agent of permanent genetic change in a developing organism.'

Until recently, there wasn't much tall or short people could do with their lot. Beyond good basic nutrition, there were no height diets and only the most desperate surgery. But science has found its usual way of ameliorating and profiting from human desire and unhappiness, and there are now proven methods of growing and stunting, of forcing the human body against its natural inclinations.

Genetically engineered human growth hormone (hGH) was first marketed in 1985 by Genentech, the biotech company also responsible for cancer drug Herceptin. Like most drugs, it is open to abuse, not least in sport. Once used solely to help children who, due to a malfunction of the pituitary gland, were unable to produce their own growth hormone, since 2003 the American Food and Drug Administration has also licensed hGH for children who are medically normal but not as tall as some of their classmates; for parents who have read about the height/earnings correlation, it has suddenly become a very alluring proposition.

As yet there is no evidence that hGH makes its users happier; the injections may, indeed, only enforce the concept of shortness as a disability. But there are now many generic versions available and the price is getting cheaper.

Soon, growth hormone injections may be seen as a perfectly acceptable intervention, like Botox. And, as with Botox, there will be unpredictable and permanently scarring side-effects.

Inevitably, there are other paths to greater height to be found on the internet. Our inadequacies and social conditioning are such that there is certainly a large enough market to make even the most implausible claims profitable. There are special soles that stimulate particular areas of the feet; there are special cereal bars; there are promises of 'the most complete, comprehensive and effective program ever produced on gaining height available anywhere - GUARANTEED!'

But these are only solutions to self-perceived dilemmas. Short children may not have much of a problem unless we inform them of it. Tall adults should find ways of not looking down on people. It's easy to say: just ask Tom Cruise and Martin Sorrell about the seductive powers of illusion and aspirational marketing. We live in a culture that is relentlessly attentive to physical appearance, and one convinced that being slightly taller will make us immeasurably happier.

So what is the ideal height? 'The best thing of all may be not to stick out,' Stephen Hall says. 'It may actually be a great advantage just to be average.'