



Unnatural Endeavours

As another athletics season gathers pace and we tune into the box to follow the circus around the tracks of Europe, we may be drawn to ponder the aftermath of the 'Drug Olympics'. It is now almost a year since the Games of the XXIV Olympiad ended in uproar and moral panic induced by the Ben Johnson episode.

Although it is difficult to find hard evidence of the nature and extent of drug-taking among top athletes, the Canadians' subsequent protracted inquiry into Johnson's case has merely confirmed what we already had good reason to suspect had been going on for a long time.

Johnson was caught because he had been taking Stanozolol, a steroid which had been thought to be undetectable. One up for the testers on this occasion, but steroids are old hat now, anyway. The same job is performed by Human Chorionic Gonadotrophin (HCG), which is derived from the urine of pregnant women and stimulates the body's production of testosterone, or Human Growth Hormone (HGH), used to treat dwarfism in children. HCG is not on the list of banned substances, and there is no test for HGH, so these drugs are 'safe' for athletes to use at the moment.

Blood-doping (re-injecting the red cells of one's own blood immediately prior to competition in order to boost oxygen supply to muscles) is illegal, but religious and other objections prevent blood-testing to detect it. In any case, virtually-undetectable genetic engineering procedures are now available to take over from mechanical means of blood-doping.

The Canadian inquiry has also pointed up the web of involvement of sports professionals. Administrators collude in protecting star performers so that they are not 'embarrassed' by unexpected tests; promoters agree non-testing deals so that athletes can safely appear at times when they would be vulner-

able to tests; coaches act as middle-men, pushers and paramedical advisers; and sports medics are caught between maintaining confidentiality and preserving health.

One reaction to all this might be to dismiss the whole circus as simply evil. But many on the inside see themselves as co-operating with the inevitable, or even welcome new technologies as more efficient means for modifying performance.

At the nub of it, modern-day high-performance sport encourages us to see the body as an instrument; and a deep-rooted acknowledgment of the value of science and technology leads us to seek technological means for propelling the body ever more efficiently.

The athlete is faced with an inherent contradiction. The internal logic of high-performance sport looks towards continual record-breaking, not recognising that limits must exist. Athletes can go on setting records for as long as their support services can produce better shoes, better tracks, better diets, training, psychological preparation and equipment - but not forever.

At some stage the game must change, evolving into a form which will cohere with new socio-economic conditions. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are witnessing a decadent phase, as traditional values come under increased pressure.

One such value was amateurism, but over the past 20 years or so athletes have become free to sell their sporting labour for as much profit as they can make. And the logical extension of this instrumental attitude is that others seeking to compete in the market will adopt whatever methods are necessary to 'win' - both in sporting and socio-economic senses. It's not so long ago that the moral crusaders in sport were waging war against 'shamateurs', claiming that they were undermining the moral basis



of sport and cheating by unfair economic advantage. Now we have millionaire tennis and athletics stars.

Fuelling the stakes is the evolving relationship between sport and the modern media. TV in particular, has discovered in high-performance sport a readily-available source of circus material. The tv public is very demanding, requiring ever-rising standards to maintain the level of spectacle and satisfying outcome. To meet their requirements the conditions, kinds and outcomes of competition have been manipu-

lated: for example, pace-setters are used to create artificial race conditions and athletes try to set records over distances rarely run (such as 150 metres, or 4 x 200 metres).

In these circumstances it is not easy to see what sport will become. And it is difficult not to sympathise with Ben Johnson's predicament. He has been scapegoated, vilified and denied the opportunity at the height of his powers to do what he does best because he was guilty of the greatest sin: getting found out.

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