

# MANUFACTURING CHAMPIONS : STEROIDS AND THE MODERN ATHLETE

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**T**he positive testing of a local female athlete for a banned substance has agitated the otherwise complacent sphere of sports in Sri Lanka. Other than banal political controversies over administrative corruption and incompetence, the dominant thinking of sports in Sri Lanka has held on to a romantic idealism of the "wholesomeness" of sports. In this essay my purpose is to briefly explore the themes of manufacturing of champions against a background of commercialism and professionalism in modern sports.

Although cricket has monopolized the discussion of sports in Sri Lanka, there are close to twenty-two other popular sports, some displaying far greater international competitiveness than cricket. Two very immediate examples are the sports of female rifle shooting and female sprinters. Both groups of athletes have participated in major international sports events and especially recently, have excelled into medal contention competing with athletes produced by sophisticated sports science and abundant financial resources. Unlike the post-colonial legacy of cricket, rifle shooting and athletics lack the large audiences and often jingoistic appeal to national sentiment. And, one does not maintain pavilion seats and feast on catered meals, or spend a full day engrossed in a single, leisurely paced, extended team event when watching a shooting or athletic event.

Since breaking into the international arena quite recently, Sri Lankan female athletes' performances have received more media publicity. Cricket and to a certain extent rugby were able to achieve a notion of professionalism and commercialism in the mid 1980s. Being team sports, easily packaged as a spectator event, they provided the advertising "milage" that most other individual sports lack. Manufacturers of consumer products, mostly private capitalist companies, began appropriating sports for the purpose of maximizing profit on their products. Thus a selected group of financially powerful companies are contracted at each sports event to display their advertisements in multiple forms (logos on athletic garments, equipment, banners, posters, etc). Especially with the medium of television, sporting events are promoted catering to a greater number of advertisers, through the televised production process and advertising at the actual location of the event. For the television audience of a cricket match, the spectators/consumers are presented with commercial icons of a multinational cigarette manufacturer on the cricket field along with advertising video interludes of multiple multinational commodities. But, the more rigorously trained female athlete who performs a 200 meter dash in 22.23 seconds, which is less than two seconds away from the world's best mark, is unable to provide the manufacturer of consumer goods (and needs) with advertising space or time.

The notion of amateur athletes who made no money from sports and pursued it in their leisure time has been transformed in modern society. Now excellence in sports requires endless hours of training, and the assistance of a number of institutions and personnel. The best athletes (or the athletic elite) in internationally popular sports are mostly professionals engaged in a transitory form of employment. People directly or indirectly connected with the social practice of sport continue to expand including specialized coaches, government bureaucrats, business marketing experts, physiotherapists, psychologists and even legal experts. Sports medicine, sports science (for example biomechanics labs), sports marketing, sports journalism, sports management, are some of the institutional derivatives of modern sports. In effect, sports equipment technology that enhance performance, wind resistant garments, sophisticated starting blocks, running shoes, racquets, etc, now also include nutrition supplements from vitamins to steroids.

Chemical performance enhancers (steroids) appeared in the international sports arena in the early seventies and were then considered a monopoly of the sports factories of Eastern-bloc countries. Now steroid use or at least experimentation is rampant among quite a few high-performance athletes. Euphemistically termed as the 'Roid-rage', a pharmacopeia of steroids (chemical cocktails) are advertised openly in numerous sports magazines. Specifically, performance enhancers are common among individual sports events (track and field, body building, weight lifting, swimming, etc). The newer water soluble anabolic steroids are harder to detect and remain the mainstay of most sports.

Policing the athletic world has also refined its technology. Quite a few world class athletes admit to using performance enhancers and a few have been charged and temporarily banned from participating in competitions. For the world class athlete who has tested positive and is threatened with the loss of lucrative advertising revenue, resorting to legal action has also become more possible. In one distinctive case, an elite athlete from the US successfully contested the International Amateur Athletic Federation's (IAAF) ruling that banned him from competition and secured a substantial financial settlement. On a marginally different issue which was under considerable debate, the IAAF abolished the gender verification tests in 1993.

Why the need for performance enhancers? Simply that there is more at stake now for athletes. Especially elite athletes who are aware of the extensive economic, physical and psycho-social sacrifices that are made in order to bask in the brief elusive moment of being the best, that one major international event might be their biggest and the last. And victory means financial wealth as well as symbolic capital of status and adulation.

The profit oriented sponsors/advertisers and pharmaceutical companies that manufacture steroids have little in the way of a real commitment to the athlete's well-being. For the athletes who have laboured, pushing the cognitive and physical boundaries of existence within the idiom of sports, performance enhancers are simply a part of the process of manufacturing a "world champion". Those who criticize the athlete who is prone to use steroids, have failed to grasp the larger idiom of modern sports.

The Sri Lankan female sprinters have arrived within the margins of the world class arena and the pressure to excel is escalated by the

possible economic gain and accumulation of symbolic capital. More importantly, unlike cricket, there are no ready (local or multinational) sponsors, and the life span in the elite arena, particularly for the female athlete, is in a Hobsonian way solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Given the heightened commercialism in sports, it is unlikely that the use of performance enhancers will be reduced with better policing. It is more important to explore the real social structures of modern sports that have normalized reckless experimentation with steroids. This calls for an analysis that contextualizes sports within the commodity culture and unravels the puritan "spirit of competition" mystification of sports. ■

## FAITH AND MILK MIRACLE

Seema Mustafa

**F**aith can move mountains, they told us when we were children and we believed this old time-worn cliché, implicitly. Faith, for them, was synonymous with religion and was not to be confused with faith in oneself, faith in one's country, faith in humanity. It was faith in God only that had the miraculous power to make Madonnas weep and gods drink milk. And to move mountains for the asking.

They were right. Faith has tremendous powers. It can blind people, it can make ears hear voices in the night, it can make eyes see the impossible, it can make the brain impervious to pressures of reason and rationality. It has nothing to do with poverty, with illiteracy as some would like to believe. Indeed the poor are more sceptical and as queues offering milk to the gods in Delhi showed, faith had moved the middle class and the upper middle class more than it had the poor living in *jhuggis*. The poorest of the poor looked askance at the milk flowing down the drains of Delhi, while the middle class lined up with lotas and buckets to pour milk down the mouths of willing gods. For the word went around that the gods were drinking milk happily except that being offered by sinners. So each and every man and woman in the queue insisted that his offering had been accepted and it was only the bold exception who could declare in the presence of all that his spoonful of milk had been churlishly rejected by the deity. In fact one noticed reports in some newspapers where even the reporters seemed to have lost control of their reasoning facilities and were "moved" enough to insist that the gods were actually drinking milk.

It was a miracle. And how one wishes it was, for a miracle would be far more welcome than the sinister implications of the above. As people poured out of homes and offices to line up outside the nearest temples and an almost fanatical frenzy gripped the city, one was reminded of similar episodes in the past. The only difference being that these were not sustained by faith and hence could not be described as a miracle and were openly menacing in their effect.

There is a rumour machinery that exists, one cannot say it has been created because of reports by those who witnessed partition and recall the role played by rumours in generating riots and bloodshed. This rumour machinery, grapevine is too mild a word to describe it, is used to perfection by fanatic forces like the RSS and the Jamaate-Islami. The large majority of communal riots in this country are preceded by days of wild rumours that are believed by the populace and which increase tension to such a pitch that finally, any little move can trigger off a riot. In Aligarh a few years ago Hindu and Muslim *mohallas* were gripped with insecurity following rumours of a Muslim boy being killed, a Hindu girl being kidnapped, a body being found, etc. The tension was palpable in the areas and finally an altercation between a *biryani* selling vendor and a customer sparked off the riot that led to curfew and real deaths. In Assam massacres of the worst kind were perpetuated by armed hordes who attacked villages like Nellie to kill all, the bloody incidents being based entirely on rumours that the other village was going to attack them. The result was that in a large number of cases in the State people were motivated through this rumour machinery to come out to defend themselves, in the process becoming the aggressors instead.

In Delhi, in 1984, the Capital was swept with rumours of water being poisoned by Sikhs and middle-class homes desperately telephoned each other, warning friends and relatives not to consume the 'poisoned' water. The big bad men were the hapless Sikhs who were the victims of organised violence, although it was the non-Sikhs who were made to feel that they were the victims. The rumour that trains from Punjab were coming with corpses of Hindus led irate mobs to stop trains just outside Delhi and to butcher Sikhs and the trains rolled into Delhi railway stations carrying bodies of Sikhs, not Hindus.

In Bombay, in 1992, rumours that terrorists with armed guns were moving around in a white Maruti car had crowds stopping Maruti cars in their localities and killing those inside. And what is more,