such as fibrinogen, are improved by exercise. Apart from the environmental benefits of cycling, there may be good grounds for encouraging a modal shift to the bicycle both as a means of transport and as part of any CHD prevention programme. On the other hand, these findings were made in a hilly area where cycling entails considerable effort and the benefits might not be as dramatic in flatter parts of the country. More data are required about the cardiovascular pathology of those who exercise regularly.

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Olympic freak show?

Preparation of top level athletes entails intensive manipulation of their physiology and psychology. This is done mainly through controlling their lifestyle and diet, partly because of arbitrary limits set on the range of drugs that may be used to achieve the desired changes. I have argued that biotechnology, including genetic engineering, is opening new possibilities for producing athletic champions. Should we use these new means?

No, of course not, says the knee jerk reaction. I am not quite so sure. Sport, we are told, is a “good thing”. Well, yes, people should take some exercise, and maybe it’s even ok to encourage them to gang together in teams to slaughter rival teams. No doubt there was a time when sports champions were rounded people, mens sana in corpore sano, who trained a bit, ran their race, then got on with the other things in their lives. But not now. Becoming a top class athlete is a full time commitment and requires the services of dedicated teams of physiologists and psychologists. And if these turn out insufficient, maybe the pharmacologist can help. The combination of big money, national prestige, and prima donna status for the champion are irreversibly separating top level sport from any ideals. Each year the gap widens. Increasingly, world championships will be the province of one dimensional dehumanised products of a ruthless people engineering industry.

Professional telly sport has none of the virtues of participative amateur sport—it enriches a few, destroys a few, and turns millions into couch potatoes. We would be better off without it. But there is no hope of stopping its corrosive influence by laws or regulations. Only education can defeat it. As with anti-smoking campaigns, the aim must be to stop the practitioners being seen as role models. This is where cloning, genetic engineering, and the rest can help.

Give the drug designers and genetic engineers free rein and they will turn professional sport into a freak show. Remember the East German athletes of the 1970s—didn’t they have a decidedly factory farmed look to them? Would you want your child to have been one of them? We can build on that first flicker of revulsion. The sacrifice of a few unfortunates—and it will be a few because of the cost—might be a modest price to pay for returning the rest of us to a state where sport is played by real people for fun.

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