



## MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

# Faster, stronger... higher?

**W**ELL, I managed to drag myself away from the unfolding drama of the Olympic Games and applied myself to the task of writing this column. Keeping in that glorious Olympian spirit of 'faster', 'higher' and 'stronger' – (well 'higher' anyway), my attention was focused on stories with a drugs reference. On the box, Channel 4 delivered *Cheating at Athens – Is It Worth It?* In this rather interesting programme 24 male volunteers were shipped off to Australia, and in a double-blind study some were dosed with illegal anabolic steroids, some a placebo, and the rest a variety of legal stimulants. Following baseline measures of strength, speed and endurance, the guys competed in several Olympic events some six weeks later.

Rather worryingly for sport governing bodies, those taking the steroids showed significant improvements in energy output and bodily strength: in the 100 metres event 4/5 of the most improved times were recorded by those on steroids! A better advertisement for steroid abuse you could hardly find. But interestingly, caffeine use led to some impressive gains as well. Dr Robert Wetherby (Southern Cross University) was keen to point out the side-effects – acne, mood swings, less expression of empathy and an impaired immune system; though I guess such concerns won't bother those eager for sporting fame and glory.

I was particularly interested in this programme because a while ago the producers had contacted me and a colleague at Northumbria to act as 'experts' and oversee the testing. We found out that other psychologists in the UK had also been approached and had backed down over ethical concerns. We were also slightly dubious but suggested some refinements to the protocol and strict ethical criteria. We never heard from them again!

Parents will be pleased to hear the results of a Home Office survey conducted by social psychologist Peter Marsh (reported in *The Times*). In a sample of 1000 11- to 19-year-olds one fifth pretended to have taken drugs to appear 'cool' in front of their peers, but in reality had not tried any. The findings indicate that

drug taking is far less important to teenagers than being seen to be 'in the know' about drugs. Dr Marsh concluded that teenagers have to create a social

identity, which means that they have to be accepted as being part of a group, and to do this they have to adopt the right 'uniform' and use and understand the 'correct' jargon when talking about drugs.

On a more worrying note, the *Daily Telegraph* conducted a survey of psychologists and psychiatrists concerning unease over the widespread use of Ritalin and Prozac in children. Apparently, some 250,000 prescriptions for Ritalin are administered every year, and Prozac is doled out to some 20,000 children annually. Three quarters of those polled felt that not enough was known about the long-term effects of such drugs, and were worried that they might be being administered on social rather than medical grounds. Dr John Mathai, a consultant

child and adolescent psychiatrist, was strongly in favour, arguing that both drugs have given much relief to children and parents. Psychiatrist Dr Morris Zwi points out that at present drug companies only reveal the results of clinical trials showing positive outcomes – those that show cause for concern never see the light of day. Professor of pharmacology at Oxford University Leslie Iversen concluded that the benefits currently outweigh the risks, though he noted that the most pressing concern was how to distinguish between children who have severe forms of the conditions and who would merit drug intervention, and children who are not doing well at school. Like Greek sprinters evading the sample bottle this debate will undoubtedly run and run.

Nick Neave

## TIP OF THE MONTH

At the end of an interview with a journalist, particularly a feature writer, ask what they are working on next. An ongoing relationship could help you to promote your research in the future, leading to possible collaborations and funding opportunities.

■ Next media training day – Monday 29 November 2004. Contact Dawn Schubert for details on [dawsch@bps.org.uk](mailto:dawsch@bps.org.uk) or tel: 0116 252 9581.

**W**ITH a hectic summer of sporting events behind us, it seems that sport and exercise psychologists are in high demand by the media to try to explain our sporting disasters.

In the highly competitive modern world of sport, where exercise regimes and nutrition call upon state of the art science, can psychology help give us the edge?

BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme highlighted the impact use of sports psychologists can have on our sporting heroes. The programme commented that Australia not only invests in better training facilities, but also call upon sports psychologists more. Recent Australian success at rugby and cricket and a Wimbledon finalist might be an indication that psychology is having some impact.

Sports psychologists help increase confidence in the squads, whilst focusing concentration on winning. Dr Van Vugt from the University of Southampton commented that the role of the captain is vital for success, demanding high standards and professionalism. A captain can help to improve performance by being highly focused and confident of winning, but not too tense to help others achieve.

With the very public front page coverage of Paula Radcliffe's pain in not completing the Olympic marathon and her inability to explain what happened, the mental strength and strains of world-class sporting events may at last be highlighting the need for sports psychology.

Jeremy Horwood