

The power of sport



There are many examples of how sport has transcended barriers and unified the nation. Perhaps the most famous example is the Springboks winning the 1995 World Cup, followed by Nelson Mandela handing the trophy to François Pienaar and then the euphoria which swept the country for a short period. Indeed the importance of this moment has been captured in a soon-to-be-released movie, *The Human*

Factor, directed by Clint Eastwood with superstar actors Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon playing Nelson Mandela and François Pienaar respectively. Subsequent to the 1995 event there have been episodic examples, prompting Nelson Mandela to make his famous quote: 'Sport has the power to change the world, to inspire, to unite people in a way that little else can.' However, just as sport has the power to unite the nation, so it too has the power to divide the nation. Consider the example of Caster Semenya, winner of the 800 m race at the World Athletics Championships in August 2009. The dominant way in which she won the race against the best in the world should have brought another glorious moment to the nation. Instead, information leaked out to the media that the IAAF were conducting a sex test to exclude a rare medical condition which might have given her an unfair advantage over the other female athletes in her race. This leaked report was the catalyst for a range of responses from politicians, commentators, administrators and gender rights activists. Politicians in particular seized the opportunity to launch their inflated egos into the public light, making absurd accusations and in the process further polarising public opinion. It seemed the media were not interested in the views of the expert medical practitioners and scientists, particularly after the president of Athletics South Africa was reported to have said: 'Let me warn professors and scientists that the only scientists I believe in are the parents of this child. One scientist from a stupid university somewhere is going to erase the entire life of this girl.' (www.Sport24.co.za, 2009-08-25).

The policy of the IAAF is that there will be no compulsory, standard or regular gender verification during IAAF championships. Any problems related to gender should be picked up by the national team doctors during health checks or by medical/doping delegates at specimen collection during doping control at major championships. If there is any suspicion or an official challenge, the athlete can be asked to attend a medical evaluation before a panel consisting of a gynaecologist, endocrinologist, psychologist, internal medicine

specialist and expert on gender/transgender issues (IAAF policy on gender verification, prepared by the IAAF Medical and Anti-Doping Commission, 2006). This is usually conducted in private, out of the media and public focus. With all the mudslinging, accusations, and counter-accusations, the focus of the debate has shifted, and the poor girl in the midst of the most difficult time of her life is being used as a pawn either by politicians to elevate their own person profile, or by administrators to deflect some of the blame targeted at them for the shoddy way in which the whole affair has been handled. However, with any bad experience there are lessons to be learnt. Firstly, someone needs to be held accountable for leaking information from the IAAF to the Australian journalist. Strategies need to be implemented to prevent leaks from happening again. Secondly, the journalist who wrote the story needs to take a look deep into his heart – do the positive outcomes of a sensational story really outweigh the negative outcomes which included personal damage and humiliation to the girl and her family? How would the same journalist have felt had one of his colleagues written a deeply personal story about his child for the whole world to read? Thirdly, the administrators of the sport need to take some accountability and instead of shouting loud to deflect blame, rather do the job they were entrusted to do. Fourthly, so-called 'experts' who are quick to form an alliance with the media, ready for a dial-a-quote, should understand that there are other channels in which they can operate and communicate. By trying to explain an extremely complicated and sensitive medical/scientific topic to a journalist seeking sensationalism is only adding fuel to the fire. Perhaps it is time to re-visit the ethics around communicating personal details about another person, whether it be an athlete or a patient? Let us hope that lessons have been learnt and we do not see history repeating itself sometime in the future. In the meantime there is a young lady and her family who need to deal with their predicament. May we all demonstrate our love and support to help her through this difficult period. It is time that the unifying side of sport regains its rightful place in society.

On a positive note, this is a bumper edition of the journal! We have decided to merge issue 3 of the journal with the supplement edition coinciding with the 13th Biennial Conference of the South African Sports Medicine Association (21 – 23 October 2009). We are graced by the presence of experts from around the world and anticipate their contribution will make the conference a wholehearted success! We hope you enjoy reading the papers in this edition of the journal and also the material associated with the presentations at the conference.

Mike Lambert

Editor-in-Chief