



Dying to win

## Playing a dangerous game

A growing number of sportsmen and women are developing disorder. Researchers fear the tendency is especially pronounced in young people and children

By Marie Venø Thesbjerg

**T**he death of a female gymnast in the early 1980's made a lasting impression on Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen of Norway's National School of Sport. The girl, who was an acquaintance of Ms. Sundgot-Borgen, had developed anorexia, and lost weight due to extreme methods of training. As a result of her friend's death, Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen began to investigate eating disorders among young athletes, and found some alarming results. She provided *Play the Game* with some startling evidence from her research - such as the fact that 18 percent of top handball players suffer from some kind of eating disorder.

In a society where anorexia is a growing problem, Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen is especially worried about the effect of extreme training methods on young people. Although the media generally focuses on elite athletes, she points out that eating disorders are increasingly affecting amateur sportspeople - including children.

»It is difficult to say whether society's focus on body, weight and is having an effect on sport, or whether sport's extreme use of the body is having an effect on society,« she says.

»But what is certain is that the rate of eating disorders in sport is double than of society as a whole.«

»The problem is especially pronounced in aesthetic disciplines such as gymnastics, weight-class sports like judo and endurance sports. Women are not alone in suffering from this problem. Men are also at risk. Ski jumpers, for example, whose success depends on losing weight, are also potential victims.«

Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen points out that not enough information is available on the damaging effects of eating disorders. The fact that many top female athletes stop menstruating due to hard physical training has been common knowledge for many years. However, few athletes or coaches are aware of the dangers that arise when the body ceases to produce the hormones it needs to keep the bones in good condition. »I have seen a 20-year-old girl with the skeleton of a 70-year-old,« she says. »What is destroyed cannot be repaired.«

All too often, she adds, young people enter top sport too early, when the body is not yet fully developed. The young body can only adapt to give the highest level of presentation af-

ter extremely hard training, which can have a costly effect on the body's subsequent development. When women do not menstruate, it can mean they have an abnormally low fat level and lack a balanced diet.

»If women are not menstruating, then this is abnormal,« she warns. "Most simply do not realise they are risking permanent damage to their bone structure.«

### Coaches focused on results

She also provides examples of coaches who convince their athletes to lose weight, but are unable to offer sound advice on the correct way to cut down on fat. Trainers are all too often focused on results, she claims, and often only have a layman's knowledge of nutrition and diet. This can result in athletes employing starvation methods, which can result in serious consequences for health. If athletes force their weight down to improve their results, such a cycle of abuse can damage the body and in the long run, have a negative effect on performance.

Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen expresses her hope that a raising of awareness can make real inroads into the problem. However, she believes that expert professional help must also be made freely available. If athletes wish to achieve a high level of performance without destroying their body, good advice is essential.

»One solution could be that all those taking part in sports where eating disorders are commonplace are required to have a set percentage of fat in their body. In addition, the age of participation in major competitions should be raised,« she adds. ♦

