

The Reception of *Dopingdjævlen* (1999) in Denmark

By John Hoberman

The publication of Verner Møller's *Dopingdjævlen* a year after the 1998 Tour de France scandal was in itself a kind of media event that gave the doping debate in Denmark an analytical dimension that is usually lacking in public discussions of this topic. The fact that an academic intellectual had succeeded in entering the public discussion of athletic doping in an original, heretical and highly publicized manner provoked a reaction that can teach us much about the status of "doping" in modern societies that consume large quantities of "legitimate" drugs. For one of the consequences of reading Verner Møller's book was a confrontation with the uncomfortable possibility that the drug use of professional cyclists was not, in some respects, fundamentally different from the drug use of millions of people who regard their own pharmacological habits as being both normal and legitimate. As consumers of pharmacological products, they are involved in remaking themselves in ways that mean departing both from their "natural" state and from their drug-free identities as well. As one reviewer of *Dopingdjævlen* put it, modern people inhabit "*en tidsalder, hvor traditionelle og prøvede grænser smuldrer, og nye samfundsværdier og -normer hastigt defineres*". And one aspect of this world is artificiality:

"På den måde er sporten med cycling i spidsen i fint trit med udviklingen: kun-

stigt klonliv, kunstig intelligens i form af computere, vækstfremmere, lykkepiller, medicinering af raske mennesker, hybridnet, Internet – listen af surrogater som erstatning for det bestående er lang".¹

In this sense, the scientizing and medicalizing of high-performance sport belongs to a larger global process that initiates the inhabitants of all technologically advanced societies into medicalized identities that do not reject, but rather require, an openness toward the various biomedical enhancements that are being offered to increasing numbers of medically (and athletically) ordinary people. This is what we might call the global context of the controversy surrounding Verner Møller's book.

But the public controversy over *Dopingdjævlen* can also be read in some ways as a more local story which is also a Danish story in some important ways. While cycling has been a popular sport in Denmark for over a century, it was the 1996 Tour de France victory by the Danish rider Bjarne Riis that gave elite cycling unprecedented public status in a small society that had accustomed itself to the domination of top-level cycling by riders from larger countries such as France and Italy. But Riis' role in the reception of *Dopingdjævlen* was also more complex than it would have been had he simply remained a national sports hero after 1996, when he

was honored in a ceremony at Tivoli that was also attended by prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen.

In fact, Riis' symbolic significance underwent a strange and uncomfortable transformation after the majority of the Danish public became convinced that he had been doped when he became the first Danish Tour de France champion. As Jakob Kvist wrote of Riis' victory in 1999:

“Så er glansen gået kraftigt af den. Den er blevet et ømt punkt og en fløvsér, og det skyldes selvfølgelig det simple faktum, at vi alle i dag er overbeviste om, at Riis var dopet, da han vandt. Det var snyd, og derfor gjaldt det ikke, og siden har han bare talt udenom, og det har kun gjort ondt værre. Helten er rutschet direkte fra piedestalen til muddergrøften”.²

Few who have seen “Doping på landevejen” (1999), a widely broadcast film about doping in Danish cycling by the investigative journalists Olav Skanning Andersen and Niels Christian Jung, will forget the frozen half-smile that seems to paralyze Riis' face when he is asked whether he had ever doped himself, while the camera closes in for the kill.³ The DR-TV program “Tavshedens pris” (1999) further reinforced the idea of Riis' guilt among the Danish public by revealing that his red blood cell volume (hematocrit) had once been measured at the abnormally high level of 56%. The ideal of physiological transparency in the Age of Doping now presumed the public's right to follow certain physiological variables for the purpose of guaranteeing the integrity of athletic performances.

Publicity of this kind has put Riis' reputation in a curious sort of twilight zone, a

purgatory somewhere between genuine innocence and definitive guilt. Yet it is also interesting to note that this unofficial guilty verdict has not in the end brought with it the social and professional exclusion that one would expect to result from what had appeared to be real disgrace. At the end of 2001 Riis was celebrated without any sort of negative comment along with other Danish sports stars on a national television program. Most importantly, he has remained active in professional cycling as the manager of the MemoryCard and Tiscali CSC teams. He is regularly quoted in the Danish press as an opponent of doping. “Selvfølgelig fordømmer jeg doping”, he said two months after the 1998 Tour de France scandal. At this time he expressed the hope that “cykelsporten skal genvinde sin troværdighed. Folk skal kunne se cykelsport igen uden straks at høre om eller forbinde det med dopingskandaler”.⁴ Similar endorsements of clean cycling have followed, even as reports of Riis' own use of the blood-booster EPO remain a matter of public record. This semi-official rehabilitation bears witness to the selective amnesia of a Danish society that, according to one opinion poll, almost unanimously rejects “brug af lægemidler til fremme af sportspræstationer”, while 52% believe that “brug af præstationsfremmende medicin bør straffes”.⁵

This attitude toward the consumption of doping drugs by athletes should be seen in the larger context of society's acceptance of what one Danish journalist has called “doping i dagligdagen”. Riis' ambiguous status as a “dopingsynder” should thus be seen as one symptom of the general cultural syndrome that Verner Møller described in an interview following the publication of his book:

“Parallelt med sporten er der jo en samfundsudvikling, og de to størrelser er nært forbundne. Det er jo underligt, at meget af det, idrætsfolk bruger i dag til at dope sig med, i civile sammenhænge er at regne for nærmest hverdagsagtige hjælpemidler og ikke en slags mirakelmedicinsk narkotika, som det ofte bliver fremstillet, når det angår sportens verden”.⁶

Small wonder that even a critical reviewer of *Dopingdjævelen* declared that: *“Egentlig er vi alle en flok fascinerede hyklere”*⁷ who accept voyeuristic roles vis-à-vis various kinds of entertainers whose self-destructive behaviors appear to be the price of creativity. This double standard, separating the lifestyles of ordinary people from those of “creative” types, and the willingness of some entertainers to “take it to the limit”, are the central problems examined in the book. It was the author’s unorthodox and romantic responses to these problems that provoked so much controversy in the Danish media.

The growing social acceptability of applying medical approaches to enhancing human capacities is an example of what the Danish researcher Claus Møldrup has called “medicinsk forstærket normalitet.” This emerging biomedical universe of “enhancements” will be the most dramatic socio-cultural development of the 21st century, and this is the context in which the entire doping drama must be understood. *Dopingdjævelen* forced the Danish public to confront this fascinating and anxiety-provoking promise to transform human identity by forcing people to think hard about athletic performances they normally enjoy in an unreflective way. It was, therefore, entirely appropriate that some reviewers of the book related Møller’s treatment of

doping to what Thomas Kaarstad called *“en tidsalder, hvor traditionelle og prøvede grænser smuldrer, og nye samfundsværdier og -normer defineres”*,⁸ *“Det er vel det nærmeste en postmodernistisk analyse af sporten vi kommer”*, wrote Ulrik Sass. *“Verner Møller opløser de forskellige værdibegreber i en sproglig hvirvelvind”*.⁹

It is clear that a number of reviewers of *Dopingdjævelen* experienced this “sproglig hvirvelvind” both as a threat to their ethical of standards and as a kind of rhetorical fraud. Jakob Kvist, for example, complains that *“alle bogens argumenter, som retoriske tricks, [er] vendt mod at undergrave de positioner i pressen og idrætsslivet, som i det sidste års tid har stået på nakken af hinanden for at få ‘ryddet op’ og ‘renset ud’”*.¹⁰ In this situation it may be difficult for reviewers or other readers to distinguish between what they regard as intellectual dishonesty and arguments that appear to pose a threat to the conventional concept of human identity that is being transformed as “therapeutic” techniques become synonymous with the practice of medicine itself. For this reason, complaints that a text is disorienting do not necessarily confirm that the text is defective in logic or rhetorical technique; it may rather be the case that the reader needs more time to deal with a conceptual disorientation which will eventually produce a deeper understanding of the problem under discussion.

That “medicinsk forstærket normalitet” includes treatments that are available to both athletes and ordinary citizens was demonstrated during the 1996 Tour to a Danish public that appears to have expressed no objections to medical interventions of this kind. As Jens Sejer Andersen commented:

“Hvorfor gav det ikke anledning til ramaskrig da enhver tv-seer i 1996 kunne se hvordan akupunktøren John Boel stak nåle i Bjarne Riis?”

Riis' acupuncture treatments also provided Verner Møller with an opportunity to enlist the general public on the side of “medicalization.”

“Den forsonlige holdning til sportsfolks brug af akupunktur og naturmedicin er interessant, fordi den afspejler, hvordan man aktuelt forliger de to modsatrettede attraktioner: På den ene side sundheds- og naturlighedsidealet, og på den anden side den evige drøm om forøgelse af rammerne for menneskelig formåen”.¹¹

One may assume that this procedure has become so familiar to the general public that it is not identified with therapeutic techniques that might be perceived as illegitimate forms of “doping”.

Dopingdjævlen became a controversial book by offering two major arguments that compare professional cyclists with ordinary citizens. The first of these arguments is that the lives of these athletes are related *by analogy* to the lives of ordinary people. These analogies connect the medicalization of elite sport with the medicalization of everyday life; the world of sport with society at large, both of which are seen as ethical communities; the risk-taking athlete with the potentially self-destructive artist; and, finally, the transition from drug-free sport to doped sport with the transition from amateurism to professionalism.¹² The rhetorical function of these analogies is to both explain and justify the “extreme” athlete's way of life by presenting this lifestyle as a defensible extra-

polation of, rather than a perverse deviation from, how most people live their lives. These analogies assert: that the medical treatment of athletes responds to real human needs in the same manner as medical treatment for the non-athlete population; that the sports world, like civil society, enforces ethical rules and limits on behaviour; that athletes, like some performing artists, must take risks to fulfill their creative lives; and, finally, that a transition to the legitimate doping of athletes will eventually be accepted just as the value system of professional sport has largely displaced that of amateurism.

This multiple argument by analogy is essentially defensive in that it is an attempt to make cycling ethically defensible in the eyes of people who do not understand or approve of its internal code of conduct, which includes a tolerant attitude toward the use of doping drugs. Here the author attempts to persuade a general audience that professional cycling is something far nobler than the perverse and drug-abusing subculture that was described in so many media reports during and after the 1998 Tour scandal. The problem for the author is that a large segment of the general public still refuses to accept that unorthodox drug regimens for athletes are ethically defensible. Further complicating the situation was the fact that the cyclists had demonstrated little public relations *savoir-faire* during the crisis of 1998. As Møller puts it in *Dopingdjævlen*:

“Når rytterne har talt om nødvendigheden af at få ryddet op, men samtidig fremhævet at det er nødvendigt med en vis medicinering, har det kunnet høres som den svagere parts defensive eftersnak”.¹³

Having chosen to be a defender of this embattled subculture, the author found himself in the same position of trying to reconcile the apparently contradictory tasks of “cleaning up” doping in the cycling world while insisting at the same time on the propriety of “en vis medicinerings” for these professional athletes. Morality, he insists, is not foreign to the cycling subculture, even though it often seems that way:

“Når det kommer til dopingspørgsmålet, synes den [cykelsporten] imidlertid at afvige fra den almindelige moral, som om cykelsporten eksisterer som en kultur for sig”.¹⁴

This is a curious statement in that the book’s second (and deeper) argument is that professional cycling is, in the last analysis, a world unto itself, and that it is fully entitled to its exceptional status:

“Man må atter konstatere, at der er en markant forskel på den moral, der hersker inden for (cykel)sporten og den, der hersker uden for. Det er som om, der er tale om to kulturer, med radikalt forskellige værdier”.¹⁵

Møller’s ambivalence on this point reflects the paradoxical reality that professional cyclists both do and do not belong to the larger community. At the same time, he is willing to grant this subculture a degree of autonomy, including drug use, that most commentators do not, and this is a major reason why reviewers criticized *Dopingdævlen* as a subversive text. “*Sport og idræt*”, wrote Thomas Kaarsted, “*er en del af en bredere folkelig kultur og en integreret del af samfundet*”.¹⁶ Membership in a society also involves ethical responsi-

bility. “*Efter min mening*”, writes Jens Sejer Andersen, “*er Verner Møller gået i sin egen fælde. Ved at erklære at sporten har et æstetisk ærinde, tror han at han kan holde sporten – og sig selv – fri af en etisk debat. Og det ønsker han så alligevel ikke*”.¹⁷ This comment points once again to Møller’s fundamentally ambivalent attitude toward the social status of the cyclists whose cause he has adopted as his own. The author’s (unconscious) suppression of this ambivalence in favour of a more one-dimensional argument played its own role in making *Dopingdævlen* a controversial book.

What, then, is the relationship between the elite athlete and society? It has been traditional since the Victorian period to believe that athletes fulfill an ethical obligation to society by serving as inspirational role models, and this is the standard to which *Dopingdævlen* was held by some reviewers. Against Møller’s argument about cyclists’ moral autonomy, Jakob Kvist offered “*den – moralske – indvending, at også feltet har ansvar og pligter i forhold til den omgivende verden*”.¹⁸ “*Argumentet om rytternes rolle som forbilleder er det allerstærkeste mod doping*”, wrote Sørine Gotfredsen. “*Bjarne Riis, Richard Virenque og Marco Pantani*”, she argued, “*er ikke fiktive heltefigurer i en uskyldig ønskeverden*”.¹⁹

The problem with such claims is that the role-modeling argument is one of the least examined sociological propositions in both journalism and the social sciences. Indeed, to argue that any public figure is a role model is little more than a tautological claim about presumed influence due to public visibility. Commentators in this vein typically substitute wishful thinking about influence for any evidence of verifiable effects. An apparent exception to this

rule occurred after it became known in 1998 that the American baseball star Mark McGwire had been using the anabolic steroid androstenedione. Sales of this drug to young customers rose dramatically, demonstrating that the role modeling effects of athletes can be both unpredictable and, from a public health standpoint, undesirable. While Møller concedes the possibility “*at dopingbrugen har afsmittende virkning og siver nedad i rækkerne til ulykke for sagesløse børn og naive teenagere*”, his counterargument is that “*forargelsens stemme*” may lead young people to “*finde det smart at bruge doping*”.²⁰ Indeed, such a response may have played a role in expanding the market for androstenedione. The most persuasive claim about role modelling has to do with the importance of establishing limits that promote self-discipline. Sport, says Ulrik Sass, “*er et mini-billede på, hvad vi vil tillade i samfundet – og vi holder hver især med sportsfolk, der står for ting/egenskaber, vi sætter højt*”.²¹ The advantage of this thesis is that it does not presume a cause-and-effect relationship between the behaviour of athletes and that of ordinary citizens. On the contrary, it rather regards the permitted behaviour of elite athletes as a “leading indicator” of social standards that exist prior to the public behaviour of athletes. Here the world of elite sport is assumed to play a diagnostic rather than a therapeutic role in the life of the larger society.

Verner Møller’s romantic interpretation of the cyclist who performs and suffers in front of his audience has led some observers to make an interesting comparison between athletes and artists as performers, who run risks on behalf of those who experience their performances. Jens Sejer Andersen of DGI emphasizes their compa-

rable ethical responsibilities:

“Kunstnere skal ikke være dydsmønstre. Men hverken kunstnere, idrætsfolk eller forfattere kan frasige sig en etisk fordring, for enhver af deres handlinger har konsekvenser for andre – på dét punkt er de hverken værre eller bedre stillet end alle os dødelige”.²²

“*Her begiver vi os så igen over i kunstens – eller rockmusikkens – verden*” says Thomas Kaarsted. “*I den trives illusionerne og drømmene også i udpræget grad. Så meget, at det perfekte bedrag i nogen grad er blevet en del ad vores kultur*”. Self-deception of this kind allows us to enjoy the drug-dependent performances of artists as well as athletes:

“Egentlig er vi alle en flok fascinerede hyklere. Præcis som da Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin eller Kurt Cobain døde, vidste vi egentlig godt, der var noget galt. En udpræget ubalance var til stede. Men så længe vi var betagede, så længe musikken spillede, og poesien flød, kunne vi fint lukke et øje eller to. Men så en dag var det pludselig slut”.²³

The sports journalist Olav Skaaning Andersen has also pointed to the argument “*for brugen af dopingstoffer i sportens verden, fordi det er kutyme i den øvrige underholdningsbranche*”.²⁴ The more interesting question, however, is how a society strikes unofficial bargains with its performers, such as rock stars and Tour de France riders, that allow them to use illicit drugs in exchange for the gratifications they provide to large numbers of people.

The most mysterious protagonist in the doping drama is the public, that enormous and illusory creature analyzed by Søren

Kierkegaard long before it had come to the attention of sociologists. The Danish public was (or, perhaps, should have been) the audience that observed and even drew some conclusions from the controversy over *Dopingdjævlen* in 1999. For it is the interests of “the public” that are supposed to be at stake when doping is practised or discussed or regulated by law. Doping is alleged to be a threat to public health. Athletes owe the public behaviour worthy of “role models” who reinforce healthy social norms. Opinion polls “take the temperature” of the public to determine how a society feels about doping. It was the public that was told that Verner Møller was a proponent of doping.²⁵ The public is also “the nation” that can feel entitled to the victories of the athletes who “represent” it. But what does the public really think about drug use by athletes? For the debate over *Dopingdjævlen*, like all doping debates, was carried on, not by “the public”, but by a variety of actors – journalists, politicians, academics – who are often willing to invoke public opinion on behalf of their own viewpoints.

Given the often unstable nature of public opinion, it is not surprising that on various occasions Verner Møller has perceived the public either as a threat or as an ally. The ban on the endurance-boosting drug EPO, he said in a 1999 interview, “*falder i tråd med folkestemningen. Siden man fandt tomme ampuller i skraldespanden hos nogle cykelryttere under sidste års Tour de France, er der oppasket en folkestemning, som har været vanskelig at ignorere for politikerne. Det er populistisk politik, der næppe vil ændre mængden af EPO blandt danske elitesportsudøvere*”.²⁶ A year later, he saw public opinion moving away from anti-doping populism in the direction of a more realistic understanding

of athletes’ drug use:

“*Til trods for de helbredsrisici, der unægtelig er forbundet med overdreven brug af dopingmidler, havde programmet [Olav Skaaning Andersen i “Dan-skerlægen”] ikke styrke til at mobilisere forargelsen og få dopinghysteriet til at blusse op igen. En vis besindighed er tilsyndeladende ved at indfinde sig. Det er, som om den sportsinteresserede offentlighed er ved at indse, og forlige sig med – at ambitionen og englelighed næppe er forenelige størrelser, og at sportens verden i grunden er ganske almindelig, skønt fortryllende og derfor frister til idealisering [...] Heldigvis er den offentlige debat ikke længere så unuanceret, som da dopingstormen var på sit højeste*”.²⁷

Indeed, Møller’s faith in the public’s ability to resist anti-doping hysteria was already clear a year earlier in *Dopingdjævlen*.²⁸ It may also be that his faith in the Danish public owed something to his own feelings about his country. For it was Verner Møller who described Bjarne Riis as a man who “*begejstrede ved at vise, at Danmark ikke er for lille til at skabe noget stort*”.²⁹

Notes

1. Thomas Kaarsted, “Den dag cykelsporten døde” I: *Fyens Stiftstidende*, 27th June 1999.
2. Jakob Kvist, “Eksistens på to hjul” *Berlingske Tidende*, 2nd July 1999. “Nu er det kommet frem, at Riis gik under navnet ‘Mr. 60 procent’ (og det referer til hans hæmatokritværdi) under Tour’en i 96, da han sejlede direkte ind i alle danske hjerter”. See Bo Kampmann Walther, “Ingen sport uden snyd” I: *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 22nd July 1999. On the symbolic role of Bjarne Riis see Kristian

- Rasmussen, "Bjarne Riis – idol og syndebug" I: Jørn Hansen og Thomas Skovgaard (red.), *Idrættens Mangfoldighed Idrættens Grænser? Idræts-historisk Årbog 2000*, 16. årg. (2001).
3. See also Olav Skanning Andersen og Niels Christian Jung, *Doping på landevejen* (København, 1999).
 4. "Riis: Smid doping-synderne ud" I: *Berlingske Tidende*, 5/10 1998. Riis' implicit claim that professional cycling had possessed "troværdighed" before the Tour scandal belongs to the rhetoric of evasion that has long served to buffer the relationship between cycling and its doping practices and the general public.
 5. "Masser af lovlige dopingmidler"; Camilla Frank, "Forsker: Forbud stopper ikke doping" I: *Politiken*, 1/7 1999.
 6. Quoted in Lars B. Jørgensen, "Doping i dagligdagen" I: *Berlingske Tidende*, 27/5 2001. It is not surprising that one reviewer described *Dopingdævlen* as "en bog, der som overordnet mål har at frikende ikke bare Riis, men hele cykelfeltet og hele den professionelle sport som begreb". See Kvist (1999).
 7. Kaarsted (1999).
 8. Ibid.
 9. Ulrik Sass, "Dopingdævlen kan ikke uddrives".
 10. Kvist (1999). "Verner Møller har mange skarpe iagttagelser, men hans tilsyneladende nøgternhed kan ikke skjule, at han kan være lige så manipulerende og tendensiøs i sin 'analytiske' fremlæggelse af holdninger og argumenter i den danske dopingdebat, som han finder er hetzlige". See Ib Skovgaard, "Opium til dopingdævlen" I: *Weekendavisen*, 16-22/6 1999. The most extreme accusation of this kind describes *Dopingdævlen* as "interessant, forførende, vanvittig og kynisk manipulerende på grænsen til det uanstændige". See Sørine Gotfredsen, "Den grusomme kærlighed" I: *Aktuelt*, 8/7 1999.
 11. Jens Sejer Andersen, "Doping er da ingen kunst" I: *Ungdom & Idræt*, nr. 23 (1999), s. 13; Verner Møller, *Dopingdævlen – analyse af en hed debat* (København, 1999), s. 144.
 12. "Efterhånden vil offentligheden tabe interessen for dopingbrugen, på samme måde som den har vænnet sig til professionalismen". See Møller (1999), s. 205.
 13. Ibid., s. 75.
 14. Ibid., s. 74.
 15. Ibid., s. 92.
 16. Kaarsted (1999).
 17. Sejer Andersen (1999).
 18. Kvist (1999).
 19. Gotfredsen (1999).
 20. Sass.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Sejer Andersen (1999).
 23. Kaarsted (1999). In the last analysis, Kaarsted finds sport and art to be essentially different: "For sport er ikke kunst. De to størrelser er på ét punkt fundamentalt forskellige: kunsten er en abstrakt størrelse. Den lever i kraft af det finurlige, det utraditionelle og til en vis grad det forbudte, som udvider vores horisont. Det utæmmelige – det ukontrollerede – er selve kunstens eksistensgrundlag. For sporten gælder det modsatte, nemlig at lige børn leger bedst, hvorfor der nødvendigvis må være regler. Ellers forsvinder konkurrencemomentet og eksistensgrundlaget".
 24. Olav Skaaning Andersen, "Afsporet debat" I: *Politiken*, 17/4 2000.
 25. Jens Sejer Andersen points out that, even in the absence of an open endorsement of doping, the author of *Dopingdævlen* had left himself open to this accusation: "Verner Møller betyder at han ikke ønsker en frigivelse af doping, og i avisinterview har han ligefrem erklæret sig som modstander af doping. Men hvorfor dog?" See Sejer Andersen (1999).
 26. Quoted in Frank (1999).
 27. Verner Møller, "Cykelsport, sponsorer og moral".
 28. "Det indlevede publikum, viser en respekt, som er fremmed for udenforstående. Det er derfor heller ikke her, man hører fordømmelse af ryttere, der afsløres i brug af forbudte stoffer. Måske fordi det blot opfattes som endnu en overskridelse og et vidnesbyrd om rytternes offer- og risikovillighed". See Møller (1999), s. 111.
 29. Verner Møller, "Cykelsport, sponsorer og moral".