

NSA INTERVIEW – 3

Ma Junren

by Rolf von der Laage

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1993 saw a revolution in women's distance running. Leading the way was a squad of athletes, coached by Ma Junren (pictured left), which included Wang Junxia (1993 World Champion at 10,000 metres and world record holder for 3000 metres and 10,000 metres), Qu Yunxia (1993 World Champion at 3000 metres and world record holder for 1500 metres), Zhang Linli (1993 World Championships silver medallist at 3000 metres) and Zhang Lirong (1993 World Championships bronze medallist at 3000 metres). In this Interview, Junren, who has been a professional coach in the Liaoning Province since 1988, discusses his philosophy and training methods and provides us with long awaited background information on the year's biggest athletics story.

The interview was given to Rolf von der Laage (GER) who was a Media correspondent in Asia during the 1960's and 1970's. During that period he also coached many middle and long distance athletes in South Asia.

NSA: the phenomenal standard of performances in the middle and long distances by Chinese women during the World Championships in Athletics in Stuttgart as well as during the Chinese Games in Beijing only a month later, sent shockwaves around the world. How do you explain this rapid development?

MJ: This is a very complex subject. Let me, therefore, split my answer into three different sections and describe: the pre-conditions for this achievement; the support – both in China and generally; and the particular development of my group of runners.

1) The pre-conditions:

Track and field athletics is a very popular sport in China and has been since modern athletics was introduced into Asia at the beginning of this century. The Far Eastern Games were hosted by China in 1915, 1921 and 1927 and since 1932 the country has also participated in the Olympic Games. In this period, admittedly, only a small proportion of the Chinese population was able to practise sports because the country was suffering from political and economical problems. However, after the Communist revolution sport was made available to everybody. By the 1950's many Chinese athletes had reached world class standard and 1957 Zheng Fengrong became the first Chinese

athlete to set a world record in athletics, clearing 1.77m in the women's High Jump. In the mid 1960's there were several Chinese athletes in the world rankings until the unfortunate Cultural Revolution brought everything to a halt.

After the Cultural Revolution the China joined the international sports movement and soon our athletes came to the fore again. High jumper Zhu Jianhua won China's first ever major international games medal at the first IAAF World Championships in 1983. He also set three world records.

Since this time, Chinese athletes have been successful in the World Championships and the Olympic Games, winning medals and competing with distinction against the world's best athletes. Of course, Media coverage of Chinese successes in international athletics boosts interest in the sport among young boys and girls all over China. This growing interest is supported by the traditional policy of our country to support sports as a means of health and education.

2) General support:

The Chinese Government and the Governments of 31 Chinese provinces and Autonomous Regions, as well as the country's 300 district and most of the 2180 county administrations, have started to complete the necessary sport installations for our vast population of some 1.2 billion inhabitants. Year by year, more and more young people are educated in sport not only the their schools but also during their spare time. Development in the cities however, was far faster than in the rural areas. Therefore, much more stress has been laid on the development of these areas since the beginning of 1980. By 1985 some 50,000 sport meetings had already taken place with some seven million farmer athletes. These figures were increased to some 100,000 sports meetings with a total of some 33 million farmer athletes by 1991.

To build up a brighter future in sport, Sports Schools were installed in all provinces of China. 15,000 athletes in all sports ranging from the candidates for the Chinese national teams to teams from the various provinces are included. They are concentrated in the 30 National Sports

Centres now existing which, in most cases, are connected with the National or Provincial Institutes of Sport. The districts and the cities today also maintain some 150 Sports Boarding Schools with some 28,000 young athletes. Finally, there are approximately 3,000 spare-time sports schools all over China catering for a total of more than 300,000 promising young athletes. These are the reservoirs from which the provincial coaches, like myself, can recruit athletes who could prove to be another Wang Junxia or Qu Yunxia.

3) Development of the Ma Junren group

The development of my own group of female distance runners: After I was demobilized from the Army in 1970, I took part in a short-term sports faculties training class and later became a sports teacher at the 55th Middle School situated in a mountainous area 40 kilometres from Anshan City, Liaoning Province. I cycled to school every day to train my students who were too poor to afford shoes and ran bare footed. After a few months of training they triumphed in local competitions. when I was transferred to the 29th Middle School I could already rely on my experiences and also began to train women in middle and long distances. This was also the time of my daily studies of books, magazines and all scientific material available from all over the world on the subject of middle and long distance training. I experimented, had successes and many failures, but I never gave up. After 15 years of work and numerous achievements, I was named a professional athletics coach at the Anshan City's Sports School. There I began to train the current national and world champions, whom I had recruited from the various spare time sport schools.

I can say that my key to success lies in two elements: selection of the runners and development of skills. All the runners I chose are from rural areas in Liaoning Province. They are used to enduring difficulties. Otherwise, how could they bear to run the equivalent of a Marathon a day at high altitude? Who else in the world does this? Furthermore, I keep all my runners away from disturbing influences. They are runners and they have to train to improve their

performances. They have to follow my advice with dedication and not think of things other than running and performing well. This is my philosophy and it is proven by success.

NSA: Are your training methods based on any particular philosophy?

MJ: In the 1980's I found that most of the training methods used by our coaches were outdated copies of those used in Europe in the 1950's. Therefore, I frequently went to international meetings to observe advanced running skills. Moreover, I started research for my own running theory. I studied various training theories of well-known coaches from Australia and New

Zealand, from the USA, from Great Britain, Sweden, Hungary and Germany. Besides learning about the various theories on training load and frequency, aerobic and anaerobic training, endurance, speed-endurance and speed training, it was interesting to learn that there were thoughts that women might be especially suited for endurance sports. This is something which is confirmed by the situation in my country.

Moreover, I think that running skill is a very important factor. Therefore I went back to nature to study the harmonious and easy way animals use to move. Whenever I had the chance to go to a zoo, I observed the walking and running skills of different animals. To help my athletes improve running skills I often took them to the roadside to watch horses, donkeys



Ma Junren explains the ingredients of the breakfast soup to Rolf von der Laage. Photo: Chai von der Laage.



and dogs run. I also studied the running skills of ostrich and deer and tried to adopt them in training. It is from deer and ostrich that I found the key to success in distance running.

In general, one can say that I tried to adopt the experiences of many successful coaches of the past, combined these experiences with my own, studied carefully the opinions of the world's best sport scientists and studied animals as well. Out of all this knowledge I tried to develop my own training theory taking into consideration all the environmental factors, traditional living attitudes and sport supporting pre-conditions in my country and in my province Liaoning.

NSA: Of what importance is centralised training within your theory?

MJ: Centralised training is of great importance: the coach must be able to control everything in the life of his athletes. As you know, I prefer a spartan life with my girls because it is that which protects them from seeking other pleasures in life. These young athletes are professionals. Thus, they should not even think about things other than their aim to be even better. My relentless training regime is the foundation of our successes. I myself get up at 4.30 a.m. every day and prepare a chicken soup for my runners which they drink when they get up at 5.30 a.m. Training starts before 6.00 a.m. with gymnastics and gentle jogging before my athletes set off for their morning run of between 25 and 30 kilometres depending on the individual demands. Also, the pace over the different parts of the distance differs from athlete to athlete. In preparation for the World Marathon Cup, for instance, Wang Junxia had to run more kilometres at a faster pace than Zhang Linli or Zhang Lirong. They, in turn, had to follow a higher loaded programme than the middle distance runners.

After breakfast, washing up and laundry, the girls do their studies which include English language and Mathematics. Lunch is at 12 noon. Those athletes who are under particular strain have to drink the fresh blood of soft shelled turtles which I myself have beheaded. Strict rest is maintained until 3 p.m. and we meet for training again at 3.30 p.m. This time, rather than run on roads, we train on a exactly measured grass track with an undulating surface. We only work out on a cinder track once a week and only on a track with an artificial surface just prior to very important track races.

Dinner time is at 6 p.m. After dinner is spare time which is used for physiotherapy. Bedtime is 9 p.m.

Some medical doctors say that the stress these girls are under may be well above the normal tolerance range, but I think that my programme, and our way of life, will do little serious harm to my athletes.

NSA: High altitude training seems to play an important role in your training programme. Could you please tell us more about it?

MJ: Altitude training is perhaps the major factor in our successes. I believe that 30 to 40 days is an ideal period. One month high, one month low, this is how we can put it. I do not want to go into details.

But I will say that the period after coming down from altitude before competition is also very important. This period of time is different for middle distance runners than for long distance runners.

In China we have many possibilities for altitude training. I prefer two places, Qinghai Province on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau and Kunming in Yunnan Province. Qinghai is higher, some 2,400 metres, but very cold during winter. Kunming with an altitude of some 2,000 metres offers a moderate climate all year round.

(left) Wang Junxia, 3000 metres and 10,000 metres world record holder, during early morning gymnastics. Photo: Chai von der Laage.

NSA: You mentioned that the runners undergo a physiotherapy programme daily. How is this conducted and what other means of medical care are taken?

MJ: My training loads demand good physiotherapy. The roads on which the girls have to run are hard and the padding in their shoes wears out easily. I myself do the physiotherapy with massages, electric massages and acupressure to aid the girls' recovery. I use acupuncture on their injuries. I know a lot about Chinese herb medicine as well and so make full use of this to strengthen the girls' health and to treat them in case of injury or illness. It depends very much on the type of injury, but in many cases the girls have to continue with their training. Nature heals, of course, and if they stop for injury, the fat they put on in a week takes four to get off.

NSA: Please give us some idea of the girls' daily diet.

MJ: You can take food as a delicacy and you can take food under the aspect of its nutritive value and power. I pay very close attention to the second. I put together the menu for my runners myself and even go to the market personally to select what should be prepared. The meals must be well balanced between carbohydrates, fats and proteins, minerals, vitamins and trace elements.

It is a science of its own to find the right balance for the different grades of training load and training types. During altitude training we have to look for nutrition that helps in the production of red blood cells. To this end we use several nutrients and special Chinese medicines. Westerners, and many Chinese, might find the taste of our dishes repellent and the appearance unfamiliar, but my runners eat it dutifully.

NSA: Do many fellow coaches in China follow your training and your philosophy of running?

MJ: When you are successful people give a big hand, when you are not they laugh at you. For

many years people laughed at me and my philosophy. Yet I had tremendous successes last year in the Seoul World Junior Championships and the Barcelona Olympic Games, and even bigger successes this year in the Stuttgart World Athletic Championships as well with the series of world records during the 7th China Games. So now I go from town to town and city to city in China and give speeches.

But I must admit that there were also some coaches in the past who always encouraged me and who had come to similar conclusions regarding the training of middle and long distances. Among these is Mr Luo Weixin. He is coach to Zhong Huandi who took the silver medal in the World Championships in 1991 as well as in 1993 and who – behind Wang Yunxia – was also good enough to break the old 10,000 metres world record.

There is also Mr Günther Lange, a well known distance coach from West Germany, not the East, who was with us in China for two years and was involved in the build-up of programmes for distance running for junior athletes.

But I must say frankly that not every coach in China, not to mention other countries, should follow my programmes – which, by the way, no one can expect I completely reveal – to have the same success. Everybody can come to see how I work with my runners, but coaches must find out for themselves the suitable way for his own athletes even when adopting parts of my method. We must not forget that athletes are individual human beings and that what is good for one might be wrong for another. In general, I think that coaches, not only in China, will dare in the future to burden their athletes with a higher mileage and a tougher load. But they must be careful and should not forget all the other necessities.

NSA: Where do you find your future athletes; how do you select them?

MJ: As I have already explained, we have many sport schools both in China and in Liaoning Province in particular. I myself had coached at

two of these schools at different levels, a spare time sport school and a sport boarding school. It is this type of schools where I look for talent and where I also advise coaches-cum-teachers on how to support those athletes which I think could, after some time, make my group.

I look for skill and a personal background which promises endurance qualities. One finds this with athletes who have a rural, peasant background. Life in the country is hard. They have been used to running long distances since they were small. Their mothers think nothing of trudging 20 kilometres to market with heavy baskets on their shoulders.

The father of Wang Junxia, for instance, is a poor fisherman, 54 years-old. Junxia helped him fish when she was a child. From the boat she dived into the water and scared the fishes into her father's net. During her rare spare time she took part in sport with the boys of the village and it was soon discovered that the boys were no faster nor more persevering than Junxia. Her talents were noticed in school as well and at the age of 12 she became a member of the local spare time sport school. She was transferred to the Unlien Boarding Sport School at the age of 15. She liked this life very much and was very obedient because it was much better



From left to right: Zhang Linli, Zhang Lirong, Ma Liyan and Wang Junxia during a 30 kilometres morning run. Note that Wang is 'zig zagging' to cover a greater distance. Ma Junren can be seen following on his motorbike. Photo: Chai von der Laage.

than at home, where five persons of her family had to share two rooms furnished only poorly.

Even poorer is the family of Qu Yunxia. Her father is a peasant worker. The family of six was living in a two-roomed mud hut. Yunxia ran six kilometres every morning to her primary school, and the same distance home again. All of it barefoot because she had no shoes. When, at the age of 12, she was invited to attend a specialist sport school because of her running ability, her father had to sell his prize possession, the family's only pig, to buy her running shoes.

Wang Yunn, aged only 16, has a very similar background. This girl is 1.70 metres tall and may yet prove to be the most talented in my group. During the China Games she set World Junior Records at 800 metres and 1500 metres. These are the distances I work on with her. In another country I am sure she would be trained as a sprinter because of her speed ability. She has personal best times of 11.6 secs for the 100 metres and 53.8 secs for the 400 metres.

What I want to say is that one has to put the talented athletes in the correct events. Wang Junxia for instance, who is only 1.62m tall, is too short for the middle distances, although she is by no means slow, as her 3:51.92 for 1500 metres proves. But I think her best distances are the longer ones.

In general, what we need are talents with an endurance background. Such girls are also mentally prepared for enduring difficulties and setbacks on their long way up to the top. Such girls really want that way of life and the burden that is loaded on them.

And we must not forget running skills, the ability to run in an easy and natural way, when we select talents. Just look at how many long distance runners move, they simply do not know how to run. We see it even at the World Championships and Olympic Games. There was, and still is, a philosophy among many coaches that: "If you are too slow for a shorter distance go to the longer ones, for at the longer distances you do not need running skill." This is completely wrong! Just think of how much ground you lose, how much time you spend in vain if you have no running skill, if you do not know how to run forward.

Once you have found the talent, you must treat it carefully. You must find a way to develop it which best suits each individual. The athlete's aim is to be outstanding one day; this is what you want too. Thus, always have an eye on that target. You and the athlete must be patient. A gradual build-up takes time. All disturbing influences must be kept away from the athletes. In my view a spartan way of life is the best way to reach it. A spartan way of life allied to the most appropriate training programme.

True, we have many talents in China. As soon as one falls aside, due to permanent injury or illness or burn-out, there are another thirty to step in. But, if you think of the individual sacrifices the talented athletes are making on their way to the top, if you think of all your time and work involved, you will be as careful as the athletes to be obedient and dedicated.

NSA: The rapid development in middle and long distance running in China at present mainly comprises the womens' events, why?

MJ: The answer is closely connected to the historical and socio-cultural background of men and women in Chinese society. The position of women in society is similar to many societies in many countries: a woman is a minor being in comparison to a man, a man is always superior to a woman. Thus, women have to be more obedient, more modest, more easily satisfied than a man. Therefore, women have learnt to cope. They have learnt to undergo a harder way of life, to carry heavier burdens and to be more patient.

Patience is a typical feminine quality. This attribute is clearly connected to the general idea of endurance. We must also consider psychological, physiological and bio-chemical peculiarities when discussing the idea of endurance in its complexity. All these qualities are more developed by nature in women. That is why I agree with the theories that women are born and more developed for endurance tasks in life and thus also in sport.

Nevertheless, we have just started a men's group in middle and long distance running

under my philosophy. Let us wait for three years or so to see the outcome.

NSA: In the international press there have been repeated allegations that the tremendous performances of your world beating and record breaking runners are mainly the result of doping. How often were your athletes tested?

MJ: Once again, I repeat what I have said on many occasions: we do not need unfair and illegal methods to achieve performances.

My girls have been tested very often in the past, and always tested negative. Professor Dr. Yang Tianle, the Director of the National Doping Control Laboratory in Beijing said, just recently, that some of my runners are among the most tested athletes in the world. As a mat-

ter of fact, since the Tianjin Marathon in April this year my best runners have been tested about nine times. No illegal substances could be detected – simply because none were taken.

Testing was carried out after races and out of competition, by the Chinese Doping Control Centre and by the International Amateur Athletic Federation. The medical doctors of the IAAF have permanent re-entry visas for that purpose. Some of them are Chinese people living in other countries and holding other passports and they fly into China via Hong Kong. Nobody knows they are medical doctors or laboratory assistants; they simply look like business people travelling through China. As the Chinese Athletic Federation regularly informs the IAAF where Chinese athletes are training and at what times, the IAAF anti-doping squad can go to cities near the training centres and



Zhang Linli and Wang Junxia (left to right in red jackets) lead members of Ma Junren's group during a morning run. Photo: Chai von der Laage.

book into any suitable hotels. From there they can take a taxi and go to any place where there are athletes they want to test. There they can just put a hand on the shoulder of an athlete – like the police – and tell them “Hey, Doping Control!” That is what we call ‘doping control without notice’ and that is what my runners have already experienced.

But let us come back to the false accusations by sections of the international press and by some of the world’s best women long distance runners or their coaches. They all have been shocked by the excellent performances of my runners and did not know how to explain them.

Well, we think we should go to Europe from next year onward to compete also in the important meetings there and undergo doping controls under their eyes again and again. Perhaps this will change the attitude of people in the west who always applaud World and Olympic Champions and record breakers from everywhere else in the world but who insult my runners and call them names.

Wang Junxia, at the press conference after winning the Marathon World Cup in San Sebastian, asked: “What exactly is the differ-

ence between world class athletes who always get applause and us who are insulted for our performances?” No-one gave an answer. But I must admit that the spectators in San Sebastian were very fair and there was no booing or whistling as at the World Championships in Stuttgart.

NSA: How do you rate the further development in middle and long distance running both in China and in the world amongst the men and women?

MJ: Without resorting to speculation, I would say it is still possible to better all the world records in men’s and women’s events. Chinese athletes will try to be among the record breakers in future. So far, we have only broken those records that were overdue to be broken, at least in some cases. More will follow. And if you compare some of those records with others you can already see in which events there is still a margin left. Let us look to the next decade and let us be patient. How does the saying go? Rome was not built in a day.