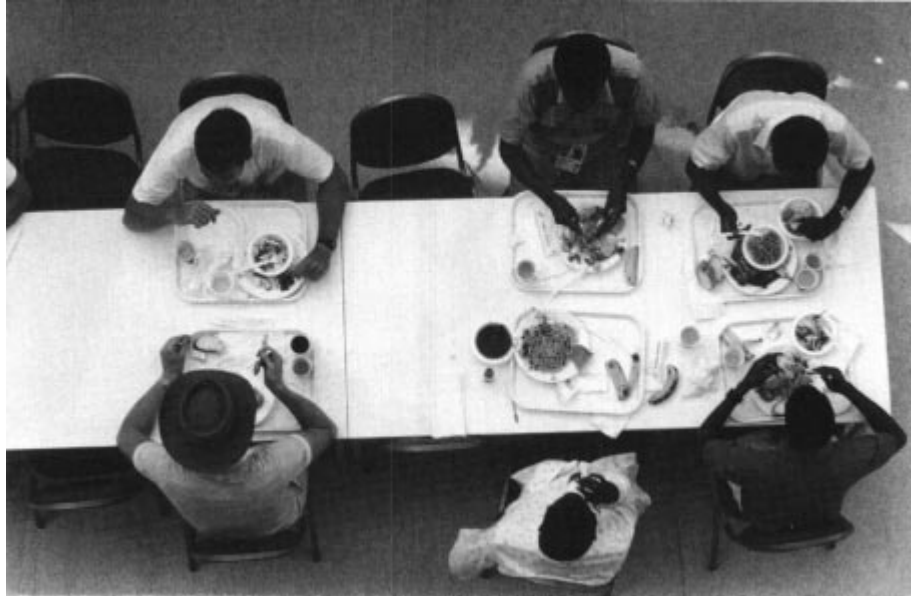


WHAT THE CHAMPIONS EAT



The athletes' diet, a major daily operation in the Olympic Village. Here, in Seoul.

By Donato Martucci

When reviewing a book by Moleschott on "The Theory of Foodstuffs", the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 - 1872) wrote : "The theory of foodstuffs is of great ethical and political importance. Foods transform themselves into blood and blood into heart and brain, the stuff of thought and feeling. Human diet is the foundation of culture and feeling. If you want to improve people, instead of imprecating against sin, give them a better diet. Man is what he eats".

Such statements are disdained by anyone who dislikes materialistic theories of all kinds. But it sounds less homespun and irritating when repeated by Professor Giovanni Caldarone, nutrition specialist with the Italian Olympic Committee's Institute of Sports Science. Caldarone has prepared a small book entitled 'Eat with the Champions', which the CONI itself has recently published. However, he is aware of the paradox inherent in the formula "We are what we eat". He explains that "although

sports dietetics has to a large extent succeeded in shaking off all the myths and prejudices which characterized it for so long, there is still a tendency in some sports circles, even now on the threshold of the third millennium, to cherish the illusion that you can transform a mediocre athlete into a champion simply by modifying his diet or feeding him special and original foods. The truth is very different. Nutritional intervention can influence only partially his athletic performance. True, an ath-

lete's diet is important, but the quality of a performance depends to a great extent on the individual's genetic and constitutional characteristics. In reality, performance can only be improved through a gradual and co-ordinated training process, which must also take the individual's psychological makeup into account. Consequently, his psychological, sociological and cultural attitude to food should equally not be overlooked. The nutritionist and the sports doctor must be convinced of their contribution, but without trying to take the coach's place. He concludes with honesty that "there are no foods or substances or magic formulas capable of guaranteeing success ; it all happens gradually and physiologically and success is the fruit of the constant hard work of many people, but above all the efforts and physical and psychological capabilities of the athlete himself".

These are welcome words in a period which has been marked by the baleful influence of ill-intentioned and dishonest people who have invented magic formulas capable of enhancing athletes' performance. Our alarm is justified, given the sudden, universal currency the word "doping" has acquired in all countries and in all languages. We shall have to remove from the precincts of sport - and the IOC is already doing so with great commitment - all the sorcerers who infest the scene.

But the work with which Professor Caldarone and his group of excellent assistants have concerned themselves concentrates particularly on Italian athletes. After the war, Italian dietetics suffered from the effects of a misapprehension. Athletes, technicians and doctors enthusiastically embraced traditional principles far removed from the country's own culture, convinced that to win medals it was enough to imitate the habits, not only at the table, of countries which were stronger in the various sports disciplines. In other words, a "Mediterranean-type" diet was abandoned in favour of, primarily, North American and Anglo-Saxon models. The tendency was so strong that even today -

Caldarone observes - it is difficult to persuade the athlete of the need to increase his daily consumption of pasta, rice, bread, salad, vegetables and fruit while at the same time reducing and diversifying sources of protein, such as meat and cheese, and of lipids.

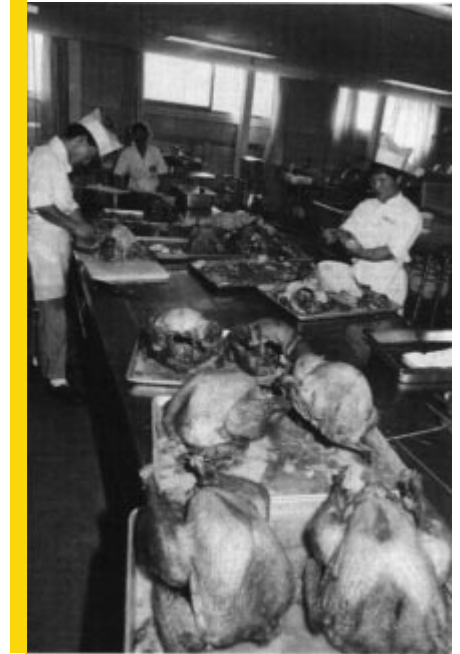
However, even before the second world war, a number of Scandinavian authors had suggested for athletes a diet rich in complex carbohydrates; they considered it particularly suitable for long-distance events (walking, marathon, 5,000 and 10,000 metres, cycle road racing, nordic skiing). The theory was put forward again in the seventies and extended to all disciplines which require large amounts of glycogen as the main energy source, and in sufficient quantities to sustain the organism in physical effort (canoeing, swimming, football, basketball, volleyball, boxing, fencing, skiing, tennis and cycling).



There are no magic foods or formulas that can guarantee success.

In addition to doctors specializing in various disciplines, some of the most famous athletes, such as Bordin, Olympic marathon champion, the Abbagnale brothers (canoeing), Lamberti (swimming), Tomba (skiing), Maenza (wrestling), give their views based on personal experience. I think that such a fascinating and original work will interest not only Italians. After all, everyone knows that the so-called "Mediterranean diet" is successfully breaking into dietetic systems in all corners of the world.

D. M.



Meat, fruit ? Depends on your choice of diet.

