

# The Muscled Self and Its Aftermath: A Life History Study of an Elite, Black. Male Bodybuilder

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This article draws on the life history of an elite, black, male bodybuilder to explore the social meanings of muscle in the construction and confirmation of specific forms of masculine identity. Attention is given to childhood experiences in a hostile environment and how this initiated a quest for a hyper-muscular body. Having successfully achieved this aim by winning a British Championship a turning point moment prematurely terminates his sporting career. The aftermath of this moment for his sense of self are examined by focusing on experiences of the following: negative pain, an atrophying body, the loss of a disciplined body and an athletic identity, and becoming 'black again' in a small body. Finally, some reflections on the muscled self and its aftermath are provided.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Shilling (1993), in the affluent West the body becomes a project that should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity. People come to believe that the appearance, size, shape, and even the contents of the body, are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of the owner. For him, 'Treating the body as a project does not necessarily entail a full-time preoccupation with its wholesale transformation, although it has the potential to do so' (1993: 5).

One example of the body as project noted by Shilling (1993) is the increasingly popular activity of bodybuilding<sup>1</sup> in which the sheer size of the muscles achieved challenges accepted notions of what is 'natural' about male and female bodies. Likewise, Benson (1997) notes

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this activity is one in which bodies become treated as a project of the self and as bodies for display.

The central idea is to build *mass*: to build big muscles. . . . These muscles should be hard and clearly defined, 'shredded' or 'cut'. . . . The result will be a body for others to look at, not a body for use. . . . The body here is a very literal project of the self. . . . The flesh itself must be blasted, bombed and shaped, and the mass and power of built muscle confirms the body-builder in his or her own selfhood: I bulge, therefore I am.

(Benson, 1997: 146–48)

Others have also noted how with this group identity construction takes a peculiarly physical form. For example, Bloor *et al.* (1998) point out that for bodybuilders their identities are crucially shaped by their physical appearance in such a way that Cooley's (1983) looking glass self is no longer a mere metaphor. Indeed, according to Fussell (1991) and Hotten (2004) the admiring gaze of the other is the ultimate reward for the body-builder. Brown (1999) also notes how bodybuilders both desire and use the gaze of others regarding their increasing hyper-muscularity, along with their own constant self-scrutiny, to construct and confirm their identities as their flesh is transformed. With these transformations, Brown suggests, bodybuilders became acutely aware that they *are* their bodies and that changes in their bodies can bring about changes in their sense of self. Therefore, in Frank's (1991) terms, bodybuilders provide an excellent example of the *mirroring* body in action. This kind of body seeks to recreate the body in the image of other bodies that are more muscular than itself. The primary sense is visual. The body sees an image, idealises it, and then seeks to become the image of that image. Importantly, the mirroring body is judged by its appearance.

To produce the desired hyper-muscular body requires many hours of intense training each day over a number of years. Dedicated bodybuilders also follow elaborate and rigidly defined diets, and many opt for chemical interventions to enhance their training programmes and gain muscle mass (Benson, 1997; Bloor *et al.*, 1998, Fussell, 1991; Hotten, 2004; Klein, 1993, 1995; Monaghan, 2001a). In attempting to transform their bodies, bodybuilders adopt increasingly disciplined regimes of self-regulation and self-monitoring strategies in order to promote the maximal conditions for muscular development. As such, they provide a good example of the *disciplined* body in action as described by Frank (1991). This kind of body defines itself primarily in actions of self-regimentation that are intended to lead to predictable outcomes in muscle growth and shape.

In this regard, Brown (1999) notes how, in attempting to transform their bodies, the bodybuilders in his study adopted increasing regimes of self-regulation and self-monitoring strategies in order to promote the best

possible conditions for muscular development: 'This can be regarded as an anthropometric bodybuilding lifestyle, characterized by the measurement of the body size, composition, performance, recovery, ingestion and excretion' (1999: 86). Indeed, Benson (1997) notes the obsessional concerns that bodybuilders have with what they take into their bodies along with the anxious attention they devote to policing the boundaries of the self in the quest for the 'perfect' body.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the value placed on, and the acceptance afforded to this constructed hyper-muscular body varies greatly. For example, the general public, along with many in the sporting world treat bodybuilding with suspicion because of its focus on 'unnatural' muscle mass and an end performance that involves 'just' being looked at and appraised. Furthermore, as Basalmo (1997) notes:

The women who use bodybuilding technology to sculpt their bodies are doubly transgressive; first, because femininity and nature are so closely aligned, and any attempt to reconstruct the body is transgressive against the 'natural' identity of the female body. Second, when female athletes use technology to achieve physical muscularity – a male body prerogative – they transgress the 'natural' order of gender identity.

(Balsamo, 1997: 167)

Against this backdrop, as Wesely (2001: 173) emphasizes: 'Female bodybuilders face incredible pressure and tremendous attacks if they do not stay within the realm of acceptable femininity'. Thus, as a number of studies have highlighted, the experience of becoming and being a bodybuilder varies significantly according to gender (e.g., see Benson, 1997; Grogan *et al.*, 2004; Klein, 1993; Mansfield and McGinn, 1993; Roussel *et al.*, 2003).

## **BODYBUILDING MOTIVATIONS**

With regard to the motivations for becoming a bodybuilder, particularly with regard to men, the dominant view in western cultures seems to revolve around notions of masculinity in 'crisis'. Thus, Pope *et al.* (2000: xii) talk of a 'widespread crisis among today's boys and men'. The signs of this crisis, for them, are evident in a range of body obsessions that constitute what they define as the 'Adonis Complex'. With regard to male body image obsession, Pope *et al.* note how many 'normal' boys and men feel insecure and anxious – even paralysed – by how they look: 'Society is telling them now, more than ever before, that their bodies define who they are as men. Because they find it impossible to meet this supermale standard, they turn their anxiety and humiliation inward' (2000: 4). They suggest this can lead some men to develop a psychiatric condition known

as ‘muscle dysmorphia’ that involves misperceptions and/or obsessions about their muscularity. They identify bodybuilding as one outlet for this obsession.

For those adopting this crisis perspective, in a situation where taken-for-granted notions of culturally dominant masculinity are being challenged in many social spheres, sport, and particularly aggressive contact sports, become defined as one strategy for retaining, continuing, and reproducing hegemonic forms of masculinity. Monaghan (2001a: 8) summarizes this perspective as follows, ‘bodybuilding in particular provides men (and some women suffering personal insecurities) with an atavistic means of redressing their feelings of powerlessness through the pursuit of a culturally valorized mesomorphic image signifying hegemonic masculinity’.

An example of this perspective is provided by Klein’s (1990; 1993) ethnographic work on bodybuilding. According to Klein, his findings reveal a widespread lack of self-esteem among bodybuilding males that are bolstered by various institutionalized forms of narcissism found in this sport and subculture. He suggests that, for the male bodybuilder, the quest for muscular mass and size, is a defence against the thing he fears most, his smallness. This has implications for his often fragile ego structure and also for his equally fragile gender identity structure. More recently, Klein (1995: 114) summarized the situation as follows, ‘the social psychology of male bodybuilders is quite simple really, almost cliché-like. The more insignificant he feels on the inside, the more significant the bodybuilder strives to appear on the outside. In bodybuilding this translates into an obsession with appearing large’. Thus, the hyper-muscular body becomes a mask or wall between low self-esteem and a potentially threatening world.

With regard to the constitutive predicament of masculinity and the hidden anxiety at the core of conventional masculinity displayed in Fussell’s (1991) autobiographical tale of becoming a hard-core bodybuilder, Wacquant (1995) notes the following:

Bodybuilding forms a unique prism through which to examine this predicament because muscles are *the* distinctive symbol of masculinity, the specific armamentarium of embattled manhood. Their wilful acquisition and exhibition serve to establish and repair a damaged sense of oneself as a properly gendered being, i.e., a virile individual. Surveys have shown time and again that men’s self esteem correlates highly with having a muscular upper body, that males with slight or ‘soft’ physical make ups have lower levels of life satisfaction than their more athletic peers. The quest for muscles reveals men locked in a ‘passionate battle against their own sense of vulnerability’.

(Wacquant, 1995: 171)

While analyses informed by the crisis perspective may be useful in helping explain why *some* men are drawn towards bodybuilding, it should not be assumed that this perspective applies to *all* male bodybuilders. The crisis perspective needs to be treated with caution as it has a number of limitations. In the first instance, at a general level, it tends to view masculinity as a unified and homogenous entity when this is simply not the case. As Salisbury and Jackson (1996: 7) point out: 'There is no such thing as masculinity – only masculinities... Masculine identities are always full of cracks and fissures, as they shift across history and different cultures. They are complex and contradictory... They are never harmoniously integrated or rationally coherent.'

The crisis perspective also tends towards an overly simplistic view of sport as a patriarchal institution that reinforces men's domination and power over women. However, as Messner (1992: 17) points out, 'the rise of sport as a social institution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had at least as much to do with men's class and racial relationships with other men as it did with men's relationships with women'. Importantly, Messner goes on to argue that the turn-of-the-century 'crisis of masculinity' was, in actuality, a crisis of legitimation for *hegemonic* masculinity: 'In other words, upper- and middle-class, white, urban heterosexual men were the most threatened by modernization, by changes in the social organization of work, by the New Woman's movement into public life, by feminism, and by working-class, ethnic minority, immigrant, and gay men' (1992: 18).

Against this backdrop, Mercer (1994) has criticized the Eurocentrism of many theoretical approaches to masculinity that have failed to recognize that, 'not all men in the world are white or even that white masculinities are informed by an ethnicity of whiteness' (1994: 153). In drawing attention to the historically constructed social position of black males he emphasizes that 'black masculinity is a highly contradictory formation of identity, as it is a *subordinated* masculinity' (1994: 143). Subordinated masculinities, as Carrington (2002) emphasizes, cannot be fitted unquestioningly into the template of the crisis perspective without reproducing a 'non-raced' male subject. Thus, he calls for a more sophisticated and non-reductionist analysis that takes seriously the intersectionality of 'race', gender, nation, and class if we are to fully appreciate how social identities are constructed over time.

With specific reference to bodybuilding, various scholars have drawn attention to the limitations of the crisis perspective and its 'deficit' view of masculinity. For example, Brown (1999) points out that the relationship between hyper-muscularity and the construction of a specific form of masculinity is much more dynamic than is generally presumed.

The notion of bodybuilders all being insecure men, bolstering their flagging sense of masculine selves by building their bodies to keep the world away, is I feel, a narrow and essentialist view of male insecurity, which takes no account of the possible consequences of ontological insecurity in the context of high modernity. Furthermore, bodybuilding's hyper-muscular masculinity must, therefore, be seen in the hegemonic, competitive sporting context into which it is locked, because modern bodybuilding is a sport. . . . Unlike Klein (1993), therefore, I remain unconvinced that idiosyncrasies of the bodybuilding masculinity are more significant than the obvious similarities to mainstream hegemonic masculinities and its inherent insecurities.

(Brown, 1999: 89).

Monaghan (2001a) also advises caution and provides an extensive critique of the crisis perspective and its notion of deficit. For example, while he notes that the social construction of masculinity may *contribute* to the current appeal and sustainability of bodybuilding, given a social structural shift in gender relations and the erosion of traditional sources of masculine identity, he emphasizes that such a view can only reveal so much. This is particularly so given the ways in which the work of Klein (1990; 1993; 1995) and Pope *et al.* (2000) *pathologize* the individual commitment to bodybuilding by explaining this activity in terms of personal and gender inadequacy. In contrast, Monaghan (2001b: 331), argues that more positive readings are possible in terms of the 'sensual pleasures that muscle enthusiasts derive from their vibrant physicality. For individuals embroiled in the positive moment of bodybuilding, such activity is beneficial to mental, physical and/or social health'.

Monaghan (2001b) also points out that a variety of men from a range of occupations are attracted to bodybuilding. As such, existing theoretical work, that seeks to explain bodybuilding in terms of gender inadequacy caused by a masculinity-in-crisis scenario pays scant attention to the heterogeneity of this activity and the multiple reasons why men engage in it: 'Different spatially, temporally and contextually located actors will give different and sometimes mutually incompatible reasons for adorning their bodies with muscle' (2001b: 334). Consequently, Monaghan argues that hegemonic masculinity is not the only meaning that may be ascribed to the muscular body's surface, and that taken by themselves, '*particular* meanings attached to muscle *partially* as opposed to *exhaustively* account for the ongoing appeal of bodybuilding' (2001b: 334).

Furthermore, Monaghan (2001a) notes, given that modern day competition standard bodybuilders have physiques that are stigmatized by non-initiates, then the social process in the affiliative context of bodybuilding becomes important in accounting for individual commitment to

the cult of muscularity: 'Rather than being antecedent, motives and dispositions for transmogrifying the body emerge during the course of experience within a subcultural context' (2001a: 10). For Monaghan, this means that while gender anxieties might fuel the desire for muscles in a number of bodybuilders it remains that 'antecedent insecurities are neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for bodybuilding' (2001a: 10).

Clearly, there are many complex reasons and motivations why different kinds of men seek to become bodybuilders. This said, it is interesting to note the limitations of making such an investment in the body. The most obvious, as Shilling (1993) points out, is that bodies age, decay and die. Bodies can also refuse to be moulded in accordance with the intentions of its owner. For example, some body types find it harder than others to develop muscle mass. Finally, individual body projects can be interrupted by fateful moments or disruptive life events such as illness, serious injury, or acquired disability. In this regard, as Connell (1995) notes, 'The constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained – for instance, as a result of physical disability' (p. 54). Such interruptions can be particularly disturbing and generate a number of specific masculine identity dilemmas for men who have invested in sporting bodies (Sparkes, 1996; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Sparkes and Silvennoinen, 1999; Sparkes and Smith, 2002; Young *et al.*, 1994). These dilemmas are likely to be accentuated for men who have adopted the anthropometric lifestyle, subordinated all concerns to the pursuit of maximum muscular growth and, for whom, the display of this muscle is a defining feature of the self. As one of the bodybuilders in Klein's (1995: 112) study commented, 'Shit! Life's too short to die small'.

Against the backdrop provided above, some interesting issues are raised regarding those men who seek to bolster their sense of self by building a hyper-muscular body, and actually succeed in doing so, but then find themselves in circumstances where the maintenance of this muscularity is not possible. This is particularly so with regard to men who have subordinated masculinities in relation to race and social class. To explore some of these issues, we now turn our attention to the life history of one male, black, elite bodybuilder, called Jessenka (a pseudonym). In Monaghan's (2001a) terms Jessenka was an elective bodybuilder who engaged in a stylized form of this activity that involved him entering competitive shows where the physique is judged by specific criteria. He was very successful in this sport and won a British championship. However, Jessenka's bodybuilding career was then prematurely terminated by a serious injury.

## METHODOLOGY

According to Cresswell (1998), life history or biographical research, is an approach in which the researcher reports on an individual's life and how it reflects personal themes, institutional themes, cultural themes of the society, and social histories. It is assumed that human action can be best understood from the accounts and perspectives of the people involved, and so, the focus is on the individual's subjective definition and experience of life. Plummer (2001: 40), a leading advocate of life history research states, 'the life history reveals, like nothing else can, the subjective realm'. He goes on to argue that one of the major strengths of this approach is its ability to give meaning to the overworked notion of process: 'The life history technique is peculiarly suited to discovering the confusions, ambiguities and contradictions that are played out in everyday experiences' (2001: 40).

The exploration of this subjective realm can draw on a range of data sources. These include the life story as defined by Atkinson (2002).

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and as honestly as possible, what the person remembers of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person... It includes the important events, experiences and feelings of a lifetime... Whatever form it takes, a life story always brings order and meaning to the life being told, for both the teller and the listener. It is a way of understanding the past and the present more fully.

(Atkinson, 2002: 125–26)

Accordingly, the data presented in this article are based on a series of six life story interviews, lasting 13 hours in total, that were conducted with Jessenka over a nine-month period. The interviews were conducted by the primary investigator (Joanne Batey) who worked alongside Jessenka for a period of one year at a health club where he was employed as a personal trainer. During that year, the primary investigator learned about Jessenka's involvement in bodybuilding, his former championship status, and the car accident that terminated his career in this sport. As part of a larger study on interrupted body projects and the performing self,<sup>3</sup> Jessenka was invited to share his life story. Given the trust and rapport that had developed between him and the primary investigator he agreed to do so.

Prior to the first interview, the ethical principles that would inform the process were discussed with Jessenka. These included the following: the content of the interviews would be confidential; the interviews would



be audio-taped and the only person to listen to the audiotapes and transcribe them would be the primary investigator. It would be Jessenka's decision at the end of the project as to whether the audiotapes were returned to him, wiped clean by the primary investigator, or were allowed to remain in her possession for further analysis. It was agreed that in any publications pseudonyms would be used to protect the identity of those involved. The difficulties of maintaining anonymity given Jessenka's former status as a British Champion were also discussed. Jessenka was to have access to any article written about him in order to pass comment on the accuracy of the data presented and the fairness of the interpretation. It was also made clear to Jessenka that he was free to terminate an individual interview or withdraw from the study completely without having to provide any explanation for doing so.

As suggested by Wolcott (1994), the first interview began with a 'grand tour' question in which Jessenka was invited to tell the primary investigator something of his life in his own words. With this as a starting point, life course stages and experiences were explored in an open-ended manner as issues and themes emerged from his life story in relation to pivotal events. During the interviews the primary investigator adopted the role of active listener. As Wolcott explains, this implies taking an interactive role in making a more effective speaker out of the person talking.

After each interview, the primary investigator transcribed the tape and then assumed the posture of indwelling. This entailed reading through the transcript several times in order to immerse herself in the data and understand Jessenka's point of view from an empathetic rather than a sympathetic position. Next, the transcript was read through again several times with a view to identifying narrative segments and categories within it. As part of this process analytical memos were also made. Following this, in discussion with Andrew Sparkes in his role as 'critical friend', preliminary and tentative connections were made to theoretical concepts that were thought to be related to issues emerging within Jessenka's story. This process along with the analytical memos helped shape the questions asked and the themes explored at the next interview as part of a cyclic process. As the interviews progressed and data were accumulated, connections were sought across narrative segments and themes in an attempt to identify patterns and meanings as constructed by Jessenka.

Interpretation, Wolcott (1994: 36) suggests, is when the researcher 'transcends factual data and cautious analysis and begins to probe into what is being made of them'. Here, as Cresswell (1998) notes, the researcher reconstructs the individual's biography and identifies factors that have shaped the life. Following this an analytic abstraction of the case is produced that highlights the processes in the individual's life, the different

theories that relate to these life experiences, and the unique and general features of the life. Accordingly, we now present a partial reconstruction of Jessenka's life that revolves around him becoming a bodybuilder and the impact that a career-terminating injury had on his sense of self.

### **THE EARLY YEARS: SMALL AND BLACK**

Jessenka was raised in a working-class, black family in the heart of a major city in England. His parents parted when he was sixteen. He has two elder brothers and one elder sister. As a young child, relations with his parents were distant at best. Although Jessenka's relationship with his mother got closer in his teenage years, the relationship with his father was often characterized by fear and sometimes violence. Jessenka states that he was a very small, shy child, who was no good at sports, and weighed less than seven-and-a-half stone at secondary school. In contrast, his brothers were good at sport and were 'very rough customers' with a stature and attitude more appreciated by their Jamaican father, who had been an excellent boxer in his youth.

I do believe to this day that my Dad always looked at me as sort of a wimpy person. He'd always been quite rough, a man's man. He boxed for Jamaica. . . . When I see my Dad even to this day, having a conversation, it feels like there's a big tension there. My other brothers get on better with him because I believe they were shown to be rough or harder people than I was. You know, from very young Lewis was just a brilliant sportsman. . . so it left the little one who wasn't particularly bright and couldn't do any sport. . . . I felt the odd one out from quite early on. . . . A couple of incidents, we were playing cricket one day and my Dad decided. . . he was going to teach me to play cricket properly. He bowled this particularly fast ball damn hard and nearly took my fucking head off, bashed me in the face and I ran off. And then he came in to give me a hard time, 'Don't cry you big sissy, you will get back out there and play cricket.'

With regard to boys, sport and masculinity, Drummond (2003) notes that those who are good at sport are often afforded the privilege of being popular among their peers. This enhances self-esteem, self-image and masculine identity due to the creation of dominant and subordinate groups. In contrast, Drummond suggests: 'Boys who are less athletically skilled are often ridiculed, which can negatively impact on their self-perception. . . . Boys who do not live up to societal expectations of being accomplished at sport and physical activity may feel unskilled and awkward' (2003: 133).

Furthermore, as Drummond's (2003) study of school-based adolescent males indicates, muscularity is also a highly prized feature among this age

group (also see Grogan and Richards, 2002). Those boys who have muscular and mesomorphic bodies tend to be held in high regard, are led to feel good about themselves, and often develop a healthy body image and positive self-esteem. However, Drummond emphasizes, the same cannot be said for boys who are small and frail. Such boys often develop a poor body image and low self-esteem. For him, during this period of schooling, boys quickly learn what is a 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' body and define their own bodies in relation to these categories in ways that have consequences for masculine identity construction. In particular, those with unsuccessful bodies perceive their identity as 'flawed within a social and cultural context that upholds and vindicates specific forms of physicality as a masculinized virtue' (2003: 138).

It would appear that from an early age, sporting prowess, physical size, muscularity and strength emerged as defining features of a 'successful' body and a respected masculinity for Jessenka. These features were made particularly prominent at his school where racial tensions ran high. Here, because he was black *and* small Jessenka was bullied: 'There was a lot of racism there, but it was kind of underlying, kind of waiting for an explosion... I got fairly beat up as you can imagine, being small and the rest of it.' However, due to their physical size and prowess, he was 'protected' by his two elder brothers. Indeed, there was a period in school where his elder brother 'ruled the roost' and the bullying subsided. But, once his brothers left the school the bullying erupted again: 'They left. That year was fucking open season. It was like shooting season it really was. They weren't there. Everybody who had been upset by my brother, or had grief with him, came after me. I had a full year to swallow it all.'

Jessenka remembers other racially fuelled incidents during his adolescent years that led to his brothers becoming involved in violent encounters: 'We had got into a war, it's as simple as that. And it was quite a frightening experience for me because of me still being fairly small.' At the time, Jessenka remembers being 'very, very scared to be honest'. He was scared for his own personal safety and also for what might happen to his eldest brother in particular should he take things 'too far' in these fights. This said, Jessenka admired the qualities displayed by his brother.

Very, very frightened sometimes, cos he's just a hard bloke. Sometimes I envy him because he is as rough as he is. If I be honest, sometimes I wish I had that sort of air about me that people sort of knew I was hard, that hard. That I don't have to pick up a bottle or a knife. I'll punch the living daylights out of you with my bare hands. And then on the other hand I think, he must be nervous of himself sometimes knowing what he's prepared to do for his family.

It was the pervasive fear that Jessenka felt in his neighbourhood that eventually led his brothers to decide that he should leave the area when he was 16 years of age. The backdrop to this was a simmering feud with a group of older white men that was escalating out of hand with regard to the violence used. His elder brothers rightly feared for the safety of their younger, smaller, brother.

I saw this [white] man one particular day on the road. I was walking along the road with my girlfriend and he just stared at me, and I was walking towards him. I was just in shock because he went, 'You're next nigger'. He was a big man, big grown man, and I was just scared, I was really, really, scared. Really, really, scared. I haven't been that scared before. . . . The truth is that I was quite happy to get away. I was frightened to fucking death.

Shaped by what Jefferson (1996: 153) calls the 'scarring psychological impact of racism'. Jessenka's fearful experiences were truly embodied via his smallness in relation to his peers, his elder brothers, and his father. Here, Jessenka was simultaneously impressed, protected and frightened by muscular male bodies and a specific form of masculine subjectivity and performance that enabled self-survival plus an element of control in a threatening and hostile environment.

### **BUILDING MUSCLE AND BUILDING THE SELF**

On leaving school with minimal qualifications, Jessenka moved away from his home and gained employment in the catering industry. While enjoying a day off from work, he got into a brief conversation with a 'very big guy he's about six foot two, stepping with purpose'. Jessenka found out he was going to a local gym and that he did bodybuilding with his brother. That same evening, Jessenka visited a nightclub and met the same man who was working as a 'doorman'. Again, they struck up a conversation, and Jessenka decided to visit the gym the next day.

When asked why he decided to go to the gym, Jessenka commented, 'I needed to be stronger for what I was doing, being as small as I was, and just the way this guy was walking and the way he approached me. The way he stood and the way he walked, he looked good. And he was friendly and he was confident. I thought "Yeah".' Entering the gym the next day began the process of identity construction and confirmation via physical activity that takes the initiate from the outside to the inside of a sporting subculture. Thus, as a newcomer, Jessenka went in 'very quietly, trained very quietly. I was learning the ropes. And so I trained with them'.

After five months of regular training in the gym, Jessenka recalls getting a 'real taste' for bodybuilding when at the end of a session, the two broth-

ers, both weighing approximately 17 stone, took off their tops and began flexing their muscles and checking out their poses in the mirror. When they looked across at Jessenka he thought 'but I'm only little. And they made me take my top off and flex, and I haven't ever done flexing up like that before. So I had a little flex. I saw them look at each other, and one of them said, "You got a good little shape there". I said "Really?" That made me smile and wanna flex some more. I got a little bite of it then'.

Gradually, Jessenka adopted the anthropometric bodybuilding lifestyle described by Brown (1999), Fussell (1991) and Klein (1993). This involved moving from his usual gym to a rougher hardcore bodybuilding gym where a number of former national champions trained: 'It was like coming out from Buckingham Palace and walking straight out onto the streets of Harlem.' He recalls feeling intimidated and inferior when he began training there: 'I got a few looks and it intimidated me. I remember taking my shirt off once there in the early days and putting it back on again because I thought, "You just can't do this in here you haven't got the size."' Jessenka also recalls the strict pecking order in the gym with people like himself at the bottom and Leroy, a former national champion at the top.

Leroy was head dog in there, very much so. You could talk to him outside but the minute he passed that threshold to the gym then don't speak to him. Don't look at him. Don't go near him. If he wants that dumbbell that's near you – you're *not* using it . . . . I knew who Leroy was the minute he arrived by the way that everybody in the place reacted. They picked up their training by maybe thirty percent and that's no word of a lie. It was a feel and you felt it lift the fucking place up. If you weren't breaking your arse in there when Leroy arrived then get the fuck out . . . . I was in there training one day and I could feel fucking electricity in that place, bouncing off the walls. . . . Looked like he would rip your head off as good as look at you. But he got the job done and I learned a lot of techniques from him.

Leroy was eventually to become Jessenka's mentor and acted as his guide into the world of elite bodybuilding. For example, prior to taking control of his diet so that Jessenka could make the necessary weight gains Leroy once informed him, 'Eat like a sparrow and you'll look like a sparrow.' Leroy also acted as a motivator for Jessenka to overcome pain in his training routines. Jessenka recalls the worst leg workout he ever had in his life prior to a competition when he was hardly eating anything because he was trying to reduce his body fat and show his muscles 'cut' to maximum effect:

We did supersets of everything which were squats, lunges, bent-over dead lifts, and leg extensions and all this stuff. As you can imagine this just went in a constant circle for forty-five minutes. One time I fell down onto one

knee and said, 'I don't want this anymore'. Leroy grabbed me by the scruff of my clothes and hoisted me back into position with some quiet words in my ear, not loudly: 'Don't fuck with me now Jessenka.' I couldn't speak, couldn't speak, I was using energy just to speak to him, I needed all the energy I'd got.

For a period of years, Jessenka disciplined his body in the pursuit of muscle: 'I trained, I ate, I trained, I ate and trained and trained, and watched videos [about bodybuilding] and ate.' He attributes his rapid progress in the quest for muscle and his willingness to endure the bodybuilding lifestyle to the insecurities he experienced in his youth:

All the aggression that was going on back home that I couldn't get involved with because it was more than I could handle. I knew if I went back home I've got to be able to take a hit. I could give out a hit but I still wasn't strong enough, nobody was going to fall down. . . . I had to vent a lot of anger, and I had a lot to vent 'cos I was the little one and couldn't really participate, couldn't do my piece, and so because I couldn't do my piece for my brothers. . . . I had a lot of anger then, and all that went into my training over the years.

All this training and sacrifice eventually led to Jessenka becoming a British champion. On the morning before he won the title, he recalls how his body looked.

As I got up that morning (prior to the show) I was about to get showered, I looked in the mirror and I have never looked so good in all my life. Yes, I had a big smile just come across my face. I flexed my abdominals and my obliques in the mirror and they all stood out like three or four fingers. All of my abdominals are like chocolate biscuits and I just smiled at me in the mirror. . . . I felt confident, I looked fucking tremendous. That sounds really arrogant doesn't it? But I did. I felt tremendous, I felt full, I'd got my carbing right. Literally spot on the bone. I was ripped to the bone and hard and full. . . . I felt like I'd won it before going on stage.

Winning a British title was a peak moment in Jessenka's life and he remembers the emotions he felt on stage:

I felt my eyes almost burst out of my head and my mouth dropped open, and all these really bright lights are in my face. And it's, 'Got the fucker it's mine.' Then they say it 'And first place Mister Jessenka . . . the new.' I love that word 'and the NEW (weight category) British Champion.' That was just incredible and then they play the music again and the lights flash on and off and it's just too much. It's just too much and they hand you the trophy and put a medal around your neck.

## ATHLETIC IDENTITY AND THE GLORIED SELF

Winning a British Championship confirmed the strong athletic identity that Jessenka had been developing in the previous years as he devoted his life to training and gaining muscle mass. According to Brewer *et al.* (1993), athletic identity is the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role. The overwhelming strength of Jessenka's identification with the bodybuilding role at this period in his life is evident in the following comment.

Life *was* bodybuilding. Jessenka *was* bodybuilding. If you looked it up in the dictionary you'd see me and my name right in front of it. . . . It was my whole identity because it has to be your life. It was my whole life. I can't say any more on it than that. It was *everything*.

Brewer *et al.* (1993), suggest there are both positive and negative consequences associated with having such a strong athletic identity, and that this identity can act as either 'Hercules' muscles' or an 'Achilles' heel'. The potential benefits include the development of a salient self-identity or sense of self, positive effects on athletic performance, and a greater likelihood of long-term involvement in exercise behaviours. Here, it is interesting to note that having won a British Championship, Jessenka felt 'fairly invincible' at this stage of his career. Indeed, he began making plans to win the forthcoming World Championships in his weight category because, in his words, he was now an invulnerable 'monster'. Thus, it could be argued that, quite literally, Jessenka's muscles had acted in a Herculean fashion to assist him develop a positive sense of self as opposed to the fragile self he experienced prior to his involvement in bodybuilding. Indeed, with regard to the work of Giddens (1991), the development of muscle can be seen as a defensive carapace or protective cocoon that provided emotional support and protected Jessenka against previous feelings of inadequacy and the ontological insecurities that permeated his childhood.

Becoming a British champion heralded the start of a new lifestyle for Jessenka as his physical capital was exchanged for economic and social capital (Shilling, 1993). Along with a new car, came free entry into night-clubs, being recognized by people at sports exhibitions, guest appearances at bodybuilding competitions, and feature articles in bodybuilding magazines. He was now sponsored by a leading nutritional supplements company, who provided him with this expensive but essential resource for building the body. Jessenka was also earning money as a personal trainer and he was in demand as a result of his new found fame and celebrity status. In this regard, Jessenka showed signs of developing a *gloried self*, as identified by Adler and Adler (1989) in their study of the changes in the

selves of elite college basketball players in the United States when they entered a world of celebrity and fame.

According to Adler and Adler (1989), experiencing glory is exciting for the athletes involved and creates or expands various aspects of their sense of self. They point out that, characteristically, the gloried self is a greedy, intoxicating and riveting self that seeks to ascend in importance and to cast aside other self-dimensions as it grows. Thus, the gloried self encourages role engulfment or identity foreclosure to occur. Here, energy and time are withdrawn from a variety of social roles in order to focus on the athlete role. This transformation involves various forms of self-narrowing or self-erosion. As both Adler and Adler (1989) and Sparkes (1998) point out, athletes can sacrifice both the multidimensionality of their current selves and the potential breadth of their future selves as various dimensions of their identities are either diminished, detached, or somehow changed as a result of their increasing investment in a gloried self which makes it difficult for the person to conceive of any other identity for themselves. Accordingly, the influence of a gloried self in combination with a strong athletic identity can be problematic.

Various studies point to a number of potential risks for individuals with a strong athletic identity that relate to the difficulties they might encounter in sport career transitions such as career ending injury. For example, Brewer *et al.* (1993) suggest that a strong athletic identity is a risk factor for emotional disturbance on termination of an athletic career because individuals with this kind of identity are less likely to explore other career, education and lifestyle options due to their intensive involvement and total commitment to a sport. In this regard, Brewer *et al.*, note that individuals with this kind of identity exhibit greater depression, anxiety and lower self-esteem when they experience injury than those who do not have this kind of identity. In this sense, a strong athletic identity can become an 'Achilles' heel' in specific circumstances.

## **THE FATEFUL MOMENT**

According to Giddens (1991) fateful moments have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual's future, but also for self-identity. Such moments, he argues, threaten the protective cocoon that defends the individual's ontological security because the 'business as usual' attitude that is so important to that cocoon is broken through. In these moments, the sense of invulnerability provided by the cocoon is undermined and the bodily and psychological integrity of the individual is challenged. Jessenka's fateful moment, when his plans for the future dissolved, came several years after winning the British Championship



when, between training personal clients, he took a short drive to the bank to deposit some money.

Sitting there for a few seconds I started hearing the screech of a car. I looked in my rear view mirror and I could see a white vehicle and I know it's gonna hit me. . . . I went violently forwards. . . . Hit my head across the top of the car, smashed my ribs on the bottom end of the steering wheel, and felt my shoulders cave in. . . . Next thing I've hit the car in front of me which was at least a metre and a half away, and I felt a surge of pain and anger all at once from my back mostly and my neck.

The injury Jessenka sustained in the car crash prematurely terminated his bodybuilding career. Reflecting on the impact of this injury on his life, Jessenka states: 'I had just been rocked from my world. It was like one minute being in Buckingham Palace and the next minute being a pauper. It just rocked my world completely. . . . In the bat of an eyelid that day you [the driver] decided you was late getting to where you was going and you fucked up my life.' Unable to continue with bodybuilding, Jessenka entered a period of depression and drug taking.

First of all, when you're E'ing it up, you're jumping around like a fucking lunatic you're wasting muscle away. Secondly, maybe you might die from one of these E's and just call it a day because my Championship was gone. It doesn't really matter, it doesn't fucking matter. I had about six months where I just kind of ripped the arse out of it. All of the time E'd up, drinking, smoking to excess, coming back, crashing and just feeling sorry for myself . . . My head tells me, well if you keep going jumping around in these clubs on those drugs you're gonna make it worse still. . . . I must have been putting an awful amount of stress on my neck and my back but I just didn't care. My Championship had gone. I didn't care, life didn't matter any more. I'd split up with my girl . . . it didn't matter. . . . I was at the lowest that I'd ever been.

Indeed, at the time of interview, four years after this event, Jessenka acknowledges that he has yet to find a replacement for the sense of self he lost as a hyper-muscular, champion, bodybuilder: 'Replaced it? I haven't if I be honest. . . . Every so often I try to believe, or I try to tell myself to believe that I've got over it. But I'm really kidding myself. I don't know how long it's going to take. I thought I would have got over it by now.'

#### **LOSING MUSCLE AND LOSING SELF**

The injury sustained in the car accident means that Jessenka now experiences intense pain on a daily basis. He continues to work as a personal trainer but hides this pain from clients.

It feels like you're living two lives because in the job that I do nobody really wants to know that you're constantly in pain and that you feel suicidal at least once a week. I find that very difficult to say as you can imagine. I get upset thinking about feeling suicidal, thinking that I haven't got the bollocks to go on with life. Most evenings I'm in bed as early as possible, sometimes I'm in bed at six o'clock. Often I try to finish work as early as I can just so that I can lie down.

Hiding this kind of pain is in direct contrast to the sharing and celebration of another form of pain that Jessenka experienced when training in the gym as a bodybuilder where he adhered to the old sporting adage of 'No pain, no gain'. In this context, pain was defined as not only necessary but at times pleasurable in its effects. It was welcomed because it was seen as instrumental in the creation of an ever expanding and idealized body. As Monaghan (2001b) points out, as part of the so-called 'erotics of the gym' non-injurious pain can be a sensuous experience that bodybuilders learn to enjoy. As such, the learned capacity to convert self-induced, controllable and non-injurious pain to pleasure contributes to the sustainability of bodybuilding.

In contrast, the injurious, solitary and unwelcome pain now experienced by Jessenka causes what Leder (1990) calls *spatiotemporal constriction*. This exerts a phenomenologically 'centripetal' force, gathering time and space inwards to the centre and collapsing the surrounding universe. Such pain is isolating and not easily shared. It is associated by Jessenka with shrinking and being crushed rather than expanding his world.

I take them [painkillers] every day and you think this is just killing my stomach. I'm in so much pain, my stomach hurts, you're bleeding from your bottom. It just drags you down, drags you down. So then you stop taking the painkillers for a while and the pain gets worse. . . . And that's why I say about once a week you feel suicidal. You think, 'This is shit'. It's like someone is pressing you down with a great weight and they're just waiting to try and squash you into the ground.

According to Leder (1990) the disruption and constriction of one's habitual world by injurious pain brings about a new relationship to one's body. Here, the body or certain parts of it emerge as an *alien presence* and is often experienced as something foreign to the self. For Jessenka, his body as an alien presence was experienced in several ways. The first, and most obvious, was the threat posed by this kind of pain to the disciplined body-self he had developed. As Frank (1991) points out, given that this kind of body-self defines itself primarily in actions of self-regimentation and its most important action problems are those of control, it experiences

its gravest crisis in loss of control. The anxiety provoked by this loss of control and the body now acting as an oppositional force that prevents him bodybuilding is evident in the following comment by Jessenka.

People wouldn't even dare squat five plates each side as low as I was squatting them, they wouldn't even look at it. . . . But my head tells me your body can do this . . . and your body will do it because your head tells it to. This is very difficult for me because I was always able to tell my body to do something and it would do it. . . . Now I do two little biscuits on the bloody leg press and my back says 'Fuck you head, I'm not doing it. I just can't do this.'

The demise of the disciplined body poses a major threat to Jessenka's core sense of self that is associated with a hyper-muscular body. Unable to train intensively with weights any more, Jessenka's sense of self as a 'mirroring body' (Frank, 1991) is amplified as his changing shape and size is subject to his own critical gaze and the gaze of others.

I was really depressed one morning. I got up, looked in the mirror and my legs were like sticks. Two people had recently told me 'Oh Jessenka haven't your legs disappeared'. And that was like such a blow to me because I was really well known for having great legs. I was so ashamed.

For Giddens (1991) feelings of shame have a direct bearing on self-identity and the experience of shame often focuses on the body as the 'visible' aspect of self. Indeed, over time, as the loss of muscle mass and definition has become more evident, Jessenka appears to have grown increasingly ashamed of his body's aesthetic appeal. This might be because the body he is on the verge of becoming is a reminder of a past body that was deemed by him and others to be inadequate and inferior. Jessenka is fearful of returning to this body that was itself fearful. Indeed, his sporadic attempts to train again with weights are fuelled by this fear of losing muscle and the desired self that goes with this. As he states: 'I just feel like I'm fucking fading away, just fading away.'

Given that muscularity is closely associated with masculinity any loss of muscle would appear to have ramifications for the masculine self. As Murphy (1990: 94) notes, 'For the male, the weakening and atrophy of the body threaten all the cultural values of masculinity: strength, activeness, speed, virility, stamina and fortitude.' Thus, Jessenka's hyper-muscular and masculine sense of self, a self he has laboured to construct is, quite literally, disappearing in front of his eyes. Having transformed himself over a number of years from a frail and small body into a 'short monster' his body is now metamorphosing back to whence it came. In this process, Jessenka's body is once again becoming a source of embarrassment to him

and a reminder of inadequacies. Having lost muscular mass he no longer looks at himself in the mirror unless he is fully dressed, and he hides behind cars when he sees old bodybuilding friends coming his way. At times, however, Jessenka cannot hide his body from view and is forced to acknowledge the reactions of others.

My friend's wife proceeded to tell me how skinny I looked. That was very difficult for me, but I have to tell myself that I was always a very small person. It's like someone who was this thin becoming very, very fat and then becoming very thin again. It's difficult looking at this body in the mirror, it's very difficult. You get up and look in the mirror and you think "Yuck!"... People turn up in the funniest of places and catch you by surprise. I often move house because I've caught up with people. People have turned up in supermarkets and stared at me. Sometimes they don't want to say it but they'll do this (makes shocked face looking someone up and down) almost in shock. I see the look on their face and I feel a sadness and it's almost as if to say, 'Please don't ask.' And I just feel as though I need to be somewhere else.

Other key events heightened Jessenka's dissatisfaction with his body and diminishing masculine sense of self. One such occasion was when he made a trip abroad to visit a bodybuilding friend with a view to making a guest appearance at his gym. The trip was a disaster and Jessenka returned home feeling humiliated and undeserving of his British Championship title.

He was expecting me coming to his country, big bodybuilder and everything. But I wasn't this short monster that he'd expected.... He'd shown the [old] photos and videos of me to them.... I'd let everybody down. They were expecting an elephant and I brought them a mouse. That was very hard to take because I could see the disappointment in him.... I didn't look nothing like my former self and I even felt bad because there's mirrors all over the damn place. And I wore my England shirt because it is *my* England shirt and it's the shirt I'm most proud of. But, it was very difficult wearing it because I wasn't in the condition to deserve to wear an England shirt.... But I didn't know which was the worst of two evils, do I not wear it at all? I came to him with nothing and the least I can do is wear my fucking England shirt. But I didn't feel right wearing it.

Besides not feeling right about wearing his England shirt, Jessenka does not 'feel right' in the body he currently inhabits. Just like he let his friend down with his smaller body, so Jessenka feels his body has let him down. Like many other male athletes who have experienced a serious injury there is a sense of bodily betrayal and heightened feelings of corporeal alienation (Sparkes, 1996; 2003b; Young *et al.*, 1994).

As you get up in the morning and you wash your face and you wash your body, you feel your body and it doesn't feel like it's my body. You know, someone borrowed mine and they gave me this, and I don't want this one, I want mine back. It's like you've driven round in a Rolls Royce for twenty years and then someone takes it away and gives you a Mini. This isn't fair, this isn't right, this isn't mine. Where's mine?

The losses and anxieties associated with losing muscle are intimately connected to racial dimensions within Jessenka's life story. This issue will now be explored.

### **LOSING MUSCLE AND BECOMING 'BLACK AGAIN'**

According to Sewell (1997) issues of race, while vitally important in contemporary life and politics, are not separate from other factors (class, gender, sexuality, disability) nor is it always the most important characteristic in human experience and action: 'Race may be more or less important to the same person at different times in different contexts' (1997: xiii). For Jessenka, as for many other black athletes, success in sport takes on specifically racial and ethnic dimensions at particular times (Carrington, 2000; 2002; Majors, 1990). Being a black British champion was something he was immensely proud of and he gained a lot of attention once in this position: 'I'm here and I'm British champion. I'm from England, and I've got an English accent. Just to speak in an English accent to foreign people with a black face and my look, it was just different so I caused a lot of attention.' Furthermore, despite being aware of the racism that pervades British society, Jessenka felt his success in bodybuilding could help break down racial barriers and allow for greater tolerance and acceptance of ethnic minorities. Indeed, he acknowledged how issues of race and ethnicity often 'disappeared' or were blurred when he was a British champion.

Being black and in Britain is very difficult. Someone said the other day, 'Because a dog is born in a stable that doesn't make it a horse.' And that really opened my eyes to what I already knew was true. I mean, if you look at any black people in Britain in sport they're known and respected but only because they represent their country. We are then . . . classed as British and they are proud of us, we are British. Being black doesn't occur then, but in the other ninety-nine percent of your life you are a black person and you're in Britain, and you shouldn't be here. So to become British Champion, to be black, British and proud and representing my country gave me belonging. Jamaicans still class you as British, British class you as West Indian or Afro-Caribbean as they like to call it these days, but nobody wants to accept you.

It's the same as mixed race children, it's like being in the middle and nobody wants to accept you on that side or on the other... So to be British champion, the belonging, the pride, the pride of competing for my country, representing your country all over the world was great.

Thus, for Jessenka, being a British champion, resolved a number of contradictions and tensions he felt regarding his ethnic identity by foregrounding his national identity through success in bodybuilding. By doing so, he gained a sense of belonging that had been denied to him previously. However, as Carrington (2000) notes, gaining acceptance for the black athlete is normally conditional on the athlete renouncing claims to their own cultural history and dissolving themselves within the notion of nationhood and 'Britishness'. Jessenka appears to have been willing to adopt such a position. As a consequence, he remains resentful of the woman who caused his injury because he believes this act robbed him of his newly gained national identity, his Britishness, and accentuated his race and ethnicity once again. In short, Jessenka feels he is no longer regarded as British but is now just another young black man on the streets having to deal with the racist stereotypes imposed on him.

It goes all the way back to what I said at the beginning about being black and being British and belonging. She's taken away my belonging and made life difficult for me on so many other fronts to be accepted. If Linford Christie walked into a sports shop everybody knows who he is. Everybody is happy to see him in their shop and he's British and he's black. Now you walk into a shop and the assistant comes and looks at something beside you to see if you're gonna nick something. You see what I'm saying? There's that anger. Yes, there's the anger of me being in constant pain but there's also the anger of her taking away my British passport, she put me back floating in the river of not belonging to either side.

The comments made by Jessenka are testimony to the manner in which the social meaning of muscle and masculinity are infused by issues relating to race, ethnicity, social class and national identity. Here, it is interesting to note how his experiences parallel those of other black athletes. For example, Harrison *et al.* (2002) illustrate how African American athletes competing in intercollegiate sport are shielded from racism and discrimination so that their athletic identity comes to the fore and the importance of their racial identity decreases and slips into the background.

Likewise, in his analysis of the racial signifiers at work in the media portrayal of Michael Jordan, the basketball player, Andrews (1996: 142) notes how early on in his extremely successful career the popular media constructed him as a 'racially neutered identity'. As long as Jordan conformed to the role of the wholesome, non-threatening, hard-bodied hero,

he was deified for being one of 'America's boys': 'However, once his behaviour, especially off the court, was deemed to be transgressing the boundaries of what was considered acceptable for the prototypical All-American male, the spectre of racial Otherness reared its demonized head' (1996: 142). With regard to the case of Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson, Jackson (1998) uses the term 'twist of race' to characterize the mediated floating signifiers which served to either demarcate or displace Johnson's racial identity within particular contexts during his life in Canada. Thus, prior to his world-class performances and subsequent to the national shame of the steroid scandal at the Seoul Olympics, Johnson was represented by the media through signifiers that defined him as the 'racial other'. For example, in these periods he was defined as 'Jamaican-Canadian'. In contrast, during his reign as world champion there was a temporary displacement of his racial identity and Johnson was simply referred to as 'Canadian'. Finally, within a British sporting context, Mercer (1994) notes the following:

On the front page headlines black males become highly visible as a threat to white society, as muggers, rapists, terrorists and guerrillas: their bodies become the image of a savage and unstoppable capacity for destruction and violence. But turn to the back pages, the sports pages, and the black man's body is heroized and lionized; any hint of antagonism is contained by the paternalistic infantilization of Frank Bruno and Daley Thompson to the status of national mascots and adopted pets – they're not Other, they're OK because they're our boys.

(Mercer, 1994: 179)

Similarly, as a champion bodybuilder Jessenka's racial identity was effectively displaced and neutered. He was not Other. In contrast, following his injury, the loss of his athletic identity, and the loss of a champion status and hyper-muscular body, Jessenka experiences the 'twist of race' that brings into sharp relief his racial identity. This reminds him that in the eyes of many he is the Other once again.

## REFLECTIONS

Multiple interpretations can be made of Jessenka's life story as it has been presented. The following reflections are offered with a view to generating discussion rather than providing closure. Even though we have no desire to pathologize his individual commitment to bodybuilding by explaining this activity in terms of various inadequacies, it remains that *one* interpretation might be that Jessenka's story provides a penetrating treatise on the hidden anxiety that punctures the core of conventional masculinity and discloses the multiple dimensions of vulnerability experienced by some men. In this

regard, it might be argued that the quest for hyper-muscularity he embarked on when he was 16 years of age was a case of, quite literally, building the muscles of Hercules and a strong athletic identity. This was necessary to protect a fragile sense of self that was developed as a small, black, adolescent male in relation to his powerful father and brothers in a climate of racial discrimination and violence, and in a context where Jessenka was regularly bullied at a school. As his comments reveal, in a sense this strategy worked, his original 'damaged' sense of self and low self-esteem were repaired and he felt (for a while at least) 'fairly invincible'.

From this perspective, it could be argued that as the body was 'muscled up' so a different self was constructed in the process. That is, Jessenka's story is one of positive self-change via bodily transformation. In this regard, Jessenka is similar to the men focused on by Wesely (2001), whose motivations to begin bodybuilding were rooted in dominant social constructions of gender. According to Wesely, they began bodybuilding because 'as children they were sickly, teased by peers, or felt otherwise insecure and powerless; what they saw or imagined on the muscled male body conjured feelings of being powerful' (2001: 170). Of course, as Wesely is quick to point out, this is not to suggest that all male bodybuilders were sickly as children, nor is it to say that all weak boys become bodybuilders. However, within her study, 'the more powerless a boy or adolescent felt, the more appealing the muscular body became as he matured' (2001: 170). Importantly, participating in bodybuilding made these men feel empowered because they saw the muscular body as a signifier of masculine power and a repudiation of feminine weakness.

The promise of self-transformation that the muscled body can bring, and which appealed to Jessenka, is reflected in numerous advertisements in bodybuilding magazines. As part of their analysis of such advertisements, White and Gillett (1994) suggest that in constructing muscular bodies, men seek to pursue and construct what they perceive to be their true or 'real' selves. This true self, a masculine self, possessing power and self-confidence, is one that is encased in a hard and defined muscular physique. What is required, the advertisements suggest, is the transformation or metamorphosis from the non-muscular, passive, and weak self via bodybuilding into a muscular hyper-masculine body that represents the new powerful self.

The construction of muscles and a muscular physique, through the consumption of bodybuilding commodities and involvement in disciplinary regimes (diet and bodywork), holds the promise that the individual will be freed from his less powerful self. The building of a muscular exterior yields a different, better person.

(White and Gillett, 1994: 28–29)



In contrast, another interpretation is that despite building up a muscular body, Jessenka's core sense of self did not change. That is, the hard muscular exterior he developed encased a fragile and vulnerable self that was continuous with his former self. From this perspective, while Jessenka might believe that by building muscle he could transcend his former self, this is evidently not true because this self remains, lying dormant within his hyper-muscular frame. As the muscles disappear so does the illusion of the powerful, transformed, new self, as the fragile, and in many ways the *feared self*, announces itself one again. Reflecting on his own personal experiences of becoming a bodybuilder, Fussell (1991) acknowledges the *illusion* of the transformed self that hyper-muscularity can create.

But this shell that I created wasn't just meant to keep people at bay. After all, a can of Mace can do that. No, this carapace was laboriously constructed to keep things inside too. The physical palisades and escarpments of my own body served as a rocky boundary that permitted no passage, no hint of a deeper self – a self I couldn't bear. . . . As long as I hated myself, I still believed that I mattered. My deepest fear was that I didn't matter. All my life, I'd felt like I was treading water in a bottomless sea. . . . I needed whatever buoy or marker or myth I could find to keep me from feeling meaningless in the face of infinity. . . . But behind that huge frame and those muscular sets, I felt shut up in a kind of claustrophobic panic. Not flexing but drowning. . . . I was as twisted, warped, and stilted as a bonsai tree. Another of life's miniatures.

(Fussell, 1991: 248–50)

Being one of 'life miniatures' with regard to ideals of masculinity raises a number of identity dilemmas that foreground the issue of gender. However, as Jessenka's comments reveal, his trajectory into the world of hyper-muscularity is also shaped by his social class position. As Shilling (1993), drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, points out, the body bears the indisputable imprint of an individual's social class. Thus, working class individuals via their habitus, tend to develop an instrumental relationship to their body that becomes a means to an end. Accordingly, it might be argued that, given his lack of ability in conventional sports, Jessenka's 'choice' of bodybuilding as a means to the end of bolstering his insecure sense of self is classed as well as gendered.

Jessenka's social class position is also connected to issues of race and ethnicity in terms of the ways in which as a black, working-class male he comes to understand the multiple meanings of muscle and physical size in relation to his own body and the bodies of others within a racist society that has historically objectified, sensualized, and sexualized the black

body. Such 'bodies' have also encountered a limited structure of opportunity in terms of access to education, employment, and institutional power. Against this backdrop, Majors (1990) suggests, the dominant goals of hegemonic masculinity have been sold to black males but access to the legitimate means to achieve these goals has largely been denied. As a consequence, many black males seek to prove their manliness to themselves and others via sporting activities.

Messner (1992) also notes the role of sport in allowing subaltern groups to realize a masculine identity. For him, '[s]ubordinated groups of men often use sport to resist racist, colonial, and class domination, and their resistance most often took the form of a claim to "manhood"' (1992: 19). Likewise, Carrington (2002: 285) suggests: 'Sport provides an arena whereby black men can lay claim to a masculine identity as a means of restoring a unified racial identity, freed, if only momentarily, from the emasculating discourses imposed by the ideologies and practices of white racism.' In this sense, Jessenka's choice of bodybuilding and his use of this sport to develop one of the defining features of masculinity (muscularity) is understandable.

Jessenka's commitment to bodybuilding can also be seen, therefore, as an attempt to recuperate some degree of power or active influence over the objective conditions of powerlessness created by institutionalized and individual racism. As Messner (1992: 13) argues, subaltern groups are able to 'use sport as a means to resist (at least symbolically) the domination imposed upon them. Sport must thus be viewed as an institution though which domination is not only imposed, but also contested; an institution within which power is constantly at play'. Thus, becoming and being a successful bodybuilder, and developing an empowered sense of self can be interpreted as an act of resistance by Jessenka. Like the black, male cricketers described by Carrington (2002: 285), the sport of bodybuilding provides for Jessenka, 'a modality though which black cultural resistance to racism can be achieved'.

Clearly, the ways in which gender, social class, and ethnicity and race interact to shape the story told, and lived, by Jessenka are complex and multidimensional. How these operate to construct a strong athletic identity developed in relation to the production of a hyper-muscular body is equally complex. In combination, however, it would seem that in Jessenka's case these have acted as an Achilles' heel. This is particularly so regarding his reactions to a turning point moment in his life that has consequences for his long-term personal development. Like other elite athletes facing premature career termination due to injury or illness, Jessenka encounters problems regarding the availability of alternative narratives within specific subcultures on which to build alternative iden-

tities and notions of self that recognize and acknowledge, among other things, issues of vulnerability and fragility.

As the comments earlier suggest, for Jessenka, the issue of access to a variety of narratives and counter narratives is of no small importance. At the moment he is struggling to envisage a suitable replacement for the hyper-muscular, disciplined, body-self he had developed through bodybuilding. Lacking narrative resources, that might, for example, assist him to reject or reformulate conventional versions of masculinity, Jessenka struggles to use the disruption that has occurred in his life as a platform from which to reconstruct a positive sense of self in relation to the body he currently inhabits. The unfolding story, the aftermath of the muscled self, therefore, remains problematic.

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### NOTES

1 Monaghan (2001a) has questioned the usefulness of ‘bodybuilder’ and ‘bodybuilding’ as descriptive labels because these terms can have different meanings for those who do and do not train with weights. That is, it is a heterogeneous category. He notes various orientations to lifting weights in order to distinguish between weight-lifting, weight-training, and bodybuilding. Weight-lifting (comprising Olympic Weight-Lifting and Power-Lifting) is aimed at lifting the maximum weight (bodily performance). Weight-trainers are typically fitness or sports orientated and possess a functionalist attitude towards the body. Bodybuilders have as their goal the improvement of physical appearance (bodily display), as defined by the aesthetic criteria operating within a specific subculture.

2 As Monaghan (2001a) points out, conceptions of physical perfection within the differentiated subculture of bodybuilding are spatially and temporally contingent, varying from one individual to the next and also for the same individual during the course of their bodybuilding career. Furthermore, this lifestyle, particularly in its ‘hard core’ manifestations, can carry with it a number of health risks that range from major surgery to repair injuries caused in training, degenerative arthritis, cirrhosis of the liver, hypertension, heart disease, and a host of other problems associated with long-term drug use. For details, see Fussell (1991), Hotten, J. (2004), Klein (1993; 1995) and Monaghan (2001a).

3 For further details of this project see Smith and Sparkes, 2002; 2004; 2005; Sparkes, 1996; 1998; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Sparkes and Silvennoinen, 1999; Sparkes and Smith, 2002; 2003; in press.

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