

Chinese: Track Secret not drugs, but a potion

NEW YORK

By 10 a.m. Friday, Chinatown had hit full stride. Sidewalks were thick with shoppers, narrow streets jammed bumper to bumper with honking cars.

The traffic in Grace Ho's store-Kam Tat Chinese Herbs Co.-was equally hectic as a steady stream of customers buzzed in and out. They asked for ginger and ginseng or directions for

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cooking herbs or hints on the all-important art of mixing the right herbs for a particular ailment.

When it was my turn, I asked about "the worm". The store owner's eyes brightened in instant recognition; without missing a beat she reached under the counter and produced a neatly wrapped package containing about 20 dong chong xia cao worms.

Each worm was about an inch and a half long, and a thick growth that resembled a stem protruded from the top of each carcass added a half inch. It was this protrusion, Grace said, that gave the worm its energy-giving properties.

I held it and chuckled to think that a half inch of fungus was sparking a running revolution in China. At least that's what Ma Zunren says.

Ma is the unpredictable coach of China's Liaoning province women's track team. In the last month his runners, nicknamed "Ma's Army," have set the track world on its heels.

On Sunday, Wang Junxia broke the women's 3,000 meters mark by 10 seconds at the 7th National Games. Four days earlier she had smashed the 10,000-meters record by 42 seconds. On Saturday, Qu Junxia broke the world record in the 1,500 by 2 seconds. In Sunday's 3,000 meters race alone, five Chinese runners broke the 9-year old world record.

Predictably, the stunning performances prompted suspicions that China's sudden rise can be attributed to steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs. At a news conference on Wednesday, Ma replied angrily when someone suggested illegal drug use.

"Now that we're strong, they say we did it through drugs," he said. "They're the ones on drugs."

The secret is not drugs, Ma said, but drink. He said he made his runners drink large portions of an expensive potion made from the rare dong chong xia cao worm found on China's western plateau.

The worm lives in the summer, before it dies in the winter the worm produces a thick fungus that herbalists say is rich in minerals. Peasants harvest the worms and sell them to herbal medicine markets.

According to Ho, the potion's power comes not exclusively from the worm or the fungus but from both being used in combination with other herbs. During his news conference in Beijing on Wednesday, Ma said he had discovered the perfect mixture. Asked for the formula, Ma said he planned to market it.

Grace Ho said the properties contained in the fungus help to open the lungs, allow a greater capacity for oxygen and increase endurance. At \$35 a packet, the worms are



AP Photostream

China's Wang Junxia, left, and Chong Huandi have set the track world on its heels.

also increasing someone's fortune. At a time when every athlete who sets a record is suspected of using drugs, Ma's claims of a miracle potion are being met with skepticism-especially by the West.

The concept of deriving nutrition from eating insects is not new. Insects are widely used as food in parts of Africa, Asia and South America. Many are high in protein, vitamins and minerals.

"There is still a great difference in medicine between East and West," Ho said. She suggested that we meet a traditional Chinese herbalist about five minutes away. We went down the bustling streets and around the corner to Kamwo Trading Co., where I met Dr. Shan Leung, President of the Chinese Herbalist Association.

In the front of the store, clerks sold herbs to customers as they measured and cut barks, and scooped rich red powder into pouches.

In the back, Leung received patients in an office packed with plants, and manuals. He said the greatest effect of China's international success in track - and Coach Ma's highly visible presence - will be to focus attention on the benefits of herbal medicine and alternative approaches to healing and health care.

But suspicions surrounding China's stunning success will not soon subside. The cynicism over drug use, especially in the United States, may preclude officials from embracing natural formulas for success, forcing athletes to continue ravaging their bodies with steroids.

Perhaps U.S. athletes, faced with the challenge of serious competition at home during the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996, will consider altering their diets.

They may find that it's better to eat worms than dust.