

Riddle of runs that scorch record books

HAVING just smashed her own 3,000 metre world record by 6.1 seconds, Wang Junxia would have been forgiven for collapsing exhausted on the track at Beijing's Workers Stadium.

But the 20-year-old "super-girl" from northeast China looked no more out of breath than if she had just jogged around the corner to pick up the morning newspaper.

Surrounded by press photographers and cheering fans, Wang's face betrayed no emotion, not even a slight smile, as she slowly made her way back to the changing rooms. It seemed that for her it was just another day.

But everybody watching Monday's race, broadcast live on national television, knew they had just witnessed something quite extraordinary.

The feat was all the more remarkable because Wang had only the day before knocked 10.4 seconds off the existing world record, set by the Soviet runner Tatiana Kazankina nine years ago.

THAT remarkable feat had followed a 10,000 metre race a few days earlier in which she took a staggering 41.91 seconds off the existing world record.

But Wang has not been alone in re-writing the record books: her Liaoning teammate, Qu Yunxia, broke Kazankina's 13-year-old record in the 1,500 metres by 2.01 seconds, while another Liaoning runner, Ma Liyan, also broke the existing 3,000 metre record with almost three seconds to spare.

All three runners were coached by the mysterious soldier-turned athletics guru, Ma Junren, whose unorthodox training methods and conspicuous success have turned

THE performances by China's women athletes have left the world astonished. GEOFFREY CROTHALL reports from Beijing.

him into an overnight celebrity.

Chinese and foreign journalists have been clamouring for interviews with by far the most successful coach in the history of Chinese athletics, and Ma has been only too happy to bask in the international spotlight.

The spectacular success of coach Ma's middle distance runners has undoubtedly boosted the profile of Chinese athletics just prior to the crucial International Olympic Commission (IOC) meeting in Monte Carlo which will determine the venue of the 2000 Olympic Games, but whether such intense publicity will benefit Beijing's bid to host the Games is open to doubt.

While the vast majority of people in Beijing have greeted the incredible run of victories by Ma's stable of athletes with a mixture of pride and amazement, there is a fear in some cir-

cles that they may have been too successful.

There have already been allegations that Ma's team used performance-enhancing drugs and, though these allegations have been vigorously denied by both Ma and his athletes, suspicions remain.

Ever since the Ben Johnson scandal at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, there have been suspicions that anybody who breaks a long-standing world record by a significant margin must be using drugs.

When so many records fall in such a short period of time and are broken by such big margins the most vociferous of denials may not be enough to convince the cynics.

Ma says his team's assault on the record books is the result of intense training designed to raise the standard of Chinese athletics as fast as possible and

so make a strong impression on the world stage before the IOC's Monte Carlo meeting.

"We just can't follow in other people's footsteps," Ma said at a press conference last weekend. "If we are to go up, we have to go up fast." But many observers think he has overdone it.

"People are bound to be suspicious when they see these girls run the way they do. It's just unbelievable," said a member of the Beijing team at the National Games.

"He should learn from [Ukrainian pole vaulter] Sergei Bubka and gradually break records a little bit at a time. This is too much," the athlete said.

Suspensions have heightened because it has only been women athletes at the Games who have been turning in record-shattering performances.

Providing women athletes

with male hormones is a well-established method of enhancing performances.

Ma says people making allegations of drug use simply don't know what they are talking about. "According to some people, Chinese are not good enough to break world records in middle distance events so, if they succeed, they must be on drugs," he said.

So far, there has been nothing to substantiate suspicion that Wang Junxia and Qu Yunxia may be taking performance-enhancing drugs and it could be that Ma has discovered a revolutionary new and perfectly legal training regime.

Ma said his training methods had been devised through years of research — including studying the running techniques of deer and ostriches — and were a combination of a highly nutritional diet and high altitude training.

The diet uses traditional Chinese herbs and medicine as well as the occasional turtle, a symbol of strength and longevity in ancient Chinese culture.

Ma said he had prepared a tonic, whose contents remain a closely guarded secret but which he was willing to sell to any interested parties, to raise money for his training regime.

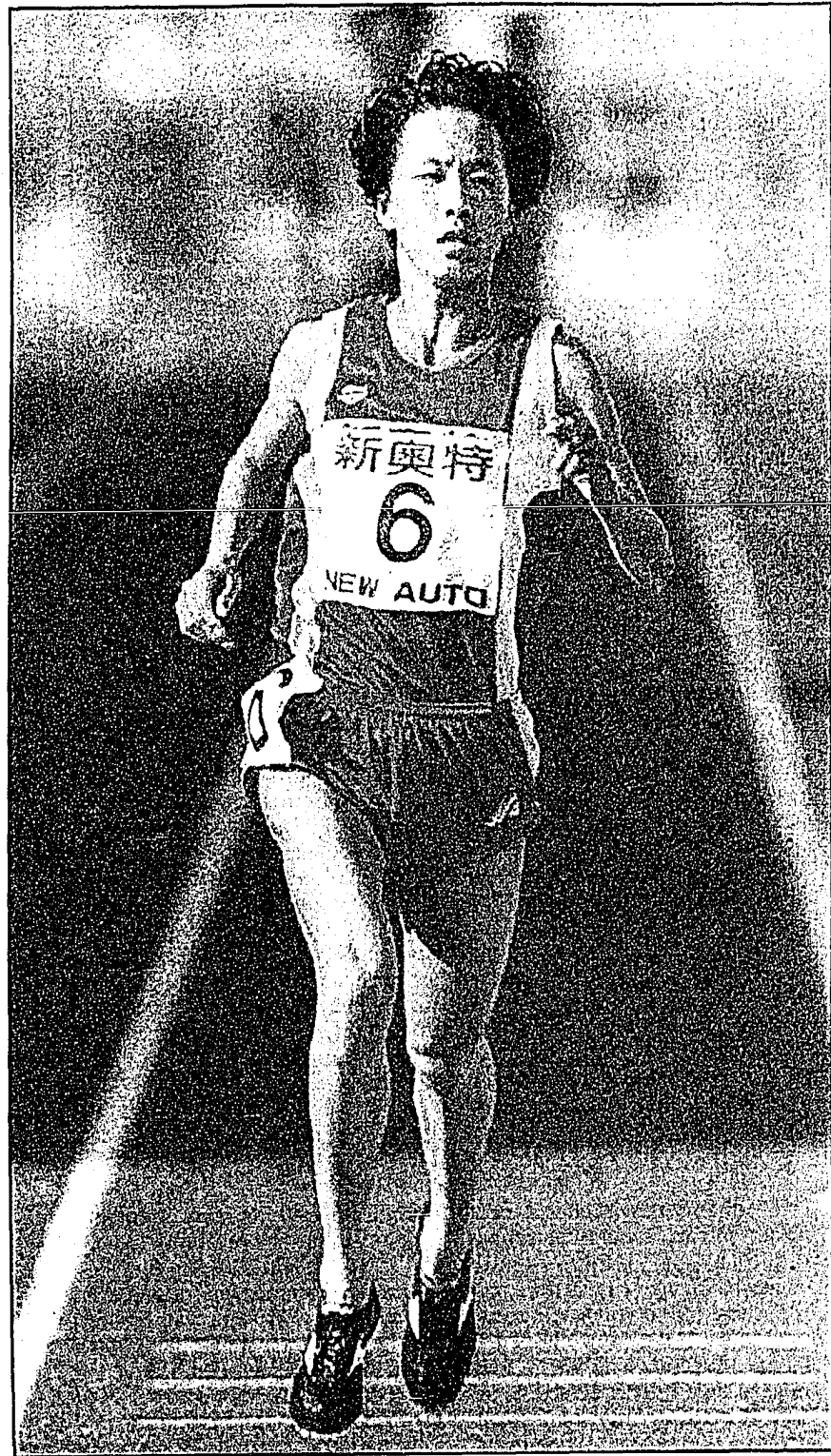
Ma's idiosyncratic coaching methods, not to mention considerable ego, has led to friction with the national team coaches, who Ma accuses of trying to steal his thunder.

There has been speculation that Ma's "girls", as he likes to call them, will not be able to reproduce their performances on the international stage.

But whatever the outcome of the controversy, Ma has certainly achieved his primary objective of putting Chinese track and field athletics on the map.



Wonder coach . . . Ma Junren's successes have nettled even Chinese national coaches.



Super girl . . . Wang Junxia on her way to yet another remarkable record-breaking victory.