

- 1 The hendiatris Citius, Altius, Fortius is the Olympic motto, which means ‘faster, higher, stronger’ in Latin. The motto is a challenge to all competing athletes to strive to push themselves to the limit of their endurance – reaching a point within the depths of their strength where there is almost nothing left for the mission at hand. At every Olympic Games, the world watches this struggle being reflected in some of its top competitors: a sprinter breaking a world record by a micro-second, a gymnast stunning the world with the first perfect ten, and a weightlifter astounding us with a single lift of the barbell burdened with weights. We worship these athletes who outperform themselves and others and achieve the humanly impossible. They are Hercules and Achilles, inspiring us to conquer the seemingly insurmountable challenges we face in our lives. 5 10
- 2 Sport has always played a significant role in religions, whether through amusing or appeasing the gods, either as entertainment or an irrational sacrifice. The first ancient Olympic Games were staged on the plains of Olympia to honour Zeus and the Olympian gods. The Mesoamericans, or the Mayans, had ritualistic ball games where losers were punished with death as offerings to the gods – players literally had to win or die! Fortunately, sport also served more purposeful uses: tribal hunting was as much a fundamental survival enterprise as a social endeavour, and Sumerian wrestlers and Roman gladiators provided ceremonial (albeit barbaric, bloody and brutal) entertainment for the rulers and the ruled. Conceivably, it is the remnant ancestral aggression in all of us that makes us participate in and spectate javelin throws, target shooting and bullfighting today. 15 20
- 3 However, in modern societies, sports activities have become organised and civilised forms of play. The British sporting culture arguably started during the Industrial Revolution, where the participation in sport was highly promoted to ensure that workers were physically able to perform their jobs. To prevent the exploitation of workers, the Factory Act in 1850 stipulated that workers had to stop work at two in the afternoon on Saturdays. Consequently, football matches – the key pastime of the proletariat – only commenced at three. And for migrant workers from all over Britain and Europe who flocked to these industrial cities for work and had no ties with the community, football became a pursuit they could partake in to assimilate to the neighbourhood. But unlike the workers, the bourgeoisie engaged in sport as an ostentatious pastime – the lavishly tailored apparel and expensive equipment made them look stylish while skiing, yachting, playing polo and enjoying equestrian activities. 25 30
- 4 As the Industrial Revolution allowed wealthy traders and nations to extend and expand their presence globally, indigenous sports activities were insidiously replaced with those introduced by the colonial masters: instead of playing ulama, the Mexicans are playing soccer, and cricket has become the most popular sport among the Indians. Ultimately, imported games ‘won’ the acceptance and adulation of colonial subjects, either by force or habit. And soon sports activities became homogenised, making cultural games obsolete. Yet, deplorably, distinctions in the form of prejudice still persist. Sport is always male-dominated; women in sport have less television exposure, fewer sponsorships, restricted game options and a negligible number of role models. The trend is changing but alas, only at a laborious speed. The stronger sex happily and quickly defends this phenomenon, alluding to the fact that the very essence of sport – aggression – runs counter to women’s predispositions. Moreover, numerous sports are the singular domain of the aristocrats: fencing, golf, pheasant hunting... these expensive indulgences are only a pipe dream for the plebeians, as no benefactors would ever bequeath them with wealth for a life of leisure. 35 40 45

- 5 Sport also breeds an unhealthy desire to win at all cost. Since winning is big business, sportsmanship has been side-lined for success: cheating via match-fixing or ingesting of steroids have become common; technology (for more rigorous training and costume design), and not talent, has become the means to ace the race. The mania to bolster international standing has led countries to put young children through exhaustive training to compete later in life, and to persuade and purchase foreign athletes to win medals for them, in exchange for the prized citizenship and a remuneration package. Ironically, in the quest for a 'perfect' body, such as in appearance sports like gymnastics, many athletes develop anorexia nervosa and bulimia and suffer from muscle injuries. Attractive, media-savvy 'athletes' are also recognised more for brand endorsements rather than their performance in games. We also unduly accord athletes with aptitudes they do not possess, a dangerous mental short-cut known as the 'halo effect', and erroneously vote them into the government, only to be disenchanted later. And frankly, some puerile pursuits for the sake of beauty and grace – synchronised swimming and figure skating – have very tenuous links with sport. 50 55
- 6 The technological revolution has dramatically altered the way we engage in sport in the twenty-first century. We have moved sports activities from the outdoors to indoors. High definition, mesmerising screens and gaming consoles with motion sensors allow us to play games in the secure and cosy atmosphere of our living room, insulating us from the harsh but needful external elements of the weather that toughen us up. These devices replace entirely the players whom we previously had physical contact or interactions with in outdoor games. Additionally, with an ageing population worldwide, we see the increasing popularity of mind games – word games and mathematical puzzles – promoting solitary activities. Such trends only alienate us from one another and weaken our sense of camaraderie. 60 65
- 7 The treatment of athletes by the media also distracts us from the rudimentary meanings of sport, exercise and healthy living. The media propel athletes to the stratosphere of stars to profit from our fascination with celebrities and desire for frivolous entertainment, not necessarily by emphasising their expertise or values but by exaggerating their eccentric lifestyles. Consider the iconic Bruce Lee, whom many only recognise from the few movies he made, in which he flaunted his stylistic manoeuvres and skills in kung fu. The untimely demise of Lee at age thirty-two in the seventies, which ended his film career prematurely, was a media sensation worldwide; even till now, the enigmatic circumstances of his death are peppered with scandalous speculations by the media, including murder involving the triads and a supposed curse on him and his family. Surely, the 'legendary' status of celebrity athletes is the product of a surreptitious scheme by managers and the media. 70 75
- 8 Conversely, when lesser-known godfather of fitness Jack LaLanne died at age ninety-six in 2011, it was without any ripple of fanfare even though LaLanne was indisputably a national treasure. LaLanne was the consummate fitness and nutritional expert, a motivational speaker and a pioneer in the trend of fitness gyms. Over the decades, he greeted millions of Americans earnestly with his morning exercise routines daily on the goggle box, and fervently advocated a balanced diet void of additives, drugs and processed foods. Today, as all developed countries are plagued with cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and obesity due to our languid, sedentary lifestyle and a sugar- and salt-rich diet, perhaps LaLanne's prodigious feats of strength and discipline should inspire us to live as fitter, healthier and smarter human beings, even if we have no aspirations to be faster, higher and stronger like Hercules or Achilles. 80 85