

# Reflections on Soviet sport

by John Disley

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After the 1952 Olympic Games, Chief Coach Geoff Dyson preached a sermon entitled 'Lessons of Helsinki'. It was a lecture he gave many times pointing out the reasons for Britain's fall off the gold standard. After last September's Britain versus U.S.S.R. match, he could well devise a sequel called 'A Moscow prelude to lessons of Melbourne' ! For as the statistical history books show, Britain was well and truly vanquished by 220 points to 141 points, Russia taking twenty-four first places out of the thirty-one events.

The result was little different from what was expected in this meeting between the World's second athletic nation and the World's fourth power. Obviously, with Russia just beginning to tighten her hold on the men's events as she has done with the women's, medals of any colour are going to be at a premium in the 56 Games.

## Reasons for Failure

We were outclassed — of that there was no doubt. But why ? Many reasons can be produced and were produced. First, that Russia is a nation of 180 million, Britain only 50 million. This is a reasonable assumption on the surface, but on reflection I doubt, because of the geographical size of Russia, whether Russian sport can reach as many prospective athletes as British physical education can. Secondly, that Russian coaches are better than British. This I think is untrue ; of all the Soviet coaches I met, only one, Korokov, measured up to our National Coaches. The rest seemed to rely on the 'hard work' theme alone. Thirdly, that training facilities are better in Russia. Here again I very much doubt it. Flying over Russia from Leningrad, there was no evidence of a track in every village, neither did the facilities in Moscow seem any better than in London. Remember, too, that

winter snow restricts outdoor work for many events. Fourthly, that Russian athletes get more time to train. Here I think is part of the answer and more of this in a moment. Finally, I think that Geoff. Elliott, the pole-vaulter, had a valid reason for our defeat. He said that the Russian athletes really put everything into their efforts, they gritted their teeth, swore to themselves and concentrated all their energies on a determination to win. 'Our chaps,' said Elliott, 'just went through the motions !'

I wonder if years of preaching that, 'the games' the thing,' 'be a good loser', and 'the important thing is taking part and not winning', has not built up a psychological barrier to winning in British youth ?

## The Russian Attitude

Granted that facilities in Russia are about the same as ours, and the coaching not as good, why then did we do so badly ? The main reason is without a doubt the Russian attitude to sport.

They regard their star performers in sport with the same reverence as they regard their prima ballerinas and leading sopranos. That is, as artists who not only entertain and inspire the public but increase national prestige abroad. Kuts breaking the 5,000 metres world record is as much a national asset as Olga Lipeschinskaya dancing in 'Le Lac des Cygnes', or Goar Gasparan singing Mozart's 'Queen of the Night'. All three are showing that the Soviet way of life produces great talent and allows it to develop.

We in this country may say and keep on saying that sport is recreation and not attached to politics in any way. And this is correct, as long as you stay out of international sport ! Once committed to a programme of international matches, then, even if we don't do it ourselves, we must expect others to make comparisons. I know this is true, because I know just how much our Embassies in other countries hope and pray that the visiting British team puts up a good performance, preferably winning. Because it will make a world of difference to their efforts to sell Britain abroad !

## **The Top of a Pyramid**

There may be little enough reason for linking success at sport with the rest of a nation's way of life. But there is a very close connection between international success at sport and a country's physical education programme. For a champion is not up in the air on his own. The star performer stands at the top of a pyramid, and the higher he stands, the greater the base of that pyramid must be. That is to say, the Country that produces the most champions must be the country that gives an opportunity to the largest number of young people to compete in sport.

I believe that many British officials in sport see this problem as I do. The rest are probably using the 'we play for fun' ploy in much the same way as the 'poor food' excuse was used to explain our losses after the war.

### **Crowd's technical Appreciation**

The Russians take their sport seriously. The technical appreciation of the Dynamo crowd for Krivonosov throwing the hammer over 200 feet was similar to the acclamation of the audience in the Bolshoi for a particularly difficult jump in the ballet. Failures such as a lapped runner were not clapped à la White City. Instead they were assailed by shrill whistles of disapproval, much the same as a theatre crowd greet a bad performance.

Soviet athletic officials, with no financial worries limiting their schemes or dictating their programmes, can arrange meetings when and where they like and provide training camps for their athletes. For instance, after the October Russian championships, all the likely prospects for next year were given the opportunity to compete in the Ukraine, where the weather was warm enough for athletics until late November. Also thirty of the top Soviet athletes spent the six weeks before Christmas in China. There they underwent intensive training in similar weather conditions to that expected next year in Australia.

How do the athletes get the time off to do all this preparation ? Well, many of them are students either in Universities or factories. As the State is always the employer, it can afford to be generous in its interpretation of time off, and in its interpretation of work ! A professional attitude ? I wonder if it is any more morally professional than the American University system of 'you break the record — we'll give you the degree' ?

With this 'nothing left to chance' attitude coupled with the Russian athletes' determination to do well, there is no doubt that the U.S.S.R. will dominate the U.S.A., Hungary and the rest of the world in sport in a few years' time.

We in this country can only stay in striking distance by adopting a more realistic attitude to our sport and to our sportsmen.