

Yuri Vlassov, poet and outstanding weightlifter:

“My 27th world record”

In the Soviet Union, it is not only weightlifters and their fans who are familiar with the name of Yuri Vlassov, one of the strongest men in the world, since he has also won the admiration of readers with his short stories “White Instant” and “To Overcome Myself”.

The champion has taken up his pen again to write, this time an autobiographical novel “Salty Joys”, an extract of which was published in the periodical Olympic Panorama No. 6: it is the story of how he earned his twenty-seventh world record.

When it was announced that I had asked for a barbell weighing five kilograms more than the record held by the great Thornton a groan rose from the hall.

As I entered the hall I saw that some of the spectators had left their seats and had gathered around the platform. There was a shout, they noticed me and they parted to make a small passageway. I was already losing contact with the world around me as my thoughts delved deeper and deeper into the sensations of my muscles, into the forthcoming exertion, into a precise chart of my movements. I was separated from the hall and the spectators by a wavy grey shroud through which eyes looked at me, hands reached out towards me and voices called my name or shouted encouragement. I saw only the barbell and PorechyeV, my coach.

Then I heard a roar. The spectators jumped to their feet. The photographers' flashbulbs blinded me. I suppressed my irritation and immersed myself again in the sensations of my muscles and the barbell.

Two key moments

I always bore in mind that success depended on my performance at two moments: when I started the exercise and when the judge gave his signal.

I had more of a reserve to get the barbell up from my chest than in the jerk. Since the press has to be performed from a single, definite position I began by setting my feet apart at the required distance.

My arms were only just long enough for me to grip the barbell. My elbows almost touched my knees, which were slightly bent, a departure from the ideal position.

I tested my grip. Then, after plunging completely into my world of sensations, I suddenly felt that each and every muscle was ready for the work it had to do. At this instant I moved the barbell.

Muscle co-ordination

I could feel my muscles mesh with one another. Now it was important to get the barbell as high up on my chest as possible. I lifted it to my throat, above my collarbones. It would be impossible to bring the weight onto my chest in this position.

Next I braced my legs and straightened up. What joy ! This was one of the few feelings my brain had been trained to perceive and to pass on to my muscles.

I had not yet straightened up completely. Continuing to expand my chest and to tense my back muscles, I shifted the barbell to a position sufficiently high on my chest for me to lift it without sending it forward. My elbows were parallel to my trunk. I checked this instantly and did not let myself freeze in this position, as I used to. When the judge gave his signal I lifted



the barbell from my chest. I mentally controlled my knees and my back muscles. My rigid knees and my back muscles had to be tense but at the same time mobile in order to bring the centres of gravity of my body and of the barbell as close together as possible.

I controlled the path of the barbell as it approached its final point. Near my forehead the barbell loses its initial impetus. The efforts of many muscles cease here and I have to move it quickly as high as possible so that new groups of muscles can join in.

Steady on one's feet

I remembered my feet all the time. In the press, if you raise a foot from the platform your lift is not counted. I swayed, retaining my balance. Then my knees became firm and my back muscles reliably held the weight.

When the barbell was nearer its final point I began to wheeze. Burning foam appeared

on my lips, and they began to twitch woodenly. The wheeze moved down my throat into my chest. I felt as though my chest would soon burst. I was holding my breath and my reserve of air was giving out.

This I realised when my vision darkened. I kept moving the barbell upwards. I could remember everything and hear everything while concentrating on what I was doing. When I began to tremble I braced my legs desperately and moved my shoulders. The barbell was going up slower. My muscles grew harder. I moved my shoulders back and gained a few centimetres. But the main thing was that now my chest muscles were more fully engaged. I had to curve my thorax to bring it into the same position in relation to the barbell as when on the inclined exercise board for practising the press. That kind of press gives you nearly 50 kilograms more than the standing position does. It developed my chest muscles by moving back my shoulders and using my chest muscles more fully I immediately sent the barbell higher.

Suddenly, I became conscious of my face. I was exhausted, drained by the movement.

In fact, I had become the very movement itself and was aware of it and nothing else. And suddenly, I felt my teeth. My mouth was set in a grimace, my lips immobile and my teeth clenched. My eyelids were almost closed. My cheeks were swollen and they pushed up towards my eye sockets.

Maintaining the “ideal sequence”

My joints were helping to support the weight. I knew where and how to change the exertion without even having time to realise it. My memory retained the sensations of the ideal sequence of movements and arranged everything to fit that pattern. All this took place instantaneously. The air became hotter and thicker. I pushed onward through the thick air.

The barbell rose more confidently. I whipped myself to greater effort by giving myself orders. I was afraid I might drop the weight after I had already lifted it.

I felt the soles of my feet. The important thing was to keep my balance. Now, with my back muscles fully engaged, the barbell moved faster. More tense than ever, I had to be extremely cautious not to move from my place. I concentrated on keeping my balance. I felt as though my feet had become attached to my brain. My shoes were filled with burning steam.

I raised the barbell into the required point. On completing the exercise I froze motionless.

I held my breath, waiting for the judge to approve. I had to stand motionless, and I did. I felt oppressed by the thick air. Yet the whole of my body was alive. My blood bubbled, demanding air, but I could not breathe without the risk of destroying the framework of my muscles. I continued to keep my balance. The whole of my body was a single, rigid, mighty muscle.

Then I heard the judge say : “Done !”

Release

I waited several more instants to separate myself from that world. I always like to guarantee myself this way. Then the entire

framework collapsed. I could feel all my joints and muscles relaxing. I moved back from under the barbell. Still shrouded in darkness that was pierced by gulps of air, I squatted beside the barbell, feeling it pull my palms. With a clang, the barbell came down onto the platform. When I realised what I was doing I suddenly found I was smiling. I had been smiling for some time without being aware of it. My lips had become soft again and had spread apart. I began to laugh. I heard my voice. Not a wheeze but my real voice. A multitude of hands lifted me up. I saw the entire hall, or rather, outstretched hands.

I saw the crowd push aside the judges. Then a voice coming over the public address system drowned out the noise. The hands awkwardly lowered me.

Weighing in

The crowd moved aside, and I saw the scales. Assistants carried the barbell to the scales. There was curiosity on all faces. Sometimes the barbell does not weigh what it should. I would be very pleased if I had broken the record by more than five kilograms. But I was afraid it might not have the correct weight. I wanted to-increase the record by five kilograms. That was the only way to improve on Thornton's great record.

The judges were busy with the weights. It was so quiet in the hall that I could hear the squeaking of the rosin underfoot.

I liked the look of my arms. Large, soft arms, just right for working with the barbell.

My leg muscles were limp and relaxed when they called me and I went up to the scales.

I stepped on the scales. There was a buzz of voices. When I stood erect on the scales the hall began to cheer. This was my twenty-seventh world record.

Y. V.

