



*The gold medal for the Polish volleyball team at the Games in Montreal.*

## THEY WERE GREAT !

*By Janusz Noworeniuk*

I will never forget that night, or rather, that early morning of July 31 1976. Facing each other across the net in Montreal - the Polish and Soviet volleyball teams : at stake - an Olympic gold medal. After the first few sets, I slipped out of the editor's office to another room with a TV set since the shouts of exasperation coming from my colleagues next door was threatening to bring the walls down. The paper had already been put to bed, a small window left on page two, and I was off like a shot to get the latest from the live televised

showing. In the fourth set of the super-drama the Soviets actually had a match-point, but lost it thanks' to a powerful smash from Tomasz Wojtowicz. Actually the whole team played brilliantly, radiating calm and self-assurance ("the masters of the fifth set"), and super-fit. What an amazing, talented team it was. They won the fourth and then went on to play even better in the fifth. Repeats of the game's highlights are occasionally shown on television. Quite rightly. Because although the nature of the game has somewhat altered since then, Wagner's team will always be remembered as a team of tremendous individuals, all of them masters of the art of volleyball. They were brilliant executors of the mas-

sive, premeditated attack, surprising their opponents by attacking from the second line, a tactic adopted by other teams only later, and impressed with their excellent defending and ail-round physical fitness. It was a superbly functioning organism, made up of human beings who shocked their opponents not so much through physique, but through their fierce competitiveness, technical ability and intelligence.

Much of the credit for the victory at Montreal was given later to coach Jerzy Hubert Wagner: too much, in my opinion, since although his contribution was substantial it was never critical since everyone worked hard for victory. Of course, Jurek was an impressive figure, long gripped by a passion to build a great team from the great material at his disposal, to challenge old modes of thinking, and exploit the general desire for a different style of game. This had been his ambition for quite some time. I remember the trip back from an unsuccessful championships in East Germany which we spent the whole night discussing with the team captain. At the time I thought it was bitterness and thwarted ambition speaking, but it was actually, even then in 1969, his vision of the future. He became the team coach in 1973 and immediately set about carrying out his plans. Whether the gold medal won in Mexico in 1974 was more important (and more difficult) than the one in Montreal, I don't know, but by then the whole world had heard about the new Polish team (even if they had not had a chance to see them on TV), with its mixture of young professionals and those who felt their ambitions still to be totally fulfilled. For example, the brilliant and acrobatic defender Stanislaw Gosciniak from Janusz Strelczyk's Rzeszow School: then Edward Skorek, perhaps one of the great volleyball players of all time : and alongside him Tomek Wojtowicz, a youngster at the time, who used to astonish his opponents (and later force them to their knees) with his missiles launched from the second line, smashed across at moments in the game when most people's hands were shaking they were so nervous.

After Mexico came the intoxication of victory and our private meeting at the

Wagner's where, at a certain moment, Danuta interrupted Jurek, as he regretted the team's attitude having changed, to suggest that perhaps it was he who ought to change his approach. And change it he did: from close friend and confidante, he became a no-nonsense tough guy who was prepared to give the team stick in order to provoke a response. "We'll show him who is the best," they would say. And show him they did.

*An astonishingly talented team.*

