

Commentary: A Bright Future Shrouded in Mist Sport in Eastern Europe

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As that wisest of sages, a taxi driver, said to me in Moscow last week, 'Our bright future is shrouded in mist.' That same mist has descended on predictions, in West and East, of the socialist future, including in sport. If the future is obscured, at least past and present are coming more into focus. We can now perceive more clearly the contours of sport and its place in the popular consciousness. The three essays are excellent contributions in presenting valuable case studies-of Lithuanian basketball, Soviet soccer and East German elite sport; they are, significantly, by scholars who know the language and culture, and care about sport. For it is not only Redlands that led us astray; as John Hoberman observes, 'the fantasies of uninformed observers about the sport cultures of the East have done much to shape our conception of Communist sport practices.' It is time to take stock.

Sport at the barricades

A compelling feature of the turbulent events in Europe's socialist states has been the intense debate about sport. Far from being at the periphery of politics, sports has been at the epicentre. In Rumania, athletes manned the barricades, with Dinamo Club members defending their patrons, the Securitate, in opposition to the army athletes of Steaua whose Olympic gold medallists in shooting were among those firing on the secret police. Small wonder Dinamo Bucharest changed its name to Unirea Tricolor once the smoke of battle cleared. Rumanian rugby captain Florica Murariu and teammate Radu Dadac were just two of the stars who fell in battle. In East Germany, athletes such as Katarina Witt, Roland Matthes and Kornelia Ender all complained of having had their homes and cars vandalised by erstwhile 'fans' angry at the privileges of the stars and their association with the old regime. The officials of GDR's umbrella sports organization DTSB resigned en masse; its finance director Franz Rydz drowned himself. In Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia several sports clubs have hurriedly sought a new name, sponsorship and even Western commercial backing. With the welling up of hostility and revenge directed against the paramilitary forces that have shored up the old corrupt regimes, it is natural that their sponsored sports clubs should suffer by association. For since the end of World War II, the East European sports system has been dominated by clubs of

the security police and the armed forces: Dinamo (Tirana, Bucharest, Zagreb, Berlin, Dresden as well as Moscow, Kiev, Minsk and Tbilisi—Dinamo Tbilisi renamed itself Iveria in 1990) and the clubs of the armed forces such as Dukla Liberec in Czechoslovakia, Legia in Poland, TsSKA in Bulgaria and the USSR, Vorwärts in East Germany, Honved in Hungary, Steaua in Rumania and Red Star in Yugoslavia.

Such events have demonstrated that sport in such countries has been identified in the popular consciousness, as Senn, Edelman and Hoberman all testify, with privilege, coercion, hypocrisy, distorted priorities and, in the case of the non-Russian states and republics, with an alien, Soviet-imposed institution.

Some in the West have looked with envy at the successful talent-spotting and nurturing system developed in the socialist states. It has indeed brought considerable success in world sport. But many people, East and West of the Oder-Neisse, have abhorred the flag-waving razzmatazz accompanying sports success, which was evidently more for the benefit of bringing prestige and recognition to the regime and its ideology than to the people. The elite sports system, moreover, in producing medal winners to demonstrate the superiority of communist society, is popularly perceived as being a diversion from the realities of living 'under communism.' Not only, as Hoberman shows on the GDR example, has this produced 'a response to the discipline and dehumanizing limitations inflicted on athletes by the requirements of high-performance sport,' it highlights the 'custodial role of the state-or, in blunter terms, the power to shape and control the lives of individuals.'

In the heat of battle, it is tempting to blame Stalinists and 'stagnators' for neglecting 'sport for all' in their race for glory. Here I diverge a mite from Bob Edelman's view that: 'Success in high-performance sport was purchased at the expense of mass participant sport.' Many Soviet critics would agree with that. Yet, I feel that much effort was made over the years to involve the population in some form of exercise and recreation that was completely free of charge—whether through the national fitness programme, work-based facilities or compulsory sports lessons for all students in their first years at college. It was the *coercive* nature of sporting activities, their being part of the plan-fulfilled system (every school, factory, farm and region received a sports quota and incurred penalties if they fell short) that turned people off.

In the case of the non-Russian nations, there was the added irritant of having to put up with a system tailored by Stalin and imposed from without in contradiction to their own traditions: Sokol gymnastics was banned in Poland and Czechoslovakia after 1948; youth organisations involved in recreation, like the YMCA (in the Baltic states), the Boy Scouts and the Jewish Maccabi, were similarly disbanded. All this despite the long traditions and often superior standards in the non-Russian socialist states. Alfred Senn reminds us that Lithuania won the European basketball championship in 1937 and 1939 and, until the building of Moscow's Luzhniki complex in the late 1950s had the only special-purpose basketball hall in the USSR.

Being tied to the USSR meant following Soviet foreign policy, including on

Olympic boycotts. The Soviet Party decision to boycott the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics was simply passed down to other members of the Warsaw Pact—no sports or national Olympic Committee, not to mention athletes, were consulted. Rumania demurred, though hardly because of player-power.

Yet, as our three authors show, player power and popular frustration have combined to undermine the old regime and introduce new structures and priorities. Bob Edelman looks at this process within the framework of the struggle within the USSR between the state amateur and the Western-type professional system. As he points out, 'most sports heroes officially have been soldiers or police officers—guardians of order and role models for a disciplined and obedient citizenry. In the new competitive structure, a trade union, factory, or even a cooperative will have a better chance of organizing a successful team. Heroes will be civilians, not warriors.' Will they be more in control of their bodies and minds and destinies? That is a question only Edelman addresses, as we shall see below.

Sport and the state: some historical and comparative factors

The Western pattern of sport closely followed the idiosyncratic evolution of Western states: from the numerous private single-sports clubs and commercial spectacles in North America, with minimum intervention by the state; to the amateur-elitist clubs and professional leagues of Britain; and the close links between sport and politics, religion and class in France and Germany, with intimate involvement of the state.

In Eastern Europe (Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and, to a lesser degree, Hungary and Rumania) an organised sports movement evolved under the direct tutelage of the state, which established and controlled, inter alia, Olympic committees, in the absence of a pioneering middle class—even *before the countries came to socialism*. In the case of Russia, for example, not only did the communists inherit the largest nationalised industry in the world, they also took over a centralised state sports system with strong military and utilitarian connections through the tsarist Office for Physical Development in the Russian Empire, headed by General Voyerikov. Just before World War I broke out, a Provisional Committee of representatives from various government departments and sports societies was established to assist General Voyerikov, giving him effectual control over all sports and quasi-sports organizations in the country. This centralized state control of sport was primarily intended for mobilising the population for the war effort; it was to be taken over three years later by the Bolsheviks and turned into the military training organisation *Vsevoluch* which, once the fires of Civil War and Revolution had died down, became the basis of the government Sports Committee.

The Russian communists, then, were to inherit from tsarist Russia an incipient sports movement that had one great advantage: it was largely centrally-controlled. In North America and the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the governing bodies of sport were separate from one another and independent of government, based for purposes of control and largely of finance

on their members. Moreover, many Western clubs specialised in a single sport, whereas Russian and other East European clubs grew up around military training and Olympic-type multi-sport organisations (not entirely dissimilar to the pattern that developed in Italy, Spain and Latin America).

Since the October Revolution of 1917 until roughly the present, sport in the USSR has been centrally controlled and employed in the pursuit of specific socio-political objectives. Sport has been a political institution run by the state. The USSR National Olympic Committee, for example, is a government body appointed by the USSR Sports Committee and run by a member of the sole political party in the USSR—the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The policy of both the Sports Committee and the NOC has always been determined by the Party and Government. Such has been the case elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

The reasons for this ‘politicisation’ of sport, which distinguishes socialist sport from that in the West, *but which parallels sports development in many other modernizing societies, especially in Africa and Asia*, have to be sought in the enhanced role of sport as a social institution and medium of social change, part and parcel of the cultural revolution, in developing nations. Sport in such societies as the USSR, Bulgaria, Albania, Yugoslavia and Hungary, whose recent development has rested on an overwhelmingly illiterate peasant population bearing all the standard features of social backwardness, has had serious functions to perform. Sport, then, has been associated in Soviet development with hygiene, health (physical and social), defence, patriotism, integration of a multi-ethnic population, productivity, international recognition, even cultural identity and nation building. Sport was regarded from the outset as being far too important to be left to the whim of private clubs, circus promoters, commercial entrepreneurs and rich foreigners—as it was in most developing countries before their national liberation and regeneration. In any case, after liberation or revolution, there is rarely a leisure class around to promote sport for its own disportment. Such was the case with Russia and most countries of Eastern Europe.

Exporting the Soviet system

It was the Soviet state-controlled sports system that was adopted by, or imposed upon (along with other political, social and economic institutions), those countries of Eastern Europe liberated from fascism by the Red Army in the period 1945-49 (just as a similar process took place in the countries liberated by the US, UK and France). The eight nations in the Soviet-dominated half of Europe were forced to adopt the Soviet system of state control of sport, sports medicine and science, the national fitness programme (Prepared for Work and Defence), the sports rankings pyramid, trade union sports and societies, state ‘shamateurism’ (by which the professional athletes claimed full-time employment as army officers or skilled workers, or full-time students, with appropriate remuneration from outside sport, once the USSR decided to join the Olympic movement in 1951) and overall control by the army and

security forces. Such was the extent of the Soviet blueprint being copied that very often the Soviet name was retained (however insensitive this may have been to national pride and dignity), as in the case of the KGB's Dinamo clubs, the State Committee on Physical Culture and Sport (*Gosudarstvenny komitet po fizicheskoi kulture i sportu* in the USSR; *Staatssekretariat für Körperkultur und Sport* in the GDR), the monthly theoretical journal *Theory and Practice of Physical Culture* (*Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kulture* in the USSR; *Theorie und Praxis der Körperkultur* in the GDR; and *Teorie a Praxe Telesne Výchovy* in Czechoslovakia). And whenever the Soviet sports structure altered, that in Eastern Europe followed suit. It is hardly surprising that such insensitivity to national traditions should finally provoke mass anger and hatred expressed so violently in the popular uprisings of late 1989.

The domination of sport by the state for political purposes also resulted in a great deal of hypocrisy and chicanery forced upon players and public. There was the falsity of the state professional status by way of an army officer sinecure, eternal studenthood—what Bob Edelman calls ‘the “students” and “soldiers” who comprised the vast bulk of Soviet and other East bloc athletes (who were not amateurs but state-supported professionals)–or false registration at a workplace. Further, evidence is emerging of long-term state production, testing, monitoring and administering of performance-enhancing drugs in regard to young people from the age of 7-8, particularly in the USSR, East Germany and Rumania. While John Hoberman is right to say ‘it is still impossible to establish to what extent the doping of East German athletes in years past has been official policy, or whether-as in the West-it has been the practice of trainers and physicians acting on their own initiative,’ the revelations of the last few years—mainly, so far, from the Soviet Union—would indicate that drug taking was organized at *the top* and that no athlete was allowed overseas without a clearance test.¹

It is this long-time hypocrisy by members of the ruling regimes—loudly condemning drug abuse cases in the West as typical excesses of capitalism, while concealing their own involvement in a far more extensive programme of state manufacture and administering of drugs—that has repelled both the public and the bulk of people involved in sport. The latest revelations are not so much responses to new orders from above; they are much more the result of a

1. Back in 1986, Yuri Vlasov, the one-time Olympic weightlifting champion, then Chairman of the USSR Weightlifting Federation (now parliamentary deputy) accused Soviet athletes of using anabolic steroids ‘for several decades’ and named USSR Sports Committee member Arkady Vorobyov ‘who was one of the first to distribute anabolic steroids to members of our national team’ (see A. Klaz, ‘Rekordy po retseptu?’ *Smena*, 4 May 1988, p. 3; Yuri Vlasov, ‘Drugs and Cruelty,’ *Moscow News*, no. 37, 1988, p. 5). A Soviet TV report made in late 1989 revealed a document, signed in 1982 by two deputy sports ministers, prescribing anabolic steroids as part of the preparation for Soviet cross-country skiers (see *Sovetsky sport*, 10 October 1989, p. 1). The coach Sergei Vaichkovsky, who was in charge of Soviet swimming from 1973 to 1982, has admitted that ‘Soviet swimmers were using banned substances from 1974.’ He indicated that while the East Germans gave drugs during periods of intensive training (early part of the year), Soviet competitors took them to within a month of major meetings (see Alan Page, ‘Sacked Soviet official admits widespread use of drugs,’ *Guardian*, 2 December 1989, p. 20). For further coverage on drug-taking in Soviet sport, see S. Dadygin in *Pravda*, 17 April 1989, p. 8; O. Polonskaya in *Ogonyok*, no. 29, July 1988, pp. 6-7; Ye. Kokurina, *Medirsinskaya gazeta*, 4 January 1989, p. 4; S. Topaov, *Sovetsky sport*, 25 February 1989, p. 4—all reported in English in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, XLI, no. 16 (1989), pp. 18-20.

'revolution from below,' on the part of coaches, athletes, journalists and fans—all of whom are seeking to put an end to decades of false amateurism, state-manipulated drug abuse and bureaucratic control.

What of the future?

In their haste to escape from the past state-controlled sports system, there are those sports enthusiasts in Eastern Europe who would clearly like to embrace virtually every aspect of Western sport. Just as those who hanker after an unfettered market economy are often blind to its deficiencies—unemployment, inflation, insecurity, asset-stripping and greed—so those who wish to install unbridled market sport may stumble upon some unexpected hazards and lose even more of their national traditions, and even “socialist gains,” by throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

I am sceptical about John Hoberman's conclusion that 'it should only be a matter of time before athletes and sports officials are expressing public doubts about the rigors of high-performance sport' (in the GDR). True, but so what? Freedom of speech has done little to deflect “progress” toward a fetishisation of sport in societies where the profit motive rules. Bob Edelman signals the dangers: 'Removing bureaucrats may be seen as a democratic step. Yet, it also creates opportunities for the elitism, special privileges, corruption, illegal gambling, exploitation of athletes, and irresponsibility of organizers associated with big-time professional sport under capitalism.'

Ultimately, the future of East European sport is for the people to decide. At least, they are beginning to have a bigger say in shaping that future. We can only wish them well, offering help and opinion should they ask for it. Foreign interference has done harm enough as it is.