

Rewriting Soviet Sports History

Jim Riordan

University of Surrey, UK

Introduction

Much has been written about Soviet Olympic success and the sports system behind it. As the late Reet Howell wrote in her final work. "For the past several decades, the Soviet sport system has been admired and envied by the West. The successes in the Olympics and other competitions seemingly verified and dramatically demonstrated the superiority of the communist system. Furthermore, it was argued that while capitalist sport was dehumanising and exploitive, communist sport was founded on the noble aims of Olympism."¹

In the new mood of "revelatory cynicism" which pervades the countries that were part of the Pax Sovietica, history is being reassessed and rewritten. including in regard to sport and the Olympics. For the first time. authors are shedding light on the dark side of communist sport. The picture is not pretty. Reet Howell again:

Hypocrisy, corruption and cheating permeated the system for decades. There is no question that performance-enhancing drugs were part of the system, as drug-taking was financially supported. approved of and administered by the state. Records and figurer. were falsified, nothing was sacred. Although "massovost" or "sport for all" was an avowed aim of the system. it was too costly and of no "benefit" to the Party, for it brought neither prestige nor glory. Sports for the handicapped were totally ignored as, theoretically, "handicapped" people did not exist in a society where only perfect health was possible. The system has been exposed.²

It is time to try to put the record straight.

Historical background to Olympic participation

After the 1917 Revolution. the Soviet leadership initially ignored "bourgeois" sports organizations and competitions, particularly the Olympic Games which were characterized as designed to "deflect the workers from

1. Reet A. Howell, "Sport and glasnost: a case study of Estonia" (unpublished paper, 1993): 22.

2. *Ibid.*

the class struggle and to train them for new imperialist wars.”³ For the most part, up to 1945, as long as the Soviet Union remained isolated and weak internationally, foreign sports relations were restricted to worker sports organizations and reflected the policy of the Communist International (Comintern) and its subsidiary, Red Sport International.⁴

After 1945, with Soviet military power having penetrated into Central and Eastern Europe and 10 Soviet-aligned states having come into being (including China in 1949), the balance of power in the world radically changed. In the circumstances of Cold War and the existence of two “hostile” camps and rival military blocs confronting one another in a divided Europe, sport became an obvious arena for international competition, for “defeating” one’s ideological opponent.

In the USSR, domestic sport was now thought strong enough to take on the world: victories over “bourgeois” states would demonstrate the vitality of the Soviet system. So, in the mood of nationalistic fervor that accompanied a great military victory, Soviet sport was to take the offensive and, in the words of a Party resolution on sport in 1949, all sports committees were, “to spread sport to every corner of the land, raise the level of skill and, on that basis, help Soviet athletes *win world supremacy in major sports in the immediate future*” (my italics. JR)⁵.

It was clear that if the USSR was to compete internationally, it would have to join existing international federations and comply with their regulations. The appearance, at least, had to be given that athletes complied with the definition of an “amateur.” Thus, in July 1947, the Soviet government issued a resolution in which it reversed its earlier prescription of monetary rewards and now declared that the only awards to be made for national and world records were to be gold and silver medals and badges.⁶

The stage was now set for international qualification, the expansion of all Olympic sports, the setting up of special sport talent schools and, in some cases (e.g. ice hockey), starting the sport anew. In the immediate postwar years, therefore, Soviet sports federations affiliated to nearly all the major world sports bodies and Soviet athletes were competing regularly at home and abroad against foreign “bourgeois” opposition as well as against the 10 Soviet-aligned states.

Once the decision was taken by Soviet leaders to take on the best in the world, political attitudes to sports performance changed in both capitalist and communist states, none more so than within the Soviet Union itself. As the immediate postwar Chairman of the government Committee on Physical

3. V. P. Kozmina, “Mezhdunarodnoye rabocheye sportivnoye dvizhenie posle Velikoi Oktyabrskoi sotsialisticheskoi revolyutsii (1917-1928).” in F. I. Samoukov, V. V. Stolbov, *Ocherki po istorii fizicheskoi kul'tury* (Moscow, 1967), 165.

4. See Chapter 3 of my book, *Sport, Politics and Communism* (Manchester University Press, 1992).

5. I. Novikov, “Bolshoi sport i vneshnyaya politika,” *Kultura i zhizn*, 11 January 1949, p. 3.

6. I. D. Chudinov, *Osnovnye postanovleniya, prikazy i instruktsii po voprosam fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta, 1917-1957* (Moscow, 1959), 189.

Culture and Sport, Nikolai Romanov, recalls in his memoirs:

Once we decided to take part in foreign competitions, we were forced to guarantee victory [to the political leaders. JR], otherwise the “free” bourgeois press would fling mud at the entire nation as well as at our athletes. . . . In order to gain permission to go to international competitions I had to send a special note to Stalin guaranteeing victory.⁷

Following the unexpected defeat of Soviet speed skaters in the European Championships in Stockholm in 1948, Romanov was duly sacked and replaced by the security forces deputy chief Appolonov. When, to general astonishment, Romanov gained his job back in 1952, he did not make the same mistake again. As ski coach Andrei Karpov recounts:

In 1952 we had prepared a good team for the world championships. Not long before them I was summoned to the USSR Sports Committee and asked whether I could give a guarantee that we would win. We well knew what could happen should we not keep our word—knowing whence the demand for invariable success came [Stalin and his police chief Beria. JR]. I said I could not give a hundred percent guarantee. Then I was told we would not be going....⁸

As the Cold War got underway and the domestic political climate was suffering a new “hothouse effect”—the regime was launching a new wide-ranging purge, this time against “rootless cosmopolitans” (Jews) and those who “kowtowed before foreign culture” (in the words of Ideology spokesman Andrei Zhdanov)—doubts began to be cast on whether Soviet sport could mount the sort of all-round challenge that would secure victory at the Olympic Games.

It was while the Soviet leadership was mulling over this dilemma—to join or not to join the Olympic movement—that a rumor spread that the IOC had invited Soviet athletes to the 1948 London Games. This was certainly met with some acclaim among sports enthusiasts, particularly at the prestigious Stalin Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow and the Armed Forces Physical Training College. Within a few days, however, an official riposte appeared in the weekly *Fizicheskaya kultura i sport* under the heading “What is happening behind the Olympic scenes?” It reiterated Soviet opposition to Olympism on the grounds that the Olympics were run by capitalists and aristocrats, that workers had little chance of competing, that racial discrimination against Jews and Blacks had occurred in Berlin in 1936 and would be applied against East Europeans who, in any case, might well be corrupted and recruited as spies. Subsequently, the government denounced the IOC.

More sinisterly, several student-athletes were expelled from the above-

7. N. N. Romanov, *Trudnye dorogi k Olimpu* (Moscow, 1987), 57.

8. See Ivan Isayev, “Slepyashchy blesk medalei,” *Molodoi kommunist*, 5 (1989): 73.

mentioned sports institutions, their principals (S. M. Frumin of the Stalin Institute, General Kalpus of the Army College) were arrested and tried as spies in the pay of foreign intelligence, and subsequently shot in 1950—as were “many sports officials and PE lecturers.”⁹ A number of (mainly Jewish) sports scientists and medics were accused of “anti-patriotic,” “anti-scientific,” and “cosmopolitan” deviations, and arrested; they included such eminent figures as D. A. Kradman, A. D. Novikov, Y. Y. Zelikson, and I. M. Sarkizov-Serazini.¹⁰

Purges were nothing new to the Soviet sports movement: before World War II, five sports ministers and countless sports officials and players had been executed, many more had spent 10 years or more in labor camps (including the most popular soccer players of the 1930s, the four Starostin brothers).¹¹ Then, following the occupation of the Baltic states in 1940, almost all the old sports leaders were removed, arrested and, in the case of Estonia’s two IOC members, Puhk and Akel, executed.¹²

Finally, the Soviet leadership decided to send just a small group of observers to the 1948 London Games. Its task was

To seek an answer to the question: would we win if we were to enter the Olympic community and take part in the 1952 Games? “The best friend of Soviet athletes” was not interested in who was running or jumping what. For him victory was proof of “my country being strong and obedient to me.” Any failure would discredit the system—i.e. sport had become a weapon of big-time politics.¹³

How serious victory and defeat were to be taken, once a Soviet Olympic Committee had been accepted into the IOC in 1951 and the USSR had made its debut at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952 (it made its winter debut in 1956), was evidenced by Stalin’s reaction to the Soviet soccer team’s defeat at the hands of the Yugoslav team at the Helsinki Games. This was at a time when Tito’s Yugoslavia had become the first communist state to break with the Soviet Union and its leaders had been branded “social fascists” by the Soviet regime. Ten days after the close of the Olympics, the Central Army Club team which had provided players for the disgraced Soviet soccer team was disbanded “on Stalin’s orders”; it included such outstanding players as Netto, Ivanov, and Bobrov.¹⁴

9. V. V. Stolbov, “Sovetsky sport i osnovnye tendentsii razvitiya mezhdunarodnovo dvizheniya,” in S. I. Guskov (ed), *Sport i perestroika* (Moscow, 1988), 146.

10. *Ibid.*, 148.

11. See my paper “Nikolai Starostin: the Footballer who cheated death.” ISHPES Congress, Berlin, 30 June-5 July 1993.

12. Gounnar Paal, “Increasing Olympic enthusiasm in Estonia,” Paper given at the International Symposium “*Sport . . . Le Troisieme millenaire*,” 20-25 May 1990, Quebec, Canada, p. 2.

13. S. Tokarev, “Portrety na fone vremeni,” *Ogonyok*, 24 (1989): 30.

14. See S. Tokarev, A. Gorbunov, “Kak razgonyali komandu TsDSA,” *Moskovskie novosti*, 28 (1988): 15. For a somewhat different version, see Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun. A History of Spectator Sports in the U.S.S.R.* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 102-110.

Because the USSR had not “won” the Helsinki Games, the entire squad suffered some disgrace upon its return: “although we shared victory with the USA in the medal table, no one received state honors. even for a gold medal.”¹⁵

Politics, ideology and “win at all costs”

The striving for world supremacy in Olympic sport for political purposes—to demonstrate (largely to the Third World) the superiority of Soviet-style communism over U.S.-style capitalism (and, later, Chinese-style communism)—is now utterly discredited in all parts of the erstwhile Soviet Union. As the World Chess Champion Garri Kasparov has said of the policy.

International victories and titles won by Soviet athletes were supposed to prove “yet again” the advantages of socialism over capitalism. . . A world chess champion was nothing short of a political post.¹⁶

As an example of political interference in sport, the one-time Soviet international goalkeeper and now sports commentator, Vladimir Maslachenko, recounts an occasion before leaving for the 1982 World (Soccer) Cup in Spain, when he and other journalists were summoned before the then Sports Minister Marat Gramov. Opening a leather-bound folder emblazoned with the gold letters CCCPSU (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), he told us exactly what we could and could not say in public.¹⁷

What no one could say openly, owing to strict censorship, was that Dinamo was the sports club sponsored and financed by the security forces, that KGB agents often accompanied Soviet teams abroad, that athletes devoted themselves full time to sport and were paid accordingly (if they held the rating of Master of Sport and over), that athletes received bonuses for winning (including in dollars). that the Soviet NOC was a government-run institution and that its Chairman had to be an experienced Party member, that Soviet athletes used drugs, etc.

Communist Party manipulation of sport therefore involved a good deal of enforced hypocrisy—or “double-think.” All athletes, coaches, sports medics, officials, and journalists had to toe the line and, not infrequently, “lie through their teeth” if they wanted to keep their jobs and not fall foul of the law enforcement agencies. As one journalist has admitted, “There was a system of multiple taboos which included both ‘seditious ideas’ and topics which were ‘not proper’ to discuss in the press Instead of attempting to

15. Tokarev, “Portrety na fone vremeni.” Compare that with the 5,000 state orders and medals awarded to athletes, coaches and officials after the 1980 Moscow Olympics. In a recently opened file marked Strictly Secret, it is also disclosed that the Party Central Committee honored “850 KGB, 1,500 internal security and 300 Ministry of Defense personnel for services to the 1980 Olympics”; see *Argumenty i fakty*, 15 (1993): 16.

16. Garri Kasparov, “Too outspoken for a closed society?” *Moscow News*, 2 (1991): 3.

17. Vladimir Maslachenko, “Ya po-prezhnemu v igre,” *Sobesednik*, 46 (1990): 15.

show life as it was, newspapers presented it as it was supposed to be according to the official scheme for social progress.”¹⁸

Journalists (and everyone else) had to assert that Soviet athletes were amateurs, instead of having army officer or KGB sinecures, eternal student status, or false registration at a workplace. As the well-known soccer coach Lev Filatov has written recently:

After many long years of silence and lies we can now finally confess that we are not amateurs Our players can now openly receive payment for their labours, instead of pretending they are students or sixth-grade fitters or turners.¹⁹

Of course, the public knew that all along; and living a lie inevitably took its toll on moral values from player and fan alike:

We got used to living a double life because many of our idols did the same. We condemned professional sport in the West and were proud that our champions were amateurs. We took it for granted that they trained for six or seven hours each day after work or study. Yet everyone knew that most athletes never went to work or college, and that they met their workmates or fellow students only on pay day.²⁰

Now that the veil has been drawn aside, top athletes, like the swimmer Vladimir Salnikov, can draw a sigh: “We have rid ourselves of hypocritical declarations about so-called amateurism and sporting achievements. Professionalism has been recognized and athletes no longer have to compromise themselves.”²¹

There was a high price to pay to maintain professional sport over the whole gamut of Olympic disciplines. Not only did the system require huge funds, including hard currency, at the expense of casual sport, handicapped sport, and general social provision, it encouraged ridiculous bureaucracy and mendacity.

The glittering victories of our “stars” required more and more money every year. Where was Goskomspport to obtain the cash injections? It cut the budget of mass sport for which it never had to answer to anyone seriously. On the other hand, for an Olympic “gold” Now there was something to show-medals. And for that the sports functionaries were prepared to fight to the last, making more and more sacrifices on the altar of big-time sport.²²

The cost of maintaining a soccer or ice hockey team was often imposed upon a factory, which had to switch funds from its recreation budget to “feed

18. Vladimir Reznichenko, “Press, pressures and impressions,” *Soviet Weekly*, 15 November 1990, p. 10.

19. Lev Filatov, “Ya veryu v futbol kak v boga . . .,” *Sobesednik*, 24 (June 1990): 10.

20. A. Novikov, “Pismo v redaktsii.” *Yunost*, 6 (1988): 9.

21. Vladimir Salnikov, “Vremya nadyozhd.” *Argumenty i fakty*. 1 (1989): 3.

22. Isayev, “Slepyashchy blesk medalei,” p. 73.

the greedy cuckoo in its nest.” This state of affairs provided funds for sports with a minority following and therefore ensured that the socialist states “dominated rowing, weightlifting, wrestling at the Olympics,” because professionals were pitted against true amateurs. Now that sport is run in Russia on commercial lines, “we can honestly face up to foreign athletes on an equal basis.”²³

Distorted priorities, drugs and athlete abuse

To many, the worst aspect of the old system was the misplaced priorities, the gap between living standards and ordinary sports and recreation facilities, on the one hand, and the money lavished on elite sport, on the other. As a sports commentator has put it, we won Olympic medals while being “a land of clapped-out motor cars, evergreen tomatoes and totalitarian mendacity.”²⁴ Valuable resources were used to buy foreign sports equipment and to pay dollar bonuses to athletes who won Olympic and world championship medals. For a gold medal at the Seoul 1988 Olympics, for example, Soviet recipients gained 12,000 rubles (6,000 for silver and 4,000 for bronze medals); since the Soviet team won 55 gold medals and 132 medals overall, it cost the USSR Sports Committee about a million rubles (almost half paid in dollars) in bonuses alone.²⁵ At the Seattle Goodwill Games in 1990, some 2.6 million rubles were set aside for bonuses (with \$750 going to each gold medalist, \$450 to each silver medalist and \$225 to each bronze medalist).²⁶

Top Soviet athletes lived very privileged lives. As Reet Howell wrote of top Estonian sportsmen, yachtsmen Tonu and Toomas Toniste, they “each received a salary of R300 per month from Moscow, which was the equivalent of a dental surgeon’s salary. This monthly salary was raised to 600, then 1,000 rubles From the Estonian government, they received a house and summer residence, which were furnished by some 20 companies who donated household furnishings and appliances. Special bonuses were also given to their coaches and administrators.”²⁷

Not all Soviet athletes did so well out of sport, particularly once they had outlived their functional value. The Montreal Olympic gold-medal winner Yelena Vaitsekhovskaya bemoans the fact that “the contrast between how you once lived and how you live today when all is in the past is enormous. It’s not something we normally talked about” Much depends on the sport. In her case, “the money just isn’t enough,” and once she retired she had to pay dearly for imported medicines to help repair the damage to her body. She explains that hundreds of former sports heroes remain with nothing to

23. *Ibid.*, 74.

24. Maslachenko, 15.

25. David Rennie, “Soviet Olympians compete for pre-set quota of medals.” *The Korea Herald*, 27 September 1988, p. 9. The author (JR) was present at the Sports Minister’s news conference in Seoul just prior to the opening of the 1988 Summer Olympics and heard these words.

26. D. Grantsev, “Otvét na vopros,” *Argumenty i fakty*, 31 (4-10 August 1990): 8.

27. Reet Howell, 21.

live on; "it is not hard to surmise that their less successful colleagues experience even greater difficulties."²⁸

The one-time world champion high-jumper Valery Brumel, now severely disabled (following a motorcycle crash), was receiving what he described in mid-1989 as "a pitiful handout" (just over 8,000 rubles a year); he complained that "all Russian ex-Olympic athletes were faring very badly. The average salary of a full-time athlete in 1993 was some 40,000 rubles a year (under twice the average industrial wage) with up to a 200-percent increase if the athlete won a world championship medal. As an example, the top ice hockey stars of Moscow Spartak were earning 25,000 a year (excluding bonuses). In late 1992, the Russian National Olympic Committee announced a 9,000-ruble "scholarship" for elite athletes, but four months later no national squad members had been paid a kopeck."³⁰

All the same, in a relatively poor country (whose per capita GNP put it, in 1990, in 53rd place in the world, where over a third of the population were living below the official poverty line), to many people the sports budget and achievements diverted attention from conditions that "reinforce the most anti-human and anti-sport system in the world."³¹ Sport and recreation for the non-elites were being starved of funds. To give an example: "For every million people, the USA had a thousand times more swimming pools than the USSR";³² in 1991, there were only eight stadiums in the entire USSR with capacities above 50,000, compared to nine in the U.S. state of California alone;³³ Canada had 10,000 indoor skating rinks in contrast to the Soviet Union's 102.³⁴ Even some amenities built at enormous expense for the 1980 Moscow Olympics were subsequently lying largely unused. Thus, the magnificent velodrome at Krylatskoye, "built specially for Soviet Olympic victories, cost a huge sum to construct; but once the medals were in the bag, it was forgotten about Since 1980 it has not been used more than two or three times (!)."³⁵

Today, commentators angrily claim that "in order to gain medals the sports department had the cheek to put its hand into our pockets, depriving us of stadiums and swimming pools, health and recreation centres and sports halls." And all "to prove to the whole world the advantages of our socialist system."³⁶ This gap between elite sport and "sport for all" began to widen from the 1950s "in the unrestricted race for international victories and

28. Oleg Spassky, "Kto my?" *Molodoi kommunist*, 8 (1989): 95.

29. See *Argumenty i fakty*, 22 (1993): 16

30. See *Argumenty i fakty*, 4 (1993): 12.

31. Maslachenko, 15.

32. Isayev, 72.

33. Edelman, 160.

34. A Druzhenko, "Olimpiyskaya slava," *Moskovskie novosti*, November 1988. p. 15.

35. Tokarev, "Portrety na fone vremeni," p. 31.

36. Isayev, 72.

records. The reborn Olympism whet the appetites of politicians and business people.” Participation in the Olympic Games “destroyed the former harmony between big and mass sport, where elite sport had once been the apex of a pyramid whose base had been mass sport.”³⁷

The last-ever Soviet Sports Minister, Nikolai Rusak, had to admit that “our sports ministry was oriented primarily on gaining prestigious victories in international tournaments.”³⁸ Time ran out for Rusak and his ministry which was shut down in January 1992.

It should come as no surprise that, given the “win at all costs” mentality that dominated the upper echelons of the sports administration, there had been long-term *state* production, testing, monitoring, and administering of performance-enhancing drugs in regard to athletes as young as 7–8. It is this mendacity of members of the old regime—loudly condemning drug abuse in the West as a typical excess of capitalism, while concealing its own involvement in a far more extensive program of state manufacture and distribution of drugs—from growth stimulants to growth retardants, anabolic steroids to blood doping—that has so tarnished the image of “Olympism” with many former Soviet people.

Back in 1986, Yuri Vlasov, then Chairman of the USSR Weightlifting Federation (and one-time world and Olympic champion. in 1960 at Rome). declared that immense damage had been done to Soviet sport in general, and weightlifting in particular, by the “coach-pharmacologist” who worked alongside the sports coach. Not only did Vlasov accuse athletes of using anabolic steroids after 1968,³⁹ but he named names. specifically that of senior coach and USSR Sports Committee functionary Arkady Vorobyov, “who was the first to distribute anabolic steroids to members of our national team.”⁴⁰ Vlasov had to pay for his boldness: “The Party Central Committee instructed that no one was to publish my work: all my books were returned to me. Of course, the public was utterly unaware of what was going on.” At that time, Vlasov had launched a new career as a writer of poetry and prose; he had even written a biography of his father, a Soviet spy in China whom the security forces had executed, but no one would or could publish this.⁴² All mention of Vlasov’s victory at the Rome Olympics was cut from a film on the Rome Olympics, even though Vlasov had carried the Soviet flag in the opening ceremony. He was told by the sports minister Gramov that he “would never travel abroad again.”

What was even worse and more shameful was that his revelations about

37. Anatoly Isayev, “Alternativa,” *Sobesednik*, 2 (January 1989): 13.

38. Nikolai Rusak, “Medali ili zdorovye?” *Argumenty i fakty*, 46 (28 April-4 May 1990): 15.

39. Yuri Vlasov, “Ya pravdu rasskazhu tebe takuyu . . .” *Sovetsky sport*, 31 October 1991, p. 4.

40. Yuri Vlasov, “Drugs and cruelty,” *Moscow News*, 32 (1988): 15; see also A. Klaz, “Rekordy po retseptu?” *Smena*, 4 May 1988, p. 3

41. Vlasov, “Ya pravdu rasskazhu tebe takuyu . . .”

42. See “Yuri Vlasov: pravda ob otse,” *Argumenty i fakty*, 18 (1990): 4.

the use of anabolic steroids in weightlifting got him into trouble with the international federation; that made him realize “that the entire international [weightlifting] federation was implicated.” He reported to Gramov that “some of its leading officials were taking huge backhanders for enabling whole teams, let alone individual weightlifters, to avoid drug testing.” Gramov did nothing, but the international federation leaders effectively “held a court to try me—with threats of fining our national federation several hundred thousand dollars and banning Soviet lifters from the world championships.” Vlasov concludes that as far as Soviet sports bureaucrats were concerned, “gold medals have always been the yardstick of their work and, at the same time, a shield concealing their idleness and easy life. What was important was medals; how you got them—whether fattening athletes up on chemicals or swallowing white-hot coals—was a secondary matter.”⁴³

Although Vlasov and others mention the late 1960s as the arrival of anabolic steroids, other drugs were used much earlier. “Steroids were preceded by psychotropic amphetamins. With my own ears in 1959, I heard our senior cycling coach, Leonid Sheleshnev, tell the sports minister Romanov that if we didn’t have them we could expect no victories. Romanov replied that “the matter would be resolved positively”; and our team received the first packet of tablets before the 1960 Games in Rome.” As a result, they very nearly killed Alexei Petrov in the 100 km race (in the same race the Danish rider Enemark-Ensen died from taking drugs).⁴⁴

It has long been known by those familiar with communist sport that drug taking was organized at the top and that no athlete was allowed overseas unless he or she had a clearance test before departing. A TV report 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. The document set out a program to test the effects of steroids and for research into ways of avoiding detection.⁴⁵ At the Olympics at Montreal (1976) and Seoul (1988) it has now been revealed, the Soviet squad had a “hospitality” boat used as a medical centre to ensure that Soviet competitors were “clean” before competition.⁴⁶ The Soviet coach Sergei Vaichekhovsky, who was in charge of Soviet swimming from 1973 to 1982, admitted that the use of drugs was widespread in his sport: “From 1974 all Soviet swimmers were using banned substances. I’ve personally administered the drugs and advised swimmers individually on how to avoid getting caught.”⁴⁷

43. Vlasov, “Ya pravdu rasskazhu tebe takuyu. . . .”

44. Tokarev, 30.

45. See *Sovetsky sport*, 10 October 1989, p. 1.

46. Vasily Gromyko, “Nash styd,” *Leninskoye znaniya*, 28 March 1989, p. 2.

47. Reported in *Corriere Dello Sport*. See Alan Page. “Sacked Soviet official admits widescale use of drugs,” *The Guardian*, 2 December 1989, p. 20.

Following the Seoul Olympics and the Ben Johnson drug scandal, Soviet senior track and field coach Igor Ter-Ovanesyan launched a well-publicized campaign against drug taking. Admitting that “many of our athletes” take drugs, he conceded that even several school athletes had been caught taking steroids; and he advised that “society needs proper legislation to combat this evil, seriously punishing both athletes and doctors, coaches, and drug-suppliers.”⁴⁸ Many reports in the Soviet press reveal cases of schoolchildren being given drugs to enhance their performance: among those named was the coach V. Yatsyn, who “fattened up his 15-year-old athletes with anabolic steroids.”⁴⁹

Yuri Vlasov has also raised the issue of physical abuse of children in sport.⁵⁰ The problem is probably greatest in women’s (girls’) gymnastics owing to the sharp fall in age of competitors in recent years. As a Soviet writer has put it, this “has made it a barbarically difficult and dangerous sport in respect of a young girl’s organism.”

The author reveals that “back in the early 1960s, the coach I. Mametiev from Leninsk-Kuznetsk made no bones about the fact that he would beat his pupils, while his wife assisted him in employing corporal punishment.”⁵¹ It was the accident to the young gymnast Yelena Mukhina, who broke her neck in training for the Moscow 1980 Olympics, that highlighted the dangers of forcing young girls beyond their limits. Mukhina, who remains paralyzed from the neck down, now reveals that “her accident was due to intense training with a leg injury while being on the diuretic furacemide . . . Her trainer had pushed her to the limit in trying out new elements that she was not comfortable with.”⁵²

Sports officials (and state functionaries colluding with them) have not been averse to falsifying an athlete’s age to gain acceptance to international tournaments. Thus, Olga Bicherova competed in 1981 at the age of 15 when the rules admitted only gymnasts over 16. Her coach later reported that he “was summoned by the chief coach to the national squad who silently handed her a foreign passport with a falsified date of birth. And off she went. At least her birth certificate showed the correct age, but how many birth certificates have been doctored?”⁵³ The above-mentioned Mametiev even boasted that he had altered dates on the birth certificates of his charges.⁵⁴

48. Igor Ter-Ovanesyan. “I declare war on anabolics,” *Moscow News*, 50 (1988): 15.

49. Ludmilla Chub, Alexander Pogonchenkov, “Impotent po . . . sobstvennomu zhelaniyu.” *SPID-info*, 11 (November 1991): 24.

50. See Yuri Vlasov, “Drugs and cruelty.”

51. See Tokarev, “Portrety na fone vremeni.” p. 31.

52. “Mukhina blames training methods for her 1980 fall.” *Soviet Weekly*, 11 November 1989, p. 16.

53. Tokarev, 31.

54. *Ibid.*

Not quite the last word

No doubt further correctives will be made to Soviet sports history as the new regime rakes over the past. Perhaps one day Russian sports historians will set the record straight before their colleagues in the world sports history community. One thing is for sure: the old system is dead. But it will take a long time to bury all parts of the corpse, especially as some of the gravediggers seem to have a predilection for necrophilia.