

SPORT IN THEIR SOUL: WHY RUSSIA WON'T QUIT

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MOSCOW – Times could hardly seem more grim in Moscow.

The city of eight million people – once capital of the world's largest empire – lies shrouded by its winter-long cloak of gray clouds. The line for bread on Volochayevskaya street is two hours long.

But there is a vitality that escapes first glance, welling up from the soul like bass voices in a Russian choir.

It is sport.

"We are optimists," says Boris Ozerov, an elderly retired hockey player awarded his nation's highest athletic honor, Master of Soviet Sport. "There is no other way. The times we have now are not the hardest we have had."

Suffering and sport, like ballet and caviar, are interwoven into the Russian character.

"I am sure of one thing," says Valery Kudryavtzev, *Sovietsky Sports'* editor-in-chief. "Sport is one of the values of human life. Modern man can't do without sport. He needs it for health, maintaining his life and to express himself."

These are the people who did not cancel the soccer season when Hitler's army, which killed one of every 10 Soviet citizens in World War II, camped almost within sight of the Kremlin walls.

When the mercury barely climbs out of the bulb, there are fishermen chopping holes in the ice-covered Moscow River to drop a line.

Subway riders on the Lenin Metro carry cross-country skis for an afternoon in the woods.

Swimmers crowd the steaming outdoor Basin Moskva on the site of St. Savior's Cathedral, razed by Stalin in 1931 because its towering onion domes dominated the landscape of his atheist utopia.

Professional sports clubs like Spartak and Central Red Army, factory-owned sports centers and "palaces of physical culture" – a grandiose-sounding term when literally translated, but basically big recreation halls – are everywhere in the city.

Sovietsky Sport, the largest daily sports newspaper in the world with a circulation of 2.5 million, sells out almost immediately at Moscow newsstands.

The athletes who are the legacy of the most successful Olympic effort of any nation – whose 1,194 medals since first entering the 1952 Helsinki Games outnumber even the United States' 959 medals over those 40 years – are still in training.

Yet the athletic life of the nation is facing a severe test from the rotten economy, which has seen prices on some basic foodstuffs rise by as much as 1,000 to 2,000 percent in January, and from the breakup of the Soviet Union into 15 independent nations.

Squeezed for profits that were never a business factor under the old communist system, many factory managers find that closing sports centers is a quick way to save money.

Paychecks to club athletes often are a month or two late arriving.

Because they are paid salaries in Russia's tumbling rubles worth only about \$10 per month in hard currency, hundreds of national team athletes, coaches and trainers have left the country to participate in the NHL, NBA, western European professional sports clubs and Olympic programs in wealthier nations.

The fracturing of the Soviet empire has splintered its sports establishment, with each republic demanding that its own team compete for world attention on the Olympic stage. Russia and Ukraine recently tried to withdraw their basketball teams from the championship of the Soviet Union to emphasize their sovereignty, but the athletes rebelled and played anyway.

"There are people who bring politics into sports and impose the sovereignty of their state on sport," complains Valentin Sytch, head of the USSR basketball federation, speaking over tea poured from a samovar in his office in a dilapidated 19th Century nobleman's palace.

“In the National Hockey League of North America, the Montreal Canadiens play the New York Islanders and the Edmonton Oilers play with the Chicago Blackhawks. No one finds any problem of violating sovereignty in it.

“Here, in the former Soviet Union, the politicians see something dreadful in the fact that the Ukrainian teams will compete with the Russian teams.”

The three Baltic republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – which seceded from the Soviet Union, have been recognized by the International Olympic Committee. With the exception of Georgia, which has not joined the commonwealth, the remaining 12 republics of the new Commonwealth of Independent States will send a united team to the Winter Olympics opening Saturday in Albertville, France.

They will carry an Olympic banner instead of the USSR’s red flag, and the anthem they sing will be the Olympic hymn rather than the solemn Soviet national anthem.

Those who represented the USSR in past Olympics were privileged people by the impoverished standards of the nation, able to earn higher salaries, get better apartments and be put on shorter waiting lists for cars than ordinary folk.

Some of those perks have disappeared, but athletes’ privileged status remains, and with it new problems.

“It’s logical the people should feel some resentment,” says Artur Dmitriev, who with partner Natasha Mishkutenok is the reigning European and world pairs figure skating champion and the favorite for the gold medal in Albertville.

“I try to mind my own business. I don’t want to overdress like a big shot.”

Even the Soviet Olympic Committee questions how much emphasis should be given Olympic sports when ordinary physical education classes in schools are badly neglected.

“The system of physical education of kids in this country hasn’t even taught the cleaning of teeth,” says Alexander Kozlovsky, committee vice president.

Some of the problems with the national sports program are longstanding, but with recent political events, they have reached crisis level.

Before it was dissolved in December by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the Soviet state committee for sport – Gossport – employed 1,200 coaches and 25,000 athletes.

Gossport's training centers were located around Moscow and also in outlying republics such as Armenia, where high-altitude training was conducted. Sports science research was done in several republics, notably Kiev, Ukraine.

With its Olympic triumphs, Gossport's 300 million rubles-per-year centralized sports program was a propaganda success for communism. And it took the Soviet people's minds off the hardship and deprivation of their daily lives much as a successful NFL team might unite a depressed U.S. city.

That helped subdue Russia's inferiority complex, which dates at least to the Renaissance, when Western Europe's peasants began to be liberated from serfdom that Russians wouldn't escape until the 19th Century. Its people are a product of an uneasy mix of both European and Asian cultures.

In the 18th Century, under the reign of Empress Catherine the Great, who believed France the epitome of European civilization, French became the language of the court and a generation of Russian nobility grew up unable to speak its Slavic native tongue.

Once the USSR entered the Olympics, athletic success joined the Bolshoi, Soviet military might and the space program as a source of national pride.

"We are far behind in many spheres, but in sports it is not so," says Alexei Petrushin, a spectator at the recent Moscow Indoor Track and Field Championships at the Central Red Army Sports Complex.

Despite their shortage of money, the presidents of the republics seem to want to maintain this role in their new nations.

Yeltsin, a former volleyball and tennis player, recently hosted International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch to discuss his republic's Olympic future.

Officials of the former USSR sports establishment, who favor athletic union of the republics, believe sports has an important role to play in reducing national turmoil and rebuilding a national spirit.

"Three hundred million rubles is a huge sum," five-time Olympian Igor Ter-Ovanesyan, now president of the track and field federation, says of the old USSR's

sports budget. "There is a part of society with nothing to eat, not enough tennis and no skiing. They say, 'Look at all those Olympic champions. They live like kings. They drive foreign cars.'

"Let's imagine spending 300 million rubles on the other aspects of society. That's one ruble (a third of a U.S. cent) for one year for each person in the country.

"People and youngsters need heroes. A psychologically sane society needs 100,000 people coming together in the same stadium to celebrate. In case this society has degraded to such a degree that there is no room for sport, then it will be very pitiful."

The former Soviet sports establishment is, if anything, better prepared for the change of the economy to a market-based system than the rest of society.

A Muscovite currently pays 15 kopecks -- .003 of a penny -- to ride anywhere on the city's relentlessly frequent 132-mile subway system, a fare that will triple in February.

Yet most have no understanding that even this higher payment fails to cover the costs of the subway because the communist government subsidized virtually every area of their personal expenses for 74 years.

Athletes are more fortunate.

"As far as being a sportsman is concerned, great sportsmen can provide for themselves," says Irina Privalovo, expected to run the women's 100 meters this summer in the Barcelona Olympic Games.

For years the state sold athletes' services in exhibitions and competitions to earn the hard currency required for international trade. Internally, the sports were financed by a national lottery and funds from sports publications such as *Sovietsky Sport*.

"We had some advantages," says basketball player Sergei Bazarevich, point guard on the commonwealth Olympic team. "We trained free of charge, and when one of us managed to win, then we were robbed."

Under former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, athletes who competed professionally in the West were at first allowed to keep 7 percent, and later 20 percent, of their earnings with the rest going to Gossport.

When Soviet athletes were finally permitted to keep the majority of their winnings, Gosport's financial failure was ensured.

Although the Olympic committee's Kozlovsky said the last portion of the \$360,000 expense of competing at the Winter Olympics was finally covered by a sponsorship agreement signed Jan. 19 with Adidas, the German sporting goods manufacturer, he believes financing sports is not really Russia's main Olympic problem.

Maintaining a united team to represent the commonwealth is more important, he said, because only a united team can win the medals it will take to generate future sponsorship support.

For past athletes like Ozerov, sports may be a key element of national revival.

"Despite the fact of hard times in World War II," says the veteran of Moscow's defense, "those times were crucial to our own health. It was sport that helped us re-create ourselves. It can again."

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