

THEY STILL KEEP CAVIAR IN THE FRIDGE

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NOVOGORSK, Russia – Tonight's meal for the Commonwealth of Independent States' future Olympic heroes is mystery meat in special sauce, buckwheat, cabbage, cold fish, purple juice and choice of black or white bread.

"In the old days we had caviar at night," a coach complains.

The Novogorsk Olympic Training Center 20 miles northwest of Moscow is no longer the luxury spa it once was for Soviet athletes.

Those who have credited the Soviet Union's Olympic success to something special about its network of training facilities would be making a mistake. Many U.S. junior colleges have facilities as good as Novogorsk.

Four of the five light bulbs in each dorm room's ceiling fixture have been removed to save money, and a third bed has been moved in now that the center is charging athletic federations for housing athletes. The indoor ice rink is no longer heated.

It probably never was the super-secret, high-tech jock factory U.S. sports fans have imagined.

The center has been open to Westerners less than a year, but that's because it's located in a wooded district surrounded by factories the Soviets once considered sensitive.

It does have some South Korean computers in the indoor marksmanship range to track the trajectory of each bullet, and there is German-made artificial turf beneath the snow covering one of the soccer fields outside, so there are some high-tech aspects.

Valentin Sytch, president of the USSR basketball federation, which uses Novogorsk as the training site for its Olympic teams, remembers when the Soviet hockey team first played a team of NHL all-stars in 1979.

Sytch had visited the Toronto Maple Leafs' practices several years before and had been lectured about the supposed reasons for North America's world hockey superiority.

Canada and the United States had 10,000 ice rinks compared with the USSR's 60, Sytch was told. There was no way the Soviets could compete, he heard them say.

But the Soviet team won the hockey game 6-0 and three years later returned to win 8-1.

"It is not the ice fields that compete," Sytch said. "It is the sportsmen.

"It is not the money that solves all the problems in sports. The main factor in sports is how I compete and how I train."

The 32 types of athletes who have spent time at Novogorsk – gymnasts, figure skaters, soccer players, marksmen, basketball players, hockey players, volleyball players, team handball players, swimmers, cross-country skiers, biathletes, even chess players (yes, that's Anatoly Karpov sipping purple stuff in the canteen) – have played and trained well as the trophy cases attest.

Vladimir Ossipovich runs the center from a desk beneath a wall portrait of Lenin with flags of the Russian republic and the International Olympic Committee flying outside in the winter wind. The military guard at the gate asks no questions before opening it for your taxi.

"For two years we have been financing ourselves," Ossipovich says. "We offer a very high level of service."

But in the new Russia he's having trouble making ends meet with his 5 million ruble annual budget.

The Novogorsk center charges each sports federation 81 rubles per athlete per day for accommodations and use of training and medical facilities, which is very expensive by Russian standards.

That doesn't cover the center's costs, however, and Ossipovich has begun selling use of its recreation, health service, restaurant and hotel facilities to the surrounding factories. The center also sells hot water to the local villagers.

He says there's still caviar in the fridge.

“We have got everything including caviar, tongues, perfect meats and delicacies,” he said, “but the cost of these food products is very high and it tends to rise. We provide sportsmen the food their federations pay for.”

Despite the difficult adjustment from government subsidy to private enterprise, Ossipovich has not scaled back ambitious expansion plans for the center.

The first of its six buildings, which are arranged in two complexes separated by soccer fields, was built in 1971. Its newest gym, with a three-story tall glass wall looking out on a birch forest, was opened three months ago after a delay caused by problems with a water-damaged wooden floor.

Negotiations are under way with a U.S. company about constructing an enclosed soccer field so practice can go on year round.

“Quite a lot depends on the business laws that are adopted,” said Ossipovich, who is quickly making the adjustment to capitalist business executive.

“The concept of private business does not offend me at all. Only the fact that I act as a private businessman will help the sports center survive.”

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