

*Excerpted from "Track's Greatest Champions,"  
by Cordner Nelson,  
published by Tafnews Press,  
Book Division of Track & Field News.*

*Track's Greatest Champions*



*Yuriy Syedikh hammer thrower par excellence*

## YURIY SYEDIKH

Yuriy Syedikh's first experience with the hammer, at the age of 12, was nearly disastrous. Chasing a soccer ball, he missed being hit by inches. His response to the angry hammer thrower: "What *is* that, anyway?"

He tried to throw the heavy ball and chain but reached only about 40 feet. "I was nothing out of the ordinary in strength. In fact, my health was poor. He liked the hammer, but he would rather be a swimmer, and for awhile he ran and jumped, but gradually he turned more to the hammer. "I liked the very process of working out. When I began to train seriously with the hammer, it began to fly right. Physical preparation at an early stage in one's career is the key."

In 1968, around his 13th birthday on June 11, he threw the 11-pound hammer 124'8". Four years later and much more serious, he entered the Academy of Physical Culture in Kiev. As a promising 17-year-old who threw 205'1", he shook hands eagerly with Anatoliy Bondarchuk, the 1972 Olympic champion.

"I wanted to train with, and learn from, the best hammer thrower in the world. Anatoliy was that, but he was uninterested in my pleas to start with. But he came around slowly, and we began working an immense amount. Anatoliy laid prime emphasis on developing physical strength. I needed this, initially being relatively weak."

A year later, he threw 226' 6", for a world junior record and he won the European Junior Championship. In 1974 he improved his best to 232' 6", tenth on the Soviet year list. "I was invited to train with the USSR team."

In 1975, he continued his impressive improvement and threw 246'2", ninth on the yearly world list at the age of 20, and he ranked No. 11 in the world. "I was to wear the national vest for the first time."

After his fine breakthrough in 1975, "Bondarchuk told me that we were going to train for the Olympics. My first reaction was one of complete surprise. I hadn't even thought of it yet. I was just 20."

In the Znamenskiy Memorial at Sochi in April 1976, he was not

## *Track's Greatest Champions*

expected to be a contender. In an exciting competition, he threw 253'5", within seven feet of West German Walter Schmidt's world record. His victory over Bondarchuk and former world record holder Aleksey Spiridonov startled all his competitors.

Two weeks later, now the center of attention, he began with 248'6", improved with 251'4" and threw a personal best of 253'9". As if that did not worry Spiridonov enough, Syedikh then whirled the ball and chain 258'9", second longest in history and a USSR record. He finished with 250'10" and 252'11" for the best series ever. All over the world, other hammer throwers had a sinking feeling.

He threw 255'8" on May 23, then gained his coveted place on the Olympic team by winning the USSR title with 257'6". Eagerly, he went to Montreal with his teammates to compete against Schmidt and Karl-Hans Riehm, a 257'7" thrower in May. Any of the five might triumph, depending upon competitive ability, but Syedikh was relatively untested.

In the Olympic final, Bondarchuk took the lead with 247'8", but Syedikh stepped into the circle and threw 248'2". Three throws later, Spiridonov took the lead by four inches. Riehm was a close fourth at 246'1".

Syedikh entered the circle in Round 2 determined to prove himself. He whirled and sent the ball thudding into the turf at 254'4". Even Bondarchuk winced a little.

Syedikh tried even harder and stepped outside the circle on his next two throws. Still almost two meters in the lead, he finished with 247'11" and then 250'8", the second-best throw of all. Less than a year after making the Olympics his goal, he mounted the highest step of the victory stand.

"It was uncomfortable when I appeared higher on the victory stand than my old comrades. I apologized to my coach, but he said, 'You're still stupid.' Your gold medal is mine, too. Today I'm prouder than ever."

Bondarchuk gave him a bear hug, and Syedikh said, "Thank you, chief. You helped me follow in your footsteps."

Syedikh was calm during his interviews. "I have prepared very well, so my victory was, actually, no surprise to me at all" Balancing his youthful pride, he commented upon his hopes for 1980: "I'm not sure I'll make the team. There are a lot of candidates back home."

Asked why he used only three turns, he said, "Why should you need more than three turns? That's quite enough. Enough for me, in any case, to reach 80 meters (262'5") in 1977."

## *Yuriy Syedikh*

After the Games, he lost to Spiridonov twice. "I hate losing as much as the other guy. My result was not too bad though, for the time of the year. I am tired and can hardly wait to get back to my beat records, friends. and a bit of rest. Next season I'll be all out to beat the 80m mark, but now I have already relaxed my schedule and am winding down." Despite his late-season losses, Syedikh was ranked first in the world in 1976 by Track & Field News, which headlined "Syedikh Undisputed Leader." Explaining the defeats which would occur in the future Syedikh said: "In the USSR we are lucky to have a whole bunch of world-class hammer men, and you simply can't count on winning every time."

Unfortunately, Syedikh's philosophy proved to be wisdom in 1977 when he concentrated on his exams and lost seven meets. His best throw went 247'8", 4 1/2 meters short of his prediction, and he ranked only No. 7. "The main thing is always to peak for the most important championships, such as the Olympic Games. In that sense, the best example is Al Oerter."

After his letdown year, Syedikh came back impressively in 1978, winning Znamenskiy with 254'1". Then, in Zurich on August 16, he threw with intensity against Riehm, who had raised the world record to 263'6" only ten days before. Riehm averaged 254'2" for six throws, with a best of 257'8", but it was no more than the best losing mark ever. Syedikh threw 261'8" on his first attempt, third best in history. He followed with 259'8", 259'4", 258'9", foul, and 258'8", by far the best series of all time.

And yet, two days later, he threw a poor 243'7", 15 feet behind Boris Zaichuk, who had held the world record at 262'11" for 28 days before Riehm's throw. He entered his second most important meet, the European Championships in Prague, as only one of several good throwers.

In a tense competition, Syedikh won by an inch with 253'6". "I haven't been in good form lately, and I didn't feel I was throwing well. Everybody was so close that I didn't really relax until after Riehm's last throw."

He continued to throw below his great Zurich form, but he won the USSR title with 252'7" and ranked No. 1 in the world.

He followed with another poor year as he pointed for the Olympic Games. His best 1979 throw came in May, at 254'6", and he lost several times, ranking only No. 6. Even more threatening to Syedikh's career, a 21-year-old countryman, Sergey Litvinov, threw

## *Track's Greatest Champions*

261'10" and ranked No. 1.

Syedikh began 1980 by losing twice to Litvinov in cold winter meets. He suffered a defeat by Igor Nikulin, who was only 19, and barely beat Juri Tamm, who was only 23. His young countrymen threatened to displace him on the Olympic team.

Spurred to greater efforts, as though in the Olympics, Syedikh went to the Black Sea training camp at Leselidze to throw against Litvinov and Tamm. The results were sensational.

Syedikh, looking very quick in the circle, began with 256'11", but Tamm threw 258'7". Syedikh roared back with 261'2", fifth best ever, but Tamm then topped it by four inches. Litvinov could throw only 259'. Syedikh whirled one out 263'8" adding two inches to Riehm's world record; but once again Tamm topped him, by one tiny inch. Two world records in minutes.

Syedikh, upset at losing the record, came back in the next round with furious power and sent the ball flying 264'7". The third world record in a few minutes ended the fireworks, with Syedikh on top of the world, momentarily.

Eight days later, at Sochi, Syedikh threw 262'5" and it gained him only the best third place in history. Zaichuk threw farther on three throws, with a personal best of 264', but he, too, lost. Litvinov threw 267'11", destroying Syedikh's world record.

Syedikh beat Tamm on June 12 with 260'10", but at the Znamenskiy on July 5, just a few weeks before the Games. his 259'1" placed third behind Tamm's 263'9" and Litvinov's 262'. Syedikh's cherished Olympic crown teetered precariously.

In the Olympic qualifying round at Moscow's huge stadium, he broke his own Olympic record with 256'7". In the July 31 final, he drew the first throw in the hot sunshine. "I concentrated hard on being the first thrower. I warmed up for a long time. I put all my determination into it and was successful."

Something of an understatement, for his first throw flew 268'4", a new world record! "I was relieved, because I knew through experience that the psychological impact of my first throw would be considerable."

Another understatement, for the pressure crushed Litvinov, who fouled five times. Syedikh threw 267'3", 261'5", foul, 265'8", and 264'9", the best series ever, with four throws better than Litvinov's. As a competitor, Syedikh reigned supreme.

And yet he endured defeat in his very next meet, in Rome.

## *Yuriy Syedikh*

Against Riehm, best of the Olympic boycotters, who threw 265'1" at the time of the Olympics, Syedikh's good 264'3" lost by 9 inches. Syedikh won the USSR title easily, with 265'3", then lost again to Riehm by one inch in a late September meet in Tokyo. But his Olympic championship and world record still ranked him as best in the world.

Syedikh kept the pressure on his opponents in 1981. He lost no meets even though his best throw was "only" 263'1". He threw only 254' in the World Cup, but he took vengeance on Riehm, defeating him by six feet. He ranked No.1 for the fourth time in six years, and he was only 26.

He continued triumphantly in 1982, even in the winter. He threw over 260' in four meets, but Litvinov broke his world record with a frightening 275'6" on June 4, and Nikulin threw 274'1" in Athens on September 2. Desperate measures were needed to defend his prestigious European championship in Athens.

Syedikh used his knack for the overwhelming assault and his first throw sailed 267'11". That shocked his countrymen, the two longest throwers in history. Only Syedikh's shortest throw failed to beat the best of his opponents, by three inches. His series of 267'11", 264', 265'7", 260'4", 267'9", 265'7" surpassed everything ever seen. His average of 265'3" outshone all except two throws of all time.

He triumphed over Nikulin four times in 1982 and Litvinov five times, and he lost none. For the third consecutive year, and for the fifth time in all, he ranked best in the world.

Syedikh began 1983 at less than his best, losing twice in February meets in the south. He won twice in May, with 263'4" and 263'10", but misfortune struck in the Spartakiad on June 21. He threw only 258'2", while watching Litvinov set a world record of 276'9". Then at Leningrad on July 28, his 260' lost to Nikulin, who threw a disheartening 272' on June 4.

Thus, he felt doomed to defeat at Helsinki for the first World Championships, far behind his two teammates. In fact, two other Soviets had better marks than Syedikh and so he was chosen solely on his great competitive record. He was also behind Juha Tiainen of Finland and about equal to Zdzislaw Kwasny of Poland and Riehm. The world was ready to humble Yuriy Syedikh.

Unlike his glorious performances in past big meets, Syedikh began with 259'11", while Litvinov's first throw sailed 271'3". Battling

## *Track's Greatest Champions*

valiantly, Syedikh improved three times, to 265'7", a fine performance but far behind the world record holder. Under the circumstances, he took a certain amount of pride in his silver medal.

Syedikh threw well in his only other meet, winning at 260'9", and he ranked second best for 1983. His resounding defeat at Helsinki appeared to mark the end of his glory.

Syedikh lost another February meet in 1984, but he was training for the summer season. He wanted Litvinov's world record. In June, he tipped his hand with victories at 267'5", 266'10", and then a personal best of 271' which beat Litvinov only by the length of his second-best throw, 270'9" to 270'5".

The two best ever made sensational history ten days later in Ireland. Syedikh threw first and the ball and chain whipped through the air so long as to astound every witness. It measured 283'3", breaking Litvinov's world record by 6 1/2 feet.

Litvinov, who fouled his first throw, threatened with 279'4". Syedikh answered with a mighty 282'2". Litvinov threw 278'4", and Syedikh threw 279'5". Apparently tiring, they next threw 274'9" and 276'3". A discouraged Litvinov fouled and Syedikh reached 273'3". Then both fouled. Thus, both titans threw a shorter distance on each succeeding turn in the circle.

When the amazing competition ended, the all-time list reeled. Syedikh's five throws ranked 1, 2, 3, 7, and 12 of all time. Litvinov's three throws ranked 4, 5, and 10. Syedikh's five throws averaged 278'10", more than two feet farther than the world record when the matchless day began!

In brilliant condition, Syedikh threw 280'10" in London ten days later, and in the Eastern bloc consolation Olympics, he won with another 280'10". At Budapest on August 20, he threw 278'11", with four other throws over 272'. He crushed Litvinov again in the Golden Gala in Rome with 275'3", and he finished his superlative season with a 277'7" victory at the Eight Nations meet. 1984 was Syedikh's answer to Litvinov.

In 1984, Syedikh threw farther than Litvinov's 1983 world record a total of 14 times, a remarkable accomplishment unmatched in track & field history. His incomparable year made up in part for his loss in 1983 and for missing the 1984 Olympic Games because of the Soviet boycott. For the sixth year, he ranked as best in the world. He also placed third in the balloting for *T&FN'S Athlete* of the Year, the

## *Yuriy Syedikh*

highest placing for a hammer thrower since Bondarchuk's third place in 1969.

In 1985, he suffered another odd-year letdown as Tamm threw farther than Syedikh's best eight times. Syedikh's 271'4" fell 4½ feet short of the year's best, but he still had the satisfaction of defeating Tamm soundly in the dual meet against East Germany. Syedikh won with 270'9" and averaged 268'1" against Tamm's best of 268'11".

At season's end, Syedikh still owned the five best throws of all time, and nine of the best 14. At the age of 30, he is still a formidable force in the hammer world.

*“Cordner Nelson (August 6, 1918, in San Diego, California– October 26, 2009, in Carmel, California) was an American publisher and writer. In 1948, after graduating from the College of the Pacific he was a co-founder of Track and Field News, along with his brother Bert. The upstart magazine's first headquarters were brother Bert's garage in San Bruno, California. The magazine covers the sport of Track and Field and other aspects of the umbrella of Athletics. The monthly magazine has declared itself to be "The Bible of the Sport." Cordner served as publisher of the magazine until 1969.*

*Nelson was inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1988.”*

*Wikipedia referenced for the short bio above.*