

Don't set your hopes on fame



*From: Legkaya Atletika
February, 1981
Interview with Yuri Sedykh*

This article was published in 1981, soon after Yuri Sedykh won his second Olympics. For these outstanding achievements, he was awarded the highest Soviet governmental decoration - the "Order of Lenin." Five years later, in 1986, he established the world record in hammer throwing, having tossed the implement 86 m 74 cm [284 ft 7 in], the result that nobody has surpassed and still stands today.

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Probably every athlete's dream is to live a long, interesting and beautiful life in sport. And not only to live such a life, but also to leave a bright mark in the memory of an athlete's generation. And not only one generation. So that people remember them, as we remember outstanding writers, poets or actors. Athletes should be remembered for their bright victories and perhaps also for their humanity. Not everyone can become an Olympic champion or world record holder, of course, but everyone should aim to become a good ambassador for the sport, so that people will remember you with a good word. You should become a good example for others, especially for those who are just starting to learn the ropes. Because, from their very first steps, they will have to battle not only with their competitors, but also with themselves. They need to build self-confidence, which is necessary to earn victories, and which is the main reason why we all enter into sports.

If someone today would tell me that they arrived in their sport, for example track and field, because they had a "calling" for that sport, I wouldn't believe them. I am surprised reading some articles about me in which reporters write that I was a born hammer thrower, and that the hammer was my favorite toy virtually from my time in the cradle. That is so not true. I certainly was far from being a sturdy child. I looked rather like an "agile kid." There are millions of them on our Earth. And why would I be a Hercules? My mother was rather short, and my father, with his 1 m 70 cm [5 ft 7 in] height, didn't look like a giant either. We lived in one of the villages in Zaporozhye region (in Ukraine). Before I started school, all our family moved to a city called Nikopol.

In Nikopol, I saw a real stadium for the first time in my life. But... I was more interested in water at the time. Maybe I would become a good swimmer, if we had an indoor swimming pool in the city at the time. In the summer, we were swimming every day, but in the winter, we were not allowed to be in the water. Maybe I would have continued to live my life like that, had I not met my future first coach one day, Vladimir Ivanovich Volovik ¹ (in Russia, an athlete calls the coach by the first name and patronymics, if the age difference is significant). I still don't know why he decided to invite me to his athletics "section" (the T&F group of the city's specialized sport school for children and youth), but he did. For us, boys, "section" was like a magic word. At first, just that magic word was enough to motivate me to come and workout. But thinking back, that was not the only thing that motivated me, I simply loved to work out, too. Back then I didn't think about doing any particular sport; I just loved training. In today's day and age, I look at some parents and strongly disapprove of their behavior. I understand that you can influence your children's decision about their professional careers, but when it comes to sports, you cannot predict anything. Do parents understand that it's impossible to see in their child, ten years in

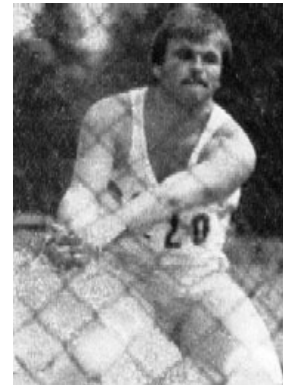


¹ Vladimir Ivanovich Volovik gave the first great boost to Yuri, making him the leading junior thrower of the Soviet Union by 1971. He trained many outstanding athletes, including participants and medalists in the Olympic games. He is still living and working as a T & F coach in Nikopol, Ukraine. He is highly respected as a coach, citizen and person.

advance, a future Kharlamov, Petrov, Kazankina, or Kiselev² (famous Russian athletes of that time)!.. You cannot force a kid into a sport that you like. Kids will find their sport themselves. Instead, parents should help their children to fall in love with physical culture in general, to make every-day morning exercises a pleasant routine. Simple physical health also is a great happiness.

Nobody took me by the hand to a sport, nobody prompted me what to do. I started doing sport myself. I liked practicing with Vladimir Ivanovich's group (could be a different group also). Back then, he just finished up at a physical education school and he was organizing very interesting practices for us. He told us right away that we were going to be throwers, but it was only considerably later that we saw the implement for the first time and could feel it in our hands. Today, this approach of coaches to their job commands my respect. Naturally, all coaches, especially those who make the first steps in their profession, want to see successful results of their athletes as soon as possible. And how do they accomplish it? If they happen to recruit more or less talented athletic kids, they put them "under the press" (a Russian idiom to express the pressure felt when crushed under a hydraulic press machine) of high loads, aiming at top results right away. And then? The kid who took 1st place in one competition, takes last place in the next one. The athlete is traumatized and the coach is not sure of what to do next.

I remember our first practices. The “section” was just starting to work, there were a lot of kids enrolled, and I was not the best. But who really cared about it? Boys’ ambition forces the weak to keep in step with the strong anyway. There is some mystical sense in this. The main thing for coaches is to understand their athletes. To understand both strengths and weaknesses of each of them. For example, I loved to run short distances and throw the javelin at practices, but cross country was like twisting a knife in my heart. Other kids liked to do something else. Volovik created our workouts based on those things: who did sprints, who did long distance, who did throwing. Basically, everyone did what they enjoyed to do the most; and all of our training was based on each kid’s interests. And when there was time to relax and play, then everyone got together. I think this approach helped me a lot, and it kept my mind “fresh” for the future. Today I am sure that the principle of “You don't want to do it, but do it anyway” is not acceptable when working with youngsters.



Then it happened so that when I took the hammer in my hands for the first time, it flew far for me right away. The reason for this could be because I was imagining myself throwing it many, many times. Finally, the first competition came around in Nikopol in 1968, the championship of the children’s sport schools of our geographic region. Based on what I had been throwing in practices, I could easily count on winning first place.

² Valeri Kharlamov was an ice hockey legend in the Soviet Union. He was one of the most decorated and recognized players of his era, the 1960's, 70's and until his untimely death in a car accident in 1981.

Vladimir Petrov was one of the best forwards on the Soviet Union hockey team in the 1970's.

Tatyana Kazankina won 3 Olympic gold medals and set 7 world records. In 1980, she set her 2nd WR in the Women's 1,500 m in 3 min 52.47 sec. This record time stood until the 1990's.

Vladimir Kiselev won a gold medal in the shot put at the 1980 Moscow Olympics.



Back then, I was also doing an additional throwing event – the shot put. In that event, I took second place, but, unexpectedly, in the hammer throw, where everyone considered me the best, I had to really fight for first place. I did win the meet, but I learned an important lesson for myself. I understood that throwing the hammer during practices is one thing, and throwing it at a competition is another. During practices, I usually sent the implement far away, but at the meet, it didn't want to fly far at all. I can't exactly remember what hindered me. Maybe I was not in the mood to throw, or maybe I was too relaxed; maybe it was because of the surroundings that I wasn't used to – after all it was my first competition ever. Long story short, I

realized that I needed to prepare myself for each competition. In one or two days, athletes will probably not lose their physical strength, but the psychological, inner strengths may vanish. So you need to prepare yourself mentally for competitions. It's just like in school when you have an exam. Seems like it's a familiar subject, but without concentration of willpower and knowledge, you'll hardly be able to solve a math problem correctly or write a good essay.

Of course, coaches can explain all of this to their athletes, actually the coaches must do it. Each coach can do this, but not all really do. Even now, I know quite a number of athletes who show good results at practices, but when they come to the circle and compete, nothing goes their way. Competitions aren't successful. Because of this, some athletes decide not to participate in competitions at all. However, the roots of such mental blocks don't lie that deeply under the surface. They are simply due to a lack of competitions. There is only one solution to fix this problem – compete as much as possible. It doesn't matter what kind of competitions they are, a championship meet or a small local meet. The desire to compete should be constantly present inside all athletes' psyche. Even when they are just heading for a routine practice, even when it snows or rains. Even when an athlete is not in a good mood. Of course this desire and this feeling will not come to an athlete on their own, they need to be cultivated. Actually they need to be fostered from the first day of practice. If you don't have this kind of desire right away, it will be very hard to acquire it later in your career. During the first steps, a coach is the one who can help you build this attitude. A coach needs to explain to the athletes that a competition is the happiest celebration of their athletic life. And just like at a celebration party, you need to wear nice and clean clothes, and your hairstyle must look neat. It doesn't matter if you don't accomplish everything that you wanted in the competition or if you don't take a desired place. The most important part of the competition is that it leaves you with a happy feeling inside. Trust me, if you learn this approach early on, then in the future you will perceive any competition as a real celebration, and if you happen to win – well then it's like having two big celebrations at once!

And one more thing, since we started to talk about those who are entering into sport today. From the very beginning, from your first practice, you need to have a journal. Unfortunately, I started to write my training journal two years later. In the journal, you need to write a full analysis of your day. It should not be just an appraisal of how you felt about the practice – like bad, or so-so, or good, – it should be an analysis. Sort of a report that you write for yourself. Keeping a

training journal teaches you self-discipline, an ability to correctly analyze various situations. All of this will become useful in the future.

A very important moment for all throwers comes when they have to switch from the youth to masters' implement. This is when coaches already expect more from their athletes. During this time, a coach must be especially thoughtful in planning particular expected results. The training philosophy must stay the same, but the volume and intensity will gradually increase. Coaches must not force results at any time. I was always surprised by the position of some administrators who, without a reason, require coaches to prepare a prescribed number of athletes with such or such quantitative level of achievement. And it's most dangerous when coaches accept such an excessive plan and try to accomplish it by any means, for which they involuntarily, resort to forced workloads. Well, the coach may achieve the goal, the athlete will reach a high-level result, but at what cost? Usually, after that the athletes fall into a period of "stagnation." And it's good if the athletes manage to find the way out of their danger zone. But what if they don't? Then they lose their interest and eventually quit. So it's very important to know how to plan their expected results.



I remember fulfilling the requirement of the 1st rank in sport (the requirement was to throw the adult implement over 54 m [177 ft 2 in]) in 1970. I threw 54.28 m [178 ft 1 in] at a local regional championship, and I took 5th place. That happened in the fall, so my competition and result drew an end to my season. After that, my coach set up a new goal for me for the next year, which was 56 m [183 ft 9 in]. Vladimir Ivanovich could have planned more for me, of course, – to throw 58 or 59 m [190 ft 3 1/2 in or 193 ft 7 in], but he did not. He knew that for optimum performance improvement, without breaking the general approach to my training, I needed to show that I was able to throw just that – 56 m [183 ft 9 in]. Besides, there isn't much difference between 54.28 [178 ft 1 in] and 56 m [183 ft 9 in]. So, from the psychological standpoint, the targeted distance didn't scare me. But if my coach had placed a goal for me to throw, say, 60 m [196 ft 10 in] the next year, then I wouldn't have been able to even imagine myself doing it. In conclusion, in order to determine a new planned distance, an athlete, first of all, needs to be psychologically, mentally prepared for this. So, that is how we moved, little by little, toward the goal of fulfilling the requirements for the rank of "Master of Sport" (the highest level in the Soviet system of sport qualifications).

But first I had to fulfill the requirements for the rank of "Candidate for Master of Sport." I did it in 1972, at the Ukrainian Youth Championship Games in Alushta. I threw the hammer 61.84 m [202 ft 10 1/2 in]. At that time I was finishing up my 10th grade in school. The period between 17 and 21 years of age is the most important time in the life of an athlete. During this age range, an athlete must strictly specialize in a chosen sport. That's number one. Number two, an athlete needs to think about school. Not an easy task. I enrolled in an institute of physical education after I finished general school, even though I was also pretty good in mathematical science. But I think that, for aspiring athletes who want to become Olympians someday, it's natural to go to a

physical education institute. The combination of practical exercises with academic disciplines taught in such an institute provides good results for a young person. Things you learn there may be very helpful in the future. For example, for me personally, this acquired knowledge now facilitates my studies in graduate school and my work on my thesis.

Everything that I just said is nothing new of course. In life, however, nothing happens as smoothly as you would like it to, you must train and you must study. But how can you combine the two, do both of them seriously and responsibly? I can't really offer you any special advice. The only thing that I can say that helped me is having an organized schedule for the whole day. There is really nothing special to it. But when some people tell me that they don't have time during the day to do certain things, I find it hard to believe now.

When I entered my freshman year at the Kiev State Institute of Physical Education, the ability of governing my own time and time management skills helped me a lot. Think about it: we lived in a dorm room shared by 4 people. Not the same as if you would be living by yourself. And cafeteria food was not home-cooked food. In other words, we had our challenges. Studying, exams, homework, practices, and competitions – you must do them all, but you can't stretch the hours of the day. I



dedicated my most important time to my training, all the more so, since my desire to train hadn't diminished one bit. The only major difficulty I faced, when I went away to college in Kiev, was that I was practically left without a coach. What saved me was my ability to work independently and on my own. For that, I am very thankful to my coach Volovik. If he hadn't developed this quality in me, I don't know where I would be today. It doesn't mean that he didn't pay any attention to me at practices. I understand now that he was saying things to me that I really needed to hear, things that were important. But having learned these important things from him, I always caught myself in the thought that I must think about many details myself, self-evaluate myself after practices, figure out what went well and what needed to be improved. Only at the end of 1972, did I get a new coach – Anatoly Pavlovich Bondarchuk³, the Olympic champion, who agreed to take me “under his wing.” I can't even tell you how excited I was at the time. I also understood the risks that he was taking on when deciding to work with me, because he was still competing himself and preparing for the Olympic Games in Montreal.

At first, I was listening to Bondarchuk with my mouth wide open, so to say. I did everything that he told me to do. But Anatoly Pavlovich didn't try to change anything dramatically in my technique, which had already demonstrated that he was a good coach. Some coaches do the

³ Anatoly Pavlovich Bondarchuk saw the height of his throwing career as an athlete in the 1972 with an Olympic record of 75.50 m [247 ft 8 in]. The height of his coaching career came in 1976, when his trainee, Yuri Sedykh won the Olympic gold medal with a new Olympic record of 77.52 m [254 ft 4 in]. Bondarchuk also placed 3rd in the '76 Olympics with a toss of 75.48 m [247 ft 7 in]. He is currently living in Canada, coaching top Canadian throwers and throwers from other countries and publishing books on T & F training methodologies.

opposite. If an athlete comes to them from another coach, they try to instill, in the athlete's technique, something of "theirs" as soon as possible, to leave their mark, so to say. It's not difficult to guess how this kind of "experimentation" ends up. Often – negatively. Bondarchuk only fixed two, three errors in my movements, leaving the general technical form intact. Only later, when we started to work closer with each other, and I became a little braver, did we start to be more creative in our work. If I didn't understand something, I would ask twice. If I felt like something didn't feel right, I would try to prove my point to him.

Then we tried to discover a single truth together. Briefly speaking, it was a very creative approach to each practice, rooted in mutual respect. I don't believe in those coaches who demand "blind trust" from their athletes in everything that they say. And statements like "You must do everything that I tell you" are absolutely unacceptable. There should be some level of discipline present in a coach and athlete relationship, but it should never cross the line of the basic requirements for an athlete. In general, an athlete can, and even should, be actively participating in the training process, starting from planning of the sessions until their actual execution. Anatoly Pavlovich never belonged to the category of mindless fanatics of sport. Huge loads, large volumes in training – all of this he approached very carefully, with a real scientific analysis. I think it was this approach that played the key role in his becoming an Olympic champion. But don't be fooled, his capacity for work was simply incredible.

Sometime at the end of 1975, Anatoly Pavlovich told me that we're going to be training for the Olympic Games in Montreal. My first reaction was surprise. Honestly, I didn't think about that kind of thing yet. At the time, even the National Championship was the highest of all heights in sport for me. But we decided to try it. The first qualification competitions were very difficult for me. I remember that we couldn't know for sure who would take first place till the very last



attempt. I only beat Pkhakadze⁴ by 4 cm [1 1/2 in] and I won the competition. I felt then, for the first time, that I was competing on equal grounds with the best throwers in the country. But one gloomy thought haunted me for a long time: if winning in future competitions would be as difficult for me as it was in this one, I wouldn't be able to endure this until the Olympic Games.

However, my belief in myself was growing from competition to competition. And my results were moving up, too. Just before the Games, I already had the best marks among all the throwers. Most importantly, I was consistently demonstrating superior results. So, I wasn't afraid anymore that I would fail at the Olympics, unless something extraordinary would happen. To tell you the truth, I even counted on winning some place. Not the first place, of course. Sport is sport, especially a competition like the Olympic Games. There are so many examples when the Game's "favorites" suffered defeat. Another danger is the fear of the level of the competition, and the Olympic Games are, of course, a very special competition. Great responsibility falls on an athlete's shoulders. Of course you want to win. The thoughts about winning often become your adversary.

⁴ Dzumber Pkhakadze was one of the leading Soviet hammer throwers in the early "post-Bondarchuk" era, in the mid-1970's, when the best results were around 75 m [246 ft 1 in]. He was ranked 5th in the world in 1974, 6th in '75 and 5th in '76.

More than one athlete suffered “burn out” by those thoughts. I think that you should simply concentrate on the competition and on showing your best result. Be it a local regional championship, or the Nationals, or even the Olympic Games, it doesn't matter.

I get this single question today from a lot of people: since I've reached the pinnacle of success in sport, what am I going to do next now? Well, I would like to say, first of all, that I don't like it when people remind me that I'm an Olympic champion. People think, wrongly, that if you became an Olympic champion, then that's it, you have no goals after that, no ambitions, and it's time for you to leave the sport. Second of all, I'm not that old to retire just yet. And finally, I'm sure that real athletes can never be satisfied by their achievements; in a good sense, they should be insatiable. What can be more pleasant and enjoyable than going to a competition amid the everyday hard practicing! All the victories and medals have their own value, of course, but they will never compare to the feeling of when you walk into the circle on a competition day! Sport for me is, first of all, sport, with all of its reflections, emotions, and results. How can't you get excited when you see yourself improving and your results growing from year to year? Sport opens your eyes to so many interesting and useful things! You feel so proud when you put on your country's uniform. For this alone, it is worth testing yourself in sports. And you shouldn't be upset if you don't get the results that you want right away. The most important thing is to have a goal, be it a far one or a near one, and to move towards it.

Today, we have a new generation of athletes coming into our sport. They are all tall, strong, explosive and they don't weigh as heavy (in the past a large bodyweight was the major indicator of strength). I will not be surprised if in 4 years some 18 year old will take first place at the Olympic Games. Such is the trend of our time. But we, the old guys, are also not ready to hang up our shoes. We'll let the sport decide.

