The 1989 NSCA Bulgaria-U.S.S.R. study tour—the organization of the Bulgarian national weightlifting program

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While the NSCA is primarily concerned with the means of developing optimal athletic performance in the individual, it is certainly not beyond the scope of the organization to focus on a model athletic program. For several days this summer the 12 members of the NSCA Bulgaria-U.S.S.R. study tour were able to spend time with two members of the Bulgarian national coaching staff in Sofia and Varna, studying their weightlifting program. Although much information was shared through a series of lectures, a great deal was learned through informal conversations during meals, shopping tours and socializing.

Emilian Jankov is the coach of the National 14- to 18-year-old Junior Team. His responsibilities include development of the best young lifters as they emerge from the numerous sports schools around the country. Liubomir Iliev is the coach of the National 16- to 19-year-old Junior Team. He trains most of the athletes who will represent Bulgaria in international Junior competitions. These two gentlemen were our guides and instructors during our stay in Bulgaria.

Our general impression of the Bulgarians was that they were extremely proud of their accomplishments in international weightlifting. They were open in their willingness to share information, and although we detected the presence of some political rivalries, there was more unity than disension. Certainly the victory over the Soviets two weeks prior at the European Championships had a unifying effect within the Weightlifting Federation.

I cannot proceed without mentioning the Bulgarian national coach, Ivan Abadjiev. He is a proud and curious man possessed by a deep love of weightlifting. His approach borders on the Pattonesque, and this has developed some detractors. None, however, can argue with his results. His lecture for our group focused on the effects of training upon DNA to messenger RNA transcription.

Initial Selection

Bulgaria is a socialist nation of 15 million people. The Weightlifting Federation has determined that it will select the best 3,000 individuals to participate in its program. Out of this number it will develop 10 outstanding individuals to represent the country at the Olympic Games and world championships. Since Olympic competition is currently restricted to male athletes, the program is designed to focus on men.

The purpose of the initial selection is to determine which athletes will be sent to the sports schools. These special schools allow students to participate in organized training programs that accommodate their scholastic development. Each sports school has coaching staff members who are specialized in the various Olympic sports. The selection of prospective weightlifters takes place on or near their twelfth birthdays. The national staff has determined that training for weightlifting should commence at age twelve so as to coincide with the increased testosterone secretion rate of the young male. Some of the sports begin selection at a younger age, so some athletic talent is lost before it can be incorporated into the weightlifting program.

Joint mobility, strength potential, talent and neurological fitness are determined by a battery of exercises. A predesignated number of candidates will be accepted into each sports school, and those displaying exceptional ankle flexibility, arm lock, pull-up and sprinting abilities are the youngsters admitted to the program. In the sports schools, the coaches teach optimal technique, develop physiological states that will accommodate future large training loads and
determine which individuals are psychologically and spiritually best suited to top-level competition. The development of technique is of exceptional importance at this point, since the technique learned in the sports schools will be used throughout the career of the athlete.

Selection to the National Junior Team

Those athletes who have demonstrated the greatest aptitude through training and competition are selected at age 14 to the lower national Junior Team coached by Emiljan Jankov. This group consists of the 20 best athletes within the 14- to 18-year-old group. Athletes who do not perform well in this program can be replaced periodically by the most worthy who remained in the sports schools. Athletes who can perform beyond the expectations of this group can be moved up to the higher national Junior Team when they reach age 16, and in some cases they can even move up to the Senior National Team.

The specifics of selection for these teams were not revealed, but the philosophy of the Bulgarians (as well as other European nations) to develop human resources rather than material resources lead us to conclude that the decisions are made by a consensus of knowledgeable coaches, rather than through the use of predesignated criteria.

At this level, the athletes compete frequently in order to determine which are most psychologically fit for the competitive arena.

The higher National Junior Team (16- to 19-year-olds) is more stable than the lower group. Although athletes can be moved up or down between the higher and lower teams during this period, the upper end of the junior program is more or less stabilized. The higher team is also a dynamic group of 20 athletes. Although I was not apprised of such a process, I would imagine that there is some vehicle for the inclusion of some athletes from the clubs around the nation who display exceptional competitive results.

The National Team

The National Team is the most stable of the three groups, and is also composed of 20 members. This team is the exclusive domain of Abadjiev. All of his methodologies are developed to obtain the maximal performance from each athlete in the group. He has two assistants who ensure that the training is progressing at a satisfactory rate. Abadjiev monitors all maximal lifts himself, and has attended every training session of this group for the past 20 years, with the exception of occasions on which he must attend other competitions. While some tinkering is allowed with the national junior teams, all training modifications for the national team must be approved by Abadjiev. The current team, as we observed them this past summer, is the group from which the 1992 Olympic team will be drawn.

Restoration and Other Factors

The rigorous, demanding training employed by the Bulgarians cannot be undertaken without the involvement of restoration facilities and scientific support. According to Abadjiev, the most important restoration factor is massage, which is utilized several times each week. Also available is a restoration center that is open to the general public as well. This restoration center has mineral baths, swimming pools, acupuncture, massage, and jacuzzis.

Nutrition for the national team is monitored by Dr. Dimov, a nutritionist with an extensive background that includes study abroad. He is quite sophisticated in his knowledge of vitamins and minerals, and is open minded about the use of herbs in the restoration process.

The Sports Hotel in Vama is another part of the national program that is particularly valuable. It allows the national teams and club teams to hold training camps in this Black Sea resort town. Athletes can be housed at the hotel and train in its spacious weightlifting gym, which has 10 fully equipped platforms. The Uesaka bars present in this gym, but not in Sofia, indicate that some training for the Olympics takes place in this facility. The athletes can also have their diets monitored while sequestered at this facility, which offers the Black Sea as a restoration facility.

As we expected, all of the weightlifters are salaried. This allows them to spend all of their time training for competition. Although I was not able to determine what other perks were available for performances, I am sure that there is some system of remuneration for exceptional competitive efforts. The opportunity to travel is another incentive for the athletes, since they can purchase items that are not readily available in Bulgaria while in other countries.

The Bulgarian national program as devised by Abadjiev is unified, and directed in such a manner that there will be little variation in technique, coaching methodologies and philosophies from the initial levels to the national-team level. My impressions from both this trip and my observations of the Bulgarian system over the last 20 years indicate that their fabulous successes are primarily due to the architecture of Abadjiev. He has submitted his resignation, effective after the conclusion of the 1989 World’s Championships. Whether the Bulgarians can maintain their current levels of success will be determined by the man who succeeds Abadjiev.

Editors Note: Bulgaria won the 1989 World Weightlifting Championship this September in Athens, Greece. This was the fourth consecutive World Championship for the Bulgarian national program.

The NSCA will be sponsoring a lecture tour to Bulgaria in April. Please see page 37 for information.