

The Transformation of East German Sport

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Despite continued resistance on the part of the East German Communist Party (SED) to glasnost-inspired liberalization, the high-performance sport culture of East Germany has been undergoing significant changes over the past several years which illustrate the diminishing ability of GDR sport bureaucrats to enforce the Stalinist norms established in 1949 and maintained for many years thereafter.

To some extent these changes reflect the diminished authority of an anachronistic Politburo which now confronts the virtual inevitability of broad social and political change. This crisis of Marxist-Leninist authority has been much more visible in the world of Soviet sport, as exemplified by the unprecedented candor of Soviet sports journalism,¹ which has reported on fixed soccer games,² elite athletes' resistance to the authoritarianism of certain trainers,³ and the administration of dangerous performance-enhancing drugs to children.⁴ A careful look at developments within East German sport reveals the same liberalizing forces at work, albeit on a less dramatic scale.

At the same time, however, we should recognize that the loosening of constraints within traditionally Marxist-Leninist sport cultures is more than a symptom of the crisis of political authority in the GDR. On another level, these changes are a response to the discipline and dehumanizing limitations inflicted on athletes by the requirements of high-performance sport wherever it is practiced. Olympic sport, as the prominent West German sportsphysician Wildor Hollmann has pointed out, amounts to "a gigantic biological experiment being carried out on the human organism,"⁵ and the human subjects of this experiment will experience the same physiological and psychological traumas regardless of their nationality.

Cultural and political differences notwithstanding, high-performance sport has become a global monoculture founded on what Germans call the "perfor-

1. John Hoberman and Terry Todd, "Soviet reform program frees sports," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 15, 1987; "Soviet journalists applying glasnost to sports," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 16, 1989.

2. "Genosse Profi," *Der Spiegel*, April 13, 1987, p. 202.

3. "Öffentliche Kritik an Trainer und System," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 16/17, 1988; "Schelte für Schuk," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 25/26, 1989.

4. "Kinderdoping," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 9, 1989.

5. W[ildor] Hollmann, "Risikofaktoren in der Entwicklung des Hochleistungssports," in H. Rieckert, ed. *Sportmedizin-Kursbestimmung* [Deutscher Sportärztekongress Kiel, 16-19. Oktober 1986] (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 1987), p. 15.

mance principle" [*Leistungsprinzip*].⁶ But the performance principle is also the inherent principle of modern industrial civilization wherever it is found. For this reason, the generic character of industrialism is mirrored by the generic character of high-performance sport. Therefore, it is not surprising that an examination of the sport culture of East Germany will offer important lessons about the elite sport culture of the West. As one West German observer pointed out almost three years ago: "Critical questions and confusion about the goals and future of high-performance sport are a part of the everyday reality of sport in the GDR. In many ways, the elite-sport problems of the GDR can hardly be distinguished from those of the Western industrialized countries."⁷

One example of the erosion of authoritarian norms within East German sport is the diminished authority of the state to shape the lives of child-athletes against the wishes of their parents. Last year, in a portrait of the Olympic champion figure-skater Katarina Witt, the veteran British sports journalist David Miller wrote that "in the state-controlled East, it is evident that [Witt's parents] had little choice once the Karl Marx Stadt sports club had made its decision" to induct her (in 1971) at the age of five.⁸ Although it is possible that the East German state's appropriation of the young Katarina Witt was a matter of compulsion, as Miller suggests, we should keep in mind that the fantasies of uninformed observers about the sport cultures of the East have done much to shape our conception of Communist sport practices ever since the Soviet Union reentered the Olympic movement in 1952.⁹ It is worth noting that Renate Neufeld, an East German sprinter who defected to West Germany in 1978, recalled that parents were often proud that their children had been selected for the special sports schools and did not object to the strict control exercised by authorities over their children's lives.¹⁰

In any case, there is better evidence that in recent years parental resistance has been part of the recruitment problem faced by East German sports officials responsible for replenishing the ranks of elite international athletes. Quite aside from their complicity in a falling birthrate, parents are less willing than they once were to send athletically gifted children to the special sports schools. One standard observation reported a few years ago was that: "The parents usually justify their refusal by saying that their children would be better off learning an ordinary profession."¹¹ This thoroughly unenchanted perspective on the merits of an athletic career in the GDR will surprise many Westerners who have assumed that such careers guaranteed a comfortable and envied existence for a

6. See, for example, John M. Hoberman, "Sport and the Technological Image of Man," in William J. Morgan and Klaus V. Meier, eds. *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport* (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc.: 1987), pp. 319-327.

7. "DDR-Sport den 'Grenzen des Möglichen' nahe," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 29, 1987.

8. David Miller, "Glamour girl of seductive charms," *The Times* [London], February 18, 1988.

9. See, for example, John M. Hoberman, "The Future of Scientific Sport: The R. Tait McKenzie Memorial Lecture. Co-sponsored by The American Academy of Physical Education and The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance at the 102nd Anniversary National Convention, Las Vegas, Nevada, April 13, 1987.

10. "DDR: Schluck Pillen oder kehrt Fabriken aus," *Der Spiegel*, no. 12 (1979); on the case of Renate Stecher, see also John M. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), p. 212.

11. "Eine Offensive des Lächelns und Selbstbewußtseins," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 20, 1986.

privileged elite. In fact, a relative degree of material prosperity, increased opportunities for travel to the West, and greater awareness of the medical dangers involved have made the high-performance sport option less attractive to many parents and children than it used to be.¹²

More recently, and despite the fact that boxing is promoted as a standard school sport, GDR sports officials have had to mount a campaign to recruit boys into boxing, which has been declining since the early 1980s. The text of one promotional text includes the following appeal: "We are aware of the reservations and concerns many parents have regarding boxing. But you can discard these reservations by informing yourself about the sport. Due to the demands it makes on the entire body during training and competition, boxing makes an important contribution to the personal development of the athlete. Boxing promotes very effectively mental attributes such as self-confidence, independence, self-discipline, risk-taking, courage, perseverance and initiative."¹³ The stilted rhetoric of this text, which clearly evokes the SED's traditional idea that sport helps to shape the "socialist personality,"¹⁴ illustrates the persistence, even to this day, of the anachronistic ideological reflexes which dominated the discussion of sport in the GDR almost completely for three decades.¹⁵ In short, this is not the sort of language which is likely to appeal to many parents in the age of Gorbachev.

One notes, in addition, the attempt to resuscitate an increasingly anachronistic sport which is now being subjected to criticism by an international medical lobby of unprecedented influence. The same East German officials who for decades have crippled the development of soccer, the world's most popular sport, because it was not an Olympic sport,¹⁶ are now confronting the possibility-raised earlier this year by the president of the International Olympic Committee-that boxing will disappear from the Olympic program in the foreseeable future. This ideological backwardness is a vestige of the old Marxist-Leninist habits which have been hanging on more tenaciously in East Berlin than in most other East European capitals. In summary, the ill-fated and wholly reactive boxing initiative is a good illustration of how GDR officials have been dealing with changes which are, in the last analysis, beyond their control. The real innovations in the area of sport have been initiated in the Soviet Union.

The custodial role of the state-or, in blunter terms, the power to shape and control the lives of individuals-is a crucial issue for any examination of East German sport, and here the contrast with developments within Soviet sport during the era of Gorbachev is highly instructive. In an interview published two years ago, Professor Edgar Meidner, Associate Director of the famous German

12. "Im sport der DDR ist der Konflikt programmiert," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 6, 1987.

13. "DDR will Vorbehalte gegen Boxen abbauen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 2, 1989.

14. "Rührt euch, weitermachen," *Der Spiegel*, October 27, 1975, p. 202.

15. See, for example, John M. Hoberman, "Ideological Foundations of East German Sport Science." Presented at the annual meeting of the American *Political Science* Association, Washington, D.C., September 3, 1988.

16. "Fußball für Gescheiterte," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 14, 1989.

College of Physical Culture in Leipzig, was asked to respond to the reforms under way in the Soviet Union. Meidner singled out the recent statements of Yuri Vlasov, the 1960 Olympic champion who, after many years of politically-enforced obscurity, had now assumed the presidency of the Soviet Weightlifters' Federation and been made a member of the powerful Sports Committee of the USSR. Vlasov had denounced Soviet measures against doping in high-performance sport as nothing more than a way to show athletes and their handlers how to beat the tests. But it was even more startling to hear this high official call the Soviet tradition of intensive sports training for children-the foundation of Soviet dominance in Olympic sport-"a crime."¹⁷

"I certainly welcome the fact that [the child-sport issue], which is in fact a very complicated matter, is being freely and openly discussed in the Soviet Union." Meidner said. "I believe, however, that it is wrong to suddenly reverse what they have been doing in the Soviet Union for years, namely to begin training at a very young age." Meidner claimed that, in the case of young weightlifters, actual competition was predicated on an evaluation of the all-round development [*Vielseitigkeitsprüfung*] these young athletes-a term which recalls the "polytechnical education" ideal of Marx and Engels.¹⁸ Given this sort of attentiveness to all-round development, Meidner then asked: "What is supposed to be criminal or bad about that? These children are given thorough sportsmedical examinations twice a year. So it is not a matter of saying that child-sport either is or is not criminal."¹⁹ Once again, the official East German position, even in the face of a profound transformation within high-performance sport, took the form of an inert and self-justifying conservatism.

But despite the persistent ideological conservatism of East German officials, important reforms have apparently been instituted in the area of performance-enhancing drugs, as they seem to have been in the Soviet Union. As early as 1983 one observer noted that female East German track and field athletes were now "prettier and more feminine," suggesting that trainers and physicians had cut back on the use of anabolic steroids.²⁰ In 1986 the same observer traced this development back to the publicizing of this issue in West Germany after the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games and a subsequent crisis of conscience among adults responsible for the medical supervision of young athletes in the GDR.²¹

Even as late as last January, after years of highly publicized evidence to the contrary, the doyen of East German sports journalism, Klaus Ullrich Huhn, was still claiming that the drug problem in sports was a foreign concern. East Germans, he said, were "proud that we have no drug scene, because we have the wall. Drug trafficking is impossible here."²² It was only last June, in the wake of sensational accusations about widespread doping practices by Hans-Georg

17. "Selbstkritik und Kooperation," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 8, 1987. On Yuri Vlasov see "Glasnost mit langer Zunge." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 23/24, 1987.

18. See, for example, *Sport and Political Ideology op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.

19. "Mit neuen Methoden gegen den Zahn der Zeit," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 15, 1987.

20. "Hohe Risiken in den Griff bekommen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 4, 1983.

21. "Eine Offensive des Lächelns und Selbstbewußtseins." *op. cit.*

22. "Aus Solidarität zu den Genossen in Pjöngjang," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 1, 1989.

Aschenbach, a former Olympic champion ski-jumper and coach who defected to West Germany in 1988,²³ that there came official confirmation that the GDR had experienced its own doping cases. "It may have been a mistake," said Volker Kluge, press spokesman of the National Olympic Committee of the GDR, "not to have made these cases public."²⁴

The uniquely East German elements in this statement were its belated timing and lack of candor about a subject which is now frankly discussed by high officials in the Soviet Union²⁵ and in the West. It is still impossible to establish to what extent the doping of East German athletes in years past has been official policy, or whether-as in the West-it has been the practice of trainers and physicians acting on their own initiative. Volker Kluge's observation that illicit drugs are available in the GDR "if you know the right doctor" applies to any number of Western countries, as well. Two years ago, in a similar vein, Professor Vitali Semyonov, chief of the Moscow Testing Institute, noted that "certain sports physicians" in the Soviet Union did not ascribe to doping the significance it deserved.²⁶ We should recognize, in short, that the sportphysician who believes in the pharmacological boosting of athletic performance is less an ideological than a characterological type.

In summary, a range of attitudes toward doping will occur in any high-performance sport culture, regardless of its political ideology. At the same time, it is quite possible that the scientism inherent in Marxist-Leninist ideology helped to foster an early and official-if tacit-tolerance of doping in the Soviet Union and East Germany as far back as the 1950s or 1960s. As late as 1986, in the spirit of this scientism, the Soviet periodical *Komsomolskaya Pravda* demanded to know: "How can it be that the most important scientific discoveries and developments which promote improved performances in sport are being achieved outside our country?"²⁷ At the present time, however, there is evidence that the extreme scientific approach to sport represented by doping is being resisted in the Soviet Union,²⁸ and that Yuri Vlasov's humane and forceful critique of high-performance sport may have played a role in this development.²⁹ Two years ago the three-time Olympic figure-skating champion Irina Rodnina complained publicly: "Successes and records are all that count in the USSR."³⁰ It is worth noting that to date I have found no comparable published statement by an East German athlete, illustrating once again that the transformation of high-performance sport in the Eastern bloc has resulted primarily from Soviet initiatives.

The case of Katarina Witt is another example of East German officials'

23. "Alle DDR-Stars gedopt," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 26, 1989.

24. "Wir haben Doping-Fälle in der DDR gehabt," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 29, 1989.

25. See, for example, "Zwölfjährige Kinder in der Sowjetunion gedopt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 7, 1989; "Kinderdoping," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 9, 1989.

26. "Steril und impotent," *Der Spiegel*, November 30, 1987, p. 218.

27. "Forderung nach radikalen Eingriffen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 9, 1986.

28. "Wieder menschliche Leishmgen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 27, 1989.

29. "Glasnost und das russische Fräuleinwunder," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 11/12, 1987.

30. "Selbstkritik und Kooperation, op. cit.

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of this individualism has been a deëmphasizing of scientific attempts at boosting athletic performance and an overall relaxing of discipline within this stress-filled subculture. Given the popular insurgency now under way against the SED, it should only be a matter of time before athletes and sports officials are expressing public doubts about the rigors of high-performance sport. Such declarations will mark the official end of an era initiated personally by Walter Ulbricht at the birth of the GDR in 1949.