



TRAIN LIKE A COMMIE

DEFEAT THE BOURGEOISIE AND BUILD YOUR BICEPS FOR THE COMMON GOOD, COMRADE

BY ROB FITZGERALD, NSCA-CPT



The 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles — the Mary Lou Retton, Carl Lewis and Michael Jordan Olympic Games — were predominantly an American party. The Soviet Union and every other Eastern Bloc nation, plus Cuba and North Korea, stayed home and watched while U.S. athletes preened, strutted and wrapped themselves in American flags after dominating virtually every event.

A few weeks later at the 1984 Friendship Games, an “alternative” competition for countries who had boycotted Los Angeles, the Soviets threw their own soirée, decimating the results of their Olympic counterparts. Among other memorable Soviet performances, superheavyweight weightlifter Leonid Taranenko, a gold medalist at the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, lifted a total that was 115.5 pounds more than the gold medal-winning total in Los Angeles and set a world record.

This Soviet state-sponsored obsession with physical fitness and sport science began after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and led, beginning in 1952, to decades of Olympic dominance and the machinelike production of seemingly emotionless athletes who crushed their competition in one international contest after another.

“The Soviets essentially took the best scientists in the world, gave them an athlete and said, ‘Make him better.’ That’s something the American sport system has never done,” says Michael Yessis, PhD, professor emeritus at California State University, Fullerton, and the West’s foremost authority on the Soviet sport system.

Now, as a result of the work of a handful of Western sport scholars — and the surprising willingness of Soviet coaches to share their wealth of knowledge — you don’t need to eat borscht or stand in line for toilet paper to breathe new life into your training with these proven Eastern Bloc principles.

LESSON 1: ROTATE THE COMMUNAL CROPS

★ The Soviets found that the human body takes, on average, about six weeks to adapt to any external stimulus. This essentially means you can train the same way, using the same exercises, for only six weeks before your body stops making gains. For elite athletes, this adaptation process may take as little as two weeks.

“What we see in the West is that nobody’s training ever changes,” says Yosef Johnson, owner of Ultimate Athlete Concepts, a publishing house specializing in Eastern Bloc athletic training literature. “The Soviets understood adaptation and the effect it had on how the body responds to training. People can derive enormous benefit from learning from this and changing things up every few weeks.”

The idea is to plan your training in stages: from a general get-in-shape phase to a more targeted protocol with higher volume and heavier weights, then a competitive period in which you go all-out and finally a restoration phase when you allow your body to recover before starting the cycle again. “The more advanced you are, the faster you’ll adapt and the more rapid a turnaround you’ll have,” Johnson notes.

★ **Glasnost Tip:** Training systematically in a periodized manner — increasing volume and intensity, rotating exercises, working your weak points, and taking time to rest and recover once a cycle is finished — will help you keep making gains and blast through sticking points like never before.

LESSON 2: THE REVOLUTION IS DYNAMIC

★ “What in the real world requires you to touch your toes while keeping your legs straight?” Yessis asks. “The best advice you can take from the Soviets is to forget all about static stretching.”

The Soviets knew that before exercising, it’s more important to warm up the body and increase blood flow to the muscles than to lengthen them. In fact, they found that excessive static stretching — the kind Americans have been taught for years, where you simply hold a stretched position without moving — can lead to injury because you’re stretching not only muscles but also ligaments and tendons, the connective tissue that holds your body together. When you overstretch, you hinder your body’s ability to stabilize itself and protect you from injury.

“What people don’t realize is the overuse of static stretching has a cumulative effect over time,” Johnson warns. “It might not happen today or tomorrow, but contributing to ligament laxity through static stretching can be a sure-fire recipe for a blown-out knee a year from now.”

★ **Glasnost Tip:** Perform a dynamic warm-up by walking or jogging slowly on a treadmill incline for a few minutes, then perform a series of moves such as jumping jacks, bodyweight squats, mountain climbers and push-ups. If your gym has enough space, do some skips, side shuffles and backward jogs. Finish with exercises targeting the muscles you intend to work, moving just slightly beyond the range of motion you’ll use.

LESSON 3: REST HARD

★ Much has been made of Soviet Olympic athletes’ drug use, but they knew they needed more than just pharmacology to win medals. With all else being equal — and plenty of evidence shows it wasn’t just the Soviets who used performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) at the time — how an athlete recovers can make the biggest difference in performance.

“The Soviets saw that PEDs made their athletes much bigger and stronger, but that their bodies’ connective tissue wasn’t able to keep up with these gains in size and strength,” Johnson points out. “So they put a lot of money and expertise into finding the best recovery methods to prevent their athletes from breaking down.”

Soviet programming revolved around athletes’ central nervous systems. The brain and spinal cord coordinate virtually every function in the body, and when the central nervous system is severely taxed by a difficult workout, the athlete needs time to restore it to its original “fresh” state. Through research, the Soviets found they could accelerate this recovery time by using various restoration techniques, allowing their athletes to work harder, feel better and avoid injury.

★ **Glasnost Tip:** Once you finish a tough workout, transition into recovery mode by

using self-massaging foam rollers, Epsom salt baths, contrast showers or sauna sessions. It’s important to rotate these means to keep your body from adapting to the process. For example, if you sit in the sauna after a hard lower-body session, take an Epsom salt bath or a contrast shower the following week.

LESSON 4: TOTALITARIAN FORM

★ The Soviets were — and still are — well ahead of the West in terms of biomechanical analysis of what actually happens when athletes both compete and train in the weight room. “Coaches in the United States look only at how much weight is being handled in the gym,” Yessis says. Soviet coaches relied heavily on video analysis to correct every aspect of an athlete’s technique. Because of this focus, Soviet athletes didn’t suffer nearly as many training injuries as their Western counterparts, who relied mainly on the “naked eye” assessments of their coaches.

“This is probably the most important thing I learned from the Soviets,” Yessis states. “Here in the West, we’re led to think an athlete either ‘has it’ or he doesn’t, and that athletes can’t be built. That’s certainly not the case. Instead of writing off an athlete and saying he can’t do something, American coaches should be saying, ‘Let’s fix it’ and teaching correct biomechanics. They’re not, however, and that hasn’t changed for 50 years.”

★ **Glasnost Tip:** Learn proper technique for every lift you perform. Use video analysis and expert coaching to perfect the biomechanical fundamentals of what you do in the gym. “Even the elite bodybuilders I’ve seen usually do most exercises incorrectly,” Yessis points out. “That’s why they always get hurt. If you don’t have correct technique, you can forget the rest of it.”

