

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, VASILIIY ALEXEYEV?

As our Olympic teams test their mettle against those from Brazil, New Zealand, and the Czech Republic, I find myself recalling earlier world competitions, before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even while rooting for a better life for Russia and its former satellites, I miss the old Soviet sport system that gave us so many superhuman athletes to watch and fear.

I miss the spectacle of Soviet weightlifter Vasiliy Alexeyev, who decimated world records like so many steak-and-egg breakfasts. The human embodiment of the Russian bear, Alexeyev was the first man ever to clean and jerk 500 pounds, and he did it with personality and menace.

I miss the Soviet gymnasts, most of whom, with the exception of Olga Korbut, were grim broad-shouldered pixies performing with the intensity of a missile strike.

I even miss the East German swimmers, those sleek soldiers of the sea, whose sole purpose in competing was to embarrass their West German cousins.

These people allowed us to measure the worth of both our American athletes and our American way of life. They were talented, sure, but we knew why. We knew about the unfair system of privileges and threats that honed their talents to perfection. Yet we couldn't turn away from their performances. How would our Archie and Veronica ever compete against their Boris and Natasha? We all tuned in to find out.

And behind it all was the drama of nuclear superpowers struggling for world domination. Sports became an extension of the evening world news, fraught with implications. Sportscasters didn't have to elaborate on the bigger struggle, or even hide it in subtext. Every meet was an editorial, every game a referendum.

Now it's a different era. For today's American athletes, the important rivalries are between their respective sports shoe companies. It seems like most of the American teams enjoy elaborate training facilities and compete almost constantly. Effort and sacrifice are still needed, of course, but the marquee squads lead privileged lives compared with those from other nations, and I feel like I care less and less. Our teams have become the winning-obsessed juggernauts we used to accuse our enemies of being. Be honest: Doesn't the notion of rooting for the US basketball team against Lithuania make you feel a little guilty?

And the Russians? They're still hanging in there, competing without huge government subsidies. No longer a powerhouse in most sports, they actually

come off at times like underdogs, full of heart and desire, rising before dawn to train in aging gyms and pools, going up against tremendous odds to win.

Without competition from the Soviets, it looks like our Olympic teams will be the 800-lb. gorilla for a long while. But I for one still like to root for the underdog. These days, ironically, that seems to be any athlete but an American.



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