

IRON GAME HISTORY



THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

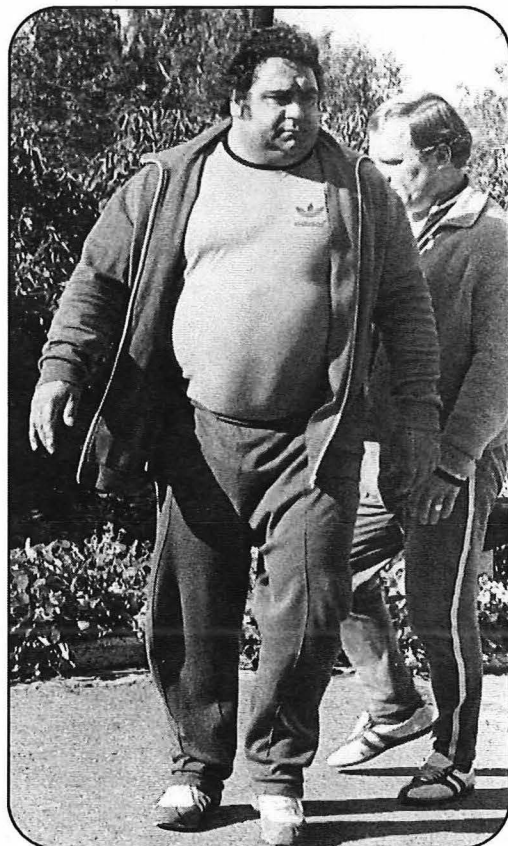
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I Remember Vasily Alexeyev

When the news reached me that the great Vasily Alexeyev had died in Germany it struck with real force. What other lifter would ever reach his status? Or cast such a shadow? No doubt my reaction had to do with how lucky I'd been to see him often in his long, majestic prime and to spend a good deal of personal time with him. Or perhaps my reaction was simply because both his face and his "figure" were so unforgettable. No one in weightlifting or in any other sport could equal his trademark scowl and no one could match—or would want to match—that great cowcatcher of a belly. In Vasily's time, mainly because Jim McKay and ABC Sports—in their coverage of the

1972 and 1976 Olympic Games—decided to capitalize on Alexeyev's unique presence by focusing on him to a degree unprecedented for a weightlifter either before or since, the rotund Russian became widely known as the strongest man in the world and the symbol of Soviet might. And so, as a way to pay tribute and say goodbye to this charismatic sportsman I'd like to offer a few of my memories, such as:



Vasily and Jan

Shortly after the publication in *Sports Illustrated* of a feature article about Jan called, "The Pleasure of Being the World's Strongest Woman," I'd been assigned by *SI* to cover a major weightlifting competition in the US.¹ Jan went with me on the assignment and she was with me when I went to the training hall and, for the first time, saw the massive man for myself. Unbeknownst to us, Vasily had seen the article about Jan and so we were genuinely shocked when he boomed out across the hall, "Jan, Jan," and motioned for us to come to his platform. As we walked up a translator we had in tow introduced us and explained to Vasily that I was Jan's husband and that I'd been assigned to work on a story for the same magazine which had profiled him several years before. "Da, Da, Khorosho," he said, "Yes, yes, good." As we all shook hands several photographers who were in the hall moved toward us. At that point Vasily put up his hand toward them palm out, wrapped one thick arm around Jan's shoulder, applied the high beams

Vasily Alexeyev's remarkable cowcatcher of an abdomen belied his athleticism. Born in 1942, Alexeyev died on 25 November 2011 in Germany.

on that rare but show-stopping smile of his, and said in a commanding voice, "Strongest Man! Strongest Woman!"

The 1977 "Record Makers Invitational"

During the period of Alexeyev's greatest celebrity, he was involved in several "made for TV" competitions—competitions which featured a relatively small number of elite lifters from around the world who might reasonably be expected to be able to break, or at least attempt, a world record in one lift or the other. Thus the name of these events—"Record Makers," the idea being that the average sports fan would be much more likely to stay tuned if he/she thought a "World Record!" was about

to be broken. Obviously, these events were funded by TV executives who were so enamored of the dour double-wide dreadnought from Russia, who seemed able to conjure up world records with ease, that they wanted to make him the star of such shows.

Las Vegas was sometimes the site of these and similar events, and although that city has always seemed somehow sad and superficial I went at the request of a *Sports Illustrated* editor who wanted me to provide some background and context for Sarah Pileggi, the writer assigned by the magazine to cover the event. I was also anxious, as always, to watch elite weightlifters in action. Arriving the day of the show I went up to Vasily's room as soon as I checked into the "meet hotel" to say hello

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www.starkcenter.org/research/igh/

Jan Todd's email: jan@starkcenter.org

Terry Todd's email: terry@starkcenter.org

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and to give him a magazine. To be specific, I had with me a copy of the newest *Iron Man*, which contained an article about his recent exploits on the platform. After we exchanged a friendly bear-hug (and although I've never hugged a real bear I imagine that such a hug would have felt much the same as the one I got that day in Las Vegas) I explained the article to him, and he immediately sat down on the bed and began to study the photos. What lifter—no matter how celebrated—doesn't enjoy looking at photos of himself/herself?

Within just a few minutes in walked Bruce Wilhelm, the US superheavyweight, entering the room via a door which connected their two rooms. He immediately asked Vasily what he was studying. Smiling, Vasily showed him the magazine article and Bruce asked to see it. Somewhat reluctantly, the Russian handed it over and Bruce then settled down on the adjoining bed and began to look through the pages. Soon Vasily gestured that he'd like to have it back, but Bruce turned partly away and kept reading. After another request or two Vasily stood up and walked over—with his big paw out—right in front of Bruce. And that's when the fun began. Bruce, rather than returning the magazine, quickly rolled it up, backhanded Vasily in the crotch with it, leapt up from the bed, and sprinted toward the door to his adjoining room with the Russian Bear just a half-step behind. What a sight! Here were two enormous men, at rough play, moving with startling quickness and grace. As Vasily zipped through the door, however, he jammed his right hand on the doorjamb.

Right away it was apparent that Vasily had injured his wrist, and as this information sank in it became clear that he'd almost certainly be unable to take part in the Record Makers event. As such things will, word of the injury quickly reached the officials of both the U.S. and Soviet lifting teams and, from there, the word was carried by the worried officials to the TV executives, who demonstrated their characteristic generous nature and love of sport for sport's sake by yelling and threatening to either cancel the event or withhold the fee they were paying—even though the rest of the lifters, all of whom were either world champions or record holders, were healthy and ready to perform wonders of strength and athleticism.

What to do!? What to do!? The lifting officials were distraught and at a loss and I felt personally terrible about what had happened even though all I'd done was bring a magazine. However, knowing that Vasily still had one mighty mitt left I told a couple of officials that there was no reason he couldn't do a one-hand

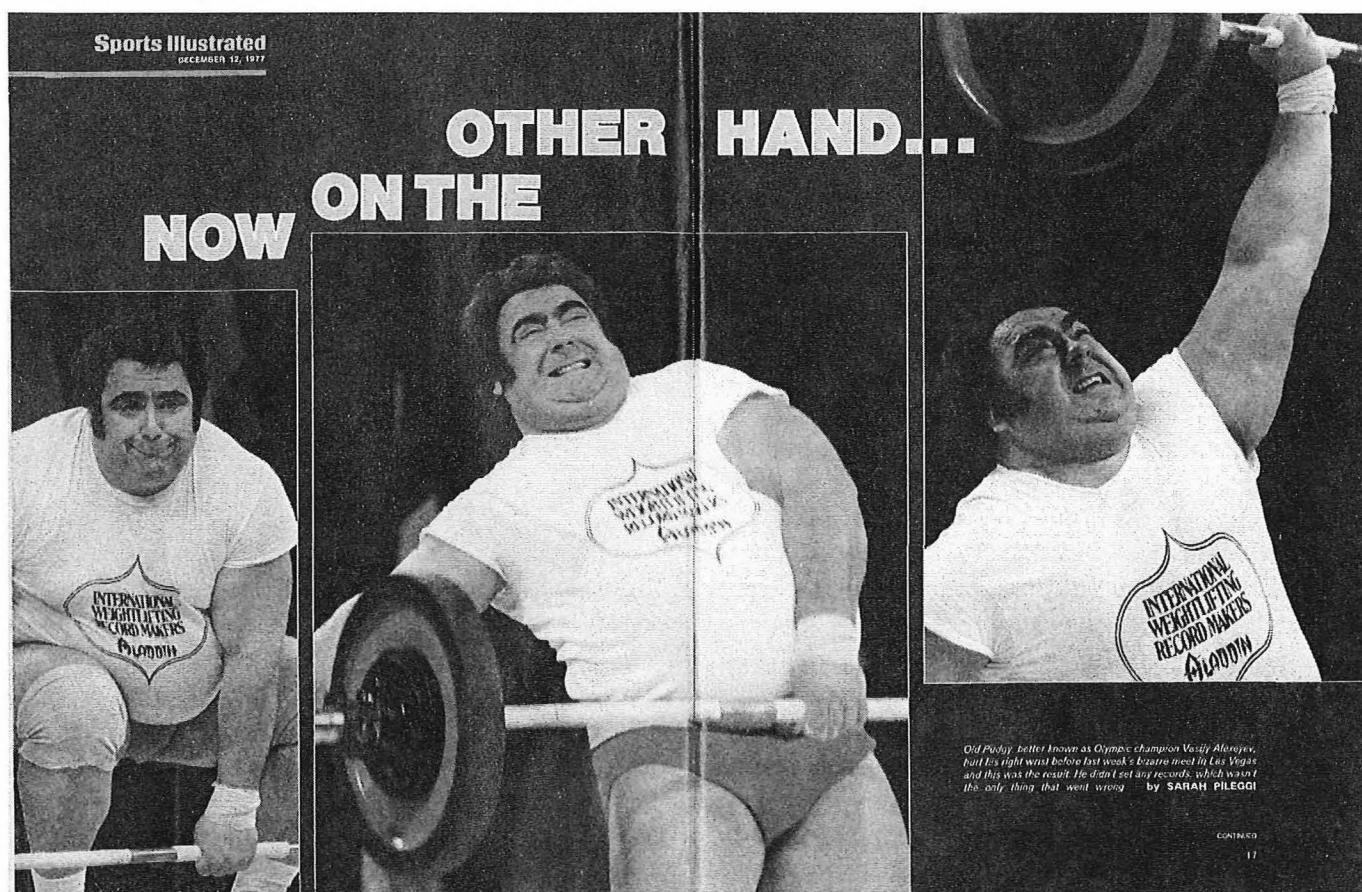


Bruce Wilhelm, on the right, famously remarked, "I'm the strongest man in the free world, Alexeyev's the strongest man in the whole world."

Photo by Bruce Klemens

snatch during the contest, especially since that very lift had for years been part of the five "Olympic Lifts"—the Two Hand Press, Two Hand Snatch, Two Hand Clean and Jerk, One Hand Snatch and One Hand Clean and Jerk. I also told them that I doubted Alexeyev, even with all his vaunted pulling strength could exceed the world record in the one hand snatch since the record was 253.5 pounds done by the specialist Charles Rigoulot, who had set the record half a century earlier. Nonetheless, I maintained that Vasily should be able to "power snatch" over 200 pounds, put on a good show, and—most important—perhaps save the event.

Finally, after an injection the following day didn't alleviate the pain in Vasily's injured wrist, and after a bit more huffing and puffing by the TV people Vasily agreed to reintroduce a lift not seen on an international platform in almost five decades. As the time drew near for his part of the show Alexeyev began a series of light snatches in the warm-up area, and I noticed that one of the two big differences between his "technique" in the lift and the masterful moves of Rigoulot was that when Vasily took his "hook grip" on the bar and got set to pull the bar with his left hand, he kept his right arm straight and well away from his thigh whereas Rigoulot and all other able men in the lift always placed their non-lifting hand on the top of their thigh in order to press downward and thus impart extra power to the pull. (The reason for Alexeyev's failure to use his "off hand" in this way was, of course, the injury to his wrist.) The other way in which Vasily's technique was different from that employed by Rigoulot and most other weightlifters dur-



Sports Illustrated featured Alexeyev's one-hand snatch exhibition in a two-page photo spread that opened Sarah Pileggi's article about the International Weightlifting Record Maker's contest held at the Aladdin hotel in Las Vegas. Note how he holds his injured hand out to the side rather than placing it on the thigh to increase his pulling power.

Courtesy *Sports Illustrated*

ing the first three decades of the Twentieth Century was that rather than drop into a full or nearly full squat as the bar was "fixed" overhead he simply dipped his legs slightly as he caught the bar at arm's length—a "power snatch" in the modern parlance of lifting. Vasily used this style since mastering the complex coordination of power, balance, and flexibility essential in a one-hand snatch using a full squat would require many months or even years to perfect.

My take on the event is that Vasily did himself very proud, making 198 pounds on his first attempt, mastering 220 on his second for a solid, powerful success, and finally trying 231, which proved to be a bit heavy. Some might think that a 220 pound one-hand snatch done by a 360 pound man was a poor showing, but a video which has been seen many times on the internet recently captures Mikhail "Misha" Koklyaev—the phenomenal Russian weightlifter/strongman whose official bests in the snatch and clean and jerk comprise a total which is slightly ahead of Vasily's best—barely making a shallow-split one-handed power snatch with 242, a lift he told me he had practiced. The point is that

Vasily did his 220 having no idea he'd need to do it until just a day or so earlier—and without using his off hand to boost his pull.

The event was chronicled in *Sports Illustrated* in early December of 1977 in Pileggi's article, "Now On the Other Hand. . . ." People have often misremembered what happened, and why, back in 1977, and few people knew the story behind the story, but having been front and center from the backhand to the groin to the majestic lift with 220 and the failure with 231 I'm happy to be able to set the record straight. I am, however, very sad and sorry about the occasion which prompts me to describe what went down—or, in this case up—almost thirty-five years ago.

The Buffet Adventure

During the run-up to the World Weightlifting Championships in 1978, which were to be held in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, I arranged for a rental car because I'd learned that the hotel where the athletes, the officials, and I were staying was several blocks from the dining hall where the teams' meals were provided—an

arrangement that was obviously not well thought out by the officials in charge of the decision since it meant that the lifters had to either “ride shank’s mare” all those blocks each day if they wanted three squares or to provide their own food in some way. Actually, this bizarre arrangement led me to hang around either the hotel or the dining hall much more than I normally would have so that I could at least drive some of the lifters around and save them all that legwork. On one particular day I gave Vasily a ride from the hall back to the hotel because—having spent a few years myself in Brobdingnag—I knew that walking multiple blocks to eat and multiple blocks back three times a day, or even once, would have galled him literally as well as figuratively. He smiled radiantly when I offered to drive him.

During the ride I asked him if he liked the food at the dining hall and he assumed his trademark scowl, shook his large head, and said very plainly, “*Nyet! Shit food!*” At that point I decided that he needed a little pampering and so I asked him in my limited Russian if he would like to go with me that night to a restaurant. “Restaurant? *Khorosho!*” he boomed, and lit the car with that wonderful grin. Thus it was that I collected him later that day at his hotel and took him to a place where I’d eaten my first night in town—a sort of country inn that featured a first-rate buffet.

Vasily was dressed in his standard uniform—a pair of warm-up pants, a matching jacket, and a plain t-shirt. He looked clean, he looked comfortable, he looked hungry. Because the inn was on the outskirts of town, because there’d been a lot of local publicity about the World Championships, and because Vasily was already so recognizable, when we were being taken to our table he got a very warm round of applause, which seemed to altogether please him.

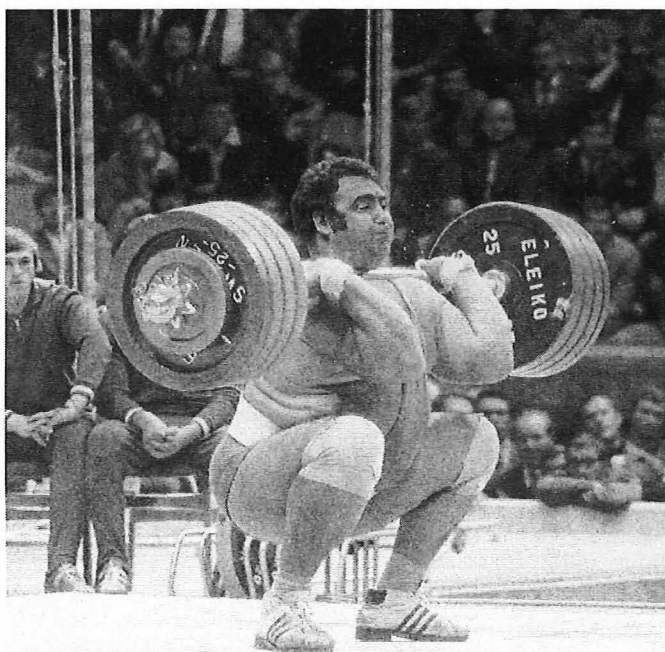
I’d noticed that they served pitchers of beer and so I asked Vasily if he would like to have a beer he quickly answered, “*Da,*

da,” and within a few minutes the pitcher arrived along with two frosted mugs. These seemed to puzzle Vasily, who touched his with his finger and smiled, so I filled his glass and signaled for him to wait just a moment. As I’d hoped, both the beer and the mugs were so cold that almost immediately some of the beer froze. This delighted Vasily, whose eyes lit up like a child’s as he cradled the mug, looked inside it, and took a long pull. After we’d each drunk a mug we moved to the buffet and I gestured for him to take the lead. As we moved along the groaning board I noticed that his first three choices matched my own, and this gave me the idea to simply take what he took as a way to remember what it felt like back when I was a “Super” myself.

When we returned to our table we each had four pieces of chicken, some roasted potatoes, green beans, beets, a modest plate of salad, and a roll. And we began to eat. And drink. I was very hungry by then and although I’d lost approximately 85 pounds from the 335 I weighed in my lifting days I still had a large appetite, so when we’d finished what we had taken I looked at him, then looked at the table and raised my eyebrow and he quickly said, “*Da, Da.*” Once again he led and I followed, quietly taking almost exactly what he took so that when we returned to the table and our third cold mug our

plates had essentially the same things they’d had after our first pass. Once again we ploughed through the food and once more we returned to the table, but this time—as I was taking my fourth piece of chicken—he stopped, looked at my plate and then at his, grinned, and said, “Competition! *Khorosho!*”

By that time I was no longer hungry but I kept going because I’d been found out. By that time we were into our second pitcher of beer, but although our pace slowed slightly we kept going. After six trips to the buffet we’d each eaten 24 pieces of chicken, five or six helpings of two kinds of vegetables, six rolls, and at least three



Alexeyev was the first man to officially clean and jerk five hundred pounds (in the 1970 World Weightlifting Championships in Columbus, Ohio). Later, prior to the removal of the press from the three “Olympic Lifts,” he also became the first man to officially press five hundred pounds, a feat which meant much less to him—as he thought in kilos—than it did to his many American fans.

Photo by Bruce Klemens

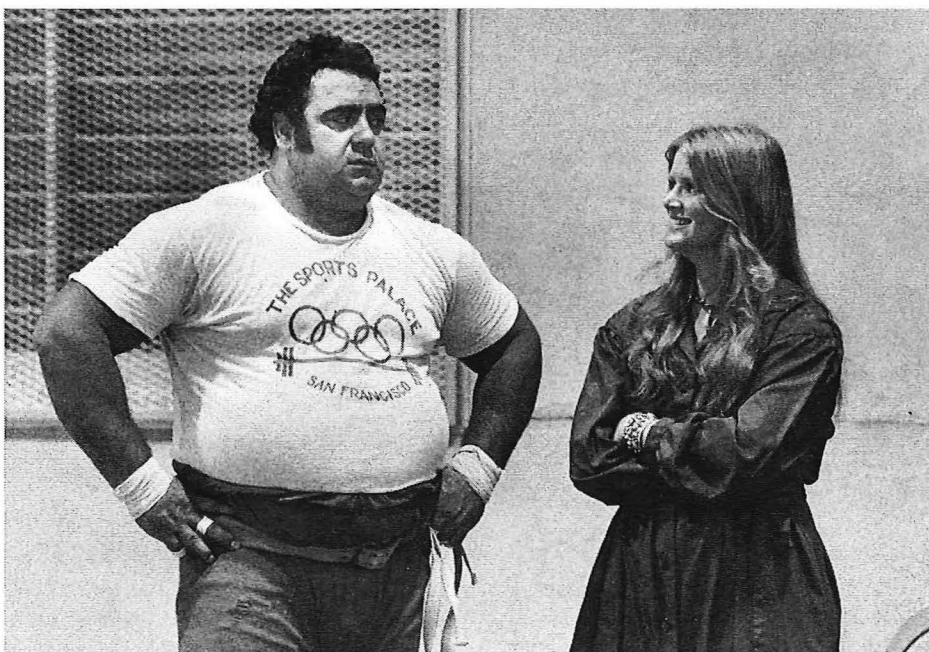
plates of salad. By then I was really suffering, but Vasily still ate and drank with obvious gusto. I knew I was badly overmatched and decided to just wish the increasingly rounder Russian “Bon Appetit” from that point forward. However, just for the theatrics of it, I looked at him when our respective plates were empty and gestured to the table, and he smiled a smile full of satisfaction, rubbed his astounding abdomen, and said, “*Nyet!* Enough!” whereupon we both laughed as I called for the check.

When we arrived at the hotel and hauled ourselves out of the car he insisted that we go to the room where the scale was kept. The scale, of course, was the bane of all weightlifters—except for the superheavyweights, who made great use of it to torment their famously hungry and thirsty comrades—but when we got there the room was uncharacteristically empty. In any case, when my gargantuan companion stepped on it the scale registered 169 kilos (372 pounds). He then looked down at me and said with genuine happiness, “*Khorosho*. World record!



I have other indelible memories about this celebrated athlete—like the time when Jan and I drove a badly injured Alexeyev from the 1978 World Championships to his hotel and drank way too much vodka with him; Nicolai Parhomenko, then the head of “Heavy Athletics” in the Soviet Union; the team physician; and a roomful of other long-faced officials who realized—correctly—that the career of their great champion may well have ended the moment a major muscle in his hip ruptured as he dipped to jerk his first attempt, a weight that would have given him an unprecedented ninth consecutive world title.

One thing which stands out about that night is that Jan was the only woman in a room with seven or eight men who were very seriously pouring tumblers of vodka and making elaborate toasts to the “wonderful world of weightlifting,” to “friendship between nations,” and, especially, to the Soviet hero who lay stricken on the nearby bed. Jan and I had been through a few simi-



Jan Todd and Vasily Alexeyev in the warmup room at the Gettysburg World Championships in 1978. Later in the contest, Alexeyev ruptured a muscle in his hip, an injury that essentially ended his career.

Photo courtesy Sports Illustrated

lar but far less serious drinking sessions with the Soviet lifters and officials before, and we knew that it was considered a major breach of etiquette to follow a toast by sipping one’s vodka or only drinking a swallow or two. The way it went was that glasses were filled, a toast was proclaimed, glasses were raised, and then glasses were emptied—and Jan has always taken great and justifiable pride in the fact that when they filled her glass she got a full share each time, a lifter’s share.

And there was the time Vasily gave me a silver samovar and I gave him a gigantic winter coat hand-sewn and embroidered for me by a group of Inuits in the Northwest Territories who apparently believed I was six inches taller and weighed at least a hundred and fifty pounds more than I was and did. Vasily told me he truly loved the tent-like coat and that it was the first one he’d ever had which was too large for him. He brought it with him to Gettysburg in 1978, and after we hauled him hobbled and hurting to his hotel room that night the first thing he did was to throw the huge coat over his thick shoulders, pull up the wolf-fringed hood, and ask for a bottle of vodka. Vasily Alexeyev was an altogether unforgettable man.

—Terry Todd

NOTES: The *Sports Illustrated* articles cited by the author may be viewed at:

1. <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1093013/index.htm>.
2. <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1093139/2/index.htm>.