

## Reflections on Valentin Hristov's *Champion on a Cross*

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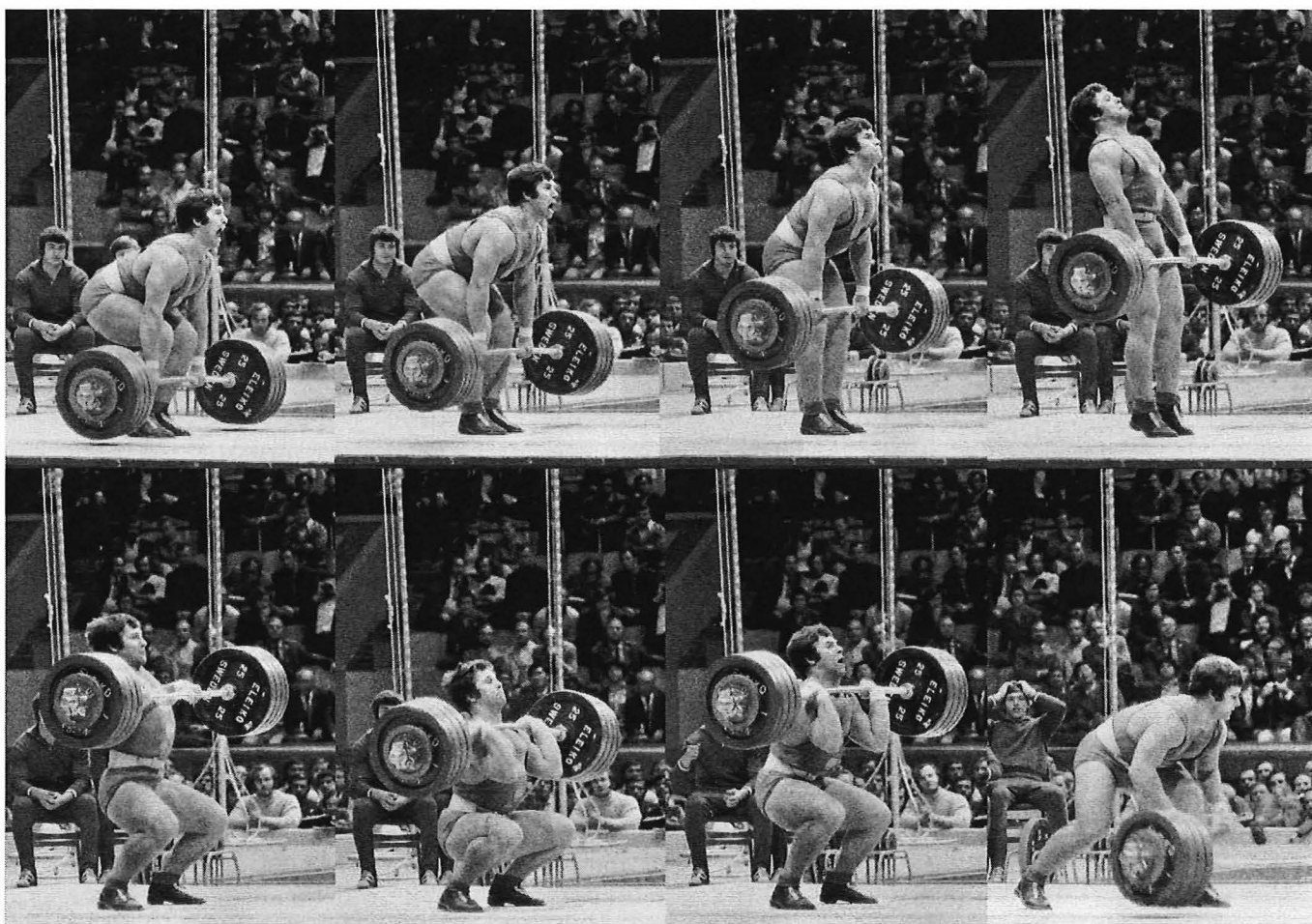
*Michael Cayton was born in Texas, took his undergraduate degree at Stanford, and earned a PhD in Economics at the University of Texas. A competitive weightlifter in high school and college, Cayton has also competed in masters' weightlifting contests in both the United States and Bulgaria. He was a university professor until going to work for the federal government. Many of his assignments were overseas, and he is fluent in Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, French, Bulgarian, Portuguese, and of course English. He first went to Bulgaria in 2000 under the auspices of the US Treasury Department as a consultant in Macroeconomics at the Bulgarian Ministry of the Economy, and he has made his home there since that time. During his years there he has met many people who either are or were active in weightlifting, and he gradually developed an interest in the politics of the sport. A frequent visitor to the United States, Cayton was elected in 2008 as a member of the Board of Directors of USA Weightlifting, and he served until 2012.*

Valentin Hristov (sometimes spelled Kristov) was one of the top Bulgarian weightlifters during the big-time days of Bulgarian weightlifting in the 1970s and 1980s. His lifting achievements included nine world records and two gold medals in world championships. He won the first of these in Moscow in 1975 at the age of nineteen and, far more remarkable, the 110 kilo (242.5 pound) teenager came very close to besting the most coveted world record in the sport—the super-heavyweight record held by the already legendary, supposedly unbeatable “king of the clean and jerk,” the Soviet’s superstar Vasily Alexeyev. (*Editors’ note: The details of this historic attempt appear later in the review.*) The following year, at the Montreal Olympics, Hristov easily won the gold medal only to be stripped of it due to a doping charge. He again won the World Championships in 1977 at Stuttgart. He took silver at the World Championships in Athens in 1979 and won another silver at the Moscow Olympics of 1980. Moscow was Hristov’s last competition as he finished his career at the tender age of twenty-four.

Hristov’s autobiography, *Champion on a Cross*, is basically the story of his early life and lifting career, especially up through and just after Montreal in 1976. He wrote the book during the second half of the 1980s, after he had pretty well broken his ties to the sport and was supporting himself largely with manual labor in the underground economy and the help of friends and family. The book—written prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall

and the subsequent regime change in Bulgaria and other Eastern Bloc member nations—is in some ways an “exposé,” and exposés do not find favor among many, or even most, former sports figures. The book is, however, a true insider’s portrait of the remarkable success Bulgarian lifting enjoyed during its ascendancy under the controversial coach Ivan Abadjiev; the book would, obviously, never have been published during the communist period. Fortunately for Hristov’s book, however, if not for the Bulgarian weightlifting program, that regime fell in late 1989 and thereby removed the largest hurdle toward its publication. Even so, during the turbulent transition period of the 1990s, with the Bulgarian economy in constant turmoil, it was not easy for Hristov to find a publisher. Finally, however, the book was published in 1998, but it only remained on the market (even on the shelves, to be precise) for a very short period before disappearing. By 2010, when this reviewer learned of the book’s existence, there was not a single copy to be found—not in any of the many used book shops, not even in the National Library or the National Sports Academy. I eventually managed to locate Hristov himself in 2011 at his home in Pernik (an industrial town about thirty kilometers from Sofia) and was given a copy of the book.<sup>1</sup> During the following months, I spent many days discussing the book and interviewing Hristov.

It should be mentioned at the outset that Hristov did not write this book with the aim of producing a standard autobiography of a prominent sports figure.



*Iron Man* magazine describes 110 kilo class (220 pound) lifter Valentin Hristov's attempt at 245.5 kilos (541.2 pounds) in the clean and jerk at the World Weightlifting Championships in Moscow, in 1975, as the "The Greatest Lift Ever Attempted." Special thanks to Bruce Klemens, who wrote the article. Bruce also took these photos and was kind enough to send the original images so they could be reproduced here. Had Hristov made the lift it would have exceeded the world record in the superheavyweight class held by the already legendary Vasily Alexeyev and become the heaviest clean and jerk ever made.

Instead, he intended it to be a work of literature based on his personal experiences, rather than a straightforward historical account of his life. For this reason, the book consists of a series of vignettes, i.e., a series of anecdotes, narratives, and themes. As a result the book is often not in chronological order. Sometimes this works well, but sometimes it leads to confusion as to what happened, and when. In certain cases the book would definitely read better and be easier to follow if the order of the vignettes were changed. The lack of continuity also means that the narrative is often somewhat disjointed, which diminishes the book's artistic value as well as its coherence and clarity.

Another drawback, at least for readers primarily interested in sport history, is that the book's time span is very limited, especially the coverage of Hristov's career after he retired. There is a good deal of detail regarding

the author's background, and even his family's background and his early days as a teenager growing up in his hometown. However, the chronicle becomes more and more abbreviated and compressed as the years pass, so that there is much less coverage of the second half of Hristov's lifting career (after the Montreal Olympics) than of the first half. Even a casual reader will conclude that Hristov's enthusiasm for the book began to flag toward the end of this writing project, perhaps in this way matching the arc of his lifting career or simply reflecting his wish to be done with the project. In any case, the book basically ends with the Moscow Olympics in 1980, when he was still only twenty-four years old. Most readers would certainly have been interested in at least a brief discussion of Hristov's subsequent experiences as an assistant coach at the National Sports Academy, of the removal of Abadjiev as head

coach of weightlifting (although he was brought back later in the 1990s), of the government's dismantling of much of its sports industry, and of the general turmoil that crippled the previous decade's most successful sport's team. Also of interest would have been his observations and experiences regarding any long-lasting health effects he and/or his teammates experienced as a result of either the extensive doping program, the almost brutal intensity of the training protocol practiced by the lifters of those days, or both.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of those weaknesses, the book is highly interesting for its personal portrait of the Bulgarian weightlifting scene of the 1970s, and for Hristov's individual situation within that scene. There are many fascinating details, not only about Hristov and his feelings, but about his friends and teammates, as well as his famous—yet controversial coach—Ivan Abadjiev. Hristov's no-holds-barred description of the team's doping practices is very helpful for sport historians, and hair-raising for anyone who still might cling to the vision of an ideal of clean sport. The book is also useful for its details about Bulgaria's state sports policies—from the standpoint of the way they played out at the ground level, i.e., how they affected the athletes themselves. In the reviewer's opinion, the book succeeds in providing a very plausible portrait of Bulgaria's version of the weightlifting "sports machines" of the late communist era. Devoid of an ideological message, though obviously heavily influenced by a strictly personal perspective, the book is a particularly valuable contribution to sport history.

Hristov's earliest ambitions to become a sports star came partly from the tales he heard of the life-styles of some of those who had already made it to the top in Bulgaria. (By the 1950s, Bulgaria—like other communist states—was already pushing Olympic sports as part of its program of promoting national pride.) By the sixth grade young Valentin had heard the stories of two-time Olympic wrestling champion Boyan Radev, for example, who would motor around Bulgaria in his own Mercedes. (Obtaining *any* car at that time was very difficult for ordinary citizens and getting a Mercedes was reserved only for the most famous or well-connected.)<sup>3</sup> Inspired, Hristov started building his muscles with a pair of home-made dumbbells, but soon graduated to a set of home-made barbells which he and other kids stole from the yard of a collective farm.

Hristov's real introduction to competitive lifting, however, came more than a year later when at age fourteen he learned that a local lifting club was being organized by the state-sponsored Pernik sports association.<sup>4</sup> The new trainer/coach, Viktor Dimchev—who also played the trombone in the Pernik orchestra—was duly impressed by Hristov, who already showed considerable strength from his home training. Dimchev, who was apparently very effective in recruiting talented boys with dreams of sports fame, immediately encouraged the boy to begin training in the small weightlifting hall. Soon Dimchev was having them train after school for up to four hours a day (Dimchev himself had attended the National Sports Academy and knew that Abadjiev, by then national team coach, trained his own lifters much more strenuously than did any other coach of his era).<sup>5</sup> Later, Dimchev even had Hristov and the other team members come in for additional workouts in the mornings before school. And the team had practice competitions once a week as well.

The European Weightlifting Championships were held in Sofia the following spring, so young Hristov and his fellow team members were treated to many top-level performances, including that of the Soviet superheavyweight star, Vasily Alexeyev. This gave Dimchev further leverage with his ambitious team members, and during the summer vacation break he had them working even harder, and doing two four-hour sessions per day: Dimchev claimed that this was standard fare for the national team by this time, though according to Hristov it was actually more workout time than even the national team was spending. Indeed, Hristov speculates that Abadjiev was using Dimchev as well as other club coaches to "experiment" with varying training loads in an effort to learn if fifteen-year-olds could handle such extraordinary workouts.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the workload, Hristov and a few of his teammates continued through the summer. At one point Dimchev even wanted his team to sleep at the gym, but Hristov refused, which led to a blow-up with his coach and Hristov's walking out. Dimchev quickly gave in and implored his budding star to come back the following day. Hristov comments, "If he hadn't given in on my mulish disposition, Viktor Dimchev probably would have lost me as a weight-lifter."<sup>7</sup>

Even though some of his teammates began to slack off later under the heavy "vacation" workouts,



Hristov seemed to thrive. And later in the summer of 1971 at the national individual championships Hristov took fourth place in the total and won a silver medal in the clean and jerk with a lift of 115 kilos (253.5 pounds) in the 82.5 kilo (181.7 pound) class. Hristov and his father took great pride in this achievement, but it contributed to major problems immediately thereafter. Having finished the eighth grade the previous school year, Hristov had intended to enroll in a technical school.<sup>8</sup> But Dimchev apparently convinced him that he would have to spend too much time there on his technical drawings and that he should enroll at the closer-by gymnasium. However, at the gymnasium, the administrators would not excuse Hristov from the mandatory “brigade work.”<sup>9</sup> Hristov assumed that Dimchev would arrange something with the school director, but in the back of his mind the boy was already finding an excuse not to attend school that year and didn’t push Dimchev on the issue. When later Dimchev found out that Hristov was not going to school, he promised to see if he could get Hristov enrolled in the “Olympic Hopes” sports school.<sup>10</sup> But that didn’t happen either.

For some time Hristov’s parents were not aware of what was happening because he would take his school bag with him to the gym, as if he were attending classes. When finally they learned he wasn’t in school, there was, of course, a major ruckus. His parents initially cut him off from Dimchev and the weightlifting team, but amazingly, after much consultation the arrangement was allowed to continue and Hristov remained out of school. His father, against the wishes of his mother, agreed to allow Hristov to continue his lifting with the understanding that Dimchev would see to it that Hristov would make such great progress that he would become a member of the national team and definitely get into the “Olympic Hopes” sports school in the fall of the next school year—1972. The agreement also included the promise that the boy would go on to college so that he would not have to sweat and strain at the kind of work his father did as a smelter.

This plan really put the pressure on Hristov to train hard and on Dimchev to push for even heavier workouts. Under such emotional and physical pressure, Hristov found the gains slow in coming. A number of times he was at the point of giving up his training and trying to satisfy his mother by applying to enter the technical school at the middle of the school year. But each

time Dimchev coaxed him back into the gym. So, young Valentin continued to grind it out: “Looking back after all these years, when I thumb through my training diary of that time I want to cry. It seems clear to me that no other fifteen-year-old lifter in the world would bear up to the training I did then, not even for a week, much less a month. I know that many trainers would say, if they saw the diary, that it is not possible, that it’s just not true. But, I didn’t have anyone to lie to; I wrote those workouts for myself in the diary, and I went through them in the gym, and without Viktor Dimchev. With more than twelve hundred tons of lifting on the heaviest months . . . my muscles would begin to feel more or less normal only on those days when, totally exhausted, I would swear off the weights and wait for Dimchev to come to the house to take me back to the gym.”<sup>11</sup>

But Hristov bore up and then some. At the national championship for juniors in 1972 he won first place in the 90 kilo (198.2 pound) class. He indicates that he feels lucky that in the two weeks prior to the meet he trained less due to an ankle strain, which allowed him to be fresh at the competition and to set a national junior record of 133 kilos (293.2 pounds) in the press, snatch 130 kilos (286 pounds), and clean and jerk 160 kilos (352.5 pounds). That meet set him definitely on the road to becoming a world champion and as Dimchev had promised, the trainer at “Olympic Hopes” took Hristov in as an official pupil. Two weeks later, even though Valentin was only sixteen years old, the national coach, Abadjiev put him on the national team.

In spite of Hristov’s record of long workouts in Pernik, he still had trouble adapting to Abadjiev’s workout routines. The main difference it seems, was that Abadjiev had them lifting near their maximums for single repetitions, while in Pernik he had done more repetitions with longer rests in between sets. Thus, he became so worn out in those first few weeks he felt like quitting. And to make things worse, some of the other lifters, the “old guns,” were rough on the newcomer. But one day one of the more experienced lifters finally let him in on a secret—most of the lifters scrimped on the workouts prescribed to them by Abadjiev. They would lift up to what they felt they could handle, but rarely did they complete the entire prescribed workout. Abadjiev didn’t have the time or interest to check everyone’s sets, and he mainly wanted to see how the workouts were coming. The old guns would fill in their workout forms to match



the requirements, regardless of whether they had really completed all the sets. In spite of his initial fears of being caught in a lie, Hristov gradually also adopted this tactic. It worked; he started becoming more comfortable with his heavy singles, and Abadjiev was happy.

The following March of 1974, just after he had turned eighteen, Hristov lifted in a tournament in Armenia (then part of the Soviet Union) in which he snatched 162.5 kilos (358 pounds) and jerked 200 kilos (440.7 pounds) at a bodyweight of 100 kilos (220 pounds). This 200-kilo jerk compared with a lift of 70 kilos (154.2 pounds) at his first workout in the gym at Pernik three-and-a-half years earlier. Hristov maintains that up to that point he had trained completely clean, without any steroids or hormonal injections. He justifiably takes much pride in such an accomplishment, saying that it must be a world record for lifting progress made completely "clean."<sup>12</sup>

But then things changed. With Hristov's results from Armenia, Abadjiev began to think about the teenager's possibilities for the European Championships scheduled for two months later in Verona, Italy. After much deliberation, in early April Abadjiev proposed to Hristov that he put on an extra 10 kilos (22 pounds) of bodyweight to lift in the 110 kilo (242.5 pound) category in Verona—even though by then the contest was only two weeks away. Hristov, with considerable misgivings, went along. With his first use of steroids—and much stuffing at the training table—Hristov did in fact manage to quickly boost his weight, and weighed in at Verona at 108.2 kilos (238.5 pounds). It was Hristov's first big international meet, and he took away a silver medal by snatching 167.5 kilos (369.2 pounds), jerking 220 kilos (440.7 pounds), and setting junior world records in the snatch, the clean and jerk, and the total. He lost only to the Soviet champion Valery Ustyuzhin, whose final jerk of 227.5 kilos (501.5 pounds) was a new world record.<sup>13</sup>

But whether because of the doping, the weight gain, or something else altogether, Hristov started having physical problems soon after his successes in the European Championships. Within four days of the meet he unintentionally lost back down to his previous weight. He also noticed that he had stretch marks on his arms and waist—no doubt because of the rapid weight gain. But the more serious problem was that he started having lower back pains. Abadjiev, who was known for his dismissive attitude to all *kontuzii* (sprains and pulls), arranged for him to receive pain pills, but apparently they had lit-

tle effect. Soon after, Hristov began making the rounds of various doctors and "healers." One doctor gave him injections in the spine, which did no good. Then a team member took him to a "doctor" who specialized in manual therapy. This gentleman had Hristov lie down on his stomach, then sat on top of him and lifted Hristov's shoulders so as to arch Hristov backward. While Hristov claims he almost passed out from the pain, the doctor indicated that this was proof that he had freed the "blockages" in his back and that he could start working out lightly in a few days. When this failed to work, more treatments followed, but none seemed to definitively free the "blockages." Finally, after time away from training and some much more moderate physical therapy, his back started getting better. But by then it was too late for Hristov to compete in the Manila World Championships of 1974—where it had been thought (or hoped) that he might become a world champion.

By the spring of 1975, Hristov, still just nineteen years old, was back in top shape and had put the needed weight back on for the 110 kilo (220.2 pound) category. And, indeed, 1975 was to be Hristov's best year of competition. In the Danube Cup competition in Germany in April he not only won gold, but made a new world record in the total of 402.5 kilos (887.2 pounds). Next came the first-ever Junior World (and European) Championships, which took place July 5-12 in Marseilles, France. Initially, Abadjiev wanted Hristov to lift in the superheavyweight category (110+ kilos) in order to try to maximize team points and beat the Soviet team.<sup>14</sup> Naturally this did not go down well with Hristov, since it would mean giving up the possibility of setting another world record (and collecting the corresponding prize money he would win from the sports association). But, at the last minute, after Hristov had already arrived for the contest, this decision was reversed because it was calculated that the Bulgarian team was likely to win the team medal in any case, and so Hristov was allowed to go back down to the 110 kilo class. In the contest he not only won gold and the Junior World Championship, but also made new world junior *and senior* records in all three event categories—178 kilos (392.4 pounds) on an extra attempt in the snatch, 230 kilos (507 pounds) in the clean and jerk, and 405 kilos (892.7 pounds) in the total.<sup>15</sup>

He was even better two months later at the World Weightlifting Championships in Moscow, on September 15-23, which was certainly Hristov's most stun-

ning performance ever. He went three for three in the snatch with 170 kilos (374.7 pounds), 175 kilos (385.7 pounds), and 180 kilos (396.7 pounds) which was a new world record. What's more, with his first clean and jerk at 220 kilos (485 pounds) he knew he had won the overall title and the gold medal, as he was 10 kilos (22 pounds) ahead of the Soviet lifter, Vasily Mazheikov. He then made 230 kilos (507 pounds) easily for his second attempt. At that point he wanted to go for 245.5 kilos (541.2 pounds) on his third attempt, which would have exceeded the heaviest clean and jerk ever made—Vasily Alexeyev's existing world superheavyweight record of 245 kilos (540 pounds). According to Hristov, however, Abadjiev would not allow it, and insisted that he try the 245.5 only on an extra (fourth) attempt. So Hristov took "only" 237.5 kilos (523.5 pounds) on his third attempt, thus making a new world record in both the clean and jerk and the total and besting his Soviet opponent by 27.5 kilos (60.5 pounds) on the total. On his fourth attempt with the superheavyweight world record 245.5 kilos, Hristov racked the bar on his shoulders and got most of the way up, but the photos indicate that the bar was slightly forward and he was not able to adjust and bring the bar back in line, loaded as it was with this prodigious weight—more than 60 pounds over double his bodyweight.<sup>16</sup> In any case, he lost the weight forward and the bar fell to the platform. While very disappointed at the time, Hristov later came to believe that it was a blessing in disguise, suggesting that besting the record of the Soviet superheavy hero Alexeyev might not have been good for his health. Even so, the attempt electrified the sport of weightlifting and solidified Hristov's reputation as a genuine phenomenon.

In October of that same year, 1975, Valentin and the superheavy on the Bulgarian team, Hristov Plachkov, were invited to a special TV-sponsored meet in London, a "Superman Cup." This turned into more of a farce than a tournament. Valentin was not really in shape but went anyway. While there, he was given the opportunity to take some publicity photos for the *London Daily Mirror* and in one of the shots Hristov was pictured supposedly lifting with his back a board on which eight "cheesecake girls" were sitting, with a total weight said to be approximately equal to his record total of 417.5 kilos (920.2 pounds). The agent for the newspaper gave each of the girls twenty pounds sterling (then worth about one hundred dollars) for posing for the photos, and was about to offer Hristov the same when the political minder for the

team, Asen Stoev, jumped in front and exclaimed, "No professionalism! No professionalism!" Hristov, meanwhile, was saying, "Now wait, Comrade Stoev, now wait," but the agent shrugged and walked away.<sup>17</sup> However, as Hristov was not in very good shape and did not feel like competing, he did not turn up for the competition (ostensibly because he was sick). Alexeyev also came to the meet but did not lift, claiming that he was willing to go out on the stage and be seen by the audience for the £15 pocket money he was offered, but not to actually lift.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the Bulgarian superheavy Plachkov won the contest.

The Olympic Games in 1976 were scheduled to be held in Montreal. Obviously these were tremendously important not only for Abadjiev and the Bulgarian sports establishment, but for Hristov personally. In the run-up to the games, the Bulgarian team was invited to a friendly America vs. Europe meet in Montreal held on 6-7 December 1975. By this time the doping issue was becoming much more troublesome. The word was that at the summer Montreal Olympics all medalists would be tested, as well as a random sampling of other contestants. The question, however, was how long before the contest would the athletes need to quit using drugs in order to test clean. Because of this issue, Hristov decided to do some experimenting on himself, and he claims to have quit using all performance-enhancing drugs for seventy-seven days prior to the America-Europe meet in December. In any event, he seemed out of shape to reporters and managed to snatch only 160 kilos (352.5 pounds) while the American champion Mark Cameron succeeded with 165 kilos (363.7 pounds). Nevertheless, Hristov managed to pull out a first-place win with his final lift of 222.5 kilos (490.5 pounds) in the jerk, compared to Cameron's new record of 215 kilos (473.7 pounds).<sup>19</sup> At the "Record-breakers" meet held in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, less than two weeks later on 17 December, Hristov did not compete, reportedly because of a "painful back injury."<sup>20</sup>

Hristov then considered two different strategies. One was to train altogether clean, all the way to the Olympics. But this would mean lighter and less frequent workouts, which would mean that he would need to get the plan cleared with Abadjiev, who—Hristov believed—would almost certainly veto it. The other strategy would be to work out even more intensively (*à la* Abadjiev), to continue with the doping, and to work up to perhaps 195 and 255 kilos (429.7 and 562 pounds)

before the Olympics. Then, with this unheard-of level of lifting prowess he would (he hoped) be able to cut the drug use for ten days or more and still win with lifts of perhaps 185 kilos (407.7 pounds) and 235 kilos (518 pounds). In any case this was the strategy Abadjiev decided to follow, and it appears likely that Hristov never even discussed the "clean" alternative with the dominating national coach.

In May of 1975 the entire Bulgarian weightlifting team, as well as athletes from other sports, started training at the sports complex of Belmeken in the mountains south of Sofia. The idea among some sports theorists, apparently, was that this higher altitude training would help the lifters use oxygen better, and so improve the chances at Montreal, even though the latter is not much above sea level and even though altitude training is of relatively little use in a sport like weightlifting or putting the shot. Hristov claims that Abadjiev insisted on everyone training there for fear that he might be criticized later if he did not do so and then the team failed to perform up to par. In fact, according to Hristov, the team lost one top-notch lifter, Atanas Kirov, who developed kidney problems and wanted to train with his own coach back in Sofia.<sup>21</sup>

The pre-Olympic doping was very heavy, and Hristov claims that Abadjiev was giving each lifter 180 Dianabol tablets of five milligrams per week. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were forty-pill days, and Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday were twenty-pill days. They were also being injected with the steroid Retabolil one day a week.<sup>22</sup> There were also heavy doses of vitamins—as well as other substances about which the lifters were told little or nothing. Hristov notes that his urine turned brown during that period.<sup>23</sup> He also indicates that after the third week of intensive training and massive drug use, he started seeing stars in front of his eyes, and even passed out one day in the gym. The team doctor decided he had gone into shock from the intensity of the workouts, but Hristov persisted, adjusted, and over the coming weeks worked up to a snatch of 192.5 kilos (424.2 pounds) and a jerk of 250 kilos (551 pounds). "Without the horse-sized doses of the white pills [steroids] and the injections of Retabolil, of course," Hristov maintains, "that [kind of workout intensity] would be impossible."<sup>24</sup> He says that without the support of the performance-enhancing drugs he would not have been able to walk out of the training hall, much less show up for the next workout. According to Hristov, all of the lifters and

many of the training staff were convinced that the extent of the doping and the intensity of the training were dangerous.<sup>25</sup> Even so, there was still the nagging question of the doping tests. *[Editors' note: The Montreal Games in 1976 was the first time in Olympic history that testing would be done to detect anabolic steroids, although at that time no test had been developed which could screen for exogenous testosterone, which is highly anabolic. What makes Hristov's account so fascinating is that it has been widely reported since 1976 that many athletes in weightlifting and other sports were aware of this loophole and therefore "beat" the drug test by stopping their use of traditional anabolic steroids and substituting them with synthetic testosterone. Apparently, although it would appear from the results of the lifting that some of the Eastern Bloc nations were aware of how to avoid positive tests through the use of this procedure, the Bulgarian team had not been informed.]* Not long before leaving Belmeken, Abadjiev supposedly learned from colleagues that quitting the steroids only ten days before the tests was not safe, and that at least fifteen days were needed for the metabolites of the steroid pills to leave the body and possibly twenty-one days for the injections to clear the body. There were rumors that one of the doctors would be able to obtain newer steroid variants from Germany which could not be detected by the labs. This was a false rumor and a decision was made for the lifters to discontinue the steroids seventeen days before the lifting was due to start in Montreal.

On his return to Sofia, and only a few days before he was scheduled to depart for Montreal (some of the lighter team members had already left), Hristov developed a very bad boil on the back of his leg behind the knee. The boil became so painful he could hardly put on his pants or walk. Seeing his chances of an Olympic gold medal possibly slipping away, Hristov became hysterical, could not rest, had panic attacks, and could hardly breathe. Some of the doctors and trainers thought that both the boil and the panic attacks were the result of the heavy doping. Finally, calmed by sedatives and the visit of a friend who told him he simply had to accept limits, and understand that he was a human being like other people Hristov recovered and was able to leave for Montreal on time.

The experience at Montreal Hristov describes in the aptly-named chapter "From the Bottom to the Very Deepest." Indeed the whole episode from the lead-up training to the lifting itself in Montreal sounds nightmar-



ish. Cutting off the steroids seemed to affect the heavier lifters, like Hristov, the most—perhaps because the ten bodyweight classes then being used competed one day at a time, which meant that a heavier man like Hristov would have been off drugs for a week or so longer than the lifters in the two lightest bodyweight classes. And, of course, Hristov had lost critical training time due to the boil and the panic attacks.

There were also problems at the team level. The Montreal training hall lifts were trending down. After one of the lighter Bulgarian lifters missed all of his lifts and “bombed out” early in the competition, Abadjiev feared more failures. In a dark, gloomy mood, he called a team meeting, and one of the team doctors (the one called the “Magician”) showed up with a catheter and syringe. Abadjiev went into a speech recounting how he had learned from the experiences of the Soviet lifters about the influence of the steroids—how, for example, the Soviet lifters trained less for the 1968 Olympics and had lifted more than the Bulgarians. He added that he had been forced to start using the steroids for the team to have any success, and that some teams had access to stimulants that the Bulgarians did not have. But he maintained that there was a solution to their problem, which was that those lifters who had not yet competed would go back on the steroids but, with the aid of the Magician and his catheter, would empty their bladders just before being tested and have it replaced with “clean” urine by the Magician before they had to submit a sample.<sup>26</sup> According to Hristov, one lifter, Atanas Shopov, finally spoke up, said it was better not to compete in the Games than do that, and walked out. The other lifters then followed him out. Thus, Hristov might well have joined them and gone on to compete for better or worse without any more drugs.

While he was still undecided as to what he should do, Hristov soon faced another serious problem. This problem was that the medical committee of the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) had decided that one athlete from each team would be selected at random for pre-testing. Unfortunately for Hristov, he was the one selected from the Bulgarian team, and he learned that he was to be tested two days before he was to lift, which would mean that his urine would be collected only thirteen days since he would have taken his last ten pills. This was thought by Abadjiev and the team doctors to be too risky. So Hristov faced a hard choice—he could gamble that he would not test positive or he could use the

catheter. The only other option, Hristov thought, was to pack up and return to Bulgaria without competing, which would probably mean the end of his lifting career. “Christ, was this what I banged away so hard for, for almost six years and for eight hours a day?” Hristov asked himself forlornly.<sup>27</sup> After more coaxing from Abadjiev, Hristov gave in and went for the catheter. Abadjiev then gave him two hundred tablets of five milligrams each for July 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, and another 150 pills for the 26<sup>th</sup>, the day of his competition.<sup>28</sup>

But the fact was that even with the new “horse-sized” doses of steroids Hristov’s lifting condition was far from his best. The episode with the boil in Sofia, the subsequent panic attacks, and the break in his steroid use had not only limited his training and weakened him but also undermined his confidence and concentration. What’s more, the further torment over the urine-switching scheme certainly did not help and Hristov was having major difficulties sleeping. He was given two types of sleeping pills; one of them provided little relief, and the stronger version left him groggy.

During the competition in between the snatch and the clean and jerk the team doctor (the “Magician”) flushed out Hristov’s bladder and—by means of a catheter—replaced Hristov’s urine with that from one of the trainers. However, apparently the procedure did not go completely smoothly and Hristov experienced considerable pain while trying to warm up for the clean and jerk. Even so, he finally came around and went on to win the gold medal with lifts of 175 kilos (385.7 pounds) in the snatch and 225 kilos (496 pounds) on his second attempt in the clean and jerk; he passed on his third attempt. Both lifts were well down from his best, of course, and worlds away from what he had done in training not long before.<sup>29</sup> Shortly afterwards he was summoned to the Doping Control to provide a urine sample. On the award podium, Hristov says, he wanted to break out in tears of joy for the Bulgarian journalists to report back to Bulgaria, but he couldn’t.

With his gold medal in hand, Hristov received on his return to Bulgaria a new Volga automobile. He had already been given an apartment not long before, and now he became engaged to get married. Three weeks after receiving his gold medal he learned that the Western press was reporting that traces of steroids were found in his urine. This was officially confirmed by the IOC Medical Commission shortly thereafter. Hristov, however, believes that his positive was bogus. In support of this

contention he includes in his book a statement by a Doctor Baldzhiev, who apparently represented Bulgaria to the IOC's Medical Commission, to the effect that the particular variety of anabolic steroid that was supposedly found in Hristov's urine was not even available in Europe at that time. Further, Baldzhiev claims that the lead seal on the vial which he was shown (the B sample) had been tampered with, which meant that the sample could have been switched.<sup>30</sup> There was also the fact that the urine which came from Hristov after the lifting was supposedly "clean," since it really had come from someone else. *[Editors' note: Because it isn't possible for a person to expel all of the urine from his or her bladder, and because it would have taken well over an hour after expelling his own urine and having "clean" urine transferred via a catheter into his bladder there could have been sufficient metabolites of banned anabolic steroids in his urine to trigger a positive result, particularly in light of the huge quantities of drugs he had just taken. As was revealed by testimony given to the Dubin Commission in 1989, members of the Canadian weightlifting team found this out the hard way when they used the same painful procedure and still tested positive.]* However that may be, Hristov thinks that he and another Bulgarian lifter, Blagoi Blagoev, were nailed for doping largely because some people in the IOC chain of command wanted to show that the IOC was tough on doping.<sup>31</sup> An additional factor, Hristov believes, was that two Soviet lifters, Yuri Zaitsev and Pyrotr Korol, moved up to claim gold after Hristov and the Polish lifter Kaczmarek were disqualified.<sup>32</sup>

At first it appeared that Hristov might not after all have to return his gold medal, due to the problem that those who initially placed fourth but now would become bronze medal winners had not been tested for doping. Hristov reports that this complication was glossed over and he was eventually told by the Bulgarian Olympic Committee that he must return the medal. If he refused, he was told, he would have to pay for the Volga automobile he had received upon his return from Montreal. Hristov did return the medal to the officials at the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, but not before having his name engraved on the back.<sup>33</sup>

Hristov seriously considered leaving weightlifting after Montreal. But of course he was only twenty years old, and really had no professional qualifications for anything *but* weightlifting. So he soldiered on. He had a knee operation two months after Montreal to

remove bone chips resulting from his last attempt clean and jerk in the Olympics. He continued afterwards to have knee pains from time to time but they did not keep him from getting back into shape for the next year's world championship in Stuttgart. The team itself did not do well, and by the time the lifting began for Hristov's 110 kilo category, three of his teammates had bombed and the team was well below the hoped-for points they expected to have at that point. But Hristov recounts that he was feeling strong and that he hardly cared about the team points.<sup>34</sup> While Abadjiev wanted Hristov to choose his weights conservatively Hristov insisted on a 7.5 kilo increase for his third attempt in the snatch. He made it with a lift of 180 kilos (396.7 pounds) "so that they would see that they had unfairly taken away my medal at Montreal."<sup>35</sup> That lift gave Hristov a 10 kilo (22 pounds) lead in the snatch over Zaitsev—who had taken gold in Montreal after Hristov was disqualified. However, Hristov's knee started hurting badly after his first attempt clean and jerk at 220 kilos (485 pounds) which was successful. He considered passing on his next two lifts, but thinking it might be his last lift in competition he went for 225 kilos (496 pounds) on his second attempt, which meant that Zaitsev would have needed 235 kilos (518 pounds) to take first place. Hristov made the 225, though he had to be helped off the platform afterwards. Zaitsev only could equal Hristov's 225, so Hristov again became world champion with a total of 405 kilos (892.7 pounds) vs. 395 kilos (870.7 pounds) for Zaitsev. Hristov felt vindicated and claims in the book that this was his most prized medal.<sup>36</sup> But, he says, "With my win in Stuttgart I still could not recoup the time which the IOC had cut from my life when it took away the medal I won in Montreal."<sup>37</sup>

Hristov, with his pride now restored to some extent, continued to have trouble with his left knee as well as with Abadjiev, with whom he was becoming more and more disillusioned. Burned out by the weightlifting scene, he essentially quit training and embarked upon efforts to find a new life. A sizeable chapter in the book is devoted to describing the twists and turns of his Kafkaesque campaign to wrangle a career outside of sport.<sup>38</sup> In fact, that chapter is an instructive example into how things were done (or attempted) during the communist period. Connections, even more than in the West, were absolutely vital. Because of his sports fame, Hristov of course had a good number of such connections. One aspiration he had was

to get into law school at the University of Sofia, but this would be difficult; with his paltry academic background he could not expect to do well on the entry exams. One angle he tried was to become a competitor for a different weightlifting club—he was officially still lifting for Pernik at that time—where one of the top officials promised to help Hristov get into a special school for State Security agents. This might have been a good launchpad for him to get into law school—or at least to have a steady job in a supposedly stable occupation—but this approach ran into difficulties when officials in Pernik got wind of Hristov's intention to switch clubs.

Many failed efforts later, Hristov gave up on that approach and instead decided to enter as a student at the National Sports Academy, to which Hristov automatically became entitled when he won the Olympics (regardless, apparently, of the doping problem). Then, Hristov's idea was, the rector there could transfer Hristov to the Law School at Sofia University. However, this plan also went awry when the rector at Sofia University refused to go along. As an alternative, one of Hristov's connections suggested that Hristov should just attend classes for a year at the National Sports Academy and then try again to get permission to enter Law School.

In the end, Hristov finally decided that perhaps the best way forward would be to go back to the weightlifting team and try to win a gold medal at the Moscow Olympics of 1980. After all, as some of his friends and contacts pointed out, he was still only twenty-two years old in 1978. With a medal in Moscow he could then proceed to the National Sports Academy, and perhaps try later to get into law school. So Hristov went back to Abadjiev and asked if he could rejoin the team. Abadjiev replied that the door was always open to him, and Hristov reluctantly resumed his lifting.<sup>39</sup>

But Hristov was still having knee problems and still worried about his general health. In September of 1978 he went to see a traditional "healer." Hristov claims that it was only with the herbs he received from that healer that he was able to continue training for Moscow.<sup>40</sup> But the problem with the left knee remained and in 1980 he started having problems with the right knee as well. The team doctor thought it was probably a torn meniscus and would require surgery to fix. However, one day Hristov's teammate Blagoev, who was also having knee problems, came to Hristov to report that he had found someone who had helped him. Blagoev then took Hristov to another famous "healer." This healer's

technique involved working a massive callous on the joint of his finger into the side of the knee, the apparent philosophy being that "one nail drives out another." The procedure hurt tremendously, according to Hristov, but he and Blagoev continued to see the healer from time to time during their training in 1979 and 1980.<sup>41</sup>

It seems evident in retrospect that Hristov's injury problems remained a serious hindrance. His next big meet was the European Weightlifting Championships in Belgrade in the spring of 1980. Here Hristov made only his opening snatch with 175 kilos (385.7 pounds). He claims that he was strong enough at the time to have made 182.5 kilos (402.2 kilos) but that the combination of the long stairs to the platform and the uneven platform itself rattled him. He made 227.5 kilos (501.5 pounds) in the clean and jerk, giving him a total of 402.5 kilos (887.2 pounds). But this was not up to the standard of the rising Soviet star Leonid Taranenko, who won gold with a new world record total of 420 kilos (925.7 pounds) with lifts of 190 kilos (418.7 pounds) and 230 kilos (507 pounds).

The Moscow Olympics came less than two months later—at the end of June 1980. It was obvious that Taranenko would be no pushover. But Hristov reports doing 187.5 (413.2 pounds) and 245 kilos (540 pounds) on his last workout before leaving for Moscow. These lifts would have given him a total of 432.5 kilos (953.2 pounds). Hristov's trainers reckoned that he would lose to Taranenko by five kilos in the snatch, but would have a good chance to win gold by beating Taranenko by five or seven-and-a-half kilos in the clean and jerk. Hristov's openers would be 177.5 kilos (391.2 pounds) and 230 kilos (507 pounds). When Taranenko's openers were announced as 182.5 kilos (402.2 pounds) and 220 kilos (485 pounds) and when the Soviet lifter weighed in slightly heavier than Hristov, the Bulgarian coaches breathed a little easier. But Hristov was having a bad case of nerves.

Things looked good for Hristov after the snatch. He made all three lifts at 177.5 (391.2), 182.5 (402.2), and 185 (407.7). Taranenko, however, after making his opener of 182.5 (402.2), jumped to 190 (418.7), and missed both attempts. This left Hristov 2.5 kilos ahead and lighter as well. Abadjiev's conservative strategy in the clean and jerk was for Hristov just to try to match whatever Taranenko did, since if successful this would leave Hristov safely ahead. Both lifters did 220 kilos (485 pounds) relatively easily. But Taranenko then



jumped to 235 kilos (496 pounds) on his second attempt—and succeeded. Hristov racked the 235 kilos on his second attempt, but just did not have the leg strength to stand with it. On his third attempt, Hristov managed to struggle up with the bar, but he writes that just as he was about to jerk it a spectator jumped up from his seat and stabbed the air with his fist. Somehow the bar got away from Hristov and he lost the lift. But even if he had made that lift it would not have been enough. Taranenkov went on to make a 240 kilo (529 pound) clean and jerk, a new world record to go with his world record of 422.5 kilos (931.2 pounds) in the total.<sup>42</sup>

Hristov, of course, was initially distraught. He went back to his room, stayed there much of the rest of his time in Moscow, and didn't have the energy or the desire, he reports, to watch the rest of the Olympic competition or even to spend his allotment of rubles. On the one hand, he had not bombed (which he thinks he might have done had he opened with 230 kilos (507 pounds) in the clean and jerk as they had originally planned) and after all he won a silver medal—which would earn him a new Lada automobile on his return. On the other hand, he was aggravated by the thought that he could have trained only five times a week for three hours each day without any pills or injections and still won the silver medal with lifts of 175 kilos (385.7 pounds) and 220 kilos (485 pounds). But he was consoled by the thought that he had finished his lifting career honorably, and that now it was time for him to start his writing career.<sup>43</sup>

The book ends rather abruptly, with only a few short paragraphs for the period after the Moscow Olympics. In there he explains that he didn't actually begin writing his story until five years later. By then he had finally received a diploma from the National Sports Academy—his plans for going to law school had gone by the board. During those five years he had also been an assistant trainer at the "Olympic Hopes" Sports School, but he had grown weary of the long hours and the trip from Pernik to Sofia every day. He mentions also that he was frustrated with his coaching position, mainly because of Abadjiev's influence, who prevented him from coaching the kids at the school the way he wanted. So he made the decision to leave the sports school and big-time weightlifting. Initially, he wanted to find a job as a physical education teacher in Pernik, but it wasn't permitted. He was a former world champion and his duty—as the sports bureaucrats saw it—was to help in producing more weightlifting champions.

So Hristov basically spent almost the entire period from 1986 through 1989 without a regular job (though with periods of work in the informal or "gray economy.") With the help of his parents and friends, he persisted with his book. Ironically, by the time he finished it the communist system in Bulgaria (and the rest of Europe) was beginning to crumble and give way to the tumultuous "transition phase" and chaotic economic conditions. It took Hristov another eight years to find a publisher. Even then, as was mentioned earlier, the book virtually disappeared almost as soon as it appeared on the market. As a consequence, Hristov received almost no money or personal acclaim for the book on which he had worked so long.

Hristov continues to live in Pernik, and now supports himself partly on the pension he receives for his silver medal in the 1980 Olympics, but also by casting bronze to produce small bells and other decorative items for sale in gift and souvenir shops. He has never returned to coaching competitive weightlifting, and in fact has virtually no contact with Abadjiev or with any of his former team-mates. As he is in much of his book, Hristov has continued to be critical of the management of high-level weightlifting generally and of Abadjiev's role in it specifically.

It should not be concluded, however, that Hristov's disenchantment or disillusionment with the weightlifting scene is typical of most former Bulgarian weightlifters. Part of Hristov's problem almost certainly was the fact that he just did not take well to Abadjiev's coaching style. Abadjiev was, by all accounts, an extremely hard-nosed coach and trainer. He pushed and bullied his lifters relentlessly.<sup>44</sup> But most of those lifters adapted and gradually learned to let the hectoring roll off their backs. To them it was just part of the game. They knew they had to train very hard to stay on the team, and that was just a fact. But like legions of other athletes before and after who have had to contend with aggressive, driven coaches, they would attempt to get away with as much as they possibly could, both in their training routines and their lives outside the lifting hall. They just did not take Abadjiev's bullying and badgering personally.

In contrast, Hristov was certainly much more sensitive than most of Abadjiev's wards. The second chapter of Hristov's book is called "A Sadistic Lesson in Manliness," and it concerns an episode that occurred shortly before Hristov's first big international meet—the

European Championships in Verona, Italy—when he was only eighteen years old.<sup>45</sup> Hristov recalls that one evening, during his last heavy workout before the competition he was the only lifter in the hall as the other lifters had left earlier after only doing warm-ups (they would be lifting at Verona before Hristov.) Abadjiev had decided that Hristov should work up to a snatch of 170 kilos (374.7 pounds) and a clean and jerk of 215 kilos (473.7 pounds) during that final training session. As Hristov waited for Abadjiev he had a hard time concentrating and getting fired up for the heavy weights. And even after Abadjiev arrived to watch, Hristov found that the weights still felt heavy. Although he tried again and again he was unable to make a 160 kilo (352.5 pound) snatch. As he watched these successive failures Abadjiev became more and more agitated. Finally, after Hristov's ninth (!) unsuccessful try, Abadjiev's wife happened to come in. Abadjiev immediately jumped up and cried, "Do you think you can snatch it for my wife? Let's see it, snatch it for my wife!" But Hristov missed it again, and Abadjiev's interpretation was that the failure "proved that I didn't respect his wife enough."<sup>46</sup>

Things went downhill from there. Abadjiev decided to leave the snatches, to give Hristov a fifteen-minute break, and then have the young lifter work up in the clean and jerk. However, the clean and jerks went much the same way and Hristov couldn't manage even 200 kilos (440.7 pounds)—a relatively trivial weight for him. By this time Abadjiev was in a rage and shouted, "Don't you remember, Valentin? At the beginning of last month I promised you that I would let you compete in Verona. But now you can't lift 200! How can I send you? You will bomb out in Verona and wreck the team's chances!" After another failed try, Hristov began to cry and this enraged Abadjiev further—"You are going to convince me with tears? It's the end! No European Championships for you! I don't need your kind!"<sup>47</sup>

Hristov kept trying, unsuccessfully, to lift the 200 kilos over his head, and even developed a nose-bleed, but Abadjiev kept ranting. Finally, though, after it appeared that Hristov might injure himself, Abadjiev gave up and began to settle down. He later tried, half-apologetically, to explain that when Hristov had broken out in tears, "I did what the senior coach needs to do. Even though I didn't want to, even though it went against my feelings, I flared up. I flared up because you have to understand that you won't go far if you break out crying for this or that."<sup>48</sup>

Two days later when Abadjiev was about to catch a flight for Verona, he first came by and woke Hristov at six in the morning to have him do some back squats in the gym. That same morning, according to Hristov, Abadjiev told him, "There is no real problem . . . Your legs are strong." Continuing, Hristov added, "As I remember I squatted 255 kilos (562 pounds) or five kilos below my maximum at the time. And, as I said, I won the silver medal on the platform in Verona—and almost got gold. But the wound from the yelling and the insults did *not* help me to become more of a man."<sup>49</sup>

I believe this incident reveals a lot about Hristov's sensitivity and, of course, about Abadjiev's behavior as the coach of a gifted teenager. Over time both adapted, to some extent, to each other. Abadjiev, it is clear, learned that Hristov did not react well to tough-coach tactics, especially during competitions, and that such tactics were indeed counter-productive. And Hristov, to a degree, learned to take Abadjiev in stride. But it is also clear from Hristov's book (and from conversations with him) that there were many incidents between the two men that left scars and bitterness. Hristov basically was a very young, self-motivated athlete who was also easily offended—and likely to nurse a grudge. He was also always uncomfortable with the intensive doping regime. Abadjiev, however, had little time or inclination for such sensibilities.<sup>50</sup>

In retrospect, perhaps the most surprising thing about their relationship is that Hristov lasted as long as he did, especially after the debacle at the Montreal Olympics. To the reviewer the tragedy is that Hristov came along at the time when doping became so prevalent, and found himself under the complete authority of Ivan Abadjiev, one of its most ardent practitioners. Because of Hristov's astonishing natural abilities, and especially his individual drive and motivation, it seems very possible that in a drug-free world he would have been even more successful—relative to other world-class lifters—than he actually was. As it turned out, his lifting career played out in an environment of intensive training and doping of near mad-house proportions.

While Hristov's book certainly has its weaknesses, it is nevertheless extremely interesting and valuable for its insights into a particular epoch of weightlifting history and its portrait of an individual caught up in that epoch. Elite Soviet and Eastern Europe sports, exemplified also in East German swimming and track and field, were often ruthlessly and relentlessly pursued,

and Hristov's book is plausible in its portrayal of that pursuit in our oldest strength sport. But the book is also interesting on a personal level, for it is clear that some athletes, at least, just do not fit well in such a sports regime. To this reviewer, the book makes a significant and lasting contribution to sport history.

## NOTES:

1. Hristov believes that the book was withdrawn from the market after only a few weeks due to political pressures coming from the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, specifically Ivan Slavkov, then a member of the IOC. This seems very likely, especially given that the reviewer could not find a copy in any of Sofia's libraries or universities. As a result of the removal of the book it registered almost no sales and hence generated no income for Hristov, in spite of the enormous amount of time he spent on it. It also received no meaningful attention within Bulgaria. A surprising part of the story is that the publisher, who had left the business years earlier, contacted Hristov in 2011 and dropped off a number of remaining copies of the book.
2. In the reviewer's opinion the book could have really used a good editor. Whether or not Hristov would have accepted such editing is not so clear. Hristov definitely has a sensitive ego and is easily offended; not an unusual circumstance among big-time athletes and first-time authors.
3. Valentin Hristov, *Шампионът на Кръстът* (*Champion on a Cross*), (Sofia, Bulgaria: Guteranov & Son, 1997/1998), 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 33.
5. Abadjiev's introduction of much heavier and more concentrated workouts was certainly his main contribution to weightlifting training. In contrast to the generally accepted practices of the 1960s and earlier, Abadjiev believed that his athletes would soon adapt to twice-a-day workouts, for five and six days per week. This intensive training is now well-accepted in many parts of the world, at least for top-level lifters.
6. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 44.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.
8. The system in Bulgaria (following the pattern of East Germany) was that students who wanted to go on with more academic studies would go to a "gymnasium" after the eighth grade for preparation for university studies. Less academically inclined students would enroll in technical schools where they would receive mainly vocational training of various kinds. Some of the technical schools, it should be mentioned, were considered quite strong in their respective fields.
9. During the communist period, students would perform "brigade work," consisting of various kinds of manual labor, e.g., gathering crops on collective farms, typically before the beginning of the school year.
10. Bulgaria had by then instituted, along with their technical schools and gymnasiums, a network of sports schools. While the students there would attend classes much as in the gymnasiums, class work took a distant second place to sports training. The "Olympic Hopes" sports school had a large share of elite athletes and in weightlifting was closely linked with the national team. Here the school work was apparently reduced to a bare minimum, and was only a formality.
11. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 58.
12. *Ibid.*, 75.
13. Hristov mentions that other lifters claimed that Ustyuzhin's record lift of 227.5 kilos (501.5 pounds) was very questionable, and this was born out in the reporting by George Kirkley, "Great Lifting at European Championships," *Iron Man* 35, no. 4 (November 1974): 42.
14. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 97.
15. Oscar State, then General-Secretary of the IWF, reported on the event in "First Junior World and European Championship," *International Olympic Lifter* 2, no. 8 (July 1975): 9-22, where he stated that Hristov with his senior and junior world records was the outstanding lifter of the meet. He noted also that his total at the meet would "rank him among the best superheavyweights in the world." And indeed Hristov's total was the highest of any lifter in the meet by a considerable margin.
16. This is clear in the famous Bruce Klemens photos run—along with his article about the contest—in "The Greatest Lift Ever Attempted?" *Iron Man* 35, no. 3 (March 1976), 40. It's interesting that the wording in Hristov's book, p.128, is somewhat ambiguous, and makes it sound as if he actually completed the lift after the bar had slightly slipped downward or forward from his shoulders. Be that as it may, Hristov was so good in the jerk portion of the lift that he and many objective experts felt that he would have jerked the 245.5 kilos had he cleaned it.
17. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 145.
18. *Ibid.*, 147.
19. Terry Todd, "Continental Europe vs. the Americas: the Montreal Meet," *Strength & Health* 44, no. 3 (April/May 1976): 53-54.
20. Bob Hoffman, "The Lifting in Gettysburg," *Strength & Health* 44, no. 3 (April/May 1976): 67. Hristov does not mention this, and suggests on page 160 of his autobiography that he competed but bombed.
21. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 165. Also training at Belmeken were many East German athletes, including the weightlifting team, though in a separate facility from the Bulgarians.
22. Retabolil is sold in the USA as Deca-durabolin.
23. But it never turned red, which was a disappointment because Abadjiev believed that having blood in the urine, as supposedly happened with Alexandar Krajchev before Munich, would show how hard they were training. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 169.
24. *Ibid.*, 170.
25. *Ibid.*, 162.
26. *Ibid.*, 183. Hristov's passage is useful: "After a few moments he [Abadjiev] came to his conclusion: he was forced to start giving out anabolic steroids since the others were training less than we were and then lifting more than we did in the meets. The bottom line was that the position we were in was not his [Abadjiev's] fault. So, Abadjiev proposed that we save the team from failure: to go back on the whites [steroids] and to give the urine of others to the Commission for Doping Control at the San Michel Arena."
27. *Ibid.*, 185.
28. *Ibid.*, 188. Hristov asks himself: "Would a normal person die with a heart attack from such big doses of Dianabol — who can say?" [Editors' note: As a way to comprehend this level of doping, consider that when Terry Todd used Dianabol in the mid-1960s, the most he ever used on a daily basis was two five milligram tablets (a hundred times less than Hristov), and Todd weighed almost a hundred pounds more.]
29. *Ibid.*, 188. Hristov claims, with some plausibility, that he could



have matched these lifts, maybe even bettered them, if he had trained the entire year clean and worked out only four hours a day.

30. *Ibid.*, 200-203.

31. *Ibid.*, 204. "At the first session of the Medical Commission of the IOC the vote was taken that the positive results for the doping samples of Zbigniew Kachmarek, Blagoi Blagoev, and myself were more important than the squashed lead seals on the urine containers. Or more exactly, that we needed to be punished for doping."

32. Blagoev, the other Bulgarian nailed for doping, had won silver, while another Bulgarian, Trendafil Stoichev (who did not test positive) had won bronze. So Stoichev moved up to take silver after the doping positives, and a Hungarian lifter then took bronze.

33. *Ibid.*, 205.

34. *Ibid.*, 220. In fact, Hristov says, if he had been feeling off that day he might have considered bombing intentionally to increase the pressure on the Ministry of Sport to dismiss Abadjiev.

35. *Ibid.*, 224.

36. *Ibid.*, 219.

37. *Ibid.*, 226. Hristov's attitude of having been unfairly nailed for doping is symptomatic of a very common attitude among Bulgarian elite lifters, and indeed among elite lifters world-wide. The attitude is that virtually all top lifters use doping, and that it is virtually impossible to win medals without it. So, as they see it, the real issue is not whether one has been doping, but whether one gets *caught* for doping. If some trick is introduced in the testing so that it is not conducted "fairly," then any individual disqualification is unfair, since *everyone* is doping.

38. *Ibid.*, 227-242.

39. *Ibid.*, 242.

40. *Ibid.*, 245.

41. *Ibid.*, 247. Supposedly the healer had been brought by the Track and Field Association to stay temporarily at the dorm/hotel where the team members lived, and to help with injured athletes prior to the Moscow Olympics.

42. *Ibid.*, 252-253.

43. *Ibid.*, 254-255.

44. Anyone who has any doubts about whether this characterization is accurate might want to take a look at the excellent documentary film produced by Adela Peeva, et.al., *In the Name of Sport* ("В Името на Спорт"), edited at the state film studio "Vreme." The film (available with English sub-titles) was originally produced in 1983 and was understandably very controversial at the time. It not only showed Abadjiev and other sports figures in an unfavorable (but apparently accurate) light but also examined some of the doping practices during that era. Although the coaches of many of the national teams in various sports as well as many faculty members at the National Sports Academy were given a viewing, the film did not see the light of day in a public venue or on TV until after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989.

45. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 9-13.

46. *Ibid.*, 9.

47. *Ibid.*, 10.

48. *Ibid.*, 12.

49. *Ibid.*, 13.

50. Tough coaching techniques were not unique to Abadjiev or to weightlifting or to Bulgaria. One would suspect that Abadjiev would have fit in well as a coach with many American football teams. Abadjiev probably was not familiar with the aphorism often inaccurately attributed to famed football coach Vince Lombardi ("Winning isn't

everything. It's the *only* thing."), but he likely would have shared that outlook. And there was also the fact that he was always, *always* under great pressure from the political regime to produce *results*, which meant winning medals in international competition.

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A group of Clarence Bass's long-time friends have joined forces to celebrate his contributions to health and fitness by organizing a one-day conference bringing together some of the best minds in the exercise field. Bass just released his tenth book, *Take Charge: Fitness at the Edge of Science*, which spotlights the increasing role of science in prescribing the optimal approach to exercise and diet regimens for each individual. For more information go to: [www.cbass.com/News8.htm](http://www.cbass.com/News8.htm) and the Stark Center website: [www.starkcenter.org](http://www.starkcenter.org).

The conference will feature three panels on topics from *Take Charge* and each panel will be led by a world-renowned scholar who will present the most current thinking on that subject, followed by comments from two other experts in the field. The panels will include a mix of perspectives, from university researchers to leading strength-training professionals. Panel topics will be the Aerobics/Strength Alliance; The Rise of Intervals; and Forget Heavy, Think Effort. Featured Speakers include: Dr. Edward Coyle of the University of Texas, Dr. Waneen Spirduso of the University of Texas, Dr. Joe Signorile of the University of Miami and Dr. Richard Winett of Virginia Tech University.

Hotel rooms may be booked at The AT&T Executive Education Conference Center on the UT campus, by calling 877-744-8822. The conference is listed under "College of Education," and the booking code is COLEDU0913. *The deadline for the special rate is August 26th.* For hotel information go to: [www.meetat texas.com](http://www.meetat texas.com).

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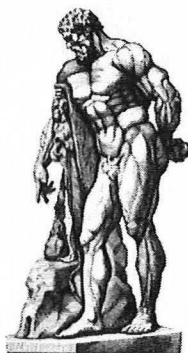
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