

# NOTES ON VASILY ALEXEYEV AND DAVID RIGERT

BY TERRY TODD

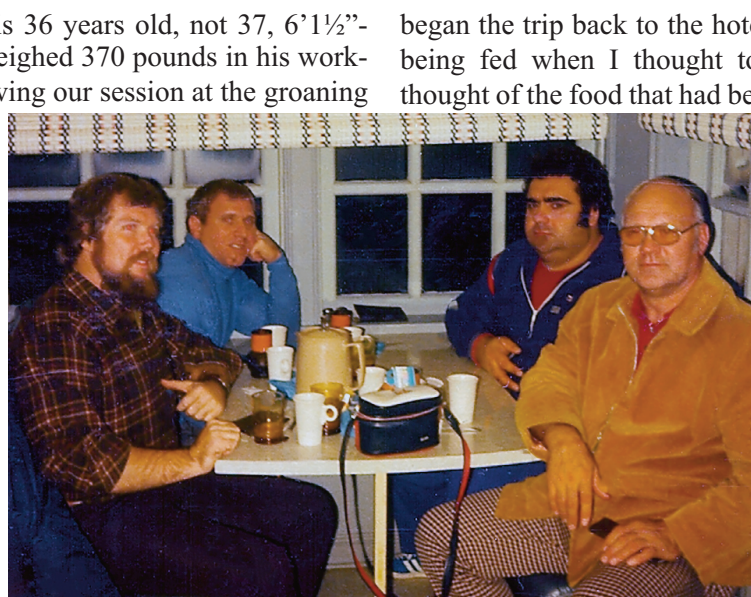
Unpublished, October 1978.

*Preface: In 1978, Terry was asked by Sports Illustrated to attend the World Weightlifting Competition in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Terry had begun to build a relationship with the magazine and had already had his first article published in SI—on arm wrestler Al Turner (“Arming Himself for the Fray,” Sports Illustrated, 9 October 1978)—but at the Weightlifting World Championships he’d been assigned to help Bruce Newman, one of their regular staff writers, conduct interviews and understand the sport. During the weekend Terry kept notes on yellow tablets—as he always did—and typed up his notes when he got home to send to Newman. If you read “Russia Keeps Coming on Strong,” published in the 16 October 1978 issue of the magazine, you’ll see that Terry’s notes on Alexeyev and Rigert were put to good use by Newman. I missed the eating contest described below, as I arrived in Gettysburg several days after Terry, but I heard him tell that story several times that weekend. I was, however, in the audience when Alexeyev tried to clean and jerk 240 kilos (529 pounds) and pulled a muscle in his hip. After that injury, Terry and I gave Alexeyev a ride to his hotel in our car and then stayed in his room, drinking vodka into the wee hours of the morning with him and our other friends on the Russian team. It was a sad night; we all knew the injury was serious, and possibly meant the end of Alexeyev’s career. He never truly recovered. (Terry wrote a memorial tribute to Alexeyev in Iron Game History in 2011 after he passed away, that may also be of interest. I’ve included instructions to find both articles online.) ~ Jan Todd*



**A**lexeyev: He is 36 years old, not 37, 6’1½”-6’2” and he weighed 370 pounds in his workout gear following our session at the groaning board last Wednesday. For the record, it all began in the training hall when, after having finished working out, he picked up his gym bag, rubbed his massive hands up and down over that marvelous cowcatcher of a belly and said to me with a smile, “Vasily push, now Vasily eat. Come.” I came.

Actually, I was driving him that day and so went to the car and I



The booth doesn’t look quite big enough to hold Terry, American weightlifting champion Phil Grippaldi, Vasily Alexeyev, and American and world champion Norbert Schemansky.

began the trip back to the hotel where all the lifters were being fed when I thought to politely inquire what he thought of the food that had been provided. Was it, I asked him, “*Khorosho* or *nyet khorosho*,” to which he replied with a downward stroke of that huge right arm, “*Nyet khorosho! Chit food!*” Chit is a Russian word with which I am unfamiliar but it was used in such a way and in such a context that I feel justified in assuming that it was used in a far less than complimentary way. So, I decided to take him to a place down the road which had lacked the



**Alexeyev at his full size, during a training session in Gettysburg. When we saw him in the gym, his sweats had holes from all the pulls he'd bounced off his thighs, the elastic was shot at the waist, and his narrow weightlifting belt was helping to avoid an international incident. His wrist wraps were tattered, his t-shirt was not exactly fresh, and yet none of that mattered. He was the king—and everyone in that training room knew it.**

foresight to take down an “All You Can Eat” sign.

Once there, having been a bit of a trencherman myself at one time and wanting in the spirit of good fellowship and hospitality to keep Vasily from feeling lonely as he trudged back and forth to the heaping buffet, I decided to see if I could match him swallow for swallow or, as it turned out, chicken for chicken.

We began with a *platter* of salad apiece, consisting of onions, lettuce, spinach, mushrooms, peppers, garbanzo beans, pickled eggs, olives, cheese, bean sprouts and four tomatoes, washed down with a pitcher of beer apiece. When we took our seats I asked him if he cared for beer and he brightened, nodded and said “Da, Da, *cold* beer.” The pitcher came, along with heavily frosted glasses which hardly had time to bead before they were emptied, filled and emptied again, after which Alexeyev closed his eyes, leaned back, smiled that wonderful smile and said “Cold beer. I love.”

Then came the chicken—drumsticks for him,

thighs for me—along with heavy duty side orders of vegetables and more salad, especially more tomatoes (five more each, altogether) and eggs, which he cradled in his huge fingers and called “little chicken” before plopping them into his mouth.

Finally, just when I realized that my combination of gluttony and hospitality had carried me as far as it could, he pushed back from the table and said, “No more. Finish!” All in all, besides God only knows how much salad and vegetables, we each had nine tomatoes, 2½ pitchers of beer and 24 pieces of chicken. And as for “little chickens,” I hesitate to mention the total for fear of doing a disservice to the memory of Cool Hand Luke.

**J**an: Vasily had met Jan in Montreal and had heard of her recent world records in lifting and of her growing reputation as the strongest woman in the world and he was looking forward to seeing her again. “Strongest man, strongest woman,” he kept saying, so when she arrived from the airport, I picked him up and brought him to our motel. Once there, I parked, leaned out of the car window and shouted “Jan! Jan!” a couple of times with no response, at which point he leaned out and thundered “Jaann!” Perhaps she was just about to open the door anyway. In any case, she came out and walked toward the car and he smiled to me and said, “Looking nice, looking strong.”

Later, in the training hall, they posed for the thronging photographers and he kept introducing her as “My woman,” to their, her, and apparently his own delight. Once while they were being photographed, he asked her to lift him but when she tried to encircle that 60 inch girth her arms wouldn’t reach, so he got not a lift but a hug. Later, in his room, we gave him one of Jan’s necklaces for his wife Olympiada and he gave Jan a bottle of perfume and me one of Russian champagne.

Later that evening, he told us about Tamara Press, the women’s world record holder in the shotput in the early 1960s, “Half woman, half man,” he said of Press, then pointed to Jan, smiled, and said, “Nyet. All woman.”

**A**lexeyev: Because of his colossal size, because he speaks very little English, and perhaps even because his fame derives from his body rather than his mind many people in the US see him as an oaf—a huge fat clown who simply happens to be uncommonly strong. What these people fail to see, or to realize, is that to become the world superheavy-

weight champion and to remain so for 8 (9?) consecutive years requires a single-mindedness and a sense of oneself far outside the reaches of even the cleverest of oafs.

Actually, Alexeyev is a quite complex man, a man who seems almost quintessentially Russian in his ursine unpredictability. Like a bear, his moods are alternately playful and fearsome. Konrad Lorenz once said that “if you have an enemy, give him a tame bear.” Through the years, media people and autograph hounds around the world have learned, regarding Alexeyev, who is in so many ways like Ali, that some days you eat the bear, some days the bear eats you.

#### Stuff to Ponder:

Alexeyev—“A sportsman dies twice and the first death is the most painful.” Remember how Zhabotinsky looked that night during the autographs and the interview?

Two other men, both Americans, have won eight world championships—John Davis and Tommy Kono.

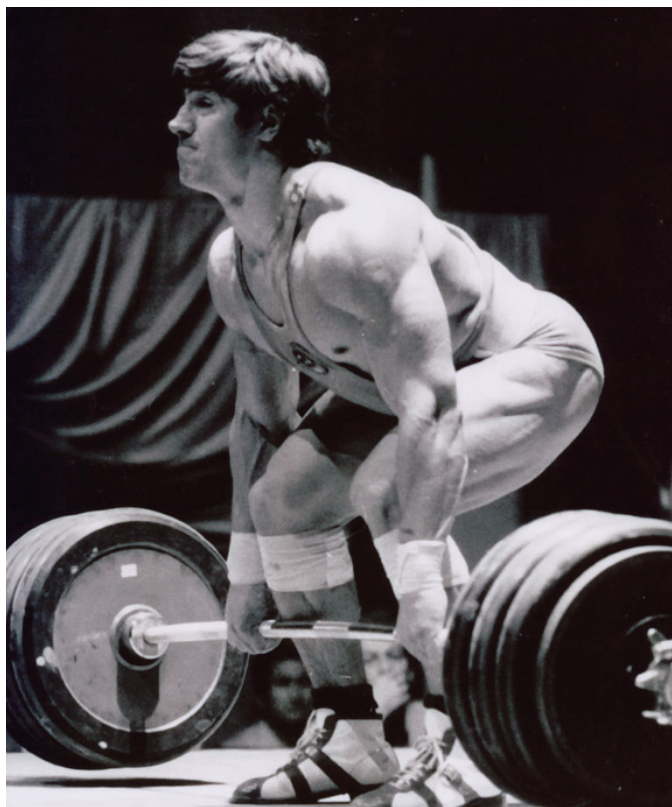
He doesn’t like even to *talk* about retirement, responding to a question about his plans after Moscow, “I think not of Moscow but of Los Angeles.”

Plukfelder and Igor Kudiukov, the USSR chief coach, upon hearing that Plachkov had snatched 418 in the training hall a few days before the meet, both laughed and held their arms out and shook them to show how they felt Plachkov would react when faced by an adamant Alexeyev *on the platform*. “Too much competition before competition,” they added.

Two things sustain him—the fact that he knows he brings great honor to the Soviet Union and the fact that he is the strongest man in the world.

**R**igert—lounging on his hotel bed, smoking a long thin cigar—cleft chin jutting forward with confidence so confident it disquiets. On lifting: “The weight cannot be feared. It must fear you. Many lifters—many strong lifters—fear the weights and if the weights resist them they yield to the resistance without a struggle. Big muscles, great strength, but no gold medals.”

“Often I have exceeded world records in practice,



David Rigert was the other media darling of Gettysburg. Despite moving up to the 220-pound (100-kilo) weight class, he was, as usual, in amazing condition. His heavy musculature awed everyone when he appeared on stage in a singlet, revealing skin so thin that he looked more like a bodybuilder than a weightlifter. Terry joked, in fact, that it looked to him like Rigert’s striations even had striations. During his career, Rigert won six world championships, took home a gold medal at the 1976 Olympic Games, and set 65 world records.

but so have many lifters. The practice hall is quite a different place from the competition platform. I am thinking always—resist the weight, resist the weight, never yield.”

“Darwin applies except I would say that in lifting, rather than that the strongest shall survive, the strongest *willed* shall survive.”

“Timidity is a great disadvantage in heavy athletics—*tyazhelaya atletica*. When you are alone with a great weight you must be very, very brave. Many men are brave when they are with other men but timid when alone.”

“Lifting is *individual* sport, not team sport. In team sport you can sometimes play hooky hooky. In lifting there is no chance for hooky hooky.”

“My fathers and brothers are strong. I am the shortest among them yet I was always strong, even as a boy. Both physically and psychologically, I think a man must be a born lifter.”

“All feats of strength fascinate me. The powerlifts (squat, bench press, and deadlift) done in the US interest me. I think that if I were to concentrate on them for a time I could prevail over the champions, although your Pacifico is very, very strong and would be difficult to overcome.”

“In Russia we have not only the lifting of barbells but the lifting of stones, bags of flour and barrels, and we play the game with the arms.” (through the interpreter) smiling, “yes, arm wrestling.”

“There is much talk today in heavy athletics about anabolics. I will tell you a story. In Russia we have a proverb that you can train a mule all you want, feed him all you want, and provide him with the best rider yet he will still be outrun by a horse.”

**R**igert General Stuff: He is coached by Rudolph Plukfelder and lives in Shakhky. He is 5’7” tall and competes in the 90 kg (198 pound) class as well as the 100 kg (220 pound class), holding world records in both.

He is Dom Perignon to the lifting connoisseur; Alexeyev is strong beer for the masses. As he enters this championship he has held 58 world records. Alexeyev has held 80.

His suspension was for a year, and it kept him from trying for a fifth world title in the World Championships of 1977. Since his suspension, however, he has been stronger than ever, creating world records in both the 90 and 100 kg classes. The suspension followed a brawl which followed a drinking bout and it was for Rigert “a time of very great sadness.” According to his coaches and the Soviet journalists in Gettysburg who have followed his career closely, the suspension seems to have improved him and made him more consistent in his platform



Another memory from Gettysburg was meeting Yurik Vardanian, shown here with Terry in the warmup room. Vardanian made a big impression on us by demonstrating his vertical jumping ability one day at the motel. The motel was on the side of a hill and there was a fairly high retaining wall along the parking lot behind our rooms. Alexander Gavrilovets, a friend of Terry’s and a Russian journalist who spoke fluent English, told us about Vardanian’s ability and got him to agree to show us what he could do. We went outside and Vardanian, wearing blue jeans, took no warm ups and simply walked over, stood for a second to gather himself, squatted down and jumped right to the top. It was incredible. Although no one had a tape, we all agreed it was at least a 48” jump—made with no warmup—and the vodka had not yet been opened.

appearances. It has made him, according to journalist Alexander Gavrilovets, “once more hungry.”

In the Soviet Union, his fame is equal to that of Alexeyev. There and in countries where lifting is followed (107 nations are members of the International Weightlifting Federation) he is known and respected for his marvelous appearance and dramatic competitive style as well as for his 58 world records and four world championships.

#### Additional Reading:

1. To read Bruce Newman’s article in *Sports Illustrated* go to: <https://vault.si.com/vault/1978/10/16/russia-keeps-coming-on-strong-to-the-surprise-of-no-one-the-ussr-team-won-the-world-championships-in-gettysburg-helped-by-david-rigert-who-has-been-overshadowed-by-the-great-vasily-alexeyev>.

2. Terry Todd, “I Remember Vasily Alexeyev,” *Iron Game History: Journal of Physical Culture* 11, no. 4 (January 2012): 1-6.

