

# BEHOLD BULGARIA'S VEST POCKET HERCULES

BY TERRY TODD

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Photographs of Naim Suleimanov by Bruce Klemens

*Preface: Terry began writing for Sports Illustrated in 1978 and his most well-remembered SI articles are undoubtedly his profiles of pro-wrestler Andre the Giant (12 December 1981), and football star Herschel Walker (4 October, 1982), and his lengthy analysis of drugs and sport called, "The Steroid Predicament" that appeared on 1 August 1983. The article I've chosen for this special issue, however, is Terry's less well-known, but equally important, article about weightlifter Naim Suleimanov. I chose "Behold Bulgaria's Vest Pocket Hercules" because the finished article turned out to be much more than he or his editors had expected when they sent him on assignment, and because he was willing to take a personal risk to get the story. At the height of the Cold War, for an American journalist to witness how elite communist athletes trained was almost unimaginable. But, somehow, Terry talked his way into Bulgaria and didn't even have a visa to travel there.*

*Terry had proposed to SI—and been given permission—to go to Vitoria, Spain, to cover the European Weightlifting Championships and write about the lifters who might be stars at the 1984 Olympic Games. He was especially interested in a young Bulgarian named Naim Suleimanov. When he arrived in Vitoria, Terry found a soulmate in Angel Spassov, a multi-lingual Bulgarian coach who helped him interview the Bulgarian and Russian lifters. The two got on so well that, as the contest was winding down, Angel invited Terry to return to Bulgaria with the team on their special plane. The fact that Bulgaria was a staunchly communist country in 1983, that he didn't have a visa to get into Bulgaria, and, that he had not been authorized by SI to go to Bulgaria, didn't stop Terry from accepting the invitation. I have clear memories of his phone call from Spain as he told me he wasn't coming home after the championships as planned, that he had no idea when he'd return, and that he also wasn't sure what would happen when he landed in Bulgaria. Despite my protestations that this all sounded dangerous—what would happen if they thought he was a spy, I remember asking—he told me he just had to go. It was too great an opportunity.*

*Thankfully, when the plane landed, Spassov talked him through what passed for customs and his lack of visa was miraculously overlooked. Terry always claimed that his week there was one of the most interesting of his life. He couldn't believe the level of strength displayed in the Bulgarian team's workouts, or what he learned from the sport scientists he met. After the article appeared and people read about the Bulgarians' multiple training sessions per day composed of high-intensity, single-lift workouts, it sparked great debate within American weightlifting circles and in the world of strength coaching. Angel Spassov was later brought over by the National Strength and Conditioning Association to give clinics in different American cities about the "Bulgarian System" and in 1990, after Bulgaria was no longer a communist country, Terry assisted Angel in moving to Austin to become the first women's strength coach at the University of Texas. He remained our close friend until his death in 2017.*

*As for Naim Suleimanov, thanks to Terry, he would be referred to as "The Pocket Hercules" for the remainder of his all too short life. He did not lift in the 1984 Olympics as the Bulgarians boycotted the Games, but he did win gold medals in 1988, 1992 and 1996. He passed away at age 50, after defecting to Turkey in 1986 and changing his name to Naim Süleymanoğlu.*

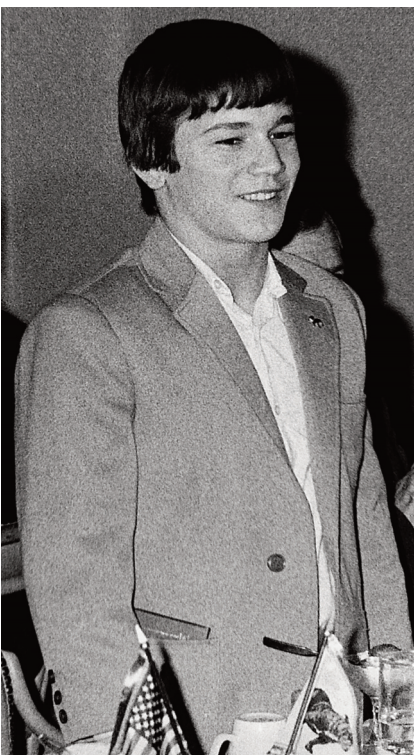
~ Jan Todd



The new, brightly colored weightlifting hall hard by the Black Sea on the grounds of the Grand Hotel in Varna, Bulgaria was quiet. Most of the men who had filled the hall with clanging action only minutes before had drifted out to stretch themselves on the dark green grass, have a smoke and enjoy a few minutes of rest in the late spring sun, but two remained. One, whose creased, wan face and haunting eyes made him seem a decade older than his age of 52, drew on a tablet that was carefully watched by the other, whose stature and physical proportions gave him the appearance not of a man or even an adolescent, but of a boy, perhaps even a child. Yet this boy-child—barely 5 feet and weighing only 123 pounds—had, less than ten minutes before, lifted 375 pounds, more than three times his own bodyweight, from the floor to full arms' length overhead.

What the man drew and the boy watched was a stick-figure explanation of a slight flaw in the lifting technique the boy had used, a flaw that, when corrected, the man explained, could result in even greater poundage. At last the man turned in his chair to face the boy. "Never be satisfied. Never," he said firmly, leveling his old, knowing eyes on the barely opened but hyperalert ones of the boy, who nodded somberly, turned and went outside to join the others.

The man in the training hall was Ivan Abadjiev, head coach of the Bulgarian National Weightlifting Team, which, the week before, had won the European championships in Vitoria, Spain, taking six of the ten weight classes—and sending the Soviet coaches and officials into apoplexy. The boy was 16-year-old Naim Suleimanov, who, at Vitoria, had become pound for pound the greatest weightlifter in history. Together, Abadjiev and Suleimanov symbolize not only the remarkable success the Bulgarian weightlifting team has had over the past 10 to 12 years against other Eastern bloc strongmen, but also the almost total devaluation of the Olympic medals to be awarded this summer in weightlifting as a result of the Soviet-led boycott of the Olympics.



**Naim Suleimanov was the star of the 1983 Record Breakers tournament in Allentown, Pennsylvania, just as he was in Vitoria, Spain. In this photo, taken at the after-meet banquet, his tender years are readily apparent.**

In Los Angeles, the wunderkind Suleimanov would have stood out with a special brilliance. This is so not because Suleimanov happens to be the best weightlifter in the world, but because he happens to be the best weightlifter in the world at the age of 16.

What Suleimanov has done is unprecedented; in fact, it is almost unbelievable. One might as well expect a world-class jockey to emerge from a group of sumo wrestlers, or a record-holding high jumper to appear among the Ituri rainforest Pygmies, or a contender for a gold medal in boxing to step forth from Culture Club as expect a boy to lift weights that not even the strongest of mature men can lift. Before Suleimanov, "world record-holding 16-year-old weightlifter" would have been a contradiction in terms.

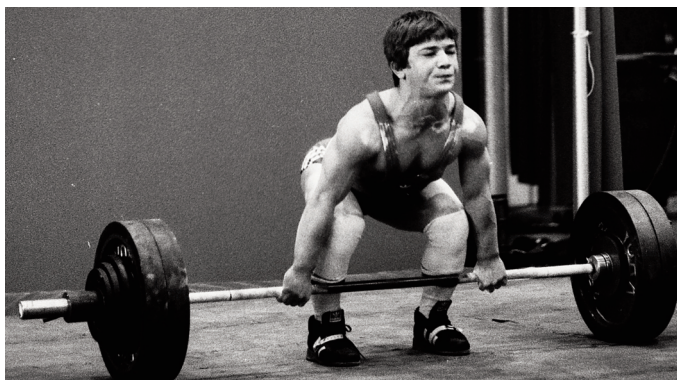
Unlike the mayfly sports of swimming and gymnastics, in which we have come to expect athletes to reach and pass their peaks before they reach their majority, or even tennis, in which teenage phenoms are an almost yearly occurrence, weightlifting at the highest levels was thought to require the full-grown, well-seasoned muscles of a man in his 20s or even 30s. After all, were not the greatest lifters—Tommy Kono, John Davis, Waldemar Baszanowski, Paul Anderson, David Rigert and the one and only Vasily Alexeyev—well and truly grown when they were at their finest? And were not the triumphs of young men like America's Pete George, who was 18 when he won a gold medal in the 1947 world championships, so rare as to be the exceptions that proved the rule that lifting would never become a playground for children?

Yet Suleimanov exists, a vest-pocket Hercules laboring to shatter our concept of human possibilities. And as incredible as his lifting is for a 16-year-old, it was perhaps even more startling when he was 15 and already held a world record; or when at 14 he exploded onto the international scene with a performance at the world junior championships in Sao Paulo that, when reported on wire services around the world, was dismissed everywhere but

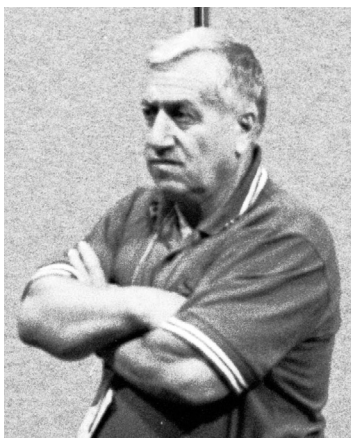
in Bulgaria as a misprint. But it was no typographical error. Lifting in the 52-kilo (114-pound) class, Suleimanov not only won the 19-and-under world championship but also fell just 5½ pounds short of the world record in the total in the open division, with 551. He then tried to break that record, and though he failed, he did not fail to get the attention of the weightlifting community, once its members had been assured by more complete reports that indeed a boy barely in his teens had equaled a senior world record.

How did this happen, everyone wanted to know. And was Suleimanov really only 14? And what new wonder drug must he be taking to do so stupendous a thing? And was it “healthy” for a boy so young to be lifting weights? And so on. To find the answers to such questions, a good place to begin might be the tiny Bulgarian mountain village of Ptichar, in what was once known as Thrace, where Naim was born in November 1967.

Like many villages in rural Bulgaria, Ptichar is populated by men and women who are hardly strangers to a life of manual labor and simple peasant food. It is exceptional only because, being roughly 75 miles from the Turkish border, it has far more people of Turkish descent than would be found in other areas of Bulgaria, a country with a population of 8,900,000 and a land mass comparable to that of Tennessee. Bulgaria was ruled by



Several months before Terry travelled to Spain, Suleimanov astonished the weightlifting world by setting a new world record in the clean and jerk with 160 kilos (352 1/2 pounds) at the Record Breakers in Allentown. He's getting set here to begin the pull.



**Ivan Abadjiev was head coach and chief training architect of the Bulgarian team when Terry visited. Abadjiev had to push for boys to begin training in weightlifting at age 12, but once allowed by the authorities, the new policy played a major role in Bulgaria's international success. The photo was taken in 1996 at the Atlanta Olympics.**

the Turks of the Ottoman Empire for almost 500 years, until, with the help of Russian armies, the Bulgarians were able to drive the hated Turks out in 1877 and '78. Even today many Bulgarians remember with bitterness the cruelties their forebears suffered under Turkish dominion, and there is almost no intermarriage with countrymen of Turkish ancestry.

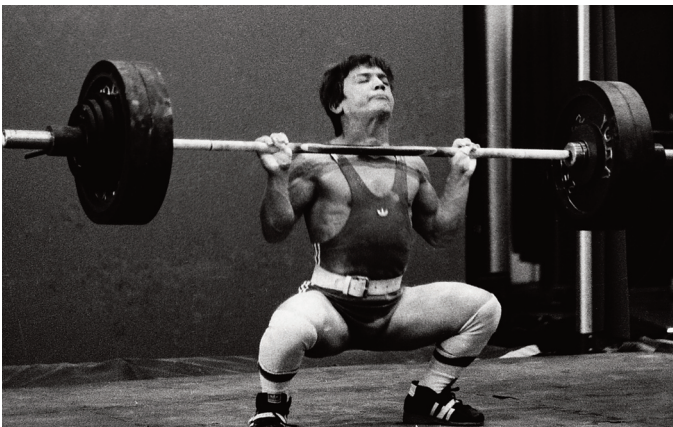
In short, people of Turkish descent are perceived by the average Bulgarian as second-class citizens. Naim Suleimanov is Turkish. Turkish and poor. And small. A weightlifting coach who teaches in Kardzhali, a town near Suleimanov's village, remembers what an unusual boy he was, and how desperate he was to get involved in weightlifting, which, along with wrestling, is one of Bulgaria's most prestigious sports. “When he was only nine,” Enver Tulumov says, “he was pestering me about lifting the weights. But he was only 115 centimeters [3'9”]

and 25 kilos [55 pounds], and I was telling him no, he was too young and small. But always he was asking.”

Angel Spassov is a lecturer in weight-lifting and power training at the Higher Institute for Physical Culture and Sport in Sofia and is a member of the Bulgarian national coaching staff for weightlifting. He first saw Suleimanov at a lifting competition in Kardzhali, when the boy was 10. “I was noticing this so small boy on the platform helping to load the bars for the competitors,” Spassov recalls, “and he was watching the lifters like wolf. Like wolf! He was missing nothing. He was loading the weights and then sitting down and watching everything the lifters are doing. And so careful he was to be moving the bar each time between lifts and to be putting it in the best place so the lifter will be having the best chance for a good result. I am never forgetting this boy because he was so small—he was looking maybe five or six—but he can handle the heavy plates and load the bar like a man.”

Fascinated by the monomaniacal mite, Spassov asked his friend Tulumov about the boy and learned of Suleimanov's compulsion to become a weightlifter. Unable to convince the coaches to allow him to train in the gym, Suleimanov lifted rocks and logs—anything he





Photographer Bruce Klemens captured Naim's historic lift just as he's pulled the bar into his chest at the bottom of the clean. This weight is almost three times Naim's bodyweight.

could find to tax his strength. And whenever he could, he went to the training hall in Kardzhali to watch the older lifters. Like wolf.

At last the day came when Suleimanov could take the test he'd been waiting, it seemed, all his short life to take—the sports school exam.

"I was wanting so much the sports school," he recalls, "that my mind was losing everything. I was having a hunger for the weights. I was lonely for them." This hunger and loneliness is still shared to some extent by thousands of young boys in Bulgaria as they near the age of 12, the time when the sports schools offer what we would call athletic scholarships to promising young athletes in a variety of sports. Many of them are encouraged by particular coaches, as Suleimanov was, to take the test—a Bulgarian version of recruiting. In Bulgaria, such testing occurs early and often—first at the age of three, in kindergarten—and the results circulate through the coaching community. Suleimanov was, of course, accepted.

Both boys and girls are invited to take these sports school tests, which are designed by the scientists and coaches at the Higher Institute for Physical Culture and Sport. The purpose is to single out the youngsters with the greatest potential for the various disciplines in the national sports program. The tests are relatively simple, involving such tasks as a 60-meter sprint, sit-ups to failure, push-ups to failure, chin-ups to failure, a standing long jump, an 800-meter run. For the potential lifter, there is a flexibility test in which the boy lifts an unloaded exercise bar, weighing perhaps 15 pounds, over his head with a shoulder-width grip, and then attempts to keep the bar overhead while he lowers his body into a full squat. In

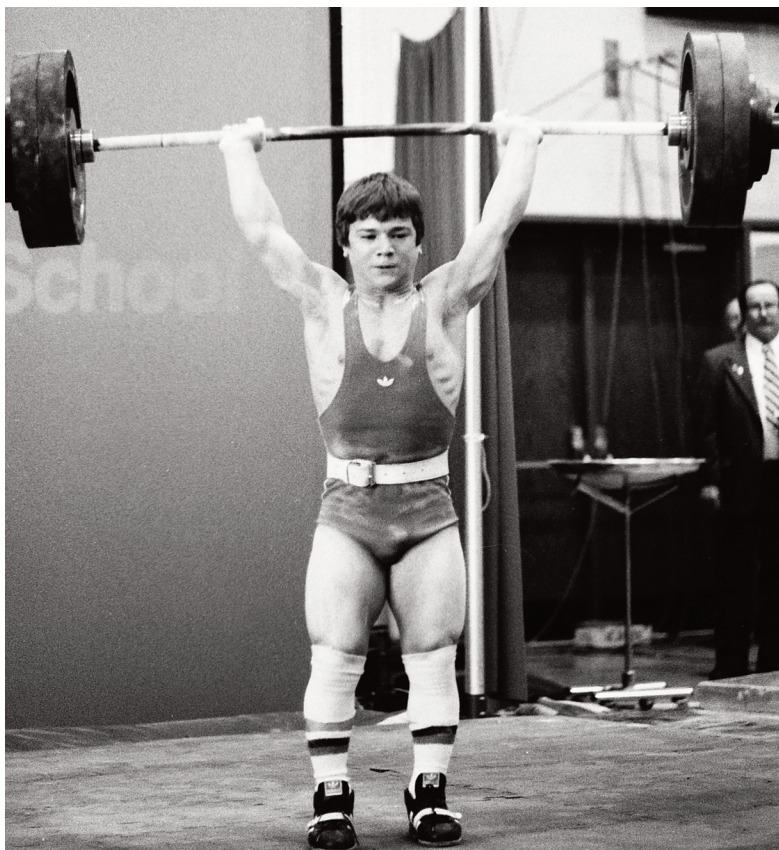
addition to these athletic tests, the children are weighed, measured and X-rayed to determine their level of maturation. Next, the coaches of the various sports study the results and offer the scholarships. Often, a boy or girl will be offered a scholarship in more than one sport, and then the youngster must decide which to choose. It is an important decision, because subsequent switching is rarely allowed.

There are 22 sports schools in Bulgaria, and they have 85 trained coaches who work full time on weightlifting with the approximately 2,000 boys specializing in that sport. The sports schools are boarding schools, and they have smaller academic classes than the average public school, to compensate in part for the fact that the students spend so much time at sports training. All of the students live and take their meals at the schools from age 12 until they graduate, at 18. The food is free, of course, and, as Suleimanov says, "So good is the food. It is of the best." Warmup suits, T shirts, lifting belts, singlets and lifting shoes are also provided; and in return the boys train year-round, hard. Like dog.

Except for the first year, when the boys practice other sports and train three times each week with light bars, the normal schedule calls for breakfast at 7, academic classes from 7:30 to 10, training in the weight room from 10 to 12, rest from 12 to 12:30, lunch from 12:30 to 1, a nap from 1 to 2, classes from 2 to 4:30, weightlifting again from 4:30 to 6:30, rest from 6:30 to 7, dinner from 7 to 7:30, supervised study from 7:30 to 10, snack from 10 to 10:30, and then bed. This is the Monday-through-Friday schedule. There are also two hours of lifting on Saturday mornings, after which the boys are free to visit their families, who in most cases live in the same town or city, or one nearby.

This intensive training of a large group of young athletes carefully screened for strength, explosiveness and flexibility has paid big dividends to the Bulgarian national lifting team. It has dominated teenage lifting for the past 10 years or so and has produced many world champions, the most spectacular being Suleimanov. More than any other country, Bulgaria is responsible for the ever higher standard of lifting among teenagers, and it all began, in a way, by accident.

Apparently, Ilia Nikolov, a coach in Vidin, a town in northwest Bulgaria on the banks of the Danube, had in 1960 a young boy who was so obsessed with a desire to lift that Nikolov allowed him to train at the age of 14, which was contrary to national policy. The boy, Rilko



**With the massive weight locked out overhead, Naim's Lilliputian stature is even more apparent. It just doesn't seem reasonable that a boy so physically small, and still so young, could also be so mighty.**

Florov, repaid the gamble by establishing a junior world record in the 60-kilo (132-pound) class in 1963, when he was 17. Florov's performance prompted Nikolov to theorize that perhaps it would be helpful for all boys to begin at a younger age. He discussed this with another coach, Abadjiev.

Though he has become the *éminence grise* of Bulgarian lifting, Abadjiev was then only a struggling young coach. He was clever, though, and determined. It is impossible to understand the flowering of a talent such as Suleimanov's without some insight into the work Abadjiev did to break the ground and prepare the soil. Some years before Florov's junior world record, Abadjiev had come to a conclusion similar to Nikolov's. However, when he presented his ideas to those then in control of Bulgarian lifting, they were rejected, partly because Abadjiev was already in hot water with the authorities for having helped organize a national teenage championship in 1959. But, as Abadjiev says, "If you are fearing the bear, do not be going into the forest."

It took Abadjiev—and the growing number of supporters drawn to his uncompromising ideas—years to convince the Ministry of Sport to go along with the idea of early training, but in 1969 the sports schools finally began to admit lifters at the age of 12. Abadjiev was made coach of the national team that same year, and soon he made it competitive with that of the Soviet Union, despite that country's vastly larger population. Today, the U.S.S.R. has more than 340,000 registered lifters and 2,500 full-time coaches: Bulgaria has only 4,000 to 5,000 and 185, respectively, but Abadjiev's lifters hold 12 (of 30) world records and three world championships.

In his 15 years as boss, Abadjiev has had so much international success with both his junior and senior lifters that he is now regarded as something of a legend. But he seems suspicious of success, as if it must be treated guardedly lest it escape. He is a serious man, and he seldom smiles as he watches his championship lifters, each of whom is accompanied by a personal coach. In fact, Abadjiev often upbraids the coach as well as the lifter if he sees something wrong.

Watching Abadjiev direct his coaches and lifters, one sees a technique not unlike the one ascribed to Vince Lombardi. Recently, during a workout at Varna, Abadjiev intended to forestall an out-break of what he calls "star illness." It was the fifth session of the day and would be the heaviest in the clean and jerk. Twenty-five weary men in the room listened quietly.

"You are all looking happy from Vitoria," Abadjiev began, "but I warn you, is not good to be too happy. Chief of Soviet delegation is telling me in Vitoria not to think it will be so easy the next time we fight. He is home now in Moscow and is sending the word all over that big country that they must be having better results. So do not be too happy. Be working hard. And thinking hard. And then harder. Do not think the top of the mountain is easy for the standing."

After Vitoria, the top of the mountain is exactly where the Bulgarian team did indeed stand. The European championships are considered to be second in importance in weightlifting only to the world championships or the Olympic Games (the worlds are not held in Olympic years). Each country tries to send its strongest possible team, and this year was no exception. The Soviet Union



entered the men thought to have the best chance for medals; Bulgaria did the same, except perhaps in the 148-pound class, in which Abadjiev entered 21-year-old Georgi Petrikov, whose mother had died less than a month before, rather than one of Bulgaria's most consistent international competitors, Yanko Rusev, 26, who has set 38 official and unofficial world records in his distinguished career. "Rusev has won many times," Abadjiev explained, "but Petrikov was maybe having only this chance. He was loving so much his mother." When you're hot, you're hot, and even this decision of the heart paid off for Abadjiev.

Petrikov won, and his victory was part of a string of what would become six in a row for the young Bulgarians—their average age was 19—over the Soviets, who went home with wins in only the final four classes: 198, 220, 242 and over 242 pounds. In the lightest class (114 pounds), Bulgaria's 19-year-old world-record holder, Neno Terzyiski, won as expected, but it was Suleimanov's consistency and contempt for world records that set the tone for what followed. Suleimanov was opposed by a small bundle of fast-twitch fibers from Soviet Armenia, Osken Mirzoyan, who had beaten him in the world championships in Moscow last October. But Mirzoyan, who held the world record in the snatch (288 pounds), was perhaps unnerved by the fact that young Suleimanov had chosen to start the competition with a weight of 275½ pounds. In any case, Mirzoyan missed all three attempts in the snatch, and he lost any chance at best total (snatch plus clean and jerk). Suleimanov, on the other hand, didn't miss until his third try, when he barely failed to snatch 292 pounds in an attempt to break Mirzoyan's world record.

In the clean and jerk, however, Mirzoyan roared back with a new world record of 364 pounds, only to receive in reply an immediate face job from Suleimanov, who, on his final attempt, elevated a majestic 370 pounds. Suleimanov thus became only the second man in history to hoist three times his weight overhead. Moreover, Suleimanov's total of 656 pounds made him the greatest lifter in history as measured by the Sinclair formula, a series of coefficients used by the International Weightlifting Federation to decide who is Champion of Champions.

The Bulgarians were on their roll, and they won the 132-pound, 148-pound, 165-pound and even the 181-pound class, in which Assen Zlatev upset five-time world champion Yurik Vardanian, like Mirzoyan a native of Soviet Armenia. As these victories followed each other,

the growing consternation of the Soviet contingent was matched by the unabashed joy of the Bulgarian journalists. The press center was behind the weightlifting platform, and after each win the Bulgarian journalists would rush to the phones, chatter excitedly to Sofia, then return to report smilingly on the jubilation back home as championship after championship was broadcast on national radio and television.

To an outsider, it is hard to understand fully the pride a small country takes in such victories, especially in sports that are paramount in that culture, and it is equally hard not to be charmed by this happiness. "We are deciding two years ago to dedicate ourselves to 1984," Spassov explains, "and we are all knowing it will be a hard thing to beat the Soviet Union. We are not so large and we must work harder. We all decide this—the coaches, the lifters, the science workers and all those helping the team. I am taking time off from my teaching at the Sport Institute, and all this year I am working with Zlatev. I am knowing Vardanian for many years and he is a great champion, but we are all pushing to bring down some of the great champions of Soviet Union. We knew we could do what we have done in Spain. It makes me want to cry like Gypsy to hear Bulgarian anthem so many times when they raise flag for winners."

A week after Vitoria, the Bulgarian team was back in Varna and listening not to the national anthem but instead to music with such startlingly improbable lines as, "You can't hang a man for killin' a woman/Who's trying to steal his horse," and "he cried like a baby and screamed like a panther in the middle of the night." True-blue kickers will recognize those lines as coming straight from Willie Nelson's album *Red Headed Stranger*.

"U.S. country music is good for training," Spassov explains to a flabbergasted visitor. "The boys are loving Mr. Nelson, and Mr. Cash also." Actually, the visitor would have been more astonished had he not heard, only minutes before in the lobby of the hotel Muddy Waters moaning over the speaker system about a "jack out with his jennet, waaaaay on over the hill."

While country music may play a big part in the Bulgarian training system, it isn't used in the training hall without Abadjiev's approval. However, it is played each afternoon and evening when the lifters unwind, record their daily training poundages in their diaries and relax before sleeping. Suleimanov is especially fond of such music. Asked who his favorites are, he says, "I am liking all country songs," then adds with a shy smile, "maybe

Mr. Rogers' Gambler is best.”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Bulgarian system is that its designers, like Mr. Rogers' gambler, leave little to chance. Diet, rest, recovery, sleep, massage, water therapy, food supplements, psychological assessment, training-hall surroundings, relationship between coach and athlete and training theory are a few of the many items factored in as members of the national team prepare for a competition. Their diet is unexceptional, derived, sensibly, from such nutritious local favorites as yogurt and an outstanding fetalike cheese made from sheeps' milk; but their actual training system is indeed revolutionary.

For years, lifters around the world trained three times a week, believing that the body required at least 48 hours to recover properly from the rigors of heavy exercise. Now that belief has been challenged by several modern training systems, particularly Bulgaria's. Pushing against the limits of human performance, Bulgaria's sports scientists and coaches have determined, to their satisfaction at least, that the body of a young, carefully chosen lifter can benefit and recover from as many as seven sessions of lifting each day, Monday through Friday, and three sessions of lifting on Saturday, Sunday being an off day.

Only a person who has trained seriously with weights can fully appreciate the workload involved in such a series of training sessions, but anyone can appreciate the time and effort required to do the workouts the national team did in Varna on Friday, May 4, 1984.

- 10—10:45: Snatch—10 to 12 sets of one or two repetitions, working up in increments to approximately 90% of the lifter's best competitive lift.
- 10:45—11:15: Break.
- 11:15—12: Clean and jerk—10 to 12 sets of one or two repetitions, working up to 90% of best competitive lift.
- 12—12:15: Break.
- 12:15—12:45: Eight to 10 sets of front squats with either one or two repetitions, working up to 90% of the lifter's best training poundage.
- 12:45—1: Walk to hotel.
- 1:00—1:30: Lunch.
- 1:30—3:45: Rest, nap, Mr. Cash, Mr. Nelson.
- 3:45—4: Dress and walk to training hall for afternoon sessions.
- 4—4:45: Clean and jerk—10 to 12 sets of one or two repetitions, working up to approximately 100% of lifter's

previous best.

- 4:45—5: Break.
- 5—5:45: 10 to 12 sets of one or two repetitions, working up to 95% of previous best in clean and jerk.
- 5:45—6:15: Break.
- 6:15—7: Snatch—10 to 12 sets of one or two repetitions, working up to approximately 100% of previous best.
- 7—7:15: Break.
- 7:15—7:45: Regular or back squats—10 to 12 sets of one or two repetitions, working up to 90% or 95% of previous training best.

To make clear how this routine translates into poundages, Suleimanov—remember, now, he had snatched 286 pounds in Vitoria, barely two pounds under the world record, and clean-and-jerked a world-record 370 pounds—snatched 275 pounds in the first session, clean-and-jerked 352 pounds in the second, clean-and-jerked 375 pounds (!) in the fourth, cleaned-and-jerked 363 pounds in the fifth and snatched 297 pounds (!) in the sixth. Taken together, these seven workouts in one day simply had to be seen to be believed, especially since everyone on the team was doing essentially the same thing. Even more shocking was that the next day, Suleimanov and his teammates came back to the training hall and duplicated the three morning workouts.

Although the entire team handled heavy weights during these sessions, only Suleimanov actually went over the world records. Even among a crowd of other world-record holders, Suleimanov stood out for the ease with which his stocky, efficient body popped those big bars over his head. In their own proud way the other young lifters understood and honored Suleimanov's uniqueness, looking at one another, shaking their heads or winking as their prodigy stacked more and more and always more plates on the ends of his springy steel bar. It became clear that he is a favorite among them, though he seemed the most reserved of the lot. Occasionally he would join the lighthearted banter that flowed through the lifting hall between Abadjiev's brief lectures, and he smiled happily when he won a friendly bet with Antonio Krastev, the talented young superheavy, in the sixth training session.

When Suleimanov actually approached the bar and lifted, though, every one of his 152 centimeters and 56 kilos was dead serious. Like wolf. He would tighten his tiny belt, chalk his stubby fingers, which are so short he must let his thumbnails grow so he can take a properly

secure “hook” grip on the bar, approach the weight with short steps, bend slowly at the waist and hips to grasp the bar, flatten his relatively long back so it became slightly concave and close his heavily lidded eyes for a moment. Then, with a slight preparatory shudder, he would begin to pull the bar at what seemed at first to be too slow a speed but which became, once the bar reached a position five or six inches above his thighs, a blur of plate-rattling speed as he extended his body fully and then dropped under the bar to fix it either at his chest or at arms’ length overhead.

As to how the bodies of these lifters, even a body so ideal for lifting as Suleimanov’s, are able to recover from so seemingly impossible a training program, we just don’t know for sure. Several factors could come into play. For one thing, the Bulgarian training relies heavily on massage and water therapy; the coaches believe it would be ideal to have a masseur for every lifter, but their budget doesn’t permit such a luxury. They can afford water, and if no whirlpool is available, the lifters use the tubs in their rooms, or even a swimming pool. The Bulgarians believe that massage and water help dispel the effects of heavy training and prepare the body for the work to come. They also hold the opinion that by always remaining slightly hungry and by fasting, except for drinking a small amount of fruit juice, for one day in every 10 or 11, their bodies naturally produce more of the hormones needed for heavy athletics.

The Bulgarians’ no-stone-untaken approach stems from a problem they had in 1976 when two of their premier performers, Blagoi Blagoev and Valentin Christov, tested positive for anabolic steroids at the Montreal Olympics. “It was so big a blow to our system when they were failing the test,” Abadjiev recalls, “but it was helping us to put more work from that time to now on proper methodics. Anabolics are a terrible thing because they are making the coaches and lifters lazy. Any problem? Take steroids. We decide to change and work without always the anabolics.”

Other members of the support staff of the national team echo these remarks in private conversations, explaining that there are many ways to safely enhance the body’s own production of such substances as testosterone and growth hormone, and that these are the methods used by Bulgaria’s lifters. Dr. Kristo Glovov works full time as the team’s physician, and he says he prescribes steroids only twice each year—for a few weeks at a time during the heaviest period of training, to speed recovery. “But we

are doing X-rays on our lifters,” he says, “and so we know when they are finished in tallness. Suleimanov is so young we think he will have more tallness, so he is without anabolics in his life.”

But while Dr. Glovov, the coaches and the other “science workers” who assist the Bulgarian team deny that steroids play a significant role in their scheme of things, other lifters and officials are, to say the least, highly skeptical, speculating that anabolics must be behind Suleimanov’s stunning achievements. In any case, the Bulgarians are proud of and excited about their new system and the effect it is having on the muscles of the lifters. Abadjiev explains, “Power is coming from the way the muscle fibers are organized, and at the Sport Institute they were teaching us that fibers and their number come only from genetics—from the mother and father. But we know now this can be changed by much work with heavy bars. We can change the genetics and split the fibers. This is a new thing for us and we are doing this with no anabolics. Only good methodics and hard training.”

Glovov and the other sports scientists with the team have done muscle biopsies which revealed, they say, that the muscle fibers of these lifters had increased not so much in size as in number, a phenomenon called hyperplasia, which is believed by the majority of scientists around the world to be impossible in muscle fibers. But one U.S. researcher contends that the claims made by the Bulgarians may indeed be legitimate. Dr. William J. Gonyea is professor of cell biology, director of the Anatomy Department and Distinguished Professor of Exercise Science at the University of Texas Health Sciences Center in Dallas, and since 1977 he has conducted studies in which cats undergo heavy resistance training. His report that microscopic analyses of the cross sections of the trained muscles revealed that the fibers had indeed split in some way and increased in number was met by doubt or outright disbelief in the scientific community. When told of the Bulgarian training methods and claims of hyperplasia, Gonyea said, “In my judgment it is entirely possible they have found a way to produce hyperplasia. There is no doubt in my mind that in our cat models the fibers were increasing in number and, given that, it should happen in humans if the stimulus is sufficient.”

Wherever the truth resides, Abadjiev is fierce in his pride in his “methodics.” “We must have a testing for anabolics by the International Weightlifting Federation in which they are going to all countries and testing the top lifters with no warning. Only in this way are they solving



so big a problem. And I am wanting it solved because then we will be winning more medals than before. I am not liking to put anabolics into a boy.”

Asked whether it was natural for a 15-year-old boy to lift world-record weights, Abadjiev replied, “No, Naim is not a normal boy, and what he is doing is natural only to him. But I am thinking there are other boys who can do this, maybe even younger boys. I was not foreseeing this before it happened, and the science workers were not foreseeing it. And then came Naim. I am telling you, only God could have foreseen such a thing. But I want no boys younger than Naim. A boy needs to have his time to be a boy. Even if big results are possible when younger, is better to wait and be getting the results later. We forget because Naim lifts a man’s weights that he is still half boy.”

It is indeed hard—given his round face and unshaven peach fuzz—to see Suleimanov as anything but all boy. His relatively short arms and large head give him the appearance of being much younger than 16. His proportions and limb shape bring to mind the small folk made famous by J.R.R. Tolkien: the Hobbits. And as Hobbits are begotten by other small folk, so too Suleimanov, whose father, a sometime miner, sometime farmer, is exactly the same height as Naim, though eight or nine pounds heavier, and whose mother is a whopping 4’ 7½”, weighing in at 83 pounds. And as perhaps befits a family of diminutive Turks in Bulgaria, they are unusually close—so close, in fact, that not long after Suleimanov enrolled in Kardzhali’s sports school, which required him to both eat and sleep there, even his beloved barbells failed to keep him from running away and going back home. But after being consoled by his mother, who was also of two minds where the sports school was concerned, he decided to return and concentrate on his lifting.

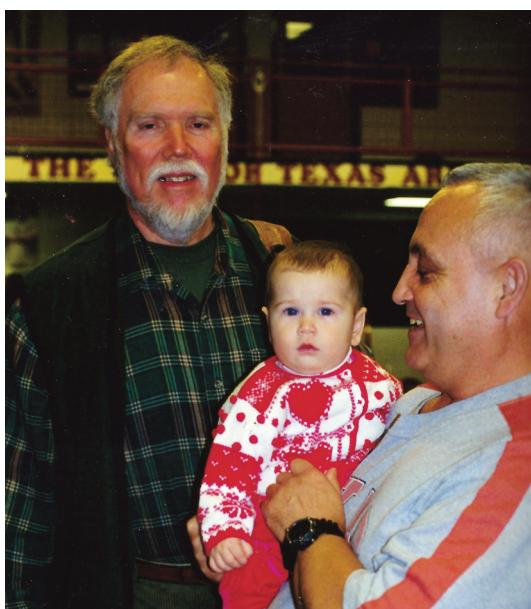
He remained at school in Kardzhali until April 1982, and

then, because of his meteoric rise in the national rankings, joined the national team in Sofia. He trained there during the four months preceding his historic performance in Sao Paulo, but because he was still homesick he was allowed to return to Kardzhali for the next academic year. In the summer of 1983, as the pieces for the 1984 Olympic Games were being put into place by Abadjiev and his minions, Suleimanov was brought to Sofia for good.

His life in that bustling, handsome old city with its backdrop of hillsides covered with fruit trees and the looming beauty of the Vitosha mountains is rather different than his life was in Kardzhali. At the sports school he was just one of the boys and girls—albeit more famous—attending classes, training, doing homework, and looking forward to weekends at home. But in Sofia, because of the obligation Abadjiev feels to train the team with regularity and severity sufficient to “split the fibers,” Suleimanov has no time to be enrolled in one of Sofia’s sports schools and little opportunity to travel the 150 miles to his home. But he keeps up with his schoolwork—a tutor comes in evenings—while his teammates watch TV and listen to songs about pickup trucks, trains, prison and love-sick blues on their sound systems.

All in all, life on the national team is a full but rather narrow one for a boy of 16. Yet Suleimanov seems to feel a sense of responsibility, even destiny.

“I know I am a so special boy,” he said quietly, two days before the Olympic boycott was announced, “and I am knowing this for a long time. I am getting much strength from nature, but I must train hard with the heart to make big results on platform. This I will do. I am hearing so much about your California and I am dreaming about seeing that so special place. It is a big dream for a so small boy. But I know there is talk that the chiefs will be keeping us from California. I can’t understand this but maybe I am not having enough years. Each night I am praying to come.”



**The friendship between Terry and Angel Spassov, begun during this remarkable trip to Bulgaria, lasted until Angel’s death in 2017. Spassov moved to Texas in 1990 to work at UT-Austin and was soon joined by Galia Tzvetkov with whom he had two daughters—Kalina, shown here in 2002, and Boriana. Angel was a major force in introducing Bulgarian methods to the United States’ strength coaching community and was much loved by his UT athletes.**

