

# European Corner: Grigori Novak

by David Webster



**M**any areas of the former Soviet Union, with all its ethnic categories, were dedicated to strength athletics. It is therefore not surprising that the areas enjoy a folklore rich in tales of peasant strength. One of these concerns Petr Gorodets, a rural worker in the village of Rublov, near Moscow. A man of enormous power, Petr would entertain his friends with various interesting feats. The most popular of these was done when he would fasten straps round a large log, hold a mouth-piece (attached to the straps) in his teeth, lift the tree

trunk and then spin with it until it rose sideways as he spun round and round. Gorodets' fame spread throughout the land in 1634 and he was called to give a command performance for his sovereign, the czar.

In later years, strength displays became very popular as a form of indoor and outdoor entertainment. In 1864, for instance, the October 25th issue of the Odessa newspaper *Entracte* made special mention of the fact that every circus arriving in the town always had weightlifting in its programs. One of the

most popular performers in the 1880s was a very tall, handsome and superbly built 320 pound strongman, Pavel Stupin. He appeared in authentic peasant costume and carried a horse on his shoulders, juggled with weights and broke chains. In another part of the program he wrestled a bear, as animals were prominent at that time amongst itinerant entertainers. After an excellent display of raw strength, Stupin brought his act to a finale with spectacular acrobatics, showing that even huge strongmen can be very agile. (Two of the biggest modern strength athletes—Tom McGhee at 6'5", 287 pounds and Paul Ferency at 6'6" and 300 pounds—can do back somersaults). The last notice of Pavel Stupin was in 1912 when he was a poor old man in Odessa and a charity show was held for his benefit.

The USSR's successes in weightlifting, wrestling, gymnastics, shot, hammer and discus, shows clearly that their constituent republics had a tremendous depth of talent in strength athletics. The Soviet Union had several competitors recognized as the world's strongest men of their time: Vlasov, Zhabotinski, Alexeev and Pisarenko. These men were all Olympic specialists outside the world of professional entertainment, although some Olympians have made the transition to the circus ring and variety stage with a good degree of success. None made the transition so effectively as the subject of this issue's article—Grigori Novak.

Without question, the most famous of all the Soviet champion weightlifters to turn professional was the short, chunky Novak. A true son of the soil, he was born in Kiev on March 5, 1919. Although he was only a mere 5'3" tall when fully grown, he was hailed as the Ukrainian Hercules.

At the age of 16 he was a talented gymnast and was employed as a circus acrobat when a man named Konkin, a weightlifting coach, saw the young man and was so impressed with what he saw that he visited Novak in his dressing room to attempt to persuade the young acrobat to try weightlifting. The resulting trial was so encouraging that Grigori was keen to begin competition immediately. There was, however, a rule requiring a minimum age of 18, so the very enthusiastic, and very impatient, lad lied about his age in order to gain competitive experience. Young Novak won event after event and it took him just three years to gain his first national record, but his excellent progress was halted by World War II. For a short while, Grigori had been a meat salesman, but in 1941 when the Germans invaded he was drafted into the Red Army and became a Physical Training Instructor, training mountain troops; he served three and a half years on the appalling Russian Front.

Novak resumed intensive training immediately after the war and shot to fame in 1945 when he beat the record total held by Louis Hostin of France. A year later he was the outstanding lifter of the World Championships in Paris, where he won the world title at light-heavyweight, pressing 308 pounds, snatching 286 pounds and clean and jerking 341 pounds. In this very first international appearance he started higher in the press than the world record held by Khadr El Touni of Egypt, setting the weightlifting world alight with this unprecedented lifting at

light-heavy. The young Ukrainian's stocky appearance and dour personality seemed very much in keeping with the then current image of Soviet lifters, and he spearheaded the Russian onslaught upon strength sports world wide. For several years records in abundance fell before this fiery athlete, particularly in the press.

During his amateur career Novak broke 111 Soviet records and 62 world records, making him the first great star of post war years. I remember well that at that time of his career he was something of a rebel in the well-disciplined Soviet team, and on visiting the USSR some years later and asking about Grigori I was told that he was a little too fond of celebrating with vodka. In any case, he married and settled down in 1947 and continued his winning ways in the sport until in 1952. But just before the Helsinki Olympics, he suffered a bad thigh injury and developed forearm and elbow problems which required surgery. He still elected to lift in the Olympic Games, and with only one press, one snatch and one clean and jerk he won the silver medal. His injuries were so serious, however, that they ended his amateur career.

In 1953 he re-appeared as a professional circus strongman, a new way for him to capitalize on his remarkable physique and fiery temperament. Weighing over 180 pounds, yet barely over five feet in height, Novak looked very impressive, with massive legs, prominent deltoids and even chiseled abdominals. As a competitor he had had jet-black hair, often awry, but now he was graying and very well groomed. Audiences expected him to lift barbells and he did, supporting these and also human weights at the same time. The feat which the Russian lifters liked best, and related to me with great gusto, involved Novak lifting huge spherical weights overhead, replacing them gently on the floor, and then opening the globes to allow countless little dogs to jump out and scamper, barking, from the ring.

To enhance his already popular act, Grigori introduced his sons into the business, and soon Arkady and Roman accompanied him in all his presentations. The act was further developed to include Novak's daughters-in-law, and some spectacular weight juggling and balancing were featured.

In one feat Novak supported a platform and two cyclists plus one of his sons who lifted huge globe weights which also held the two pretty girls. General audiences were also very appreciative of a feat in which Novak lay on his back, lifted one heavy barbell on his feet and another in his hands and then, having milked the applause for this, called Roman and Arcady to come forward and hand-balance on top of the two barbells. The Novaks had a very varied act with lifting, balancing and weight juggling, but it was also a thrilling performance because of the danger element in building up human columns and tableaux.

The great Grigori Novak's weight increased with his age and he approached 200 pounds in bodyweight, which was too much for his height. In his prime, however, he was the best in the world for his weight, and he had a good run for many years as a professional strongman, although he died rather prematurely on the tenth of July, 1980.