

## Un-Soviet Sports

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By Konstantin Sonin

After Russia's dismal performance at the Olympic Games in Vancouver, there has been a prolonged, heated discussion about who should be blamed for the failure. The "collapse of the Soviet system of preparing athletes" is the phrase most often used to describe Russia's Olympic crisis. But putting so much emphasis on the words "Soviet" and "collapse" distorts the issue.

Of course, success at the Olympics and other international sporting events was extremely important for Soviet leaders, and they devoted huge resources to training athletes to make sure that the Soviet Union excelled on the world stage. But there was another factor that had an enormous influence and remains almost entirely overlooked today — the closed Soviet borders.

Young Soviets ran up against countless restrictions when choosing their careers. Everything connected with commercial activity was prohibited, diplomatic service and the top political positions were reserved for the chosen few, and most creative, scientific and scholarly work that we now take for granted simply did not exist then. A career in sports was one of the very few ways for the "unchosen" to live a little better than the masses, to achieve the acclaim and adoration of the public or simply to travel outside of the closed borders of the Soviet Union. This is not an exclusively Soviet phenomenon. In many countries the majority of aspiring athletes come from poor families. What made the Soviet Union unique was the extremely large number of children for whom sports were the only path to glory and prosperity, at least in comparison with their fellow countrymen.

The collapse of the Soviet Union turned this dynamic on its head. With the emergence of a relatively free-market economy and open borders, the number of opportunities for Russians to make money and travel abroad increased exponentially. Sports were no longer one of the very few outlets for ordinary Russians to catch a glimpse of the Western world. To make matters worse, the birthrate fell significantly in the early 1990s, lowering the pool of potential athletes. The demographic factor could have played a role in Russia's poor showing at the recent Olympics.

During the Soviet period, young athletes had no idea what motivated their counterparts in the United States and other Western countries to train 10 hours per day, seven days per week because they did not know how children lived beyond the Iron Curtain. For all they knew, Western governments had the same fundamental approach to cultivating their athletes as part of a larger political battle in the Cold War.

Thus, we have a large paradox: Russia is pouring huge amounts of money into its Olympic sports program but is enjoying fewer returns on that investment than other countries. As Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said when he grilled top sports officials on March 5, "I have got the impression that the more money we spend, the more modest the results are."

One of the main reasons for these modest results is that the government is resorting to the old Soviet approach to develop sports. The problem is that young athletes today are living under very un-Soviet circumstances — circumstances that hopefully we will never see again.

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