
An Athlete's View Of Limits And Possibilities

Here is the greatest pole vaulter in history, speaking at the IAF "Human Performance in Athletics: Limits and Possibilities," in Budapest, October 11-12, 1997.

REPRINTED FROM TRACK COACH #148 (SUMMER 1999)

Sergey Bubka, Ukraine, is the reigning world record holder in the pole vault with 6.14m (20-1³/₄). Bubka won his sixth consecutive World Championships title in 1997 in Athens—certainly one of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the sport. He has also set 17 world records outdoors and 10 indoors. He has cleared 6.00m or better in more than 44 competitions. He was voted Sportsman of the Year for 1997 by the influential newspaper L'Equipe and honored as the best pole vaulter of the last half century by Track & Field News.

INTRODUCTION

Bubka describes his childhood and his early love for sport. His ferocious competitive spirit was channelled into many sports until, at age 10, he came under the influence of the pole vault coach Vitaliy Petrov. Bubka describes the special qualities and methods of a man he acknowledges is the best tech-

nical coach in the world and introduces the concept of The Culture of Movement. The influence of gymnastics on Bubka's technique is described, as is the importance of communication, feedback, and keeping an open mind to outside influences—especially from specialists in weight lifting, sprinting, medicine and psychology.

Bubka's meticulous approach to training and competition is described. Maintaining a distance from distractions, especially before major events, is vital. This can sometimes be misinterpreted.

Bubka describes the last 18 months which have seen him recover from a serious achilles injury. An operation was eventually required. Athens 97 was a great motivation and Bubka describes how he was able to come back, and how he is still keen to make more world record attempts. Commercialism must be secondary to performance ambitions. Limits must not be part of an athlete's vocabulary. Above all must be dedication, atten-

tion to detail and love for the Spirit of Sport.

I will start this speech with a confession. I have won gold medals in six world championships but I have never felt more nervous than I do here today!

But although I am not used to speaking at this type of seminar I am happy to have the chance and I hope you will be interested in what I have to say.

First of all, I would like to talk a little about my childhood, because it is here that you will find the essence of the athlete I would become. I was born and brought up in the town of Lugansk in what was then the USSR and would become Ukraine. My father was a soldier and my mother a medical assistant. But they weren't active in sport.

My interest in sport came from playing in the streets around my home with my brother and my friends. As a

By Sergey Bubka

boy I loved to play all sports. But what I loved the best were games like street hockey and football. When I played football, which was the most popular sport, I would play as an attacker, or in the defense or even in goal if I felt I had to save the team. I would play in five positions. I would run like crazy because I just had to win.

I wasn't very big for my age. In fact I was probably the smallest. I played with my brother who was three years older and other guys who were even four or five years older. That was how I grew to love sport. From the age of eight I began physical education classes in school and took part in sporting competitions between schools and also between the different classes. I could really run until I was dead on the sports field because I had to win.

As long as I can remember, what I call the Spirit of Sport—the competitive spirit—was in my blood. I realized that sport was something fantastic. When I do sport, or anything else in my life, it must be 100 per cent or 1000 per cent. I must give everything I have. This is part of my character.

In my first class, because I had good speed and coordination, I was selected for special coaching in gymnastics. But when I showed up, as they asked me to, at 8 am one morning, the teacher told us we had to walk to the gymnastic hall. When I asked how far it was and the teacher replied, "It is about 15 minutes walking," I decided that it was too far and so I went home!

Around the same time, when I was about 8 or 9 years old, a coach invited me and my brother to take special swimming lessons. I think I went twice. I remember being under the water, not able to breathe, and I knew it was not for me. I have such blood that I have to move fast, to be in the open air.

By the age of 10, I had taken part in most sports at school and outside. In the USSR at that time you did not normally start athletics at such a young age. But a friend of mine from the neighborhood recommended me to a

pole vault coach named Vitaliy Petrov because he knew I was strong for my age. I remember going for a test with Petrov. He timed us running 30 meters and also made us do pull-ups. I managed to do 15. That was a big result and impressed Petrov because I wasn't just using my arms but was swinging my whole body. So he could see I had good movement.

I was the youngest in the training group which moved to the city of Donetsk because it had one of the few specialist pole vault centers in the Soviet Union. I was very lucky to have met Petrov because he was to be the greatest influence on my life as an athlete.

I was with him for 16 years and I can say that he is a very smart guy. No one in the world knows more about pole vault technique than Petrov.

As I will now explain, it is the work of a team of motivated people that has helped me develop my full potential as an athlete. The talent and determination may have always been in my blood but I will always be grateful to those people who have been with me all the time: when I lose, as well as when I win.

Petrov was a very clever coach because he was not in a rush to get results. Many coaches find talented athletes and want them to win medals immediately. But Petrov wanted me to have a long career. He always used to say: "Sergey, I want you to have your best results in senior sport."

So, for example, I did no weight training at all until I was 16: just exercises with my body. Every exercise was designed to make me stronger, but slowly, without putting too much stress on my joints and muscles as I was growing.

It is dangerous to overload the body at this age. What we were doing at times was not really pleasant or fulfilling: just very specific exercises to strengthen muscles and to make tendons looser, but there was a good reason for them as they prepared the muscles for heavier loads. This is why I have had relatively few injuries in

my career.

I was not really happy with my training until I was about 16. The first five or six years I could not "feel" the right movement. But when I was in competition, everything worked out well. This was because I always loved the stress of competition. Under stress I feel alive: I can concentrate and be motivated. I love to make a third attempt at a height that can win a competition or leave me in a bad place if I miss. I can compete for seven or eight hours. No problem. I don't want to leave the stadium. Because I am sensitive, I find I can use all the special things about competition to raise my performance to the next level.

Petrov planned for me to do well at the 1984 Olympic Games when I was 20. But I won my first World Championships gold a year earlier and then missed the 1984 Games because of a political boycott. Still, he was right in a way, because I broke my first world record in 1984.

Maybe the greatest thing that Petrov helped me understand was The Culture of Movement. He showed me that the pole vault was really two sports. It was athletics on the runway: during the approach run and takeoff, and it was gymnastics once you were in the air and until you cleared the bar. Petrov realized this and he began to seek out experts in gymnastics. He wanted to use their knowledge to help us. Although we knew all about speed and power as athletes, gymnastics was another world.

Since 1990 I have been helped by a gymnastics coach called Alexandr Salomakhin who lived in Donetsk. First he taught us basic gymnastic routines and then he devised special exercises for the pole vault. He helped me make really great improvements in the second phase of the vault. I would say that my ability in this phase is what helped me break world records.

He helped us to discover many things: our position in the air; our sense of where the bar is; the angles of our limbs when we are in the air. The thing is, many pole vault coaches

think they know everything, but they are too focused on their speciality.

Petrov was excellent because he was interested in every detail. Even when we were jogging he would be looking at where the shoulders were, how the hips were aligned, the position of the feet.

It was important to Petrov that everything we did was technically correct. Even our strength training. Because he wanted us not to have to waste time when we came to the fine technical work before a competition. He wanted us to be technically efficient even during the physical conditioning period.

But one of the biggest lessons I learned from Petrov is the importance of communication, not just between coach and athlete, but in the form of communication between the brain and body during competition. I try very hard to concentrate during competition—I “feel” and think about every little art of every little phase; from the start of my runup to the moment I land on the mat.

I have a picture of what I have done. I have to analyze everything, and then to make any adjustments I think are necessary. It is very important for an athlete to do this because the coach cannot be with you. When you compete you are on your own. You must learn to think and act fast. To adjust. When I compete my brain becomes a computer. Athletes must analyze, and make a picture of what they have done, of what is wrong and how to make it perfect. That is why I have confidence when I am competing. I do not have to look for my coach for explanations.

I arrive at the stadium two hours before a competition. Because I want to look at every possible thing that could influence my result: how is the vault area, where are the stands located, what are the weather conditions? I need to be prepared for everything. I need to think about technique, about running, about my warmup—what I was doing wrong.

I also do visualization exercises,

what we call in Russian “training for the brain.” I also need to soak up the atmosphere: to raise my spirit and adrenaline for the competition. Finding motivation is something that you must work harder at as you get older and become more successful.

As an athlete I have also had to learn to be reserved. To waste no energy that could be used in competition. I will give you an example. By the time I was 15, I had left my family and was staying with my brother at the sport school in Donetsk. Once, I went to the grocery to buy 100 grams of cheese. But the woman behind the counter tried to give me just 90 grams. She wanted to cheat me. Now I lost my temper. I felt outraged and argued with the woman because I had been brought up to be honest with people.

But later I was told: “Don’t explode. Don’t waste your nervous energy on these things. You must learn to focus that energy into competition. Give it a good channel.” As I got older I began to avoid anything that was too much of a distraction. I realized that I was sensitive by nature and that sometimes I let things affect me. For example, I try not to spend too much time with journalists, or even making speeches like this one!

Back in 1986, I began to get a lot of requests to make appearances. And I always accepted the invitations. I was actually happy to meet people and to speak. But when I got to The European Championships, I found that I had no nerves, no adrenaline. I was shocked. I won, but it was difficult.

So when the competition was over I spoke with a psychologist Rudolf Zaginoff—who had been recommended by Petrov. He told me: “You were talking too much before; you spent too much time thinking and discussing the competition before it happened. By the time the competition began you were empty.”

Since then, he has advised me to stay quiet in the two months before the major competitions. To be reserved, to stay calm. I am careful not to empty my psychological battery. Now, dur-

ing a major competition I relax with a book, or I go to a park or other quiet places, or make conversation with my coach, family and very close friends. But I avoid stress.

This is also, a little bit, the method of the former Soviet system. In the West, athletes and the coaches talk more. They are more closely involved with promotions and publicity and other commercial activity. But in the end, the result comes first. If you don’t win, then nobody will ask you for an interview or to take part in promotions.

That is the reason that sometimes I appear to be cold—arrogant—with my fellow competitors and with the media. But there is a reason. It is not part of my nature. In fact, I enjoy very much meeting people and exchanging opinions with them. But people must understand that to be successful I must be left alone.

When I am speaking about my life, and my mentality as an athlete I realize that the last year and a half have been very important. On the bright side, I made discoveries about weight lifting (by taking the advice of a specialist weight lifting coach), which have been incredible. Making some changes to this important part of my training has helped me very much, especially during the period when I was injured.

This injury to my right achilles tendon stopped me from taking part in the Atlanta Olympic Games. The worst thing about it was that I was in great shape, especially psychologically. But I consulted specialists, one from the USA and another from Finland who was also a surgeon, and it was clear that I had a tear in my tendon of almost 25%. Had I competed it might have torn 100%. This was in August 1996.

Although I tried to avoid surgery, in the end the injury did not go away. In fact it got worse, with the inflammation going to the bone, so I agreed to have an operation. This was carried out on December 23, 1996, in Helsinki. The surgeon said the injury was worse than

it had appeared on the scans: they had to cut even the bone. Not until April 1997 was I able to jog.

And I will be honest with you: all my training and competitions this year (1997) have been very, very difficult. When I tried to increase the loads there would be a reaction. The cycle was up and down, up and down. Normally I would train, take anti-inflammatories, train, take anti-inflammatories and go on like this. I had to work always with pain. This is very tiring mentally too, when you can feel an injury but still want to achieve your best results.

Sometimes after training the pain was so bad that I didn't see how I could continue. But I knew that 1997, with the World Championships, was a very important year. I wanted very much to keep my tradition going in Athens and to win six in a row. Once I was there, I had to deal with the fact that every day I was in pain.

I finished my heavy training at the end of July but still wasn't sure if I could compete in Athens. I had to make many small modifications to my training as I began to get faster and sharper. I stopped weight training and began to polish my technique. Even during the qualification on August 3 I felt pain. It was only in the final, when I was running with better technique, that the pain eased.

When I first got injured I never felt like it was the end of my career. That was because I knew what was wrong. I was injured. Injuries heal. I was still in great shape, I loved to compete and I still wanted to improve. My motivation was to take part in my 6th World Championships and to win again.

Before I competed my psychologist said: "Sergey: just remember you have never lost at the World Championships and during this competition, think of your best jumps. Put a picture in

your mind." Before the final I decided on my strategy: to jump at 5.70, 5.90 and 6 meters, because I felt 6 meters would win. It was a calculated risk.

My winning jump was 6.01 and it was quite good technically. But I was a little bit too far back when I took off, because I was running faster. But because I was a little behind I was able to achieve very good penetration during the catapult phase.

I also discovered some new ways to motivate myself. One was to scream just before I began my runup because this helped me concentrate and to raise my fighting spirit. My physiotherapist Arkadij Shkvira, who used to train with me in Donetsk, also showed me some acupuncture points which, when pressed, help boost energy. After the competition I found that I had been pressing these points so hard that they were bleeding.

Many have asked what motivates me when it comes to record breaking. After all, I have set 17 outdoor world records and over 30 in all indoors and outdoors. The main factor is that I have such a character that I want to improve. To be perfect.

Many people have said that I go for so many records because of money. But they forget that I grew up in a Socialist society: there was no money at all then. Remember, I had already set nine world records outdoors before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

I have always wanted to achieve good results in sport. Petrov said to me: "Concentrate on the results, and the money will come as a result." I think it is sad when sports people put money first. That is the ugly way. Sport then becomes like any other job. But sport should be special. It should be about emotion and desire. You must want to be the best. The business should come second always.

It is important also to be realistic.

You must set goals you can achieve and then continue to work hard and improve. When I set world records I was already thinking of the next one. But it is not easy. I am not a robot. If I vault 6.13 for a world record and then later 6.14, some people think: "he has improved a record by one centimeter; he is playing games." But I don't see a world record as just an improvement but as something brand new. Each record is special in its own way. Each takes place on a different day, under different conditions, with different emotions. You must find the psychological and physical keys.

I have never recognized the concept of limits. Never. I think an athlete who accepts limits is dead. Even now, when I am almost 34 years old, I believe in new levels. I still think about clearing 6.20 next season, even though I have missed training because of injury.

It is important to plan every detail carefully, and to work together as a team. My results are due not only to my character and preparation but to the contribution of my first coach, my current pole vault coach, my running coach, my weight lifting coach, my psychologist, my doctor, my physiotherapist, my masseur. We must combine all our knowledge to improve the final result.

To conclude, I hope you have all come to realize that, above all, I love the sport. I have already been in athletics for 24 years but don't want to stop. Why should I stop if I enjoy it so much? I don't agree with the view that you should finish at the top, something which was also the philosophy in the Soviet Union. Maybe I can accept being second, or third or fifth because I still love what I do. I have always felt that a sportsman's life is the best, most beautiful life you can have.

Thank you for your attention.