

*Ira and teammates catch their first glimpse of IG.*

# **A VISIT TO THE CENTRAL ARMY CLUB**

Text & Photos by Rafael Beer

**P**olish soccer star Stan "The Fran" Terlecki, in an article which recently appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, told the following Brezhnev story: The Soviet leader, trying to save face for having lost the race to the moon, summoned his top scientists and told them of his plans for landing a cosmonaut on the sun. Told that this would not be possible on account of the sun's great heat, Brezhnev, unflappable as ever, greeted them with the following reply: "Don't worry, we will land during the night."

# Bicherova, Davidova, step aside or they'll roll ya ovah!

The Russians may not have surpassed our technological achievements but isn't anyone who watched the World Championships held this year in Moscow beginning to get the feeling that their gymnasts are truly out of this world, and that beating them is about as plausible as landing on the sun?

Who could have imagined that despite the absence of the triple threat fielded in Strasbourg by Muckhina, Shaposhnikova, and Kim, this present crop — some of them younger and less experienced did even better. Who, in their wildest dreams, would have foreseen that tiny Olga Bicherova, looking more like a Baptist Choir girl than a gritty tumbler, would dive full in the ranks of veterans and come back out with first place gold; that a world class performer like Tkatchev could not even break into a lineup (top 36 All-Around) dominated by Yuri Korolev, one year out of Junior competition! And who could have believed that, in the face of such a showing, even the vanquished complained at the unfairness of the rule which restricted the Russian team to competing only three of its top gymnasts in the finals?

The fact is that we're having about as much success going up against their gymnasts as one would imagine the Russians could have while attempting to play the Dallas Cowboys or the Boston Celtics. Forget it!

Why is that? Drop by any of the hospitality rooms where our coaches congregate to discuss such matters and you'll hear the yarns — tales of assembly lines and robots and super-human feats — which leaves you feeling that the truth is that no one really knows what's true.

But, while covering the World Championship in Moscow for *IG*, Gary Goodson and I took the opportunity to find out and wrote FIG President Yuri Titov with a request for visitation rights to one of Russia's best known gyms: the Central Army Club.

This club, we knew, was where the fabled '78 World Champion Elena Muckhina had trained until she was tragically paralyzed in a mysterious tumbling accident. The head of that facility, Vladimir Klimenko, was also her personal coach. The men's program had distinguished itself by producing world class athletes like Vladimir Markelov, who

trained under the young coach Vladimir Popov. But here again, tragedy struck most unexpectedly, robbing the Central Army Club of its well earned glory, when Markelov, injured in a freakish car accident, was sidelined with chronic back ailments.

When Titov's most gracious invitation to visit this club came through and our cab, after several futile attempts in the early morning darkness, finally deposited us in front of the vaunted shrine, the first of many myths came grinding to a halt. What we saw was not the likes of a training gym, reputed to exist in Siberia, which could swallow up the Astro-dome alive; nor did we see "Azarian's Airport," a gym overseen by the ex-World Champion from a glass control tower which split the floor in two halves: one for two hundred of Russian's top Elite men; the other for two hundred of its top women.

Rather, at eight o'clock in the morning, arriving under a blanket of darkness woken from its gloom by the tiny lights relected on the crusted snow, we saw a place more befitting of "Close Encounters." Looking like something that would result from crossing an old high school gym with a furniture warehouse it did, in fact, resemble a vintage airplane hanger, with large sheets of corrugated metal swooping over ancient iron girders. Vivid descriptions of such places, some built for a different purpose, have been the cause for many a well known Russian writer to have his works banned. Nonetheless, at this ungodly hour and across the Pole from what we called home, this was exactly the place we were after.

Our reception committee, consisting of one classic cleaning lady (big kerchief, dark clothes, body stooped over bucket) and a young wrestler turned night watchman ("Valodya is my name") seemed a bit intrigued when confronted by two figures more appropriate of Hollywood; one, a photographer dripping with cameras, the other a cowboy, boots, Stetson and all, carrying two red white and blue bags with the letters USA emblazoned all over.

You don't normally find such creatures cruising in the Moscow fog; in London it could get you arrested; in Central Park it will get you — one way or the other. But as soon as they found us harmless they did warm up and, at our request (and after

insisting that Gary shed his wonderous boots), escorted us to the interior of the gym.

Well, SCATS it wasn't. Nothing was chrome plated, the mats were old Sarneige, and the high bar didn't appear the sort of thing you'd bow to in the morning. But everything was functional. The vaulting runway exited into a pit, several beams and a few sets of bars graced the back of the room, the spring floor sprung, and everything designed to rattle human bones was generally located over pools of shredded foam. It was an office — maybe not on par with California — but meant for work.

And folks, there ain't in California — or New York, Pennsylvania, or South Borneo — which wouldn't trade its padded seats for any one of the first five girls that came walking through the door. "That one," Valodya proudly singled out the first one, "is the Soviet Junior Champion." And a lovely girl she was, fifteen year old Lilya Charisova. Charming as could be, she soon became my favorite when, shyly trodding over with her head bowed low, she offered me a gymnastics pin for a gift. "Spasibo," (thank you) I said, and "Palazhusta," (please) I offered in return a poster of one of those she strove to emulate; Ludmilla Tourischeva.

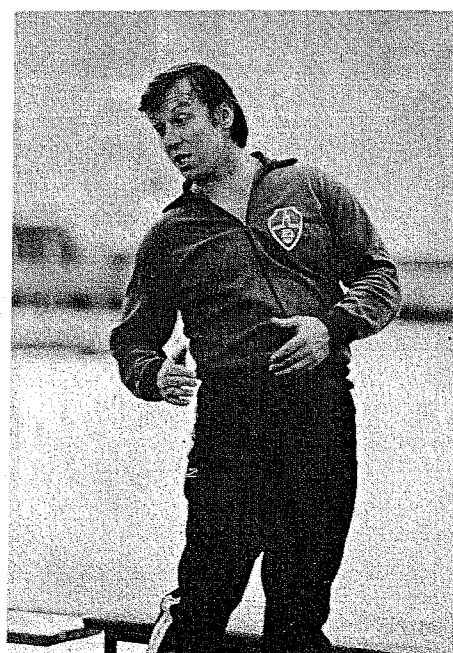
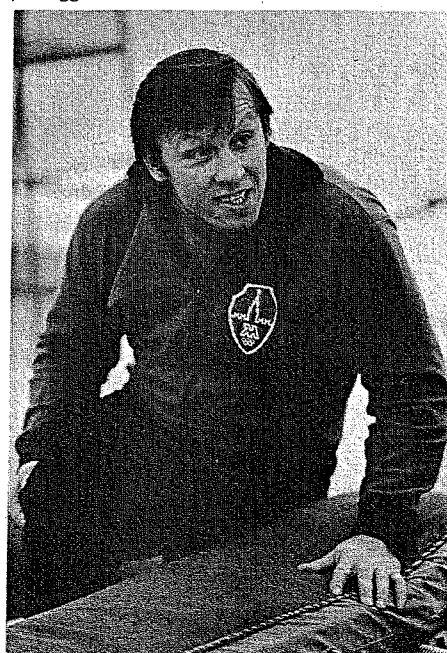
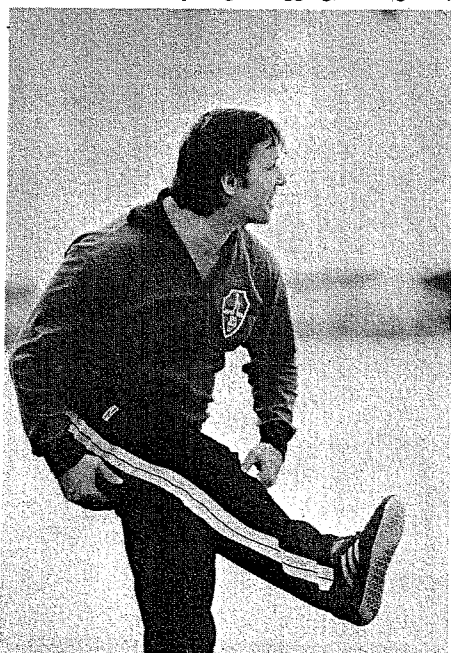
So now you can take myth number two — that Russian girls are rude automotons strictly bred for sport — and shove it out the window. In fact, throughout our stay in Russia, we found that children everywhere were an open treasure, coddled and loved. When Zaglada, the renown tumbling coach at "Dynamo," made Gary Goodson's daughter a gift of a Russian doll, Gary fondly named it — for its big dark eyes, and rosey cheeks, a angelic touch — "Bicherova." What it comes down to is that, if you can sidestep your politics for a moment, you'll find the children throughout the world — whether they come from Allentown or Leningrad, Wiesbaden or Poughkeepsie — just as full of sugar and salt as the ones in your back yard.

So score a tie here. We like our children and they like theirs.

But what about Klimenko, the coach? Does he do anything differently than we do? And does the Russian system of training as a whole differ from ours?

We didn't have long to wait before, shedding

*Klimenko at work—piking, shugging, waving and full of energy*



muffler and overcoat, the man carrying those answers came tromping through the door. Valodya had about as much success explaining our presence to his boss as an umpire's shrug would cool off Billy Martin. "I speak english," Klimenko said, in a tone implying this should be common knowledge.

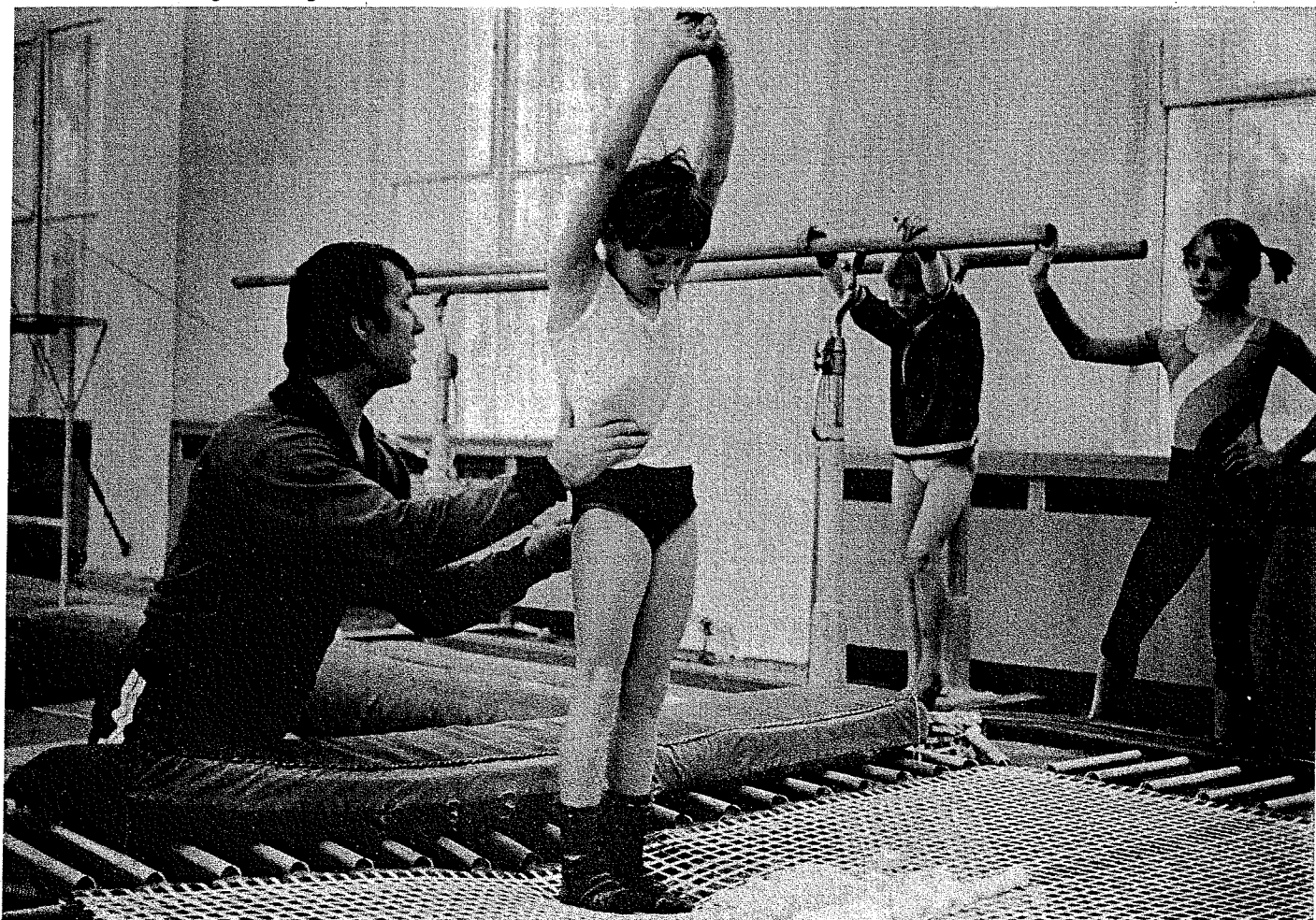
Heading towards us, his swagger made him appear taller than his actual height, perhaps no more than 5' 7". With thick brown hair parted to the side, and one large wave spilling on his forehead, his overall appearance was that of an overgrown boy, perhaps a bully, wielding the absolute authority of a man. His eyes were dark and closely spaced, the lips small and expressive, and the energy which exuded beneath his ample shoulders and barrel chest thirsted for challenge.

Gary was the first to shake his hand and explain who we were and the reason for our visit, the introduction embellished with his own credentials — past Technical Director of the Canadian Gymnastics Federation, a post he holds with the Independent Club (USAIGC) — to let Klimenko know he was among his peers. The offering accepted, we soon discovered that our host, more than exuberant and tactful, was also a true showman. There was nothing, he said, that we couldn't do, or couldn't ask, or couldn't photograph — it was, after all, not every day that one received such important guests from America. His eyes, in fact, were more than ever focused on America — and, specifically, Los Angeles — and his heart, covered with a patch from the ill-fated events in Moscow, was never far from the Olympics.

And to that end he worked, oh, how he worked! Pacing across the floor with his gifted little brood, like a moother leading its chicks, he headed straight for the mini-tramp and the site of twisting practice. And there, with their arms quietly hanging



*Ira and Klimenko working on twisting as teammates look on.*



down, the girls would wait their turn for a joyride when the flick of the wrist, like the action of a frisbee, would send them spinning madly in the air. Time shrunk. Bodies blurred. The double twist became a triple; the triple blended into a quad. How many turns? We couldn't count. But I did see Gary jacking up the speed of his movie camera. "Guess we'll know when we see the films." He said with a wink.

After each landing, Klimenko, bolting from his bench as if he'd witnessed some unspeakable disaster, would set his body into spasms — piking, waving, shrugging — all to let the culprit know how it *should* be done. Then he would sit back down only to erupt again, regular as clockwork, an instant later. "Do it again." He would say accusingly, looking as if he'd just been robbed.

Asked what he thought of Liya's chances for the Olympics, Kilmenko, making sure she wasn't watching, said "Maybe" — though the shaking of his hand spoke more like a "so-so." She was, after all, merely Soviet Junior Champion. Nothing more. "But these three," he nodded at the silent, unsuspecting bunch, "They will be in Los Angeles."

One of the tiniest, and perhaps the most gifted of the three, twelve year old Ina Chikanova, motioned for her coach to bend over so she could whisper in his ear. Klimenko listened, his eyes growing wider with every word, then straightened up. "She wants to know what Los Angeles is."

The one thing children don't understand is the natural affection they bring out in adults, and little Ina may not have understood that we were laughing only at her innocence. "Now tell her about Disneyland." I said. But Klimenko wouldn't. This was time for work and not for dreams.

In America, not every coach I've met sees the need for working as hard as Klimenko. But there are also those who do. So we really can't give Russia the edge here either. Unless it is perhaps based on sheer technical knowledge.

And, at that, Klimenko certainly is a master who earned his title. For his knowledge of such arts as biomechanics and segmentation are hard to match. Here the balance slowly tilts to Russia's favor, not because such knowledge is lacking in our country but because it isn't as widespread. The girls Klimenko trains become the subject for a lecture on Newtonian physics — this information handed out like candy, though testing more like medicine, each time they go past him on their way back from the pit to the starting platform. His controlled spasms overwith — piking, waving and shrugging, using bones and joints like laboratory cogs and levers — the man sits down with folded arms to watch the effects of his experiment.

If they get it almost right, it's OK; if right, it's better. But, if God forbid, as Ina's teammate Ira just found out, she gets it wrong, then all hell breaks loose. Then Ira Vinzyenkova, ten years old, her name sounding like the Flight of the Bumblebee, her body small enough to fit into your pocket with spare change, becomes as threatening to Klimenko as a heavyweight contender in the ring. Ira, however, proves herself a worthy opponent and, summoning all her strength and talent, finally gets the right amount of spin and lands in the right place.

Not so fortunate is the slender fourteen-year-old whose hair is drawn into two thin pony tails, Tanya Martinyenka. She can't get it. Looks right from here, but I guess not from there. Klimenko is then capable of punishing the girls by withdrawing the reward, the spin, *the Ride*, letting the gymnast drive herself into the ground with timers, but no tricks, no getting ahead and, as she full well knows, ultimately no Olympics. If it goes down to the wire there, it comes down to the wire here. And Tanya hit the wire. Feeling her frustration mount she finally gives up and sadly thrusts her head into the mat.

To Klimenko, however, it's as nothing ever happened. Turning to Gary, he repeats the arm and

shoulder jerk demonstration explaining "I want her to keep the shoulders *down* as her hips come *up*."

Gary nods politely. "Korbiet" he says, "you call that Korbiet, don't you?" he goes on, displaying some of the knowledge he acquired during his previous visits to Russia.

"Yes, korbiet" Klimenko recognizes with approval and no small measure of surprise.

"We teach this in America too." Gary adds. "We call it the Profile System." And then he goes on to explain the intricacies of the system he has popularized in both the United States and Canada.

The Profile System, as copyrighted and taught by Goodson, is a method by which (a) the more difficult skills are taught first and (b) only the skills which belong to the same "family" of moves, meaning they lead to one another, are taught in the progression.

This, as Russian research has determined, is the quickest and — when combined with proper conditioning — the safest way to develop the skills of the exceptional gymnast. \* "Positive Transfer" they call it. Everything "Negative" is out (and in that category, Goodson says, you can throw in much of what we call compulsories — exercises which quite literally come from nowhere and lead to nowhere).

So this research too is available in our country even if, as Goodson readily admits, it originated someplace else.

Evidence for the effectiveness of this system is in the way Klimenko teaches bars, his next stop for the morning. And here again the star is Ina, dismounting off the lower bar with a half twisting double back.

"No sense in teaching her the easy skills" Klimenko turns to explain, underscoring the heart of the theory. "I started teaching her this progression yesterday with a double back," he continues. "Tomorrow we complete the full twist in the salto."

Gary beams approval. "Hurry up," Klimenko snaps at Ina. You would think the Olympics were tomorrow.

Unfortunately, looking at our watches, we discovered time was running short and, though we would have certainly preferred to stay much longer, we had another job beckoning for our return to Olympisky Stadium. So, attempting our best at the Russian sounds for thank you and good-by — "Spasibo" and "Dasvidanya" — and, scattering a

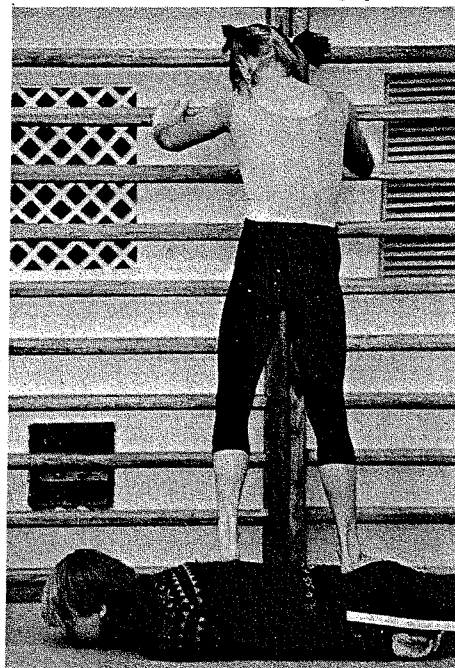
few more posters and fresh issues of *IG* behind, we headed back into the biting winds of Moscow's winter and the site of the World Championships.

Our departure was made easier by Klimenko who, when told that neither guest was happy the visit ended, invited us to come back and rejoin his practice the following morning. That, unfortunately, never came to pass.

The "official" translator who had been assigned to meet us in the hotel lobby the following morning never showed up. Tired of waiting, we finally left without her but, by that time, we had missed a unique opportunity for spending two more hours with one of the truly great men of gymnastics. *IG*

\*See the upcoming Simon and Schuster text, *Above Average; the Exceptional Gymnast* by Gary Goodson and Rafael Beer with Tracee Talavera and Julianne McNamara.

Warming up in Russia



Ira Vinzyenkova

