

VLADIMIR YASHCHENKO

by Jon

Hendershott

Everybody wanted to talk with Vladimir Yashchenko. Newspapers, national magazines, radio and television all wanted their chunk of him—which was understandable since about three weeks earlier he had raised his own outdoor world record in the high jump to 7-8 (2.34).

Now he was in Berkeley for the annual clash between two titans of track, the U.S. and the USSR. He had arrived on July 4 and got his first taste of at least the West Coast press the next day at a luncheon news conference.

Many questions dwelled on his reputation as a carousing young firebrand, more so than on the fact that he has risen farther off this earth under his own power than any man who ever lived. A partying episode after he soared 7-8½ (2.35) at the European Indoor Championships in Milan drew much interest from American newsmen.

And 19-year-old Volodya (1/12/59) became put off rather quickly with the line of questioning. Of course, it didn't help that the incident was recounted in detail in the meet program.

But *T&FN* could have cared less about how Yashchenko lets off steam. We wanted to find out about him, about his high jumping, about his ambitions and dreams.

As it ended up, everyone who wanted to talk to him lost out—to John Travolta.

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My first encounter with the angular youngster from Zaporozhye in the Ukraine came at an unlikely place—the corner of Telegraph Ave. and Durant St. in Berkeley, which could rightly lay a claim to being one of the cradles of the antiwar movement in the late 1960s.

My good friend Janis Donins, who
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won the javelin at the '71 U.S.-USSR meet in Berkeley, was talking to three Soviets we had met on the street, long-time friend Ingrida Barkane, Tatyana Anisimova and Nadyezhda Marinyenko.

When who, to my wondering eyes, should stroll up but Yashchenko, accompanied by another Vladimir, vaulter Trofimyenko. On quick glance, the young high jumper bears a striking resemblance to a tall James Dean, or a thin Mike Tully.

Janis hailed Yashchenko, who seemed surprised that an "American" should be calling him in perfect Russian. Janis introduced himself and me to the puzzled jumper, who shook hands stiffly. Janis explained that we were anxious to speak with him—personally, not in a big impersonal group, and about high jumping.

Yashchenko's reply was something akin to "Maybe later," and then he hurried off. He was already hyper enough—rocking from foot to foot, gesturing constantly and laughing nervously—but he seemed anxious to get away.

We next saw him on the high jump apron of Cal's Edwards Stadium. He had just put the bar at the lowest setting on the standard—5-6—and missed. He sat in the pit, staring blankly. Then he stood and raised the standards to 7 feet. He must have cleared it a half-dozen times in quick succession during his short workout.

Shortly after, as Yashchenko was heading back to the Soviet dormitory, Janis stopped him and again asked for some time to talk. It is important, Janis told him, and we want to talk as sportsmen.

Yashchenko stared at the ground and finally said to meet him at the dorm at 8 p.m. He promised to be there.

Over dinner, Janis explained that Yashchenko seemed very reluctant to talk. From little things he said, we gathered that the press conference earlier in the day had really bothered him. But Yashchenko seemed to believe that we cared more about how high he could jump than how much vodka he could drink.

So we arrived at the dorm at about 7:59. Not a Soviet to be found. The interpreter was the only one there. Everyone, all 80 of them, had gone to the movies, she said. To see *Grease*.

All I could think of was, how would you begin to explain to a group of Soviets about American youth in the 1950s, with their bobby sox, slicked-down hair and leather jackets? Oh well, John Travolta could have Yashchenko—for now.

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The next day, Janis and I arrived at the dorm bright and early, accompanied by *T&FN* staffer Dave Gleason—who holds, nicely enough, a degree in Russian. Again no athletes; out shopping, we were told.

But a few minutes later, who strolled out the door but Yashchenko. He turned and immediately came over as if to tell us, "I would have been here last night, but we all had to go."

Ten minutes, he said. That's all he could spare. We'll take it, I replied. So we sat on wooden benches in a central quad in front of the dorm and talked about high jumping.

Yashchenko was nervous and in almost constant motion: stretching his long legs, pulling his knees under his chin and wrapping his arms around his legs, wiping his face and neck, stroking the faint blond

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Out of competition (above with Franklin Jacobs) or in (r), Yashchenko's emotions run deep.

mustache which is sprouting on his upper lip, staring at the sky.

But he eventually loosened up. Janis and Dave helped tremendously, conversing casually but directly.

Not once was vodka mentioned.

T&FN: How would you say that being world record holder has affected your life?

Yashchenko: I would say that, in general, my life hasn't changed much. As far as sport is concerned, I think that others see my life differently. They seem to have changed some in their attitudes towards me. But I haven't changed in my attitude toward life.

T&FN: When you jumped 7-7½ last year in Richmond you weren't that well known.

Yashchenko: Oh, why not?

T&FN: In general. You weren't well known to the rest of the world even though you may have been known in the USSR.

Yashchenko: Well, I competed only rarely, but I would say I was very well-known in the USSR. I would say especially now after I set the indoor record. I think it had to do with Brumel.

T&FN: Ah yes. Do you know Valeriy?

Yashchenko: No.

T&FN: Have there been a lot of demands placed on you since you set the world record—to compete often, to give interviews, to meet people? How do you cope with all this?

Yashchenko (laughs): Well, there have been more meetings, receptions and such things than last year. One can only get accustomed to that.

T&FN: Do you feel responsible to meet all these people? Is this a burden in your life?

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Yashchenko: I don't know... no, I don't think so.

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Yet Yashchenko is, understandably, quite protective of his true feelings. He wouldn't come out and say that some of the questions at the previous day's press conference were insulting to him—particularly those which made reference to him being "young."

To refer to someone from the USSR as "young" is almost an insult. "Young" equates to emotional immaturity and implies a person lacks the status of an adult, regardless of physical age.

Janis had explained it to me at dinner the night before. "The elderly are very respected," he said. "Like my grandfather. We never sat at the dinner table until he did, or began to eat until he did. When he spoke, we shut up. He might be drunk, but we shut up and listened."

"Soviet people are more emotionally attached to each other than Westerners. Westerners are more cool in their relations with people."

"Soviets are emotionally deep people. There is no bottom to their emotions. Yashchenko is a Cossack and they are especially emotional and sensitive. They feel very deeply, for both good things and bad."

"Some words and ideas are simply untranslatable from the Russian language to English. The understanding of Russian emotions are the same."

At the press conference, Yashchenko had been asked why he hadn't left home for Moscow, where, the American writers seemed to believe, he would get "better" coaching. His answer was something vague like home was the best place for him.

But the question is one that could

burn the sensitive emotions of any Russian. Because of that deep attachment to home and to the people there, rarely would a Russian leave someone who had been his first teacher. In Yashchenko's case, that is Vasily Telegin, his coach since Volodya began jumping at age 12.

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T&FN: Of course, you have come a long ways from when you jumped 5-3 at age 13. But do you think you have a ceiling?

Yashchenko: I don't think about ceilings. I only know of concrete ceilings. [Laughs.] For me, there are no ceilings in sport. Only when I have to paint the house.

T&FN: You jumped 6-11½ in 1975 and 7-3½ in '76. Were there any indications for you that you could improve to 7-7½ in '77?

Yashchenko: Everything indicated it was possible. I fully expected to continue to progress.

T&FN: Did anything change in your training that could have caused the record?

Yashchenko: No, no, it just happened.

T&FN: What were your feelings at Richmond? You cleared 7-5½ for a World Junior record and then 7-7 for a European record before you tried 7-7½. Did those

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jumps give you a feeling of confidence?

Yashchenko: Confidence?

T&FN: Yes, as though you had wings?

Yashchenko: While I was jumping, I wasn't thinking of records, only of jumping. When I cleared the world record, I was thinking a bit to myself, "Be surprised!"

But I couldn't. I wanted to be surprised, but it was too familiar. It really was.

What I did think was only, well, that with those jumps in another competition, I could have gone even higher.

T&FN: How do you feel about the straddle style of jumping regaining the world record?

Yashchenko: Hmm, essentially, I feel that this style of jumping is dying out. It is not being fully developed, although there are some using it in Europe, like Rolf Beilschmidt. It is a more complicated school of jumping.

T&FN: Have you tried the Fosbury flop?

Yashchenko (laughs): I tried it, but not very successfully. I was far from setting records.

T&FN: The flop is more popular, but in your mind, which is the better style?

Yashchenko: Usually, superiority depends on the speed of approach, strength and development of technique. For me personally, the straddle is best. The flop is nice from a visual point of view, but for me the straddle is better.

T&FN: Do you have any specific height you hope to clear this year?

Yashchenko: If you are asking specifically about records, no, I don't have any particular aims for record heights this year. This season, I want only to compete, to take part in the competitions.

T&FN: Simply to jump, then, is enough to satisfy you?

Yashchenko: Yes, simply.

T&FN: But to win, of course.

Yashchenko (laughs): Well, who doesn't want to win? It's the same with everyone.

T&FN: This winter at Milan, why was it necessary for you to begin jumping at a low height like 2.10 [6-10¼]? It made the competition very long.

Yashchenko: It just happened to go that way in Milan.

T&FN: Were you not feeling sure of yourself?

Yashchenko: No, I felt fine. I just wanted everyone to be more interested in the competition.

T&FN: Oh, of course. How did you react to such tough competition from Beilschmidt?

Yashchenko: Well, when you know there will be such a concentration of strong jumpers, you don't want to do poorly. So you try a little harder.

T&FN: You tried 2.35 after your record at Richmond. Was it helpful to have previously jumped at that height when you were trying it in Milan?

Yashchenko: It was not really a test as such. For me, the height did not exist as a barrier, or as a limit.

T&FN: What were your feelings after your second miss at 2.35?

Yashchenko: Well, in such times you think, "Will I make it or not?" You have three chances and now only one left. Perhaps I felt a little more emotional tension. I did want to make it.

T&FN: Did you tell yourself anything special before your last attempt?

"For me,

2.35 didn't exist

as a barrier or a limit."

Yashchenko (long pause): I really don't want to say. Not in public.

T&FN: Your secret?

Yashchenko: Just something for me alone. Perhaps others would consider me strange.

T&FN: How did you feel when you did make it?

Yashchenko: How much could I feel? But I felt no worse than after I cleared 2.33 outdoors.

T&FN: And now, do you wish to improve your record?

Yashchenko: Well, I feel that 2.35 is very high, but nothing out of the ordinary. Simply, if I jump 2.40 [7-10½] I will be pretty surprised. It would be hard emotionally.

But 2.35, that doesn't affect me that much emotionally. *(Pauses, then laughs.)* Of course, I would be very happy to do it again.

T&FN: Do you try to jump a certain height in each competition, or just to do your best?

Yashchenko: That depends on whether or not I really want to jump. If I don't want to jump, then the result will be low. If I want to jump, then...

It all depends on my frame of mind. If I wake up in the morning and want to jump, then I'll usually be successful. But if I "get up on the left leg," then... [the Russian equivalent of "getting up on the wrong side of the bed"].

T&FN: What do you feel you have to improve technically—flexibility, approach, turn over the bar?

Yashchenko: Well... *(he pauses and a puzzled look comes over his face)* I feel all those things are pretty well developed. I just need to work harder in general. *(Another pause.)* Just work harder.

T&FN: Of course. What do you like to do outside of athletics?

Yashchenko (he pauses again with a faint, far-away smile on his lips; he chuckles and says quietly): Well, I like to be alone... a lot... in nature...

T&FN: You once mentioned you felt there was a similarity between athletes and actors. What did you have in mind?

Yashchenko: Well, I think athletes resemble actors in the sense that sport is also a field to master and where an athlete shows his talents. *(Laughs.)* Well, perhaps not so artistic as Stones, but...

T&FN: And you think that your life hasn't changed since becoming recordholder?

Yashchenko: No! *[as if to say, "How am I going to convince you?"]* In general, there has arisen a lot of attention on the side. But that is all it is, attention.

I get some lines in the press. *(Laughs.)* But tomorrow, well... Attention is only attention.

Two days later, ^{***}Yashchenko gained some attention by besting Franklin Jacobs in the meet, both clearing 7-5½. They both missed at 7-7 (we never knew which leg Volodya got up on that morning).

He created even more attention in the interview area afterwards when he took it upon himself to reply to the local writers who had written up his escapades in Milan:

"To those writers, I will say they should look at Russians through sober eyes and not through lenses."

In other words, an athlete's post-competitive doings are his business, but if you're going to scrutinize Russians, then try looking at the extracurricular activities of Americans, too. His comments drew quite a bit of coverage in the next day's papers.

But Yashchenko wasn't burdened by his notoriety. The day after the meet Janis and I took a group of Soviet athletes around to see the sights. Yashchenko alternately joked with us and his teammates and walked by himself, seemingly off in another world.

He was not quite so hyper that morning. That was a sharp contrast to the night following our interview when Dave, Janis and I sat talking with a group of Soviet athletes. Yashchenko was there, but he could hardly stop fidgeting. He even asked Dave to get a paper so they could find out what was happening locally. He wanted to go out and boogie.

But he was placid as we walked near the university. He got excited, though, when we passed a running shop. On a wall was a tee-shirt bearing the message, "Runners Make Better Lovers."

He stopped and read the shirt (he reads English and can speak fairly well). He laughed and turned away. Then his face got that puzzled look as he stopped.

In a quiet, toneless voice, he said, "Jumpers." Matter-of-fact.

He continued walking, but as he has done both in the athletic arena and out, Yashchenko had gotten his message across. □

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