

## VALERIY BORZOV

by Jon Hendershott

**J**ust who is Valeriy Borzov? That depends on your point of view.

He may well be the most decorated sprinter in history, double Olympic champion from Munich, three-time European 100 champion (plus once at 200) and an unprecedented six-time European indoor winner. Europeans consider him to be the sprinter's sprinter: an athlete of consummate knowledge and skill, so well-trained as to be almost robot-like in his ability to perform at the highest possible level of physical and mental superiority, time after time and championship after championship.

To Americans, Borzov seems to be that lucky Russian who won at Munich because Eddie Hart and Rey Robinson got screwed with a wrong schedule and because Larry Black got the shaft by getting lane 1 in the 200 final. Oh, Borzov is pretty good, the line of thought seems to go, but he's pretty lucky too.

It is, not surprisingly, in Europe that the Borzov mystique is strongest.

Says Aleksandr Kornelyuk, Olympic 100 fourth-placer and Borzov's countryman and rival, "On the track, we are competitors. But only in theory. I know that I have no chance against him."

Says Aleksandr Aksinin, the promising young Soviet sprinter who finished second to Borzov in the '75 European Indoor 60 meters, "People tend to misunderstand and even to underestimate Valeriy Borzov. Mainly foreigners, people who don't know him well enough. Because Valeriy is no ordinary athlete and he cannot be measured with the common yardstick. He is unique, in terms of talent, inner reserve and willpower. Probably willpower is his strongest point. It's uncanny. When you line up alongside him for a competition, you just know—you feel it in your bones—that he will win. You have no chance. Magnetism is just oozing out of him."

A Soviet writer says, "He is so cool and analytical, so unlike a typically high-strung sprinter. He is like a distance runner, calm, collected and knowing every minute what he has to do."

There are elements of truth in all of these statements, just as there is exaggeration. So who, and what, really is Borzov?

Well, there is the purely statistical side of him—27-years-old, 5-11½, 173 pounds, working on his doctoral thesis at the Kiev Institute for Sport and Physical Culture on a subject very fitting for him: "The methodology of sprint training, talent-spotting and form-timing in short distance running." His sprinting achievements are a matter of record.

But Borzov the man, the human being on the inside of the red jersey and the fluid running form, is more difficult to try to get to know—and to reveal himself. He first appears cool and reserved, probably more an effect of being interviewed by an English-speaking American than of a trait in his personality. The longer you spend with him, though, the easier he becomes, the quicker he smiles and it is soon obvious Borzov is a man of keen wit and exceptional intelligence.

He speaks English only haltingly, but he understands very well. He often began answering a 8—March 1976

question before translator Tatiana Kozlova could ask it in Russian. He listens intently to questions or comments, in English or Russian. He is expressive with his hands, often drawing diagrams or pictures in the air to illustrate a point.

Sitting on a soft, comfortable couch in a wood-paneled library, Borzov sipped hot tea. A considerable paunch (a visible sign of being some 20 pounds overweight) tugged at the buttons of his symbolically red shirt, but he was unconcerned. He was on a kind of "competitive vacation," visiting several US cities and competing in some indoor meets. He made it clear the competition was just one ingredient in the scheme of things aimed at the prime goal: Montreal.

**T&FN:** How are you approaching this year in terms of Montreal? Is your training more intense this year than in previous years at the same stage?

**Borzov:** I have already done very intensive work, so I couldn't make it much more intense. I'm working on more specific things now, trying to avoid any mistakes in both technique and methods of training. My coach and I are trying to avoid any mistakes during the whole period of preparation for the Olympics.

**T&FN:** Is this trip really that important, in terms of training or learning your state of fitness or meeting the Americans?

**Borzov:** All of what you ask is really my answer.

**T&FN:** Could you have learned the same things if you had stayed at home?

**Borzov:** The main rivals are the Americans. I had hoped to meet Steve Williams and Steve Riddick on this trip, but I didn't. I met only McTear and Quarrie.

**T&FN:** You hold them very high?

**Borzov:** Yes, they are quite good. I think McTear is the best in the short sprints in the United States. I see no reason why he shouldn't be great at 100 meters.

**T&FN:** You were quoted last summer in Britain's Athletics Weekly that to defend both your Olympic 100 and 200 titles would be too much. Do you still feel that way?

**Borzov:** I am only thinking about it. I have not definitely decided. It is a long time until the Olympics. I could break both legs between now and then

**T&FN:** What factors may help you decide to run just one race, or both?

**Borzov:** I will decide for certain only after competing in the 100 meters in Montreal. I will know after the 100 if I am ready enough to achieve good results in the 200. I will see how I feel then. It all depends on the situation.

**T&FN:** Which race do you consider

your stronger, or do you feel equal in both?

**Borzov:** I think I am equal in both. But it is very difficult to be prepared for two distances because it's very difficult to find an optimum in preparation. For the 100, you need speed training; for the 200, you need speed endurance. It is difficult to find that specific training which is good for both the 100 and 200. It is a very fine line.

**T&FN:** Which sprinters other than the Americans do you consider your strongest opponents?

**Borzov:** Leonard, Mennea, Quarrie and Crawford.

**T&FN:** You've raced them all. What are their strong points?

**Borzov:** It is hard to say because you have to study each one of them very carefully. One might run with his strength, another his quickness and another using primarily speed endurance. It is difficult to say what their specific strengths are without any specific research work.

**T&FN:** Do you try to study leading sprinters in the world from standpoint of your research work?

**Borzov:** All I really have to study the others with are slow-motion films and news reports and results. And, excuse me, but often in the press it is only the opinion of the writer about an athlete and the writers are not correct all the time.

And the problem with slow-motion pictures is that they are only a small part of the entire run, so you don't get to see the entire run from start to finish. Even if you have the entire run in slow motion, you cannot see every detail of the technique and that is what is important. You can't see all the movements, all the parts, all the details of the technique and the running. In the sprints, it is the details which are important.

If you filmed all the best sprinters together, the whole picture would look the same, but the details are different for each man and they are what makes one sprinter better than another. Each individual uses his own strong points and that is what makes them all different.

**T&FN:** What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of Williams, McTear and Riddick?

**Borzov:** All leading world sprinters, including the Americans, are very strong and they can use their strength in a short period of time. Their ability to accelerate different parts of the body in a short period of time is exceptional. But despite their great efforts, they can relax very quickly. They can put all the strength they



Wayne Glucker

have into one effort and then relax. The degree of how an athlete can change from very hard effort to relaxation depends on the level of the sprinter.

One weak point for some of the leading sprinters is not the lack of intelligence, but the lack of knowledge—professional knowledge, not only about sprinting but also about biomechanics.

**T&FN:** Does a sprinter with long legs, like Riddick or Williams, have any advantage over a shorter sprinter?

**Borzov:** There is a puzzle in one of my mathematics books which says, "Which is stronger, the elephant or the ant?" The elephant can pull his own weight, while the little insect can pull twice his weight or more. So you can see which is the stronger.

That is the question here, which sprinter is stronger? The answer lies in the proportion of the legs to the entire body, not the maximum length of the legs.

**T&FN:** What do you feel are your strengths as a sprinter?

**Borzov:** I think I have the same strengths as all the world-class sprinters.

**T&FN:** How about weaknesses?

**Borzov:** The big problem for any athlete is to be able to put all the details together and to do it at the time which is most right. So that involves much planning

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over a long period of time to reach your peak at the exact moment you want to.

**T&FN:** Your style and technique has been described, even by your opponents, as virtually automatic, so consistent it is like pushing a button and starting a machine.

**Borzov:** Well, if you use a physiological basis to describe sprinting, there is no time to think about the movements. Whether you like it or not, it must become automatic.

So there is no time for the sprinter to think about what he is doing. Thinking can only slow his movements because he is putting together all those details of technique in a very few hundredths of a second. So there is no time to think. The process of thinking takes longer than it does to run the race. You must react before you think.

**T&FN:** How long did it take before it all became relatively automatic for you?

**Borzov:** I began running when I was 12. [He whistles, closing his eyes, recollecting.] I would say seven years.

**T&FN:** How much did top-level international competition have to do with it?

**Borzov:** I found I needed to perfect these "automatic" movements to be able to compete successfully in high level international competition. During these

competitions, you have to repeat fast times race after race to get to a high level and stay at that level.

**T&FN:** Can you estimate how much natural ability you have?

**Borzov:** How can you measure it, by cups or kilograms or inches?! I can't.

**T&FN:** So you're a "made" sprinter, not a "born" one?

**Borzov:** There is a Russian proverb which says, "If you put nine women together, you can come up with a baby in one month." For me, hard work has been the key.

**T&FN:** Do you try to run every 100 meter race the same, whether it is a big meet like the Olympics or a small meet at home?

**Borzov:** No, I don't run with equal effort in the Olympics or European Championships and small meets. When meets inside my country are not very important, or when I am not well prepared, I put in all my effort to win. But in Munich, I didn't use all my ability. A paradox.

**T&FN:** You were quoted at Munich that you gave 90% effort in the 100.

**Borzov:** Yes, that's true. It really took it out of me to throw up my arms at the end of the race.

**T&FN:** If you ran 10.07 at 90% effort, what could you run at 100% effort?

**Borzov:** If I ran at 100% effort, I would crash to pieces.

**T&FN:** Like Silvio Leonard running into the moat at the Pan Am Games?

**Borzov:** I mean something different.

If you take my leg bone and put a weight of 200 kilograms [441 lbs] to it, that would represent about 90% effort. But if you put 250 kilos [551 lbs], that would equal 100% and... [claps his hands together with a loud pop.] So I will go 99% and keep that 1% as insurance to stay healthy.

**T&FN:** You are one of the premier athletes in the entire Soviet Union. Since Munich, have you felt pressure, expectations to always win?

**Borzov:** The public always expects wins and fast times.

**T&FN:** How do you try to live with that?

**Borzov:** Well the business of the spectator is to wait for good results and my business is to run. The only relation you have with the spectators is that they see you and you see them. Any athlete wants to win for himself, but it is a little mixed: for himself, for the spectators, for his nation.

Every athlete wants to be the strongest, the one who is superior. That comes from nature. But I believe that every time you enter a competition, you should try to win. There is really no reason to enter unless it is to win.

**T&FN:** After you won both European titles in '71, did you feel pressure to win both in Munich?

**Borzov:** There wasn't any talk about

two distances at Munich. All the talk was, "Can he win the 100?" There had never been any Soviet Olympic champions in the sprints so we couldn't speak about winning both. We had to be a little modest.

**T&FN:** So what was the reaction when you won both?

**Borzov:** I received the highest decoration of the country, Lenin's Order.

**T&FN:** What have those victories meant to your life?

**Borzov:** There are many aspects to one's life. In what aspect are you interested? Now you must answer the question.

**T&FN:** Hmmmm, how about in your personal life? You must be recognized by the public.

**Borzov:** Well I have to behave myself all the time, because I know people will be watching me.

**T&FN:** Surely you didn't misbehave before Munich?

**Borzov:** No one knows.

**T&FN:** An article on you last year talked a lot about a "Superman image" surrounding you. What do you think of the whole idea?

**Borzov:** It is just the opinion of some people. I can do nothing about that.

**T&FN:** You well know that psychology plays a major role in athletics and sprinting, so this kind of image must be advantageous.

**Borzov:** Psychologically I can understand how something like this got

started. For a number of years, I was unbeaten.

**T&FN:** When you hurt your hand indoors, you started with just one hand down and still beat everyone and even won the European indoor title. This would serve to strengthen this "Superman" image.

**Borzov:** Well, if you are much stronger than your opponents, physically and mentally, then you can use little things like one-handed starts.

**T&FN:** You have said the winners in Montreal will have to run 10.00 and 20.00 automatically. How fast would you like to run there?

**Borzov:** As fast as I need to win.

**T&FN:** As you probably know, in the US often a young sprinter will reach world class very suddenly, stay at the top only for a couple of seasons and turn to other things. Many Soviet athletes are at a top level for years. What are your opinions about the great number of American sprinters who come and go so fast?

**Borzov:** I think there are several reasons: many strong opponents, the system of training and different views of sport. Many want to earn money. Also during the year, they compete in maybe 20 or 30 meets. But I have 10 or 12. I am very selective.

**T&FN:** If you could give advice to these young Americans, about things like running so many races when so young, what would you tell them?

**Borzov:** There is another Russian

proverb: "Be in a hurry, but don't go too fast."

**T&FN:** What do you plan to do after Montreal?

**Borzov:** Right now all of my plan up to Montreal, but not beyond.

**T&FN:** You have said the winner of the 1980 Olympics should be running 10.50 (automatically) right now.

**Borzov:** Yes, for white sprinters. For black sprinters it may be a little faster, as they mature younger than whites.

**T&FN:** Maybe there are some young Valeriy Borzovs training now in the USSR.

**Borzov:** Well we will know in about five years. We will have to wait until then.

**T&FN:** When you were young and training and learning how to sprint, did you ever consider that one day you might be a double Olympic champion?

**Borzov:** At every particular stage of my training and development, my special aim was to beat my rivals of the same age. Of course, I knew about the Olympics but I never imagined that I would place as I did. I couldn't connect my name to that of an Olympic champion.

Competing in the Olympics first seriously came into my mind about 1965, when I trained with Olympic candidates. Then in '68 I won both European Junior sprints and the relay. I won my first USSR championship in '69. But even then the Olympics were only dreams. I worked hard, though, and my dreams came true. □

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