

WLADYSLAW KOZAKIEWICZ



by Jon Hendershott

After the Olympics, a cartoon which originated in a Swedish newspaper became popular in Europe. The drawing portrayed the results of an imaginary "Most Popular Man In Poland" contest.

Now, Poland is a country not lacking heroes these days, and heading the roll was feisty labor leader Lech Walesa. No. 2 was Polish-born Pope John Paul II.

And No. 3? None other than Olympic vault champion Wladyslaw Kozakiewicz, who had endeared himself to his countrymen forever when he scaled a World Record 18-11½ to win the Olympic title—to win for Poland—right on the soil of traditional enemy Russia.

That Olympic achievement capped a sterling career for "Wally," as the friendly, tousle-headed Kozakiewicz likes to be called in the West.

A major force in international vaulting since he was a teenager, Kozakiewicz has become one of the most consistent vaulters ever, achieving Top 10 rating for 8 consecutive years.

But he has had no greater season than 1980's, a campaign he opened with his first World Record, 18-9¼ in May. That was soon beaten by the Flying French, but he had the final word in Moscow.

During a short visit to the U.S. in January to test some new poles with Bruce Caldwell of Fibersport in Kansas City, Kozakiewicz renewed his friendship with T&FN. In a pair of conversations—a preliminary one with a translator and then a comprehensive one in which he displayed a fine command of the English language—he talked about his year of years:

Kozakiewicz: I was very pleased to be voted 4th among the Top 10 athletes for 1980. And, of course, I was happy to be ranked No. 1 in the world again. That means a lot to me and I thank you for it.

T&FN: Well then, that is just one more aspect of your tremendous 1980 season. Of course, you capped it off in Moscow, but did you ever expect to jump a World Record in such an important meet?

Kozakiewicz: Well, I didn't know what to expect. I was hurt in March so my preparations after I got well had to be very strenuous and hard. And there was still a big question mark in my mind about how well I could do in Moscow.

After the competition, my first reaction was one of surprise and then elation. And then I realized that I could do even better than what I had just done.

T&FN: What was your primary aim going into the Games?

Kozakiewicz: Actually, my main goal was to win a medal. I didn't care what color it was; gold, silver or bronze. I just wanted to win one. Of course, I also just wanted to do my best—just like every athlete. I always want to do my best, in

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any competition.

T&FN: *You jumped at 5.78 [18-11½] for the World Record in Moscow. Did you ever consider 5.79, which is 19-feet even? That is the next big barrier.*

Kozakiewicz: Yes, it is the next barrier, even as we express it. But in Moscow, I was thinking first of the gold medal and then the World Record.

The old record was 5.77 [18-11] and 5.79 is 1" more. But I wanted to jump just 1 centimeter more than the old record because I knew I would be jumping at a height which was not as high as 2 centimeters! *[Laughs]*

In Moscow, I wanted to be the best in the world. One centimeter was good enough for me. Once I cleared that height, then I could do 5.79 some other time. On that night, 5.78 was plenty for me.

T&FN: *The conditions must have been difficult with the Soviet spectators being so openly hostile.*

Kozakiewicz: The whistles from the spectators did distract me quite a bit. They made me angry too, because to react that way is not being a good sport.

Not only were the spectators not good sports, but they were not sports-minded either. Their bad behavior actually made me try harder to do better.

T&FN: *What was the reception like back home?*

Kozakiewicz: Everyone I met on the street congratulated me and tried to express how much happiness I brought to them by winning the gold medal. Many said I showed great courage and that I was not afraid of Russian athletes. My popularity rose to the maximum.

T&FN: *Have you ever felt high expectations from your countrymen, pressures always to win, always jump high, always set records? How do you cope with that?*

Kozakiewicz: I did feel pressure in 1980, starting back in May when I set my first World Record. From that moment on, I felt everyone in Poland expected me to win the gold medal.

I could feel the pressure, but having started my life in top-class athletics some 15 years ago, it was something I had experienced before and so I was able to cope with it. After having experienced a great deal in those 15 years, I am strong enough mentally to have confidence in myself and know that I can put up with those pressures.

T&FN: *Your Moscow performance was the highest point of a tremendous year in the vault. Any thoughts on what might be behind the great upsurge in the vault in 1980?*

Kozakiewicz: If there is one good vaulter in a country, then I think all the other pole vaulters in that country will watch him, to see how he jumps and why he jumps higher than anyone else. The others will watch his technique and then *The Bible of the Sport*

try to make their technique the same.

Like in Poland about 5 years ago, I jumped 5.60 [18-4½]. A few months later, Buciariski and Slusarski jumped much higher than they ever had before. They watched me very closely and tried to learn the new things I did and then tried to do those things themselves.

Also, a height like 18-feet or 18-6 is a barrier in the head; you know, a mental barrier. But if one pole vaulter jumps 5.70 [18-8¼] as we are doing now, others see that it can be no problem to jump that high. Then they try that height and some make it and then they keep going higher still.

T&FN: *Virtually all vaulters now have access to the very best equipment; the best poles. Has this helped European vaulters overtake Americans as the world's leading vaulters?*

Kozakiewicz: Yes, it has affected everything a great deal. Also now in Europe there are many more coaches who know the event and how to teach it. There are many more athletes who try the event and who want to become the best.

In the U.S., the best vaulters don't have time for practice together and with the best coaches. Like my friends Earl Bell and Mike Tully: they have competitions against each other, but they do not practice together and learn from each other. They live far apart and they must do other things besides pole vaulting. So they do not have much time for practice.

Also, I don't feel there are as many good young American athletes in the pole vault as in past years. There are Tom Hintnaus and Billy Olson, but there is not a big group of good vaulters coming up behind the very best stars.

And the U.S. is such a big country. In Europe, there are many smaller countries who often meet each other in competitions. The athletes jump against each other many times. In the U.S., the athletes are separated.

This is a big problem for American vaulters—they do not get to jump very often against the Europeans. I feel a vaulter like Hintnaus must stay in Europe and gain experience competing against all the leading European vaulters.

T&FN: *The French vaulters seem to be able to jump very high at home, but they often run into trouble in other countries. Do you have any ideas why?*

Kozakiewicz: Yes, I have jumped many times in France and I have seen the places where they jump: nice wind, runway a little downhill; very helpful conditions. I think that a downhill runway is worth 20 centimeters [about 8"] more in height.

I jumped in Paris a few years ago in May and I was not yet in good shape, but I jumped 5.50 [18-½]. But I knew that wouldn't be possible under regular conditions! In practice, I could jump only 5.10 [16-8 ¾] or so. In France, they have special places for vaulting.

Thierry Vigneron jumped 5.75 [18-10¼] twice in France. I think those were not good competitions, not legal. I do not feel these were real World Records.

T&FN: *What do you think the ultimate height in the pole vault might be? Six meters [19-8¼]?*

Kozakiewicz [laughs]: No, I don't think that high. In the next 10 years, I think someone will jump 5.90 [19-4¼]. Maybe a new material for poles would help someone go higher, but not for many years. I would like to jump 5.80 [19-¾] one day. That will be all for me.

T&FN: *How much longer will you jump?*

Kozakiewicz: Four more years, as I would like to go to Los Angeles. I would like to win the Olympics a second time. I would also like to be the first to jump 19 feet. And I would like to win the 1982 European Championships as I have never won that meet before. I have many plans!

T&FN: *Would you ever want your daughter to participate in athletics?*

Kozakiewicz [pausing]: Yes, I think so—but not in the shot put!

T&FN: *We have heard that you like to play tennis.*

Kozakiewicz: Yes, and also to drive cars. I have a Renault I like to drive. Also I like films, especially about Polish history. And we get some American television programs in Poland. The best one is *The Muppet Show!*

T&FN: *Some observers feel pole vaulters are the wildmen of track, acrobats in a dangerous and spectacular event. Would you say the pole vault reflects Wladyslaw Kozakiewicz the person?*

Kozakiewicz: Honestly, it doesn't have any reflection of me in everyday life. When I participate in the pole vault, of course, I am like any other vaulter—they must have a lot of courage and strength and be wild, as you say.

But in my private life, I am very different. I am quiet; I think everything out. I'm calm and just different.

Yet I have often thought that maybe one reason I took up the pole vault in the first place was to give myself some sort of outlet so that at certain times I could go wild. □

Wladyslaw Kozakiewicz, 6-1½/185, was born December 8, 1953 (note alteration from previous date we have carried) in Solesznicki, Poland, and now lives in Gdynia, a Baltic seaport. He and his wife Anna have an infant daughter, Katarzyna. His 2 World Records came after he had raised the European Record 4 times: 18-4½ in 1975, 18-5½ in 1976, and 18-6 in 1977. A fine indoor performer, he set an undercover WR of 18-3½ in 1976 and is a 2-time European Indoor Champion. His progression:

| year | age | seasonal best | major meet | rank |
|------|-----|----------------|------------------|------|
| 1972 | 18 | 5.02 16-5½ | | — |
| 1973 | 19 | 5.35 17-6½ | | 6 |
| 1974 | 20 | 5.38 17-7½ | 2-Eur Champs | 3 |
| 1975 | 21 | 5.60 18-4½ ER | 1-Eur Cup | 1 |
| 1976 | 22 | 5.62 18-5½ ER | 11-Olympics(inj) | 6 |
| 1977 | 23 | 5.66 18-6½ ER | 2-World Cup | 1 |
| 1978 | 24 | 5.62 18-5½ | 4-Eur Champs | 4 |
| 1979 | 25 | 5.61 18-4½ | 3-Eur Cup | 1 |
| 1980 | 26 | 5.78 18-11¼ WR | 1-Olympics | 1 |