

Vyacheslav Platonov is one of the foremost Soviet experts on volleyball. Under his stewardship the Soviet national men's team has become Olympic champion; it won the European title four times (1977, 1979, 1981, 1983), it has been the World Cup holder twice (1977, 1981), and has twice emerged victorious at international competitions (1978, 1982).

Molodaya Gvardia Publishers is preparing for print Platonov's book "Equation with Six Knowns", which is about how six individual stars merge to form a star-team, which surpasses its opponents not only in skill and strength, but mainly in teamwork and its sense of collectivism. Journalist Alexei Samoilov is working on the book together with the coach



Vyacheslav PLATONOV

EQUATION WITH SIX KNOWNNS

Never before in the six years I have been working with the national team had I been so concerned as before the tenth world volleyball tournament in Argentina. What was in store for us in South America? Would we be able to defend our title, won four years ago?

Our team was going through tough times. After our win at the 1978 world championship we gradually brought up youngsters to the team, though still counting mainly on the seasoned players. The latter had begun to tire, and many of them were plagued by injuries. We were especially concerned by the health of our captain, Vyacheslav Zaitsev, the big play-maker. Last season he had a right leg injury, but nevertheless played in the European championship and the World Cup playoff. Later, after he was well again, Vyacheslav took part in the national championship. At the height of the preparations for the Argentine tourney, he had a relapse. Our captain was forced to spend several weeks in hospital. The break in his training could not but have an effect on his playing. Zaitsev's hallmark stability of the second pass, with which he used to set up attack, went awry. The team's momentum was immediately thrown off.... It must be said that on the eve of the world championship he was not the only one way out of

shape. Olympic champions Viljar Loor, Vladimir Dorokhov and Pavel Selivanov had problems getting into form.

We needed game practice to regain our former spark. So about two months before the competitions in Argentina we took part in the Savvin Memorial Tournament in Leningrad. We played well, losing only one set. However, we were unable to execute fully our plan of checking the rookies—Alexander Sorokalet, Valery Losev, Oleg Smugilev and Sergei Gribov—in action. All we had to do was take out two or three Olympic champions for the squad to start dragging and falling apart. The youngsters had to be put back on the bench since even though the team possessed limited potential we didn't have the right to lose at home such a prestigious competition.

After the Savvin memorial we left for Brazil for a tournament which directly preceded the competitions in Argentina. I remember having warned Soviet journalists at a press conference in Leningrad that it is not out of the realm of possibility that we might not put our best foot forward in Brazil.

"The main thing for us," I said, "is the Argentine championship. In Brazil we'll be experimenting with the team. After all, we coaches are obliged to know exactly who is who on the team. Let the

newcomers test their strength against the best...."

At that time I named Brazil, China and Poland as our main opponents. And it so happened at the tournament in Rio de Janeiro, which gathered the cream of the crop in world volleyball, we bowed to the Chinese and Brazilian teams.

It was a shame to lose, of course, but there was really no cause for mourning. For one thing, we tested all the players inside out; for another, our players, who had not been set the task of winning at any cost, were able to preserve their freshness.

Imagine our surprise when we learned from the local papers that strife was rampant on our once powerful team, that players were quarrelling with one another and with the coaches, and that the domination of the Soviet squad had come to an end—proof would be forthcoming in two weeks....

To tell the truth, over the past five years we'd been accustomed to a different tone from the press. No one had ever questioned whether we knew how to play volleyball. And here were torrents of caustic remarks. I figured that their getting us all worked up would be beneficial to us in the long run. I asked our interpreter to read out before breakfast one day these vicious passages about

our players, and queried: "Well, how do you like that? Maybe the authors of these articles are right?"

This read-aloud session played its role. I could tell from the players' faces that they were more than ready for action; they were completely psyched up to defend their honour and dignity, to demonstrate how tough they were in uncompromising, fierce competition.

On October 14, 1982 the semifinal between the home team and Soviet squad began at the Luna Park sports facility in Buenos Aires.

I had never seen anything like it. Drums, horns, castanets, wild screaming—all this merged into an avalanche of noise. I couldn't hear my own voice, so I communicated with the players more with gestures than words.

Ice-cream cones, rolls of paper, fire-crackers, coins, etc. were flying onto the volleyball court. International Volleyball Federation President Paul Libaud and the captain of the Argentine team appealed to the spectators to behave themselves decently, but their exhortations were in vain.

Five years ago we played in the final of the world championship in Rome against the Italian team, and there I got some idea of how a home crowd can help a team. I remember that at a press conference before the final (our opponent was still unknown) local journalists asked us whom we'd prefer playing for the gold. "Your countrymen, of course," I answered. "Because you consider them not much competition?" "No, it's just that another game against Italy will make us rich men—I can image how the fans will rain lire down at us in the final if they were so generous even in the USSR-Italy preliminary."

The Italian journalists appreciated my joke, writing before the final that Sr. Platonov was afraid of only one thing—growing rich in Rome.

Money was indeed showered upon the court; gold medals could have well been bought for the Italian team, if world championship gold medals were for sale....

It seemed to us then that a team could not have been supported more ardently than the Italian squad was. Now, after we encountered the Argentine fans, the Italians look like well-behaved gentlemen with refined manners.

I am convinced that the Argentine

team, a middle-level squad, would have made a much weaker appearance on a neutral field. But not in Buenos Aires.

It appeared that the din would work on our players, but this did not happen. The Soviet boys were "protected" by invisible armour from all psychological attacks. They did not depart from their style one iota, winning the game by a score of 3-0. Ahead was the final, against the Brazilian squad.

Today volleyball as well as football is popular in South America. You have heard, of course, of the Copacabana, the famous sandy beaches of Rio de Janeiro. How many books, newspaper articles and films deal with the habitués of these beaches—Brazilian youngsters—who amaze you with their ability to play ball! Football, of course. Some might find it hard to imagine, but today more people along the Copacabana are playing volleyball. I saw it with my own eyes—dozens, hundreds of teams playing for their own amusement, for the "beach title".

The deafening volleyball boom has led to the Brazilian national team elbowing its way ahead of many recognised favourites in the standings. At the Montreal Olympics the Brazilians placed seventh; they were fifth at the Moscow Games, third a year and a half later at the World Cup in Japan, and they were facing us here in the world championship finals in Argentina.

Talking about this last, decisive game, I must repeat that I had never seen anything like it. Only now I'm referring not to the fans but to the game itself. The game which our team played that night.

Ordinarily I shouldn't overly admire my team, as a trainer isn't supposed to rest on his laurels. And to tell the truth, I usually do not lavish praise. For this reason our champions more often than not hear not compliments from their head coach, but severe criticism. But that day I indeed experienced moments of ecstasy....

It took our players 72 minutes to prove that they're the world's best today. Such a fast final is unprecedented in tournament history.

I find it difficult to describe how our team played. I admired them from start to finish, and, as I was told later, cheered for them along with the crowd at Luna Park. With their inspired, artistic and bold play our squad won over the fans, who were initially clearly against them.

In a bid to save the situation, the Brazilian coach feverishly made substitutions and called time-outs. As soon as he took his first time out, our players came over to me for advice. "I can't help you," I said. "It's the Brazilians who need a coach, not you. Everything is working well for you, you will be the champs. So I can take it easy."

And I wasn't mistaken. The Soviet team won 3-0. The world championship which I had been so apprehensive about was over.... Incidentally, I can't say that even after this, second, victory in a row, I was able to sleep at night. The fact is that a few years ago there were 11 equally good players on the team. This gave me freedom to manoeuvre, enabled me to even out playing loads, and stiffened competition for a starting berth. But in Argentina there were only eight top-flight players on the Soviet squad. And among this galaxy two stars—Dorokhov and Selivanov—were not in peak form for that matter. Furthermore, in each game, with the exception of the final, there were lapses on the court. So my apprehensions about the Argentine tournament were not groundless.

We won nevertheless. It was a clean victory all around, and the experts admitted as much.

This is all well and good, but today when the moments of ecstasy have passed, I am obliged to think about tomorrow, about solving the problems which became so glaring during the world championship. After all, a coach who keeps his head in the clouds of joy too long risks hurtling down to the ground and winding up where he started.

However, a coach must, of course, see not only his team's shortcomings but its merits as well. In what respects was it better than its opponents? After Buenos Aires I can easily answer this question. Had there really existed the confidence crisis on our team that the South American press supposed there did, we would not have been able to stand up either to the Argentine squad or to the wildly cheered Brazilian team. But there was not a crisis. There was mutual trust. The players believed in one another, the coaches in the players, and the players in the coaches. This is what I see to be the main trump card of the Soviet team.

Photograph
by Yuri SOKOLOV