

Athlete Development in Post-Soviet Russia

Since its debut at the Helsinki Summer Olympics in 1952, the Soviet Union dominated the Games, summer and winter. No nation in history won so many medals in so many different disciplines. This success had a far-reaching impact on elite sport in countries throughout the world, and on the Olympics themselves (not least of all opening them up to professionals as well as amateurs). When the USSR disintegrated into 15 independent states in 1991, support for Olympic sport radically changed. In Russia, during the Yeltsin period (1991-1999), Olympic sports were initially ignored as being unprofitable to the 'robber barons' who took control of the country. They were also discredited as having been a tool to demonstrate Soviet communist superiority in the world. Top athletes, coaches and medics were auctioned off to the highest foreign bidder and wealthy Russians invested in foreign sports.

Under President Putin (1999-2008), however, the country has moved swiftly from oligarchical mayhem to state capitalism directed by the Kremlin. Once again, Russian patriotism is on the agenda, and Olympic and other sports are increasingly supported by the state. Russian oligarchs who had invested in foreign football clubs are now being 'persuaded' to divert their fabulous wealth into Russian sport, and much of the old Soviet system of sports preparation is being restored.