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Sport Management Professor Smolianov Studies and Embodies High Performance

By Michael Anderson / Log Staff Writer

February 23, 2011

Many professors at Salem State University have diverse backgrounds, but Peter Smolianov, a sport management professor, has a unique resume that includes training in a hardcore environment for the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and training pentathlon athletes for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Many students just know Smolianov as "the fencing coach," but his classes—including sport marketing, sport finance, and high performance management—go a lot deeper, and he applies a lot of what he learned in the USSR in the classroom.

"The USSR had a very unique system where athletes were trained by highly educated professionals, and I apply many managerial and training methods that I learned 20 years ago to the activities and classes that I teach today," Smolianov said in his thick Russian accent.

"Smoli," as his students call him, started training to compete in the modern pentathlon—which consists of fencing, shooting, swimming, running, and horseback riding—as a young boy in the late 1970s.

"I started training in fencing and swimming in middle school from about the age of 10, all the way through high school," Smolianov said.

An average day for a 10-year-old in the United States today might be going to school and coming home at around 3 p.m., but for Smolianov it consisted of working hard in the classroom and in the gym.

"A typical day started at 8 a.m., where I trained in my sports until about 10 a.m. After that, I attended school from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., trained some more from 4 p.m. until 7 p.m., then I did my homework," he said.

Days like that were common for Smolianov. Unlike some specialized schools where people had to train in one sport, he got the chance to play several different sports each day. The training was well worth it and by the time Smolianov entered the University of Moscow in 1985, he was good enough to compete at a high level.

"In Moscow, I got a chance to compete for the university in swimming and fencing, and also play the modern pentathlon for the Moscow Dynamo, a sports team in the Soviet Union. While competing, I was also responsible in [sic] reporting the results to the media," he added.

In 1992 he was accepted to Brigham Young University, where he intended to work on his master's degree and compete for the school's fencing team. However, his biggest break would come several thousand miles away.

In 1995, Smolianov began to work on earning his Ph.D. at Deakin University in Australia, and a few years later he got the chance to help train the Australian national pentathlon team for the Olympic Games in Sydney. Training those athletes was no easy feat and to be considered elite, they had to train in a very sophisticated system.

"The athletes train most of the year and a regimen is planned at least a year in advance for each month, week and day," Smolianov said.

According to Smolianov, a typical monthly plan involves three weeks of training (two or three times a day), followed by a taper day and a competition day, and ending with a few days of restoration and recovery before training starts again.

"All this planning is part of a process called periodization and that measures and plans how long someone runs, swims, fences, shoots and rides a horse before they are ready to compete," he added.

The reason for all the training, in addition to qualifying for the Olympics, is that pentathlon athletes also train to compete in three to six World Cups per year, as well as compete in a World Championship once per year. Smolianov brought his experience to Salem State in 2003. His expertise on sports and high performance has rubbed off onto the Salem State community, including fellow professors.

"Smoli's experience is invaluable to the department," Stuart McMahon, associate professor of sport management, said. "He's done extensive research and is one of the world's foremost researchers and leaders on high performance management."

Smolianov is quite confident that the tactics he learned in the USSR will one day be a regular part of American sports.

"A lot of what was emphasized in the USSR sport system was adopted by many countries from Australia to China, and has already taken shape in the United States. Just look at the way some corporations and public organizations invest in an athlete's wellness, and look at some of the advanced training methods," Smolianov said. "All these practices came from the USSR."

The one certain thing about Smolianov is that his experiences with the Olympics and the USSR are invaluable to the Salem State community, and there is no doubt that he will leave an impression on many of his students.