

# The 'Performer' turns 60



You won't believe that Rigert has just turned 60. He is still as slender and fresh as he was in "his" 1970s. One of the greatest athletes in history, his life wasn't a simple way up, it was an intricate mixture of tragedy and fun, cruelty and tenderness, love and death, despair and hope. Competing in three weight categories, he won Olympic gold, was six times World champion, nine times European champion, 63 world records belong to him.

Throughout the years Rigert had a permanent image of the media darling. When David gave up weightlifting and started his coaching career he became (quite predictably) less open to press and television, but he never actually "buttoned up" for good.

*"I've never seriously conflicted with the media guys, I was never pompous like a turkey, though sometimes journalists wrote really stupid things. Show me somebody who never made any mistakes! Usually all of them work in a rush, especially during big events like Olympics. I should be damned if I complained for the lack of media attention. Many years passed before I could keep calm over the "colourful" publications and articles. My life experience told me that glory is quite an unsafe thing: today – triumph and fanfares, tomorrow – you loose and nobody will remem-*

*ber your name. Perhaps it was the fact that I was so cherished by media that led to the situation when I forgot to buy a newspaper that published an article on me. It's wrong, unprofessional, but I can now do nothing about it because I understood it too late. But so it was".*

The first article about Rigert was published in the newspaper called "Komsomollets" and was titled: "David: the peasant's son". Beautiful title, isn't it? Rigert enjoyed it much more than the article itself.

*"I always remember my peasant's origin, that's the point. When I became a well-known weightlifter, sometimes I stopped to ask myself: are you, David, doing YOUR job? While I was sitting somewhere on the coast of Mediterranean Sea, I asked myself: how did I manage to get here? And for what? I'm a peasant. I used to plow, feed the cattle, go out to the club in the evenings – it's all very close to me. I'd never been anxious to live in a city".*

Rigert likes to tell the story about the bull. Being just 11, David already has been working at collective farm. To look mature as all other men at a farm he started smoking. Once, he said, it was of use. He was driving a cart with grain pulled by couple of bulls. Bulls were toiling up and other boys were taking David over with their carts. Already then competition spirit was in his blood – as a bright youngster he stuck a cigarette butt into one bull's bottom. The reaction was incredible. "Smoking" bull that was much younger than his workmate took off like a rocket and



*At the age of 52 at a demonstration in Germany he still flashed his famous technique*

did it first to the finish, the older bull did not stand the race and dropped in the end.

David first saw a real weights and a bar only in the newsreel. Crowbar and tractor's parts as weights were his alternative solution and his start in weightlifting. He first appreciated true power when the PE teacher of the local country school lifted a 100 kilo bar to demonstrate the class the technique of lifting. Passer-by local jester Vanya, who was a cattle farm worker, came closer and lifted the same with one hand. Had anyone told him that he was repeating the Russian national record set by Georg Hackenschmidt in 1898, he would have been very surprised.

The tremendous breakthrough of an absolutely unknown athlete to the top of the world's podiums happened when Rigert was

19 years old. Quite late for an athlete. But four years later he was already in the Soviet national team. Rigert was lucky to meet the great athlete and coach Rudolf Pljukfelder and moved for training to his town – Shakhti. Having nowhere to stay he slept in the gym in the coach's office. Obsessed by trainings he secretly made himself a copy of the key and when everyone left home David was doing second a training session by himself. That was a revolutionary step in a weightlifter's training programme. However, his coach Pljukfelder got strong criticism for "torturing" the young athlete, critics were even threatening him with court trial. Pljukfelder took David to medical examination – all results were perfect, no abnormalities were found. Rigert continued his unbelievable training sessions. Later on it was ascertained that double sessions are no harm.

Bulgarian athletes came to visit, eager to capture the experience. By then, double sessions were scientifically approved. Meanwhile, Rigert switched back to single sessions...

*"I heard many times there were some athletes who don't like competitions. But at the same time they enjoy training. I often thought about that phenomenon. Is that really true? I loved to train a lot as well, but I always felt that it was nothing more than just a routine. In contrast the competitions... It was a holiday!"* Rigert and his coach revolutionised training techniques, they did not accept stereotypes, so they did not need to wait long for the result. Rigert's progress was stunning: David would spend months and weeks

that speed before. He was invited to the Soviet national team. There was only one other weightlifter who had the same waterfall of records - Vasiliy Alexeev. He lived in the same town. The two sportsmen occasionally went fishing and hunting together and got along quite well, if not as best friends, considering the difficult nature of the world's strongest man of those days.

Rigert's Olympic debut took place in Munich 1972. He lost those Games. David was anxious not only to win but also to establish a new world record. He was just 25. Life seemed to be finished.

*"In snatch I missed all three attempts on 160 kg. I could only vaguely recollect what*

*see when the whole world to me was painted in grey? I just wanted to go home. Next morning I went to the airport with my teammate Vasiliy Kolotov. Of course we had no tickets at all, and we had to beg the pilots to take us on board. It's strange, but finally they agreed. In Sheremetyevo I stood on the scales and was shocked: 81.50 kg. Clothes included. The day before the arrival I weighed 88.65 kg. Just one night passed..."*

Right there, in Sheremetyevo Rigert announced to Pljukfelder that he's going to retire. You can easily imagine what the coach felt at the moment. Pljukfelder knew David's character perfectly and didn't argue. He just said that after his defeat in Rome-1960 he also decided to give up. However, time heals wounds. Soon after, he realized that next Olympics were just four years away! *"I was 32, Pljukfelder told me, and at your age people are just starting their careers. Please, think twice".*

Of course Rigert stayed in weightlifting. And four years later he finally climbed to the top. *"The lessons of Munich were learned by heart. I was asked frequently how many records did I plan to set in Montreal. What should I answer? I'm going to lift 2.5 kg more than my opponents, and that's it".*

It was half true. In Montreal Rigert was irresistible and silver medallist James Lee from United States lifted 20 kilos less than the Soviet did. In fact, the gap could be much more. But what for, argued David. *"In my career I loved to compete against strong opponents. What's the life without them, I wonder? To win in a clash against well-prepared, strong-willed, ambitious warriors - that's the sport in its pure sense! I did not come to weightlifting for medals - in my time we never thought about them in the early stage of career".*

Rigert dreamed to win in Moscow too but four months before the Olympics 1980 Rigert got into a weird experiment switching from category up to 100 kg where he was the best to category up to 90 kg. His answer to why he did it was amazing.

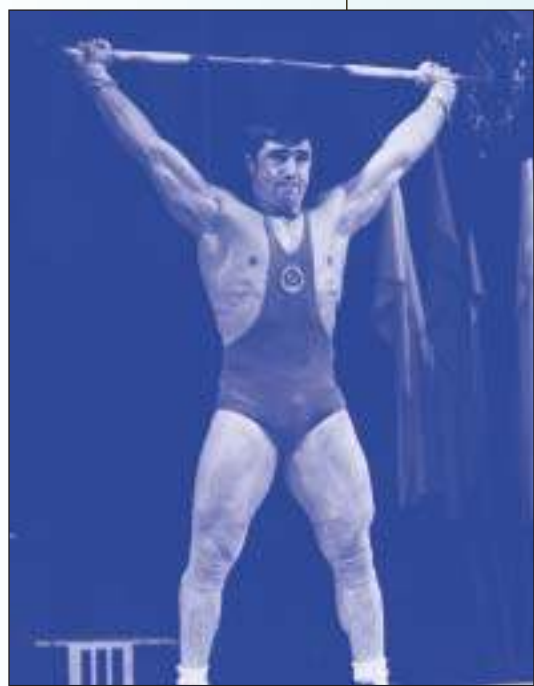
*"I was talking too much. There came a new talented Bulgarian weightlifter Rumen Alexandrov in 90 kg category. Our boys Gennadiy Bessonov and Valeriy Shariy began to loose their positions. And for some reason I thought that they are loosing due to the keen competition between themselves. They'd been exhausting each other at the training sessions, and I was insolent enough to say four months before Olympic Games: "You will exhaust each other and Alexandrov will leave you behind, I think I should drop from 100 to 90 and beat both of you plus Alexandrov!"* These words were heard not just by Shariy and Bessonov but also by someone else in sport administration. *My bravado was taken seriously, I tried to protest, even threatened the administration to quit the National Team, nothing helped. I had to pay for my words".*

Rigert's career wasn't as successful as it might have been. Yet he is still one of the most popular athletes in the world. Smiling with his eyes he confessed that for him performance came before competition.

*"If you want, there are "lifters" and there are "performers", who are much stronger once in public. I was very strong, but was able to go well above my training limits for the sake of the audience..."*

Happy Birthday, you young-old man, Great Champion: David Rigert!

Sergey Butov



**Rigert - when the whole world admired him**

to achieve an improvement others were spending years on. First step: Master's level in triathlon, i.e. 385 kilos. Next competition brings new result of 425 kilos. New start a few months later and again a new result of 470 kilos. And finally, national championships: Rigert is taking Grand Master level of 495 kilos. All together in 10 months - no one ever progressed with

*happened after. I was told later that I ran to the head coach and cried: "I'll take the weight once more!" But he just shook his head: "No, David, it's over". I forgot an old Olympic precept: victory is everything, records are nothing. I had to pay a cruel price. Losers were usually deported from the Games but the Soviet team authorities allowed me to stay. That was a gesture of support. But what could I*