

September 10, 2002

## Germans Resurrect the East's Methods

By OTTO POHL

**B**ERLIN — East Germany may be gone, but its sports system is being resurrected.

The systematic doping of athletes appears to have ended, as has the effort to use sports to prove that communism is superior to capitalism. But the centrally controlled sport school system, condemned after East Germany's collapse, is now quietly becoming the model for a reunited Germany.

In a country where reunification largely meant transplanting Western ideas eastward, the sports system is a striking example of the opposite.

"I knew right away that these elite schools must be spread across the entire reunified Germany," said Manfred von Richthofen, president of the German Sports Federation. Though from the West, von Richthofen is a longtime admirer of the aggressive East German approach to developing talent and a leader of the effort to adopt it nationwide.

The reason is simple: during its brief lifetime, East Germany won more Olympic medals per capita than any other country of significant size.

Now, after a long effort to convince German politicians that the Eastern sports system has been cleansed of ideology, state police and drugs, the sports schools receive about \$1 billion in government financing annually.

The money supports a systematic process of identifying and cultivating talent that is the heart of the German model. In communist times, school-age children were evaluated annually to gauge their athletic potential. The most promising were whisked off to sport schools, where nearly 12,000 student athletes, some as young as 5, trained up to 40 hours a week.

Testing and recruitment in the schools are no longer mandatory, and scouts now find talent at Germany's 87,000 sports clubs, to which half of all children belong. Those who stand out are strongly encouraged to transfer to a sports school. Some sports, like women's gymnastics, recruit and begin training in third grade. Others, like weight lifting and rowing, begin as late as 10th grade.

The Werner Seelenbinder School in eastern Berlin, a large complex of dormitories and sports halls, is the largest school in the system. It has produced more Olympic medalists than have many countries.

Under the East German system, the schools were under the control of the state sports and military departments. After reunification, the schools were transferred to the education ministry and the top school officials were replaced. For several years, the schools were largely run like all the other schools in Germany.

In the gymnastics center at the Seelenbinder School, Katja Abel, 19, worked this summer on her balance beam routine under the watchful eye of her trainer. She is training 30 hours a week to prepare for the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

"You have to focus your life on the sport," Abel said. Asked what comes after Athens, she appeared stumped. "I don't really know," she answered hesitantly. "My whole life is gymnastics."

Nearby, a group of 9-year-olds practiced leaps and splits with earnest intent. Their coach, Bernd Metzner, scolded several of the girls to tears with his brusque style. "We've got a performance on Tuesday," he said later, "and some of the girls just aren't ready."

They are among the 1,200 students at the Seelenbinder School, all of whom had to survive tough entrance competitions to enroll. The sports schools, as part of the public school system, are free; if students live on campus, as about 20 percent do, their parents are asked to pay part of the housing cost.

Concerted efforts by German sports officials, armed with a 1995 study that showed early emphasis on sports was not detrimental to a child's development, persuaded the government to permit three schools in eastern Berlin to reinstate elite sport training as a test. Impressed with the results, the government agreed to finance the spread of the system nationwide. It is now made up of 21 former East German schools and 14 in western Germany.

The schools all function similarly, but while those in the eastern part of the country train athletes in a wide range of sports, those in western Germany tend to be smaller and focus on one sport. German sports officials hope to expand to a total of 45 or 50 schools within five years.

The budding athletes must fulfill the same academic requirements as other German students, but classes are organized around their training schedules. By eighth grade, when students are away at camps and competitions for as many as 100 days a year, the schools do everything they can to accommodate their schedules. Teachers travel with the students, and the schools offer private tutors to help them make up missed work. The students are also allowed to take classes and exams over the Internet.

The investment in the system has already paid off. Germany won more medals than any country at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. While only a third of the athletes on the German Olympic team were from the elite sports schools, they won more than 80 percent of the German medals. In Sydney, Australia, graduates of the Seelenbinder School alone won 10 medals, 4 of them gold. Germany came in fifth in the medal totals by country, and the goal for Athens is to be among the top three.

The United States Olympic Committee has taken note of Germany's surge. "There is no question that there has been a dramatic increase by the Germans," Mike Moran, a spokesman, said. But he sees no reason to change the American approach, which is to rely on private financing and to use no formal system to identify potential talent. "As proud as the Germans may be of what they did in Salt Lake," Moran said, "we were only one medal behind them."

Other countries are taking a more active approach. Australia has established a talent identification program that draws on the former East German model, including talent searches that involve mass screenings at schools.

The worst element of the East German system, denounced worldwide, was the systematic doping of athletes, even very young ones. In order to bury that legacy, the German government recently inaugurated a National Anti-Doping Agency. The government has also agreed to create a fund by the end of this year to compensate East German doping victims. For von Richthofen, doping is no longer an issue. "We've made a clean table," he said.

Other international sports officials agree. Nonetheless, most of the coaches at the eastern schools have retained their old jobs. Ulf Dalhöfer, who has been a gymnastics coach since 1969, remembers how steroid pills were passed out as "vitamin" pills at breakfast.

He says steroids have rightly been banned, but he is still nostalgic about the system he helped build. "We would definitely be No. 1 in Athens if we were still East Germany," he said with a hint of pride in his voice. "And it's not just doping. The secret recipe was the focus, the thoroughness."

The carrots that the East German government could dangle in front of budding athletes to encourage hard work are unimpressive today. Even Katarina Witt, perhaps the most famous East German sports star, had to win several Olympic gold medals before she received a Volkswagen Golf (although she was allowed to specify, according to state police files, that it should be bright red).

With the opportunities and distractions of a wealthy market economy, officials fear that it will be increasingly difficult to attract and encourage athletic talent. "We're losing them to the discos," said Armin Baumert, the German Sports Federation official in charge of developing the schools.

But there are plenty of young athletes eager to take their place. At an awards banquet at the Seelenbinder School, the headmaster called up 57 student athletes from his school who are either the best in Germany or among the best in the world. The ceremony was earnest and perfunctory. Then the students briefly enjoyed a fruit buffet before heading out for their afternoon training. The thumping beat of the Queen song "We Will Rock You" followed them out the door.