

Czechoslovakian national team coach Ladislav Horský puts youngsters through a dryland practice during a tour of the United States in 1979.



Travels with **TARASOV**



Groundbreaking Tour Of The U.S. Helped Create A Revolutionary Way Of Looking At The Game // *By Harry Thompson*



Legendary Soviet Union hockey coach Anatoli Tarasov was at his innovative best while discussing his revolutionary dryland training methods during a tour of the United States in 1979.

AS THE SOVIET UNION BEGAN

the arduous task of rebuilding in the wake of World War II, Anatoli Tarasov received an order from the country's Committee on Physical Education and Sports to prepare an ice hockey team to play in the first USSR championship matches.

With little knowledge of the sport and even fewer resources, the young player/coach asked Soviet sports officials for some videos to see how the powerful Canadians played the game. His request was denied.

"They said, 'You will just copy their style instead of creating your own,'" Tarasov recalled. "And they were right."

Without the proper training tools, and only a tattered pamphlet explaining the rules of the game as his guide, Tarasov set out in search of inspiration.

One day while walking through the streets of Moscow, he heard the sounds of Russian folk music coming from a dance studio. Intrigued, Tarasov walked in and noticed some of the exercises that the dancers were doing, deep knee bends, lunges, duck walks, etc., and thought that was what his players could use to strengthen their lower bodies and improve their agility. That was the birth of dryland training.

In the years that followed, Tarasov built the powerful national program that medaled in nearly every world championship and Olympic tournament between 1954 and 1992.

Meanwhile, a half a world away, Lou Vairo was at his grandparents' home watching a rare televised international game between the Soviet Union and Sweden. The Soviet style of play fascinated the young coach from Brooklyn, N.Y., and inspired him to write Tarasov a letter, asking him how he could learn their methods. A few months later, Tarasov responded with an invitation for Vairo to come to Moscow.

Thus began a decades long friendship that helped changed the face of American hockey.

"We hit it off right away," Vairo said of his 1972 visit. "He liked my courage to reach out to him and come over to the Soviet Union to see what he was doing."

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—Lou Vairo

Years later, Vairo repaid the favor by inviting Tarasov and several other notable international hockey coaches to tour the United States and share their dryland training tactics with local hockey coaches.

Those lessons learned 40 years ago continue to resonate throughout the United States as coaches from the grassroots through the National Hockey League continue to use the ideas and techniques to get the most out of their players on the ice.

"Dryland training is common today, but nobody had ever seen it before Tarasov came over and showed us how to do it. Now, almost every good youth hockey program in the country has adopted dryland training," said Vairo, who adopted many of the techniques during an illustrious coaching career that includes the 1984 U.S. Olympic Team and numerous U.S. National Teams.

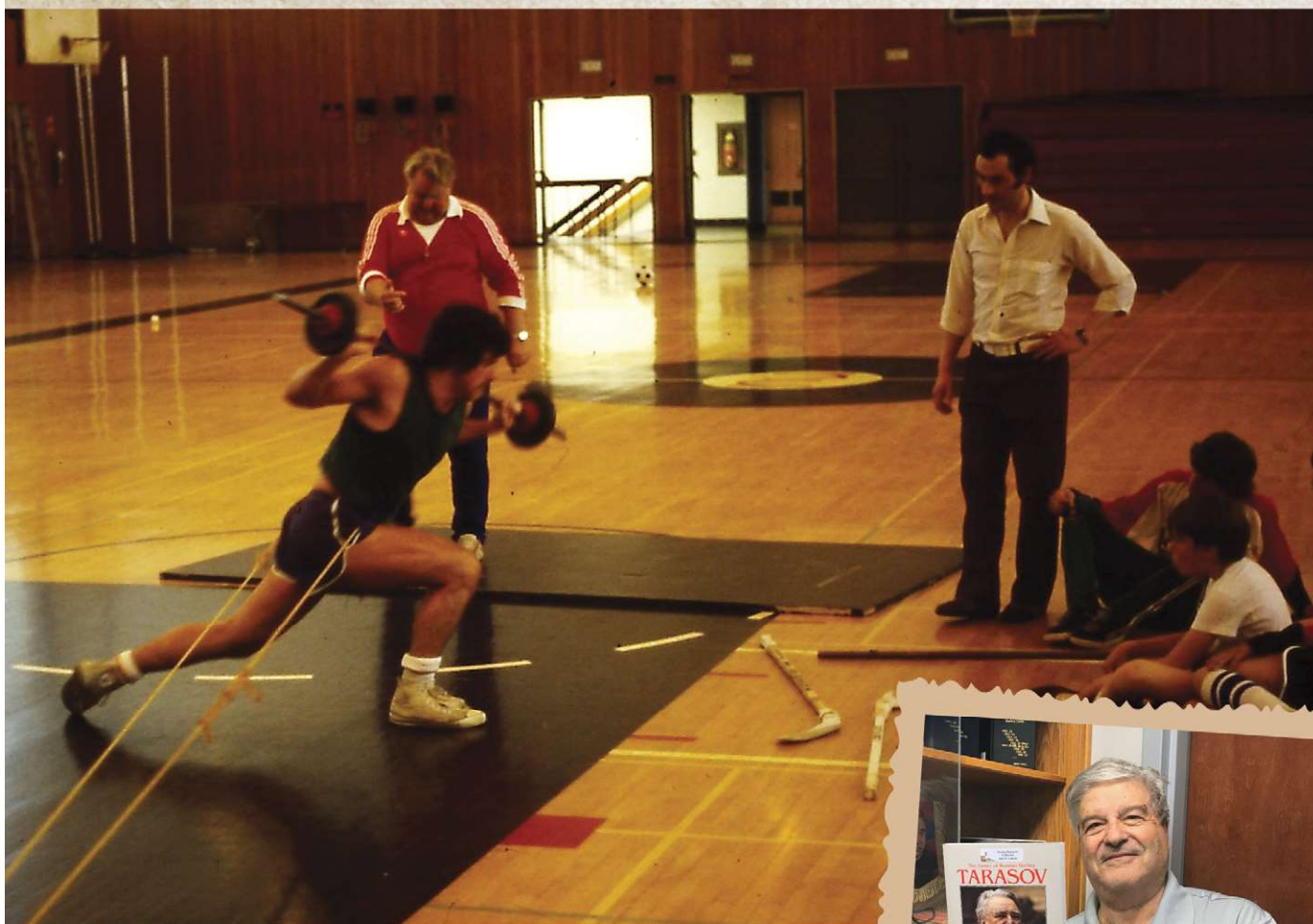
"So many countries try to take the credit for creating dryland training. It was Tarasov. He's the guy who deserves the credit."

Getting the tour off the ground proved to be a hard sell both at home and in Mother Russia. The leadership of the Amateur Hockey Association of the United States (the predecessor of USA Hockey) was concerned that such an event would be costly and a potential embarrassment if coaches didn't show up to the clinics.

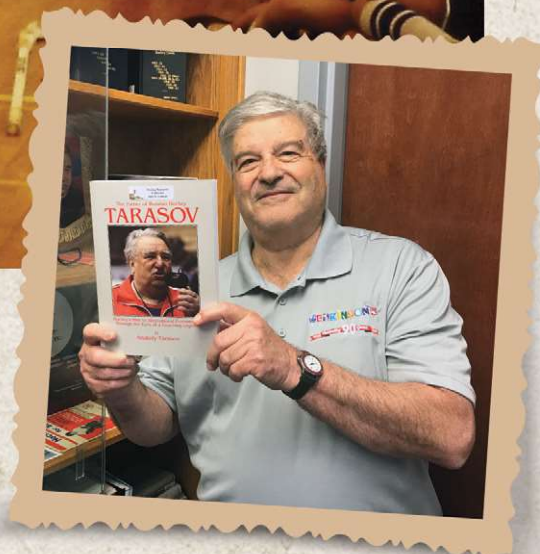
Meanwhile, the powerful Soviet Ice Hockey Federation, which often clashed with Tarasov over control of the crown jewel of the Soviet sports empire, was hesitant to allow him to share his training "secrets" with the rest of the world.

Eventually, both sides reached an agreement and the four-week tour kicked off in May of 1979 in Seattle. After missing the first few dates, Tarasov, along with his long-time colleague Arkady Chernyshev, Czechoslovakian coach Ladislav Horský and two interpreters joined the tour once it reached Minneapolis and Duluth, Minn.

Quickly, any concerns that the tour would be a flop were put to rest. At every stop along the way, the gymnasiums were packed with local coaches along with some college and professional coaches who were willing to pay the \$15 needed to hear from the great Tarasov.



With the help of interpreter Lev Zarokhovich, legendary Soviet Union hockey coach Anatoli Tarasov puts a young American hockey player through a drill during his dryland training presentation. At right, Lou Vairo displays a book on coaching hockey that Tarasov willed to Vairo and USA Hockey prior to his passing in 1995.



And sure enough, he didn't disappoint. While the other coaches faithfully stuck to their practice plans throughout the tour, Tarasov changed it up every day. No two practices were ever alike.

"He was just great," Vairo said. "He was really on top of his game. He was such a showman. The kids just loved him, and he loved them. Even though he had this reputation of being a task master, which he was, he knew how to deal with people."

By the time the tour reached Chicago that's where the wheels came precariously close to coming off. While the group was eating breakfast one morning, someone noticed the headline in a local paper that said that an American Airlines flight carrying 271 people crashed soon after takeoff from O'Hare International Airport. When

"There is no secret in hockey. There is imagination, hard work, discipline and dedication to achieving whatever the goal is."

—Anatoli Tarasov

Tarasov saw the headlines and had an interpreter read the account, he refused to board another American plane.

"It was Aeroflot or nothing," Vairo recalled Tarasov's response. "I tried to tell him that Aeroflot didn't fly here, especially during the height of the Cold War."

The only thing left to do was hire a cargo van large enough to carry the traveling party and all their workout gear. With Vairo behind the wheel they set out for Detroit and then on to Houghton, Mich., before hitting the east coast.

"There was a lot of driving but it was doable. This was the only way we could continue," Vairo said. "But by the time the tour ended I was exhausted."

Tarasov often shared his admiration for North American hockey, while quick to