

A SWIMMINGLY GOOD IDEA

Former Russian water polo star Sergei Lisitsyn hopes to score a goal for tenpins.

by LYDIA RYPCINSKI

BOWLING's chances to take root in Russia might rest on the broad and seemingly unlikely shoulders of its championship water polo players, such as Sergei Lisitsyn.

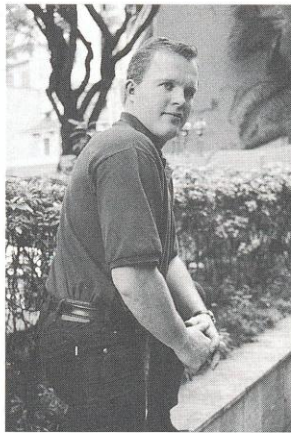
Lisitsyn, a 26-year-old Muscovite, made his mark as a player and general manager for the Dinamo Club of Moscow, the Russian national water polo champs and the nucleus of the national team. But these days, he's traded the pool for the lanes as the executive secretary of the Interregional Bowling Federation of Russia. The IBFR is a transient little group of 12 bowling enthusiasts, mostly water polo veterans like Lisitsyn, who play all their home matches on the road. That's because, with the exception of four AMF lanes housed in the U.S. Embassy and a couple more sprinkled here and there in hotels, there is no bowling center in Moscow, a city of nearly 9 million potential customers.

"When we would go to water polo meets outside the country, we would see people bowling, so we all tried it," Lisitsyn explained while observing the 1995 AMF Bowling World Cup in Brazil. "Our first impression was that it wasn't a sport like any we were used to playing, but it was interesting. We got some information and instruction, and we became very enthusiastic about the game. Soon, it got to the point where we would get our water polo schedule for the year, try to determine if there were bowling centers in the towns where we would be going, and then arrange for our bowling federation members to go on the trip, too, just so we could all bowl together."

Part of bowling's appeal for Russians lies in its novelty. Lisitsyn says that, with few exceptions, the Russian people have no bowling heritage to which they can relate. "We have some 'fun centers' in night clubs and hotels, where you can play a small-ball form of the game, and we had a *kegelbahn* in Moscow's Gorky Park back in the 1960s and '70s. Brunswick also had a small installation here in the '70s, but it has been gone for a long time.

"However, now our people get the European TV sports channels, and they see bowling on those shows. Russians are interested in all kinds of sports, and, despite what you might read in the West, we have money to spend on recreation. So I think it definitely could grow here."

While the public interest might be there, Lisitsyn admits that first he must attract investors to fund such an expensive operation. In true capitalist fashion, land prices have skyrocketed since free enterprise was sanctioned by the Russian government. As in the West, the choicest parcels nearest the big population centers command the highest prices. According to Lisitsyn, a one-room flat with kitchen in Moscow costs \$40,000, and a large parcel of land about 5 kilometers from Red Square, which would be ideal for a bowling center, runs about \$1- \$2 million. "So we must recruit businesspeople and financial experts to our federation and organize



Lisitsyn's ready to walk on (or under) water for bowling.

a large group of investors. That is a prime objective."

Lisitsyn's dream center isn't exactly small potatoes, either. He envisions a multi-purpose center, with a lounge, 20-26 lanes, a bar and restaurant, a small hotel and swimming pool. "It would be more like a club, where people could learn about bowling first as a recreation. We'd encourage them to become members, of course, so they could qualify for discounts; but the important thing is that it must be made available to everyone. For bowling to grow here, it cannot be seen as a sport only for the rich."

If and when Lisitsyn and the IBFR get their center, they'll start thinking about international competition, and not before. It seems to be a matter of Russian pride that they will not compete seriously in a sport until they are sure they have a good chance of winning. "We must know the proper way to prepare for competition first," he said. "Once we dedicate ourselves to a

sport, we stay with it. That is why we are the top medalists in the Olympic Games; we dedicate ourselves to a sport and practice. We've had good experience bringing Cuban instructors to Russia to teach us baseball and football [soccer]. We think we could do the same in bowling."

It's Lisitsyn's hope that U.S. instructors eventually will come to Moscow to train promising young bowlers and offer lessons to the general public.

Until there's a confirmed sighting of a tenpin emporium, however (Lisitsyn has heard that two are being built elsewhere, in Nogorov and Tolliaty along the Volga River, but he's not sure of the details), Russian bowling hopefuls will have to pursue their hobby outside the country. Lisitsyn himself plans to do a great deal of non-water-polo-related traveling in the coming year—on his own and his federation partners' money—to see more centers, observe more competition, and make more foreign contacts that might want to invest in or build a center in his country. He also figures that, given the current economic problems Russia is experiencing, it doesn't hurt to try to keep a high profile both within and outside of Russia, in order to advance his sport's interests.

"We joke that if the Russian president likes skydiving, it will become an official government-sponsored sport," he said. "Right now, we have no financial support from the state, but I will try to introduce bowling to the government as well as to private investors. If bowling is able to get into the Olympics, it will help our cause in Russia, because we would be eligible for more money from our national Olympic committee then. We would like to compete in events like the Bowling World Cup, but we will not do so until we think we can win.

"But first, we must get a center in Moscow." ●

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YEAR	PBA	PWBA
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1996	Walter Ray Williams Jr.	Wendy Macpherson
1995	Mike Aulby	Tish Johnson
1994	Norm Duke	Anne Marie Duggan
1993	Walter Ray Williams Jr.	Lisa Wagner
1992	Dave Ferraro	Tish Johnson
1991	David Ozio	Leanne Barrette
1990	Amleto Monacelli	Leanne Barrette
1989	Amleto Monacelli	Robin Romeo
1988	Brian Voss	Lisa Wagner
1987	Marshall Holman	Betty Morris

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