

First joys and first disappointments

At the 29th Olympics in Beijing, Belarus earns its first medal and further successes are not far off

By Yuri Karpenko

No doubt, the major event of the first day of the Games is the opening ceremony; it always represents the flavour of the host country yet also honours traditional Olympic ceremonies — the flying of the Olympic flag, the performing of an anthem, the solemn oath-taking by sportsmen and judges and the lighting of the Olympic flame in the main stadium. While meeting all these traditions, China also managed to remind us of its ancient history as one of the oldest global civilisations. The 100,000 strong audience gathered at Beijing's Bird's Nest Stadium was supplemented by billions of TV viewers enjoying the stunning spectacle of the opening, which was followed by a two-hour parade of the 205 participating teams. The Belarusian flag was held aloft by Alexander Romankov — an Olympic champion and ten-time world champion in fencing.

The Belarusian team's first match was basketball, against Australia — a favourite for gold, being world champion and the Athens' silver medalist. It was clear from the start that it would be a tough match; the Australian team easily took the lead and held sway throughout the match while the Belarusians seemed stiff with anxiety. Anatoly Buyalsky's trainees lost during their debut, 64:83, but managed to pull themselves together to beat Latvia,



Belarusian basketball players take initiative in match against Latvians and leave no chance for rivals

80:57. This places them in reasonable standing to go through to the next round.

145 cyclists — including 3 Belarusians — managed to cover 245km, with gold going to Samuel Sanchez of Spain. Belarus' Konstantin Sivtsov was placed highest among the Belarusian team, at 33rd, while Alexander Kuchinsky — who led some stages of the

track — finished 73rd. Alexander Usov finished 83rd.

The Belarusian rowing and canoeing masters did well in their preliminary races, with two-time Olympic champion Yekaterina Karsten taking the lead to win the singles, outstripping her closest rival — an American — by almost 10 seconds. Later, the Belarusian women's pair oars — Athens bronze

medallists and last year's champions Yulia Bichik and Natalia Gelakh — did well to reach the finals. The Belarusian men's pair oars — Denis Migal and Stanislav Shcherbachenya — took second place (behind New Zealand). They are now through to the semi-finals.

The men's gymnastic team — Dmitry Savitsky, Denis Savenkov, Dmitry Kasperovich, Alexander

Tsarevich, Alexey Ignatovich and Igor Kozlov — finished a less than impressive 10th, missing out on a place in the finals (top 8 teams). On a brighter note, Savitsky is to perform among the top 24 gymnasts in the all-round and Dmitry Kasperovich has won the right to battle for a vault medal.

The second day proved quite fruitful for Belarus' national team, with weightlifter Anastasia Novikova from Zhodino (under 53kg) taking the first medal — bronze. In a dramatic struggle, she lifted the same weight (in two rounds) as the silver medallist Korean Yoon Jinhee. However, as Yoon Jinhee has a lighter body weight, she was awarded the silver. Ms. Novikova beat her rival at last year's World Championship, where she took silver. Anastasia's initial successful attempt in the snatch — which went unregistered by the judges — may have affected her final result.

Victoria Chaika narrowly missed out on her medal, finishing 4th in the women's 10-metre air pistol competition, but 18-year-old badminton player Olga Konon must be satisfied with her results. In the 1/16 finals, she beat Slovenia's Maja Tvrdy (above Olga in the world rankings) 2:0. In the next round, Olga lost to top seeded Chinese Xie Xingfang. Ms. Konon's place in the top 16 at the Olympic tournament is a brilliant achievement in itself for such a young player.

BATE Borisov surprises European football league

Belarusian BATE football club in the spotlight at Champions League second qualification round

By Yuri Kovalev

In a repeat of last year, Belarus' top club successfully made it through two qualification rounds. However, this year, they faced a formidable rival in Belgium's Anderlecht (29 time national champion). After an impressive win (2:1) in their away match, BATE arrived at their home match with the same confidence and enthusiasm. Their Belarusian fans were only nervous at the end, when the angry Belgians attacked with all their strength as they tried to save the match. Anderlecht looked more confident than they did at home and had possession of the ball for most of the match.

BATE opened the score during the 18th minute, with Vitaly Rodionov and Gennady Bliznyuk forcing Anderlecht's defence to fight them off. They managed to score but Gennady sustained an injury while battling Anderlecht's goal-keeper, aggravated by an old face injury that he has only recently recovered from. BATE's fans were insane with happiness but not for long.



BATE's Maxim Skavysh (R) fights for the ball

After a further five minutes, Anderlecht's Lucas Biglia (of Argentina) realised a penalty kick to equalise the score.

In the second half, Anderlecht led, with BATE concentrating on counter-attacks. They built the match around Rodionov who, though tired, did his best to rile the opponent. He was rewarded in the 84th minute with a precise strike, pushing BATE forward again. The atmosphere became very tense as Jan

Polak (the Czech playing for Anderlecht) took advantage of BATE's lapse in concentration to score again, bringing the score to 2:2. The match stopped there, with Belarus' team entering the next round of the most prestigious continental tournament. BATE's next rival is Lewski Sofia — a team which has taken gold at the Bulgarian championship 25 times.

At the after-match conference, BATE head coach

Victor Goncharenko noted that he has an excellent team able to meet even the most serious challenges. Before the match against the titled club from Belgium, BATE's coach mentioned that his trainees had a good chance of getting through to the next round of the event, emphasising that his team are capable of a great deal in the European football arena.

Meanwhile, the International Federation of Football History and Statistics admits that BATE has made the greatest progress this July, with three victories in the Champions League qualification rounds — over Valur (Iceland) and Anderlecht (Belgium). Other teams which have achieved the same honour this year are: January — Roma (Italy), February and April — Bavaria (Germany), March and June — River Plate (Argentina) and May — Lyon (France). BATE is among the best (although, we must admit that the world's leading football clubs weren't playing during July). According to the IFFHS, BATE has jumped from 173rd to 93rd position.

Victoria Azarenko gains new heights

Belarusian tennis player achieves record rating with WTA (Women's Tennis Association)

Having recently celebrated her 19th birthday, Victoria Azarenko is now also celebrating her move to 15th ranking worldwide (up from 16th). Her ascent follows her successful performance at the international tournament in Montreal, where she reached the semi-finals, losing to win-

ner Dinara Safina of Russia.

Yekaterina Degolevich, 22, has also risen in the rankings; she is now 146th (up from 161st) while Victoria Yemeljanova, 17, is ranked 792nd (up from 840th). Top Belarusian tennis players are currently performing at the Olympics in Beijing, with Victoria Azarenko and Olga Govortsova in the singles and Victoria Azarenko / Tatiana Puchek and Olga Govortsova / Darya Kustova in the doubles.

Strong men compete in Silichi

Ski resort near Minsk hosts round of Strong Men World Cup

This year, the Strong Men contest in Silichi gathered the 14 strongest athletes from Belarus, Russia, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, the UK, Finland, Canada and the USA. Athletes competed in six categories: car-pushing with hands while sitting, pushing a beam upwards, the 'Konan circle', the 'forester's walk', a relay race, and 'Atlas' stones.

Four-time world champion Mariusz Pudzianowski of Poland gained the greatest

number of points overall. In second place was Elbrus Nigmatullin of Russia and Janne Virtanen of Finland. Double Belarusian champion Sergey Ryumin came tenth, while his colleague, Alexander Lapyrev, withdrew after an injury in the third event.

Vladislav Redkin, the Head of the CIS and Baltic States Strongmen Federation, tells us that, next year, Belarus plans to hold several competitions for the world's top athletes. "Our World Cup round in Silichi compares favourably with other events of its kind worldwide," he notes.