Although Russian pole vaulters are no longer dominating this event as was the case in the eighties and early nineties, their vaulting style - and particularly that of the greatest of all Russian pole vaulters, Sergey Bubka - is still regarded as the model to be imitated by today's vaulters. Bubka is still the only man to date who has cleared the 20-foot barrier, a height he first achieved in 1991. Between 1991 and 1994 he raised the outdoor world record a further four times to its current 6.14 m. Why was Bubka such a dominating pole vaulter?

According to the author of this book, who started his coaching career at Illinois State University and who is currently vertical jumps coach at the University of Kansas, it was not only Bubka's world-class speed, but mainly his superior technique and vaulting style that placed him and other former Soviet vaulters in a league of their own. Quite simply, the Russian vaulting style is more efficient and effective than the traditional style.

What is typical of the Russian style is that from the time the vaulter picks up the pole until he lands in the pit the vault is one continuous whole movement with the individual phases smoothly blended together. From the Russian point of view, the underlying key to becoming a successful vaulter is to position the pole as high to the vertical as possible at take-off. If properly executed, the Russian style enables the vaulter to attain this position, and, even more importantly, delays the bending of the pole until take-off. This enables the vaulter to work with instead of against the pole, as was the case in the old style, where the vaulter by jamming the pole against the back of the box created an early bend and consequently a loss of speed prior to take-off. Jamming the pole into the box also places a great deal of stress on the vaulter’s back.
Vaulter using the Russian style do not jam the pole into the back of the box, but rather drop the tip of the pole into the middle of the box. As the tip of the pole slides to the back of the box, the vaulter forcibly punches both hands high overhead and leaves the runway in a “free” takeoff fashion before the tip of the pole makes contact with the back of the box. This “pre-jump” enables the still unbent pole to reach its highest point vertically at the instant its tip hits the back of the box, thus greatly increasing the vaulter’s speed at take-off velocity.

By delaying the bend of the pole, the vaulter does not have to “muscle through the pole” and can generate much more momentum at takeoff. The vaulter and the pole simply move toward the pit together, forward and upward like a long jumper. Because the vaulter is no longer fighting against the pole at takeoff, he just rises in unison with the top end of the pole.

However, the major difference between the traditional style and the Russian style is the action on the ground. If the athlete can master and successfully incorporate the new ground phases into the take-off, the author of this book is confident that all the phases will blend together as one unit. This was the case with Bubka’s vaulting movement. In his vault there was no hesitation between phases, they were interrelated and ran smoothly together in a continuous whole movement. As the athlete continues to master this technique, he will fully understand why this new vaulting style is far superior to the old.

Against this background, the purpose of this book is to teach both coaches and athletes the technical details of the Russian pole vaulting style and help athletes achieve higher heights. In the first chapter, “Phases of the Vault”, each phase is meticulously analysed and it is explained how and why the Russian style can enhance vaulting performance. The advantages of the free takeoff (or “pre-jump”) are clearly and concisely described and illustrated. The pole grip and carry, the run-up, the pole drop, the hang-drive, the upswing, pull-turn and the bar clearance are also covered in detail.

Other chapters of the book look at the selection of the right type of pole, safety and elements of pole vault training, which includes conditioning, speed development, plyometrics, strength development and the development of vaulting technique. In a separate chapter the author also deals with gymnastic training, which he thinks to be a necessity for overall vaulting improvement. Although the choice of exercises is rather limited, at least the reader’s attention is drawn to this important element in the development of pole vaulters. Ten pages are devoted to the presentation of the principles of periodisation. A suggested year’s training plan in this chapter is also a helpful addition.

In summary, Modern Pole Vaulting covers in its 104 pages (plus a two-page bibliography) virtually everything there is to know about the modern approach to this popular event. Ferry’s book is therefore a definitive must for all pole vault coaches and vaulters.

Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer

Brian Ferry
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