

# AN HOUR BEFORE THE START

By Valery Borzov

*This article, condensed from the original text, is from the vault of Legkaya Atletika, (1:89-9, 1979) and is the great Russian sprint champion's account of his own mental preparation prior to a race.*

If you ask an athlete what he does and thinks about in the final moments before a competitive event, you may get an answer like: "My immediate preparation for competition is a sort of ritual. It is very personal, my own domain, and if I divulge it, it will cease to be 'mine.'"

I am on the warm-up track. It's familiar. I was here just yesterday. As a rule, I meet old acquaintances - coaches, athletes, journalists - before the warm-up. Our talk usually focuses on distribution of effort, on definite competitors, and the length of spikes on running shoes. But my eyes, ears, and thoughts were afar off. I was interested in other things: how the opponents looked, their height and weight, how they looked on their feet, how they walked, mimicry, gestures, whom they were looking at, how they were talking and about what, how many minutes before the start the warm-up is begun, and how long it was before the start.

If it's cold, I begin an hour and 10 minutes beforehand; if warm, an hour. I start to warm up 40 minutes before a final if the semi-final was held an hour-and-a-half to two hours earlier.

An hour is left... Just enough time to get the body ready, but plenty of time not to omit something, to make a mistake in choosing warm-up tempo, to burn out the nerves, to lose what had been built up by years of training.

Time to begin. Immediately I evaluate my degree of nervousness. All is ok if I am elevated to the "not impatient to begin" level. It is worse if the excitement has been prolonged (two-three hours) and is of a nonspecific character, vague jumping thoughts (uncertainty of the final outcome, fear of competitors, expectation of unpleasantness in case of defeat, etc.). Starting the warm-up (jogging in most cases) reduces tension because the athlete sets about to execute specific actions and concentrates on them. It is desirable to jog until "dew" appears on the body and the leg muscles feel warm. Running speed is adjusted so that the desired effect is achieved in 5-7 minutes. I run 800-1000 meters. At this point it is necessary to work groups of muscles, ligaments, starting with the neck and ending with the feet. This I do in any easy regimen, alternating exercises that imitate individual components of the start and running the distance with stretching exercises and static tension. After two-three exercises I do an easy run of 10-20 meters.

Special attention is given to working and stretching the muscles of the waist/lumbar region, pelvis, hip joints, back of the thigh, and lower leg. When the whole body is ready for special work I execute 3-4 runs in a "low sit" with gradually increasing speed and maximum relaxation. Then I do 3-4 starts, on command, with a smooth exit from a lean. This concludes the first part of the warm-up. Normally, this takes me 35 minutes. At this point, striving to keep my muscles warm, I rest 20 minutes. During this time I'm massaged with liniment, maintaining the heat, and we go to the site of competition. Here I usually change my clothes and 7-10 minutes before the start I put on my running shoes. All ready, I go onto the track (the officials come out 5 minutes before the start) , set up the starting blocks and do 2-3 flash-starts, 'running' in place with a switch to real running. From this point everything is automatic: the approach to the blocks and concentration of all senses on the starter's signal.

So much for the external aspect of the ritual, that is, preparation of the muscles, tendons, and ligaments. But a person has nerves, emotions, and a psyche. These also must be prepared. My motto: less emotion. It is a mirror of your condition. After coming out to the start, a distinct bond arises between athletes preparing to run in sharp competition. It is as if an invisible flow of information goes from one to another. Eyes are penetrating and vigilant; the senses are intensified. Underneath the external sameness they can sense uneasiness and fear, which are signs of strength or weakness. Someone tries to look me in the eye; someone waits for me to look at him... Don't look and don't wait! I give out no information. Let my opponents languish from a lack of information. Uncertainty is always disturbing. Those who are more disturbed are those who make more mistakes. Such are the rules of the game.

About nerves and one's mental state. The task is clear - to mobilize to a maximum degree and for a specific time. The difficulty is that not everyone can mobilize quickly, and being excited for a long time burns you out.

It is known that an individual's mental state can be changed depending on what images and pictures he reproduces in his consciousness. It is necessary to develop the ability to disassociate oneself from the world and evoke the desired images within oneself by willpower and exercising the imagination. I try to conserve my nerve energy right up to the time of going onto the track. During the warm-up process I call to mind a forest and a fishing scene. This leads me to feel tranquil and discourages a feeling of bustle and hurry. But now five minutes remain until the start. I must stimulate my nerves, elevate the pulse, and simulate the state that prevails during running. One must maintain the ability to control one's actions by the degree of general mobilization, not by details of technique. This can be accomplished on a foundation of anger and risk, but not fear which leads to confusion and chaos. I focus on running, "pedaling", become angry with someone or something, and stir up the thought that I am alone and that seven people are against me.