

Woman with a MISSION

*Natasha Matveeva is spreading her word
and making believers across America*

BY DWIGHT NORMILE



favorite instructors."

After the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s, Matveeva followed the path of many of her colleagues. In 1992 she accepted a coaching position in the U.S., at Fit 'n Fun Gymnastics in Gaithersburg, Md. She brought nine-year-old daughter Anya with her. And while things didn't pan out for her there, all was not lost. While attending a party, she met her future husband and business manager, American Tom Burgess.

Matveeva continued to coach in a club, at Fairland Athletic Complex in nearby Laurel, Md., before branching out on her own. Why waste all that experience in one gym?

She, Anya and Burgess moved to Nebraska to be centralized. Then Burgess started to market his wife, whose bold motto promises "Real Choreography, Real Results." That was seven years ago. Now Anya is a student at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and Natasha is on the road 30

weeks of the year, spreading her knowledge. She is a true gymnastics missionary with a growing discipleship.

A typical visit to a club lasts anywhere from three to eight days, and many of Matveeva's customers are repeat business. Matveeva tries to instill the solid foundation of the Russian system, which isn't always easy. "I try to teach them to understand the body, alignment, how muscles tighten and relax, because it's very important for all events," she says.

Choreography in Russia is not the designing of routines, as it is in the U.S. It is a systematic training of the body. It is a daily part of the general warm-up. It is also a missing ingredient in many American gymnastics clubs.

"What often upsets me in America is that sometimes coaches see what we do in Russia, but they don't understand details," Matveeva says. "And details are very important."

These details are learned as part of a highly specialized college degree in Russia. Coaching gymnastics is an actual field of study, same as business, computers or mathematics. "I mean no offense, but most American coaches, through no fault of their own, have not received comparable training," she explains. "The education simply isn't available here."

In addition to her formal studies, Matveeva

Matveeva (back right) and Dmitry Zonin (now in Australia) pose with the Soviet junior national team at Round Lake in 1988. FRONT (l-r): Svetlana Ivanova, Svetlana Kozlova, Yelena Tkochova, Yelena Levochkina, Tatiana Gutsu. SECOND ROW: Nadyezhda Tarvid, Marina Korolkova, Yulia Kut, Lyudmila Stovbchataya, (name unknown), Irina Vyatinina.

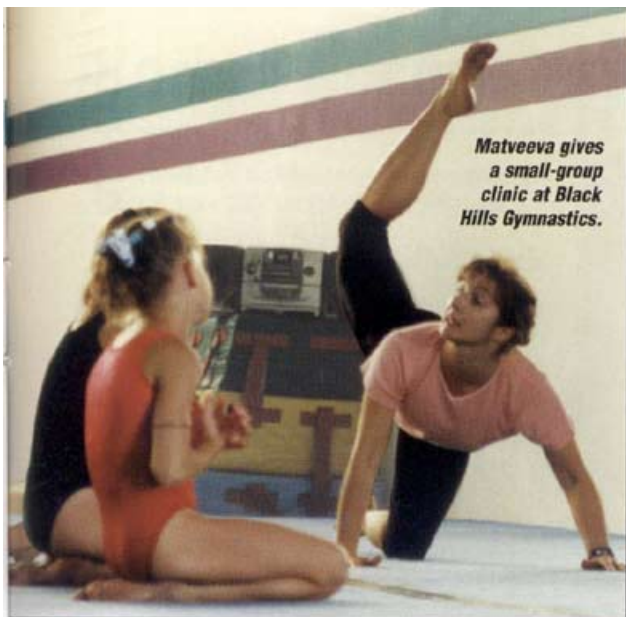
WHEN Natasha Matveeva travels to gym clubs around the U.S., she takes more than a gym bag. She brings a lifetime of experience as a gymnast, coach and educator. But working as a freelance coach within the American system can present a dilemma.

In the U.S., gymnastics is primarily a sport which often revolves around tricks and meets — and lots of both. It is also a business. In Russia, Matveeva's homeland, gymnastics is more than an afternoon activity. It is an art that takes years to learn. There are no shortcuts.

Born in Moscow and trained as a rhythmic gymnast, Matveeva became a rhythmic coach before switching to artistic gymnastics in 1978. For nine years she taught choreography and coaching methods at the Russian Republic Sport College, and she worked with the junior women's team of the former Soviet Union for four years. Her students at the time included Svetlana Boginskaya, Tatiana Gutsu and Tatiana Lysenko, all of whom went on to win individual Olympic gold medals.

"I remember her as a very artistic person with a strong Russian folk dance element in her teaching style," Lysenko says. "She certainly had a great level of professionalism and was one of my





Matveeva gives a small-group clinic at Black Hills Gymnastics.

learned much of what she teaches from best-friend Nikolai Epichen, an instructor at a sport university near Moscow. Epichen developed an ingenious teaching system in which the body works as a unit, never breaking into segments. "He helped me understand artistic gymnastics," Matveeva says. "Choreography is not only dance. It's a whole system to help kids understand [how the body moves]."

Ron Bartusiak of Sunbelt Gymnastics in Colleyville, Texas, hires Matveeva every three months to work with his team kids. He was sold on the Russian system in 1988, when he attended a clinic by Russian Anatoly Kozev. Kozev preached that you don't teach skills; you teach conditioning and body positions. Matveeva follows the same beliefs.

"Her philosophy matches our philosophy and that's why we keep bringing her back," Bartusiak says. "She's one of the most enthusiastic coaches I've ever met."

Bartusiak admits that Matveeva's methods are not a "quick fix," that they take time. "Kids and parents want to see skills being learned right away and moving up the ladder," he says. "And a lot of parents — and coaches, especially — don't want to take the time to teach these types of things."

"I don't try to explain it to kids, because it goes over their heads. But I see the end result where the kids are able to move gracefully and with good body position."

Of course, Matveeva choreographs routines, too, and ensures the gymnast is comfortable with the movements. "Her styles match each of our gymnasts individually, and we've had many floor state champions," says Jen Fatta of Prestige Gymnastics in Lancaster, Pa.

Alisa Deatherage is a head coach at Black Hills Gymnastics in Lacey, Wash., a club Matveeva has helped since 1996. "Within that time we have had three state champion teams and over 150 state, regional and national champions, and it is a large part because of her," Deatherage

says. "It's really refreshing to have somebody that cares enough about [our gymnasts] like she was their coach. It's not like she comes in, gets her money and leaves."

That's because Matveeva expects the clubs to follow her methods after she leaves. Otherwise her system won't work.

Ask Matveeva about the current state of gymnastics in the U.S. and you can sense her frustration. "Look how many American girls cannot keep their chin up," she begins. "Look at how sloppy their feet are." And don't get her started on their hand positions. "I can speak all day about it," she adds.

Matveeva is concerned with training the body for both aesthetics and health.

Gymnastics can lead to injuries if the body is moving improperly. "If gymnasts, boys or girls, cannot use their feet correctly, they hurt their knees," she reasons. "They hurt their knees, they hurt their back. It's all together."

Matveeva's biggest hurdle is usually the lack of coaching education in the clubs, and the sheer number of gymnasts. Then there's the issue of sensitivity. If Matveeva tells a young girl to lose weight and tighten her mid-section to avoid injury, she sometimes is accused of calling the girl "fat."

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—Alisa Deatherage

Criticism aside, Matveeva also sees advantages in the American system, in which anyone can sign up for gymnastics. She believes that not every future star can be singled out in kindergarten, that some shine later in their careers. "Under the former Soviet system, such gymnasts were simply passed over — excluded," she recalls.

Matveeva is also impressed with how American coaches juggle the multiple responsibilities of owning a club. They work with large numbers of kids, deal with parents and make sure there is enough money to pay all the bills. "I think perhaps some

European coaches were a bit spoiled by working with such small groups made up of only the best gymnasts — and without all the headaches of running a business," she observes.

Matveeva seems to be in the perfect place right now. There are plenty of American clubs that just need a little direction now and then. That's what she provides, but her clients must be willing to devote themselves completely. Matveeva doesn't settle for anything less. She can't. "The formula for gymnastics is very simple," Matveeva explains. "Hard work and dedication by both the gymnast and the coach."

And if Natasha Matveeva can get that, she'll provide the rest. **IG**

For more on Natasha Matveeva, visit her website: www.realresult.com

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