

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

By Wojciech Zablocki

EGIL DANIELSEN, JANUSZ SIDLO AND THE TRUE STORY OF THE 1956 OLYMPIC JAVELIN COMPETITION

Janusz Sidlo was a world class Polish javelin thrower, participating in five Olympic Games, from Helsinki in 1952 to Mexico City in 1968. He never won a gold medal. But in 1956, at the Melbourne Games, he held the lead with two throws to go when, in true Olympic sportsmanship, he loaned his javelin to Norway's Egil Danielsen. Using that javelin, Danielsen uncorked a powerful throw to upset Sidlo and win the Gold. However, for years now, as I recently discovered, the credit for the loan has gone to the Soviet Union star, Viktor Tsibulenko. It's now time to set the record straight - to tell the true story.

Although I happened to be a champion* in quite a different sport - sabre-fencing, I knew Janusz Sidlo personally. We travelled together, chatted, and joked. Janusz was a sociable and kind man. Everybody liked him. In 1956, we went to the Olympic Games in Melbourne as members of the Polish Olympic team. At the time, Janusz held the world record of 83.66 metres. We were certain that he would win the Olympic gold medal.

The javelin competition, set for the Main Stadium (Melbourne Cricket Ground) was scheduled before my own sabre tournament, thus all members of our fencing team went to the Main Stadium to see Janusz in action.

In the finals, he led on the strength of his third throw, a powerful effort of 79.98 metres. In second place was Tsibulenko. Danielsen held onto third.

We were now so sure that Sidlo would win. Then, out of the blue, Danielsen came up with a fantastic throw of 85.71 metres, snapping both the Olympic and world records. In doing so, he captured the gold medal. Sidlo finished in second place and Tsibulenko in third.

Obviously, we were disappointed. Sidlo, on the other hand, instead of showing disappointment, heartily congratulated his opponent. After we had returned to the Olympic Village, the news spread around that Sidlo had loaned his javelin to Danielsen just before the Norwegian's victorious throw. That gesture, in the true spirit of the Olympics, just might have been the reason for Sidlo's defeat.

In the beginning of 1999, in my position as president of the Polish Olympic Academy, I was in the midst of designing an educational poster for the Polish Olympic Committee, when I had an idea: Why not retell this wonderful episode of Olympic history - use it as an example of "fair play".

I visited the Sports Museum in Warsaw. There I received a photograph showing Sidlo congratulating Danielsen during the Melbourne medal ceremony.

About the same time, I joined the International Society of Olympic Historians. When I received my first issue of the *Journal of Olympic History* (September 1999, Volume 7, number 3), I read with surprise the story of the famous javelin contest. But to my amazement, instead of our Polish hero Janusz Sidlo

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loaning the javelin to Danielsen it was reported that Viktor Tsibulenko had been the lender. The story had been rewritten as an example of "fair play" during the times of the Cold War!

The Journal story had been authored by Mr. Sandy Hollway, Chief Executive Officer of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG). I was astonished but before reacting to it, wanted to verify in my own mind the history of that moment. Since Janusz had died, I contacted several sports reporters who had attended the Melbourne Olympics, and also some of Sidlo's old friends. They all told me the same story, confirming the one I knew

to be true. Yet their testimonies could not be regarded as important from the historical point of view.

Meanwhile, from 17 to 19 September 1999, I participated in the International Conference on Sustainable Sports and Leisure Facilities in Lillehammer, Norway. There I decided to speak with Egil Danielsen, if possible.

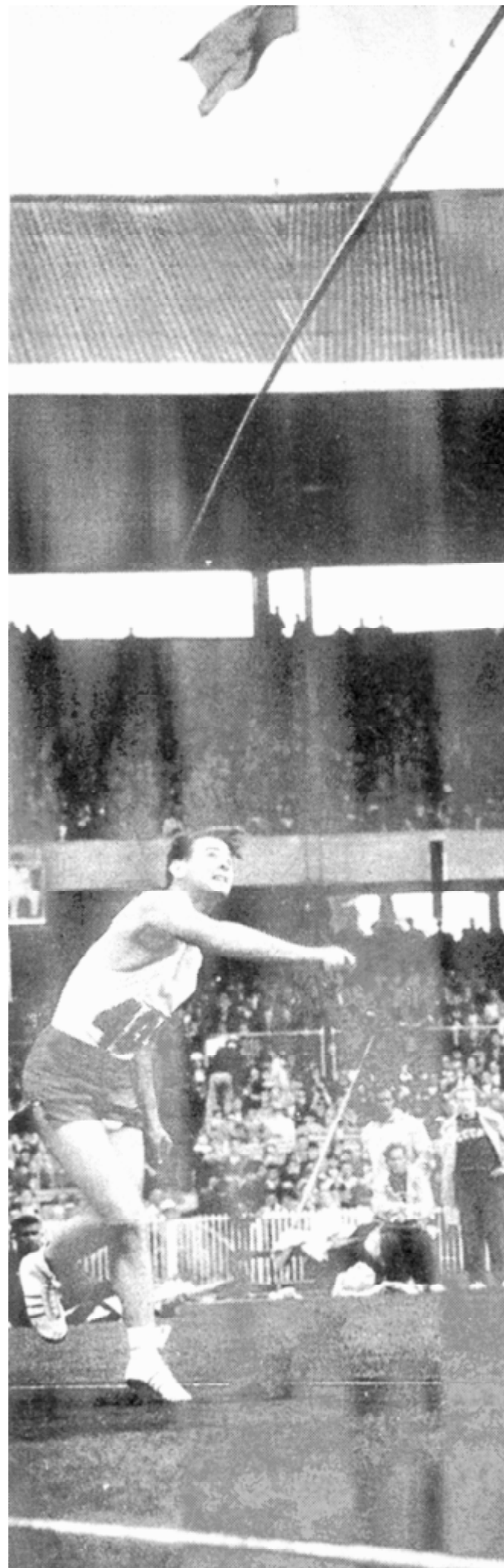
During the debates, I asked a Norwegian architect, who happened to be interested in sports, how I could possibly contact Danielsen. The architect told me that Danielsen probably lived in Hamar. He then searched for his name in the Hamar telephone directory. Since I was not sure if the number we had found, really belonged to the Egil Danielsen of Olympic fame, I requested the receptionist to talk to him in his own native language. It proved to be the correct number, but talking to Egil was not so easy because he told the receptionist that his English was poor.

Before returning to Warsaw I planned to make a short stop to visit the famous Viking Ship-Hall (speedskating arena, built for the 1994 Olympic Winter Games). It would be a good time to call Danielsen. The next day, Svante Berg took me in his car to Hamar. My plane was scheduled to leave in the afternoon and thus I had plenty of time. I asked Svante, who spoke Norwegian, to phone Egil and arrange a meeting. However, when he did call, Danielsen told him that he had a consultation with his doctor and could not make any arrangements. Needless to say, I was disappointed. Then Svante gave me his mobile telephone so I could speak to Danielsen personally. At last I had the great Norwegian Olympian on the phone. After telling me he spoke poor English, he added that he was very old - 66 years!

Well, I am 69, I retorted, so you are just a youngster! I think that observation helped to change his mind because he proposed to meet us at the reception of the Viking Ship Hall at 11 o'clock. That gave me plenty of time to visit the hall.

At 11 sharp, I saw a man enter the hall. I recognised him immediately.

I had seen his photograph from the Melbourne Olympics at the Lillehammer Olympic Museum. He hadn't changed much. We decided to visit a sports cafeteria in the city for our little chat. As earlier noted,



Danielsen at the Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games - he set a new world and Olympic record of 85.71 m

Danielsen did not speak English well, but I could easily understand him. I asked him about what had happened in Melbourne in 1956. Here is his story:

"I was born in 1933 here in Hamar and I want to die here. Sidlo was born in the same year, and he was my very good friend.

When I was young, I was fascinated by skiing - I was running cross country and I jumped. My hero was Birger Ruud.

I am not a big man, only 182 centimetres high and my weight then was 86 kilograms. My arms are not long, as any javelin thrower

javelin, I got some fencing lessons from the best Norwegian fencer from Oslo, a doctor, whose name, unfortunately, I don't remember. I did it specially to learn how to extend most efficiently my right arm and to have good reflexes and concentration. That is very important for a javelin thrower.

I met Sidlo in Budapest in 1953 during an international meet. We were different: I am a simple man, did not talk

much, I was not good in foreign languages; while Janusz was very intelligent and witty. He liked to talk and joke. We became very good friends, although we were strong rivals. I learned much from Sidlo, especially his technique. He was technically very good!

During the javelin contest at the Melbourne Games in 1956, we both entered the finals. Sidlo was leading the contest from the first throw - more than 78 metres. In those times we all used wooden javelins, but Sidlo had a new steel one, of Swedish production, called Seefab.

He asked me: "Why don't you try my javelin?" So I took his and began to prepare for the next throw. At the same time, I was approached by a French javelin thrower,

Michel Macquet, who did not qualify for the finals. He gave me a cup of very strong coffee, that he had prepared himself. I never drink coffee, but after this cup, I almost had a shock, my heart began to beat fast. I was swearing.

Finally my turn to throw came. I took the steel javelin, made a good run and a powerful stroke. Such a fantastic result I never suspected 85,71 metres! I was almost crazy with joy. Sidlo was the first to congratulate me! My next throw was very poor, only about 68 metres. In fact, I could never approach this Melbourne result again. So now I was in first,

Sidlo was in second and Tsibulenko in third place. Tsibulenko also was very good, but I had no close relations with him.

I continued my sports career, but I could never repeat my success from Melbourne. During the next Olympic Games in Rome in 1960, I could not even make the finals. Then I decided to stop my active sports career, I was no longer interested in pursuing it. I devoted myself to my family and to my work. I worked for thirty years in the Hamar Fire Brigade.



Janusz Sidlo (Poland) Egil Danielsen (Norway) and Viktor Tsibulenko (USSR)

The last time I saw Sidlo was in 1973 in Warsaw. Sidlo then was 40 years old and he still threw his javelin for a distance of about 80 metres! After that, he retired from competition too."

After our conversation in the sports cafeteria, we made some photographs and Egil invited me to visit him at his home whenever I came to Norway. I caught the train for Oslo. From there a plane flew me home to Warsaw. During the whole trip I thought that this history about friendship and fair play between two Olympic champions from two different countries during the height of the Cold War was so worthwhile that it had to be commemorated in the Journal. But even more, the record of who really loaned that famous javelin had to be set straight.