

Jim Riordan surveys East European sport

Spoil Sports

A compelling feature of the turbulent events in Eastern Europe has been an intensive debate about sport. Since the end of the second world war, the East European sports system has been dominated by the clubs of the security police and the armed forces - Dinamo (Kiev, Tbilisi, Moscow, Tirana, Bucharest, Zagreb, Berlin, Dresden) and the Central Army clubs (Dukla Prague, Red Star Belgrade, Steaua Bucharest, Honved in Hungary, Legia in Poland, TsSKA in the USSR).

With the welling-up of hostility and revenge directed against the paramilitary forces that have shored up the old corrupt regimes, it is natural that their sponsored sports clubs should suffer by association.

In East Germany, some sports stars have even been assaulted and had their conspicuous sports-reward symbols - cars and apartments - vandalised. The GDR's ex-champions Roland Matthes and Komelia Ender have gone West, while world figure-skating champion Katarina Witt has stayed put, voicing bewilderment that fans should turn on those they once feted.

In Romania, sport was in the front line of the civil war, with Dinamo clubs locked in bloody battle against army clubs and a number of athletes, like the Romanian rugby captain, are reported killed. In Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania several clubs have hurriedly changed their names. Such events have demonstrated that sport in Eastern Europe is identified in the popular consciousness with privilege, hypocrisy, distorted priorities and, in the case of non-Soviet states, with an alien Soviet-imposed insitution.

Some in the West have looked with envy at the successful talent-spotting and nurturing system developed in the communist states. It has brought considerable success in world sports - the USSR and GDR have dominated the summer and winter Olympics of recent years. But many people, East and West, have abhorred the flag-waving razzmatazz accom-

panying sports success, which was evidently more for the benefit of bringing prestige and recognition to the regime than to the people. The elite sports system, producing medal winners to demonstrate the superiority of communism is popularly perceived as a diversion from the realities of living 'under communism'.

Since Gorbachev came to power, however, radical changes have appeared in Soviet sport. The functionalist, bureaucratic mould has been broken. Until then, not only had the Soviet-



Katarina Witt: Fallen star

pioneered, state-controlled system hampered a true appraisal of the realities beneath the 'universal' statistics and 'idealised' veneer, it had also prevented concessions to particular groups in the population. The 'we know what's best for you' syndrome, whereby men tell women what sports they should play; the fit tell the disabled that sport is not for them (Soviet disabled athletes attended the Paralympics for the first time only in 1988); the political leadership, mindful of the nation's and ideology's international reputation, decides that Olympic (ie, European) sports are the only civilised forms of culture.

In the heat of battle, it is tempting to blame Stalinists

and 'stagnators' for neglecting 'sport for all' in their race for glory. In truth, much effort was made over the years to involve the population in some form of exercise and recreation that was completely free of charge - whether through the national fitness programme, work-based facilities or compulsory sports facilities for all students in their first two years at college. But it was the coercive nature of sports activities, their being part of the plan-fulfilled system (every school, factory, farm and region received a sports quota and incurred penalties if they fell short) that turned people off.

In the case of the non-Soviet nations, there was the added irritant of having to put up with a system tailored by Stalin and imposed from without in contradiction to their own traditions (Sokol gymnastics was banned in Czechoslovakia and Poland after 1948; youth organisations involved in recreation and leisure were similarly proscribed; and prewar Olympic committees were disbanded).

Being tied to the USSR meant following Soviet foreign policy, including on Olympic boycotts; the Soviet party decision to boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles was simply passed down to other members of the Warsaw Pact; no sports or national Olympic Committees, not to mention athletes, were consulted. Rumania

demurred, though hardly because of player-power.

What of the future? That is clearly for the people of Eastern Europe to decide when the dust settles. Some Germans may lick their lips at the prospect of adding East to West medals in a united team again. Others may well be sick and tired of the unreasonable prominence accorded to the winning of victories, the setting of records and the collection of trophies - a fetishisation of sport. The popular mood seems to favour sport for all and sport for fun, rather than the elitist sport of the recent past.