

SPORTING LEGENDS: ELENA SHUSHUNOVA

SPORT: GYMNASTICS

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1982 - 1990

Elena Shushunova was born in 1969 in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Her father was a lorry driver, and her mother worked in a hat factory.



As a child Elena was clumsy and often overweight. It seemed she was too short for events requiring power and too squat for those needing finesse. When she was six, Elena asked to take an entrance test to a local sports school in Leningrad.

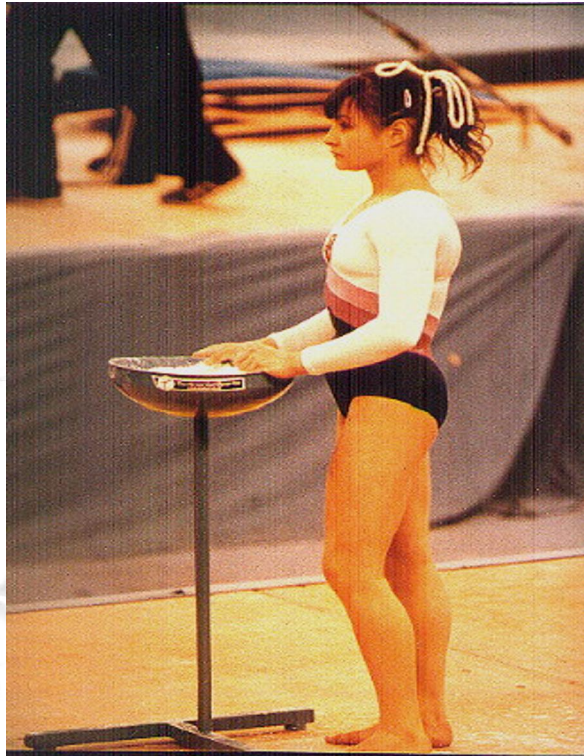
This is a routine event in the Soviet Union. "I was very young and ordinary", she says. "There were a lot of other children, and I did not show anything more special than the rest".

But a very kind gymnastics coach, Galina Rubtsova, had a rare eye and invited Elena into her class; within two years, under careful tutoring, Elena advanced to the elite grade to be coached by gymnastics expert Viktor Gavrichenko.

Shushunova made her debut for the Soviet national team when she was 13. A year later, she won gold medals in the Soviet Cup and the Moscow News International. Then, she astonished her coach by winning the European Championship in Helsinki in 1985.

In the World Championship at Montreal later that year, she tried for the individual gold medal with her great Russian rival, Okana Omelianchik. Shushunova won her best event, the vault, but lost in her favourite, the floor exercises.

SPORTING LEGENDS: ELENA SHUSHUNOVA



Shushunova was always very methodical and meticulous in her preparation.

“The floor cannot be eclipsed by any other apparatus+. She says: “It provides the most opportunities to demonstrate acrobatic abilities+.

Shushunova retained her prestige with victory in the 1986 World Cup individual event. But, in 1987, at the European Championships on her home territory of Moscow, and later at the World Championships in Rotterdam, Romania, Daniela Silivas eclipsed Shushunova in the individual event.

But Shushunova was not an athlete to accept defeat. At the Seoul Olympics, she overcame a brilliant challenge from Silivas to take the individual title in a thrilling finish.

Married to an auto mechanic, Elena still lives in St. Petersburg and has one son. In 2004 she was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame.

SPORTING LEGENDS: ELENA SHUSHUNOVA



Scott Burton's Final Thought

I believe that gymnastics is arguably the finest, all-round sport to embody the natural elements of health and fitness.

It's also amazing to consider that young girls of 13 or 14 can outwit and out-perform women over half their age in feats of physical strength and power.

Elena Shushunova's gymnastic career was all about beating the odds and proving the doubters wrong. Many initially felt that she didn't have the right build suited for international competition, yet she proved them wrong, time and time again.

She was favourite to take Gold at L.A. '84, but the Soviet boycott prevented her from being able to compete. This setback also didn't deter her; she just kept working hard and came back four years later to take the Olympic Gold at Seoul '88.

This determination lies at the heart of a true sporting legend, and Shushunova can certainly claim to be one of the best.



Shushunova made her debut for the USSR at an incredible 13 years of age!