

Jumping through hoops

THERE must be a book in the offing, for in my experience, you don't get celebrities such as one-time Olympic gymnast Olga Korbut giving frank interviews to an impecunious foreign TV station like BBC2 simply out of the goodness of their heart.

If La Korbut, who fled her native Russia after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 and now lives in the U.S., has indeed embarked on authorship, then last night's *Reputations* about the lady's brilliant, if brief, career — clumsily called *The Gymnast, Her Coach, Her Rival And The President* — performed at least one service.

For Clare Beavan's splendid documentary did such an exhaustive job that only the insanely inquisitive — or would-be Olympic gymnasts — would need to buy the book.

It was all there — the speculation over puberty-inhibiting drugs, the alleged ravishing of Miss Korbut by her Svengali-like coach, the four days of televisial fame after seven years of back-breaking preparation, and the controversial photo opportunity with President Nixon (and another with Ted Heath). No



by
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Reputations: Olga Korbut — The Gymnast, Her Coach, Her Rival And The President (BBC2)

one who saw Korbut performing at the ill-starred Munich Games of 1972 is likely to forget her amazing displays of graceful acrobatics.

She put gymnastics on the map as an Olympic sport, though whether it deserved to be there in the first place, and whether it has really ever recovered from the impact of Korbut's personality, are questions for my friends on the sports pages.

Tiny Olga embarked on the climb to greatness in 1965, when, at the age of ten and with a talent for gymnastics already apparent, she was enrolled in a sports school in her home town of Grodno, Belarus.

Her coach was the visionary Renald Knysh, who was bent on transforming gymnastics from its languid 'dying swan' style — borrowed, one supposes, from the Russian ballet tradition — to

something more fast-moving and athletic.

I have some sympathy for the Soviet guardians of the sport, who saw Korbut, after three years of Knysh's tuition, performing backward somersaults never before seen on the bars, and objected that he was importing 'crude circus tricks'.

Before that point was reached, as is always the situation between a successful athlete and a coach, a psychological battle had to be fought almost to the death.

LOOKING back on what could be described as a stolen childhood, Korbut described Knysh as 'a very bad man — a loner, a despot, a weirdo'. But she had the grace to add: 'As a coach, he was a genius.'

Of his pupil, Knysh was equally frank: 'When I started working with her, I didn't like her. She was very lazy and capricious. She didn't like doing what she was told — only what she wanted to do.'

An even darker story emerged from these interviews. Korbut, now a middle-aged dyed blonde in a red-white-and-blue shellsuit, strongly hinted that because she was so young and innocent, she did not

know whether Knysh dosed her with drugs to delay the onset of puberty. Her father remembers serious injuries — concussion and a slit shoulder joint requiring the surgical insertion of a metal pin.

But Korbut also claimed that Knysh prepared her for sex for years and eventually raped her a few days before the Munich Olympics. 'I did not want it. I wasn't ready. It was my first time, I didn't love him. All this together amounts to rape.'

Knysh, always a morose man, rebutted the charge. 'She is lying,' he said. 'There were such coaches, of course, but they didn't produce any stars. As soon as you start having sex together, the sport goes down the drain.'

'Why should I sacrifice seven years of my life to her, forever forcing myself to psyche her up, pleading with her, just to ruin it all in one go before the Olympics? It's the most stupid thing I ever heard.'

Korbut, in this remarkably frank exchange (conducted at a distance, it must be said), also alleged that Knysh would hit her, though he claimed it happened only once — 'but it's enough for her to hate me for life'. She implied that theirs was always a violent relationship — 'deep down, we carried on this internal argument'.

She also spoke with bitterness of

'no holidays, no rest, no Sundays, no eat, no drink, no boyfriend — nothing but practising gymnastics'.

Perhaps Knysh was speaking for sports coaches everywhere when he quoted a bitter saying among his Russian colleagues: 'Every pupil ends up spitting on your soul.'

The reward for all the aggravation and hard work arrived at Munich, a Games remembered for two things, the slaughter of the Israeli athletes by terrorists, and Olga Korbut's triumph (though followers of swimming will remember Mark Spitz's record collection of golds).

When Korbut was not awarded the gold medal for her performance on the bars, the crowd booed, stamped and whistled, refusing to allow the competition to continue. When she won gold in the floor exercises, the world went wild with joy.

By the next Olympics in Montreal, she could manage only one team gold and one silver: she had already parted from Knysh, to be coached instead by his wife.

The iron laws of celebrity have caught up with the ageing Korbut. She has decided to tell her story, sounding exactly like those advertisements on TV for Sunday newspaper serialisations: 'I wanted to forget everything that happened... but now I think it's time to talk about it.'

PICK OF THE DAY