

Track and Field



Vera Nikolic



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Vera Nikolic

European Champion at the Age of 18

The first semi-final of the women's Olympic 800 m took place on 18 October 1968 in Mexico City. The spectators saw, after 300 m of the race, Vera Nikolic leave the track and go straight out of the stadium. They were later told that she was suffering from toothache, which could explain her action. However, the woman who was the record-holder at the time was also suffering from the unusual methods used by her coach, Aca Petrovic, who was always more free with his slaps than with his praise, and from the burden of her country's expectations. What is more, she had never liked running, and was forced to train intensively for it (at the age of 16 she sometimes ran about 15km (10 miles) a day in the snow) and after eight years, she had had enough.

The sport she enjoyed most when she was young was swimming. However, her father, the village blacksmith, thought it a waste of time. She was too small for handball, so she did some gymnastics, some long jump (4.80 m at the age of 12) and sprinting. It was in 1961 that she met Petrovic, a geography teacher and former middle-distance runner, who at first let her try

hurdling before putting her through a strenuous training program. He believed in only one set of tactics: a fast start, getting the lead and holding on to it. Thus Vera became the European champion in 1966 in Budapest with a time of 59.6 sec in the 400 m, when she was still a junior. This was the first time that the European title had been won by a Yugoslav. After Mexico, Vera broke with Petrovic and started to enjoy competing again under the guidance of an old and very gentle coach, Leo Lang. However, it was clearly too late: although she again became the European champion in 1971, Vera Nikolic was by then becoming a worn-out athlete.

VERA NIKOLIC

Born on Sept. 23, 1948, in Cuprija, Yugoslavia

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1972 OG: 5th in the 800 m in 1 min 59.98 sec

1966 ECH: gold medal in the 800 m in 2 min 2.8 sec

1969 ECH: bronze medal in 2 min 2.6 sec

1971 ECH: gold medal in 2 min

World record:

2 min 0.5 sec in the 800 m on 20 July 1968 in London

Vera Nikolic: the dangers of being pushed too hard