

# Meet the 'Russian Arnold Schwarzenegger'

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Alexander Nevsky, right, posing with his childhood hero, Arnold Schwarzenegger. **Alexander Nevsky**

After 15 minutes of talking, Alexander Nevsky — aka "Mr. Universe" — is hungry. Really hungry.

"Mind if we take a break?" he asks, his fork hovering eagerly over his brunch.

Granted permission, Nevsky dives into the mammoth plate of five eggs before him. The self-proclaimed "Russian Arnold Schwarzenegger" is still celebrating his return to cholesterol after the punishing diet that helped earn him his bodybuilding title in late October — and flaunting the critics who say his "Mr. Universe" mantle is not the one that Nevsky's idol first captured in 1967.

At an imposing 6 feet 7 inches, with hulking biceps and a broad smile, it's hard to believe that Nevsky once favored books over barbells. Born in Moscow in 1971 to an engineer and a

professor, Nevsky says that as a child he didn't play sports.

"I didn't understand my friends — they were all running around with a ball, and I was sitting with a book," such as the Anna Akhmatova poetry beloved by his mother.

When he sprouted up to a beanpole-like 200 centimeters, the 14-year-old Nevsky encountered problems with his peers. "Boys who'd basically never read any poetry didn't like that 'skinny pencil neck' was getting more attention from girls when [I] couldn't even do push-ups," he said. "So they started picking on me."

To fight back, he began training at a boxing gym. Soon, "all the bad guys in our school, they were surprised," he said. "Suddenly that 'pencil neck' started to fight with them and put them in their place." But while his self-confidence soared, his appearance remained the same. Frustrated, he asked his mother for money to buy dumbbells and began lifting weights on his own.

Nevsky may have remained a mere at-home fitness enthusiast if it weren't for one singularly muscled inspiration. When he saw Arnold Schwarzenegger's star-making turn in "Conan the Destroyer" in 1986, Nevsky knew he had found his life's dream. "Schwarzenegger was at his prime, muscle-wise, in the movie. I was in shock," he said. "As soon as the movie finished, I knew what I should do.

"I should start bodybuilding."

Nevsky worked on his training in between classes at the State Academy of Management. Though bodybuilding had gained global popularity in the '60s and '70s — thanks in large part to Schwarzenegger — in the '80s it was still illegal in the Soviet Union. Nevsky says that at the time, there were only two bodybuilding gyms in Moscow, and they operated under strict discretion. "You couldn't even put a Schwarzenegger poster on the wall."

In the early '90s, the Soviet Union's collapse was accompanied by an explosion of Russian bodybuilding; at last its buff practitioners could bare their chests and compete openly. As his biceps expanded, Nevsky's star began to rise. At 25, he changed his last name from "Kuritsyn," which in Russian bears an unfortunate resemblance to "kuritsa," or "chicken," to the more robust "Nevsky," reminiscent of the Russian medieval hero. (Nevsky says it's also his mother's maiden name.)

Nevsky seized upon the wave of consumerist self-reinvention that accompanied Russia's shift to capitalism, marketing fitness as a lifestyle. In 1996, Nevsky penned his first book, which combined self-help advice with exercises, and called it "How to Become Arnold Schwarzenegger in Russia." A television show called "Self-Made Man" and several more books followed.

In 1999, Nevsky moved to Los Angeles to pursue a film career. According to him, in 2000 he had the opportunity to meet his idol when he presented Schwarzenegger with a book signed by Mikhail Gorbachev. (Nevsky says he befriended Gorbachev after defending him from a heckling Communist on a Russian political talk show in the '90s.) "He likes my films, by the way," Nevsky said.

After improving his English and studying acting, he has produced and starred in several English-language action movies filmed in Moscow, including "Moscow Heat" with Michael York and "Treasure Raiders" with David Carradine. So far, Nevsky's films have been widely panned in Russia, and have gone straight to DVD in the United States.

Though Schwarzenegger's international movie stardom has eluded his grasp, Nevsky finally got a shot at one of his idol's crowning achievements: the Mr. Universe title. In June, Edmundas Daubaras, head of the World Bodybuilding Federation (WBBF) and World Fitness Federation (WFF), which sponsor the tournament, approached him with an offer to compete in this year's 60th anniversary competition.

Three and a half months later, Nevsky and Oksana Sidorenko (Nevsky's recent "Dancing With the Stars" partner and now-girlfriend) took the stage in Brusno Kupele, Slovakia. They dressed as Hercules and Aphrodite, posing alongside their competitors for hours beneath bright stage lights without drinking water. ("You want your muscles to be more defined," Nevsky explained.) On Oct. 29, Nevsky's press agency announced that he was anointed Mr. Universe, Sidorenko won World Champion in Model Fitness, and together they took the pairs crown.

However, some fitness buffs claim that the WBBF/WFF event has no relation to the Mr. Universe competition in which Schwarzenegger participated, which was sponsored by the National Amateur Body Builders' Association (NABBA). Russian bodybuilding web site Powerlifting.ru led the charges, proclaiming: "Nevsky, the king of bodybuilding, has turned out to be 'naked,' since he won a competition that has conferred global status on itself and has no relation to the prize recognized by the best sportsmen."

In a press release issued by Nevsky's PR agency, WBBF general secretary Andrei Basov denied the claims, asserting that the WBBF competition is the current official Mr. Universe competition, and that the current NABBA Mr. Universe is not registered. For his part, Nevsky shrugs off the allegations. "When you're successful, other people are jealous," he said.

Despite the doubts surrounding his title, Nevsky is seizing on publicity from the event to promote his new film projects, starting with a remake of Schwarzenegger's 1977 biographical film, "Pumping Iron."

Unlike his hero, Nevsky says that for now he has no designs to run for office. However, he does believe he has a special political mission of his own. As he polished off the last morsels of his toast, Nevsky said his ultimate goal is to foster better relations between his native and adopted countries. "I'm kind of like a bridge between Hollywood and Moscow," he said. "I'm trying to show that Russia and America, they can work together. They can fight evil together. They can be friends."

Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev should take note. As his classmates learned several decades ago, when Alexander Nevsky speaks, it's wise to listen.

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