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# Outspoken Coach for Disabled Athletes Fired

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After Russia's worst-ever Olympic performance in Vancouver last year, it was the paralympians who saved the day for Russian sports.

Russia finished in second place, behind Germany, and President Dmitry Medvedev welcomed them with champagne upon their return home. Chest-puffing officials pledged to shower the paralympic movement with money.

But it appears that a year after the triumph, bureaucrats in at least one provincial city still have no use for disabled athletes or those who assist them.

This is the case with Nikolai Limansky, 61, who coached two teams of disabled athletes in the southern city of Stavropol for a monthly salary of 5,000 rubles ($180) — but was sacked after speaking to the media about a lack of support from local authorities.

In February, Limansky told the local edition of Komsomolskaya Pravda that he has to partially finance his wheelchair basketball team with his own money and does not even have an assistant to maintain wheelchairs and other team equipment.

Shortly afterward, Limansky signed a "voluntary" resignation form, a decision that he said he was pressured into making. Limansky decided to fight back after his teams asked him to stay, but local officials have given him the runaround, he said.

"I'm an uncomfortable person for them," Limansky said by telephone from Stavropol.

He said he probably was pushed out for demanding too much and being too persistent.

His resignation was filed with the director of the local state sports school where he worked, but Limansky said his ouster was likely ordered by senior Stavropol sports officials.

The school's director, Anatoly Smirnov, said by telephone that Limansky "was fired because he doesn't fulfill his obligations." He did not elaborate.

A spokeswoman for the regional labor and social welfare department, Yelena Nazarenko, denied involvement in the case, saying the coach had clashed with the region's sports committee. A committee spokeswoman said there was no conflict and dismissed the whole incident as "irrelevant."

Representatives of eight other city and regional departments contacted by The Moscow Times over the past week declined to comment on the story, most saying they are not familiar with the details.

Nevertheless, Limansky said officials have backed down now that the fuss has reached the media and he might soon return to work.

To what extent Limansky's job is irrelevant is open to debate. Statistics by the Stavropol sports committee indicate that 5,690 disabled residents of the region engage in sports on a regular basis — a figure that comprises just 2.4 percent of all disabled locals.

Russia is notorious for its nearly nonexistent infrastructure for the disabled, and Limansky said sports programs for people with special needs are what is needed to "drag more of them out of their apartments."

Moreover, Limansky is the only person in the Stavropol region to coach goalball — a sport specially designed for blind and otherwise visually impaired athletes. First developed in Europe after World War II, the game uses blindfolds and a ball stuffed with bells that two teams of three try to hit the opponents' goal with.

Limansky said the goalball team does not even have the necessary equipment, simple as it may be.

"We don't even have balls — only one — and no goals, so we have to use benches, which are not safe," he said. "The gym is no good, either. It's dirty, and the old paint is peeling on the floor."

The team is competitive despite its troubles, finishing a decent sixth in a nationwide tournament attended by 14 teams last month.

Limansky told Komsomolskaya Pravda that the authorities actually provided his basketball team with new wheelchairs. But he said the venue they are training at is not fitted for people with special needs, and he has to carry each player in and out in his own hands.

"As a coach, I think he is a good one," Alexei Bobrov, a visually challenged player with Limansky's goalball team, said by telephone.

He confirmed that the team needed more equipment and better training grounds. He also said the sport deserved more attention from the authorities because it helps improve sound-orientation skills and keep the body healthy.

Limansky, formerly a researcher with the Stavropol State University's biology and physical education departments, now works at an orphanage.

He also trains a team of enthusiasts of lapta, an old Russian variation of baseball, at another local school. Athletes on the lapta team have no disabilities, but Limansky said he hoped to eventually adapt the game for the disabled because it "is perfect for them."

"I've been working without a salary for about a year," Limansky said of his work with the disabled athletes. "But no one cared."

He said he manages to get by with the orphanage salary, the lapta team earnings and his pension.

Nazarenko, of the local social welfare department, said Limansky earned about 5,000 rubles a month for 24 hours of work with the disabled, a salary that she called perfectly normal in the region. She did not comment on his statement that he had no been paid in a year.

She said his wheelchair basketball team was "considered successful in the region."

Limansky said the team owed no gratitude for its performance to officials, who did little to provide the disabled athletes with special care they require during trips, thus leaving him to cater for every team member on his own.

No change for the better looms ahead. The region earmarked 1.56 million rubles ($55,000) for rehabilitation programs for the disabled this year, with a modest increase to 2.08 million rubles planned by 2014.

This amounts to 8 rubles for each of Stavropol's 237,000 disabled residents.

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