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Meet Ivan Savkin, Russia's Human Mountain

This strongman can pull ships, trains, and even missiles.

By Yulia Skopich

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Spassk Today / Youtube

Bogatyrs play an important role in the Russian literary and artistic imagination. Epic poems of the exploits of these fierce and powerful warriors are part of Russia's rich oral tradition, first written down in the early 19th century. At first, warriors were basically gods or shape-shifters with superhuman strength. Then they became very strong human beings.

Ivan Savkin from Vladivostok is often compared to a bogatyr, but he doesn't like the comparison.

"There are all kinds of warriors, fictional and real, but I wasn't inspired by historical or folklore heroes. I do it for myself," Ivan Savkin told The Moscow Times. "I prefer the nickname 'The Russian Human Mountain; that someone called me last year. I'm 205

centimeters tall (6 feet, 7 inches) and weigh 140 kilograms (308 pounds), like a real mountain."

However hard to imagine now, Savkin was a frail child. When reached his childhood height of 190 centimeters (just over 6 feet) he weighed only 52 kilograms (115 pounds). That was why he started working out in the gym and took up weightlifting. Then he became a powerlifter. He was awarded the title of master of sport, won many championships in the bench press and champion of the Far East in powerlifting.

2011 was a turning point. Savkin wanted to come up with a way to really impress his future wife. So, he pulled a 15-ton truck to surprise her. Three years later, pulling heavy vehicles changed Ivan's life.

Unbelievable records

Savkin has seven world records, beginning in October 2015 when he dragged a 36-ton tank T-54B 50 centimeters. The next month Ivan Savkin dragged five wagons loaded with cement with a total weight of 512 tons for 160 centimeters.

In February 2017, he set a new record by dragging a 296-ton electric train. This was a tough one, since it was cold (about -10C / 14F) and the grease that's used on the train wheels froze. It took him two tries, but he did it. To celebrate, he pulled a 312-ton crane the next month.

His record in 2018 was tough, too. Savkin dragged a TM-2 diesel locomotive and two cars and 190 centimeters. The diesel locomotive is designed with high rolling resistance, so it was particularly hard to pull.

On a roll, as it were, the same year he pulled a 11,000-ton ship and then broke his own record in 2019 when he pulled a 12,400-ton ship. The weight of this ship was 1,100 tons more than the previous world towing record. And Savkin pulled the ship aft forward, which created an additional load.

He used nothing but his own body weight and a ladder lying on the ground to give him something to grip onto.

"Actually, the heavier, the better," he said. "The most important and difficult thing is to shift a heavy vehicle from its place. Once you do that, it moves by inertia."

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The sporting life

Savkin works in security, and pulling heavy vehicles is a hobby. He goes to the gym once or twice a day, where he does general physical training as well as basic exercises like squats with a barbell and deadlift, being sure to work out all his muscle groups. He developed his regimen himself by "listening" to his own body. To keep in practice, one day he might pull a bus, and then the next day a car, and another heavy vehicle on the day after that.

Ivan Savkin does not drink alcohol or smoke, and he walks about 15-18 kilometers a day in any

weather. He also says he thinks positively and eats five times a day. He doesn't try to keep to a healthy diet.

"What does 'healthy' mean?" the strongman asked. "I try not to eat processed food. And my wife supports our healthy lifestyle."

Occasionally Savkin injures himself, but he has studied at Pacific State Medical University and has a group of doctors who tend to him. He believes that his hobby keeps him healthy. He says he can't remember the last time he had a cold.

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Training plans

Savkin has followers all around the world, aged from 14 to 57. Savkin sends them training plans online, and they send him videos of the training and towing successes and failures, which they discuss. Savkin does all this completely free of charge.

In April or May next year, Savkin plans to pull a 23,000-ton ship. In July, he'll take part in competitions with Hafthor Julius Bjornsson from Iceland — aka The Mountain from "The Game of Thrones" and the first person to have won the Arnold Strongman Classic, Europe's Strongest Man and World's Strongest Man in the same calendar year. Their competitions will include a pulling a 20,000-ton ship, a 600-ton train and a tank. Savkin has pulled loads this heavy, but he is much smaller than The Mountain: 140 kg vs. the Icelander's 205 kg. The competitions promise to be exciting.

Savkin has no plans to slow up. The 34-year-old said, "I am going to pull heavy vehicles until the end of my life."

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