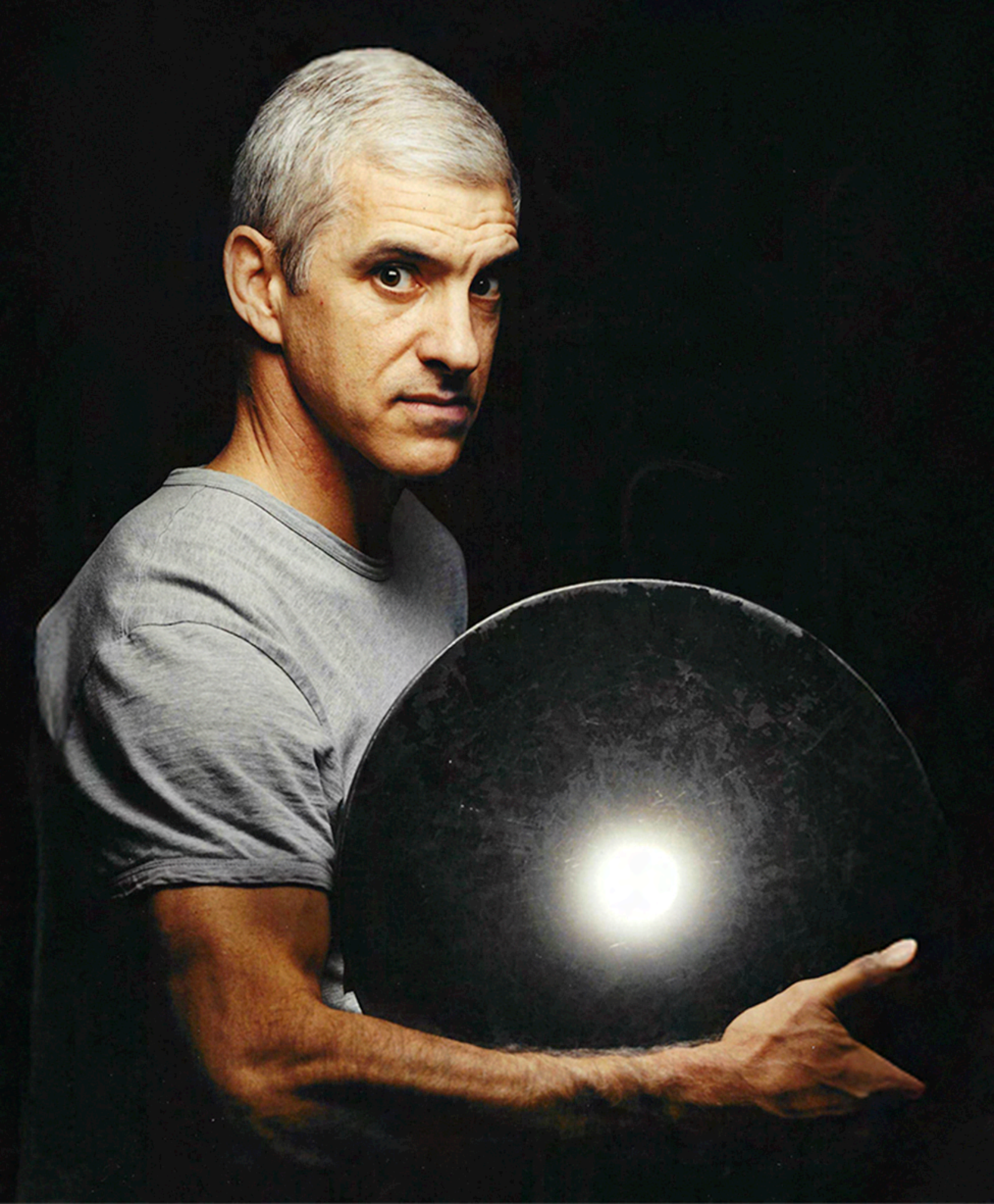


THE MIRACLE MERCHANT

VLADIMIR CHUBINSKY SAYS THE WONDERS TAKING PLACE IN HIS GYM WILL CHANGE THE FACE OF COMPETITIVE SPORTS. IF ONLY SPORTS WOULD LISTEN

BY JUSTIN HECKERT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ETHAN HILL

THE RUSSIAN DEALS IN WEIGHTS. HIS GYM IS A CONVERTED RANCH HOUSE, ITS GRAY CARPET CLUTTERED WITH A LEADEN CLOCKWORK OF DISKS. IT'S A WONDER HE EVER SLEEPS, HIS MISSION IS SO HEAVY ON HIS MIND. HE IS 48, WITH EXHAUSTED EYES, A LOUD VOICE, LONG FINGERS AND GRAY HAIR COMBED TO HIDE A THINNING CROWN. HE HAS VAST SHOULDERS THAT NARROW INTO A MORTAR CHEST AND LEGS AS THIN AS IRON BARS. HE CAN LIFT NEARLY 3,000 POUNDS.

VLADIMIR CHUBINSKY isn't the strongest man in the world, but he considers himself unusually powerful. The Russian believes not only that the weights in his gym can heal, but that they have the power to transform an athlete's career.

Vladimir is the proprietor of a patented weight-lifting system, called gravitational gymnastics, that he is certain can change sports. For more than a decade, he has been desperate to have athletes use it. His claims about what it can do are bellicose and wild. He can come across as a carnival barker when he makes them: "Give me 15 session," he says in accented English. "I train any team on system, and in one year, team will win championship. Players will have more energy, stamina and power. They use this, have best season ever."

But hardly anyone of consequence has bought what Vladimir has to sell. From the Atlanta suburb where he lives with his wife and 16-year-old daughter, he has written to the Braves, Falcons, Thrashers and Yellow Jackets, among others, begging team officials to witness "the miracles" transpiring within the tan stucco walls of his gym. Owners and trainers from these teams have all dismissed him, and he has years of their courtesy responses saved in a black binder to prove it, next to photographs of men, women and children lifting thousands of pounds off the ground.

Should these worthies ever take a serious look at Vladimir's system, this is what they might see: In the gym on this June afternoon is an ordinary man, no athlete. He takes off his shoes and slips his feet into a pair of fuzzy, wool Siberian camp boots. He stands, stretches his back and approaches a rectangular wood platform that holds a steel bar as thick as a sink pipe. Black weights pin the bar to the ground. Eight months ago, Steve Lore—a former lawyer—was as weak as a dying bird, and his disease, multiple sclerosis, was about to sentence him to a chair.

He bends down, wrapping his fingers around handles above the bar, though he can't feel how hard he's clenching. He spreads his legs two feet apart, stares down at his boots and raises his head to look at the wall, the Russian down on one knee by his side.

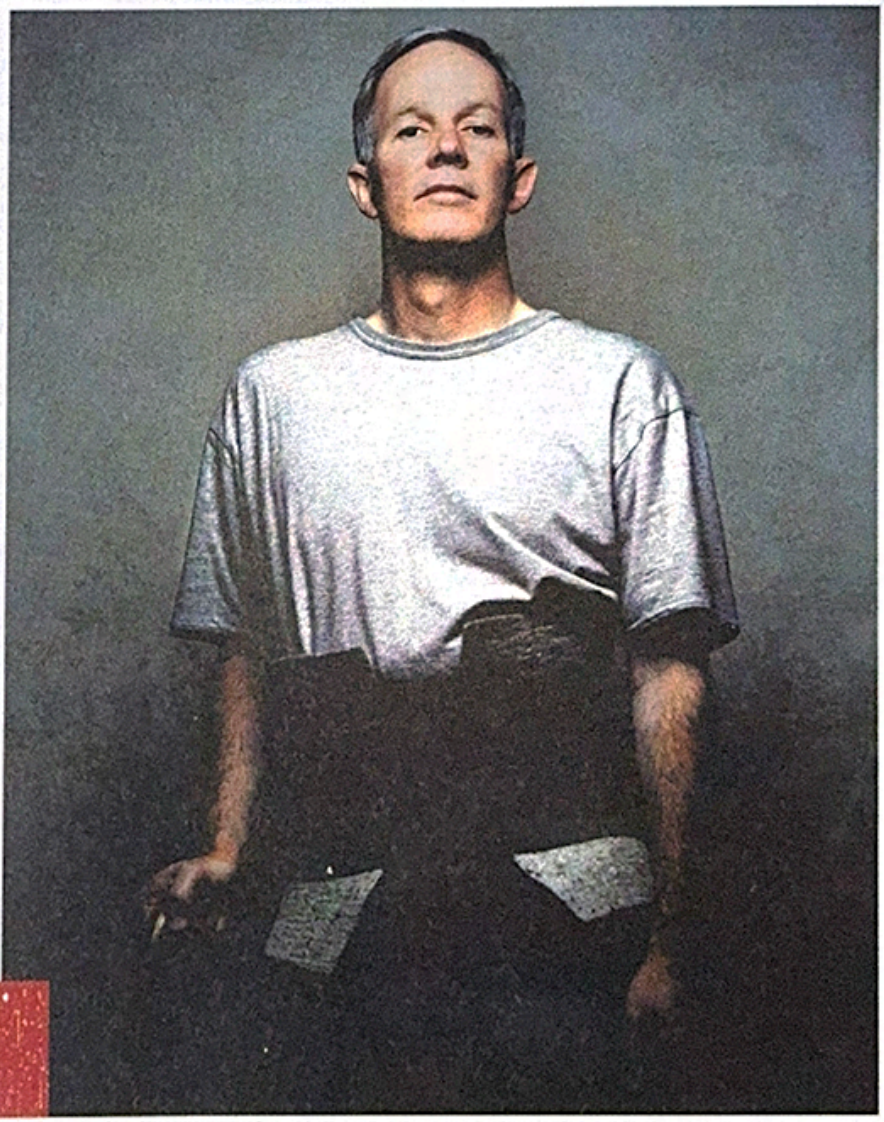
Then Steve Lore lifts 956 pounds.

THE WEIGHT is absurd. That's the essence of gravitational gymnastics: placing incredible stress on the hips, pelvis and lumbar region, initiating what Vladimir believes is an immune response in the bloodstream. The exercise begins with a long bar attached to two-foot-tall circular weights, a simple contraption that the Russian claims even the "strongest man in world" couldn't lift with his arms. There are three stations of bars in Vladimir's gym. One bar has no weight to speak of. Another is freighted with 1,000 pounds. The third, in a corner and out of daylight's reach, is stacked with as many disks as it can hold, almost 3,000 pounds' worth. Vladimir calls these bars "belt lifts," and when you stand above them and look down, you get the feeling that lifting them is impossible.

But it *is* possible.

First, a thick green belt is draped over the back, then latched to the bar with a *clink;* palms and fingers close on the handles; back and knees are bent as if leaning over to water flowers; the head comes up, eyes focused on the wall. The knees press down and the weights rise, just a few inches off the ground. When the head becomes light and the room starts to swirl, those few inches feel like a few miles.

With every lift, Lore is someone new. He's no longer a man with quivering legs that drag behind his cane, who stumbles to the floor and gropes for



Steve Lore, an MS sufferer, has found strength and hope in Vladimir's weights.

Before hefting iron, Vladimir's clients slip into fuzzy wool boots.

walls and railings, who hides himself in dark suits, should his bladder betray him. With every lift, Lore is no longer a man held captive by the foreboding of his future. He is instead a man who sends giant weights into the air.

Last January, Lore could hardly walk. But after 12 gravitational gymnastics sessions, he says, he was able to put his walker and his crutches in the closet. His limbs feel as though no disease ever changed them. This he considers a miracle.

Lore's neurologist, Ben Thrower, from Shepherd Center in Atlanta, can attest to Vladimir's effect. "Most of Steve's improvement has been through strengthening the core muscles alongside the vertebral column," he says. "Steve's balance is much better. He used to look like a fall waiting to happen. Now he looks much more stable. His improvement has been dramatic."

In a lawyer's practiced locution, Lore pronounces the Russian's name as if sounding it out. "Vla-di-mir," he says. "He is a healer. Just look at me. People at my church ask how I'm doing so well. I say to them, it's Vla-di-mir."

There is still a disease inside Lore. A mean one, lashing at his brain and spinal nerve cells with wolfish intemperance, one that terrorizes his limbs, his nervous system, his bladder and memory. It's a disease that will never go away. But as long as Lore keeps driving to this gym and hefting the weights, he considers himself a man who's been given hope.

THE RUSSIAN flips through the laminated pages of the black binder, his face as worn as its paper. As he thumbs past a few local newspaper clippings and a story about him in a massage magazine—his only real press—he lands on a letter from John Schuerholz, the Braves GM, sent to him 11 years ago. Like nicotine, the passing days have yellowed the sheet, which is to say it bears a response as useless as smoke:

VLADIMIR CALLS THESE BARS "BELT LIFTS," AND WHEN YOU STAND ABOVE THEM AND LOOK DOWN, YOU GET THE FEELING THAT LIFTING THEM IS IMPOSSIBLE.

Dear Vladimir,

Tommy Glavine has spoken to me regarding your interest in working with the Braves and also

has given me your letter of interest and résumé. I'll advise the members of our current medical staff of your interest in working with the Braves. Once I have had an opportunity to discuss this matter in detail with them, I will be back in touch.

Sincerely yours,
John Schuerholz

The next letter, faded and written in old ink that now bleeds like a wound, is inscribed on a 3x7 gold card, its words as dismissive today as when they were composed, four years ago:

Dear Mr. Chubinsky,

Thank you for the opportunity to work with Vladimir. At this time we don't think the system would benefit the team. Hope you have a happy new year. Thanks again.

-Ed Ellis, Director of Player Development, Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets

"I so tired now," the Russian says, reading the words. "You get to point when you feel like, Why am I wasting my life on this? Is it worth it when people don't understand that you try to help them? My dream is to work with team, any team. I just need someone with open mind."

Vladimir has penned countless letters in the past decade, searching for that open mind. That he hasn't found one may have a little, or a lot, to do with the fact that he can sound too good to be true and that his writing is often as puzzling as his proclamations. Take this letter he wrote in 1999 to Terry McGuirk, the president of Turner Sports, whose parent company owned the Braves and the Thrashers. In it, Vladimir actually refers to himself in the third person:

Dear Terry,

For the last three years I have been doing a program with a Russian émigré named Vladimir Chubinsky, and I can personally testify that what he has me doing has made a difference in my energy levels, my health and attitude. I won't even begin to try and explain what "it" is or how "it" works, because I don't understand. But everyone who does it changes for the better. One of these days some sports team will get "it," hire Chubinsky to work with their players, and they will become champions. I want it to be one of your teams. If you get him to work with the Braves or Thrashers, you would see incredible changes. I am not a nut case, Terry. What have you got to lose?

Sincerely,
Vladimir Chubinsky

Vladimir got no response. So he wrote letters to someone in the business of miracles, including this final missive:

Dear Oprah,

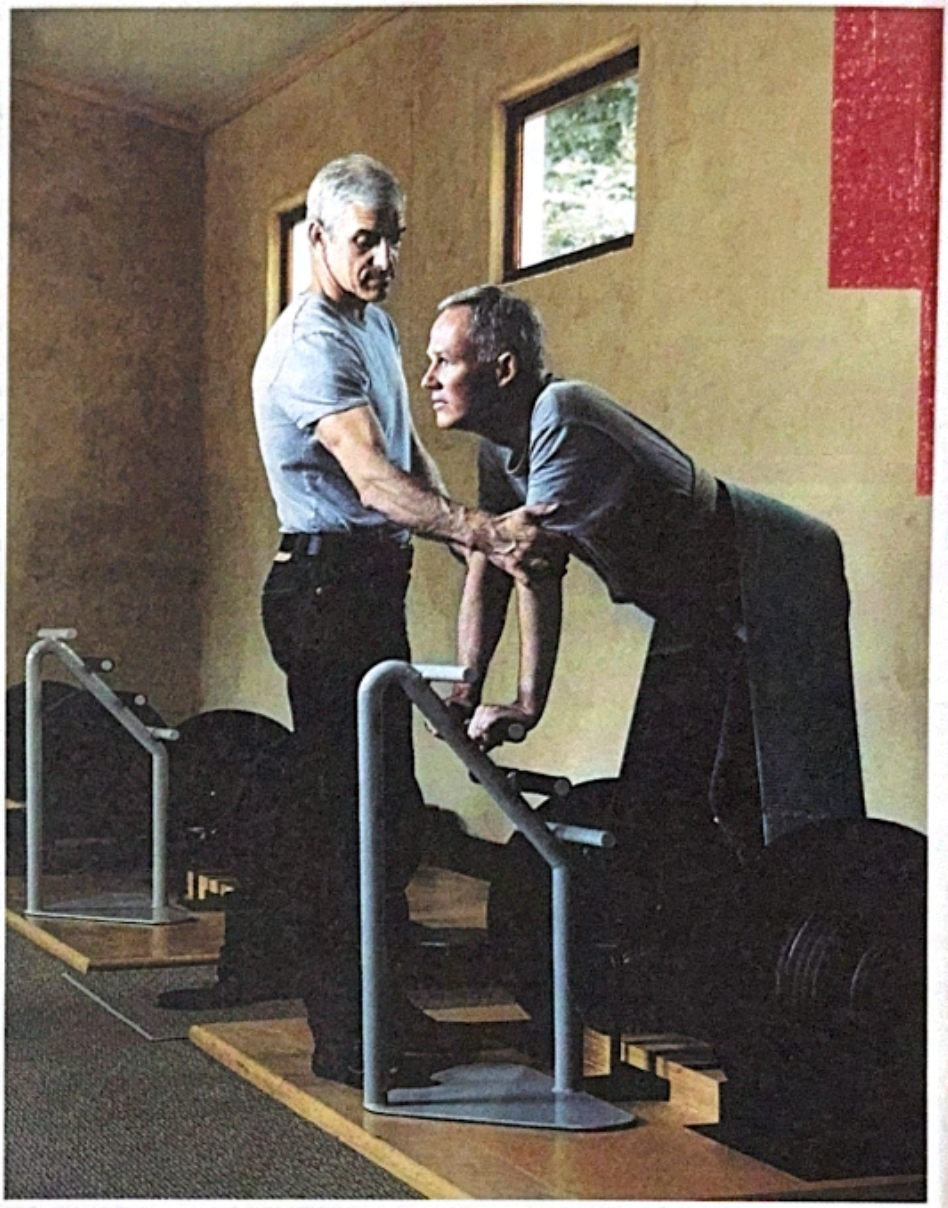
The amount of weight lifted, while astonishing, is not as important as the health benefits that have been reported: increased bone density, improved hormonal levels, increased strength, improved immune system, improved posture, improvements in disease states for fibromyalgia and carpal tunnel, plus feelings of enhanced energy and confidence ...

Sincerely,
Vladimir Chubinsky

He never heard back from her, either.

WHAT IS a miracle?

A husband and wife leave the Soviet Union in 1989. With help from a Jewish charity, they move to Atlanta with their 3-month-old daughter. They have $200, borrowed. Neither speaks much English. He has mud-green eyes and skinny legs, and she has fine raspberry hair. Their apartment is small, but they are grateful for it. They have no car. He tries to get a job cutting grass. She works every night cleaning hotel rooms. They're rarely home at the same time, and neighbors watch their girl when they're both away. At night, his head throbs like a drum and he shakes before falling asleep. He was trained as a physical therapist in Kiev, and he begs local orthopedic therapists to hire him to give massages. "I have great hands," he says. His wife believes that when he touches



A few inches feels like a few miles when the lift is 1,000 pounds.

"I SO TIRED NOW," THE RUSSIAN SAYS. "YOU GET TO POINT WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE, WHY AM I WASTING MY LIFE ON THIS?"

someone, he helps them. Finally, he begs his way into a job. He gives his massages, and hundreds of clients come back to ask specifically for him, including Tom Glavine, Ted Turner and Jane Fonda. He uses their money to build a massage practice of his own and to buy a house for his family. He buys another house and turns it into his gym.

The gym is his church, which Vladimir proudly calls the YWBI (You Will Believe It) Wellness Center. It's long and narrow, with a towering ceiling, rectangular windows and pews of stacked weights, alongside which you can usually find him, stooped, head dropped as if he's about to pray, wearing an old sweater, blue jeans and unpolished black leather shoes and hefting disks onto a bar. The black stains on his hands are from handling the weights. His eyes are red, his beard starting to grow out on his slender face. Vladimir is worshipped here. By word of mouth, they come: the sick and stricken, with chronic back pain and migraine headaches and osteoporosis. Local athletes arrive too, looking for an edge. Each is on a pilgrimage at a desperate point in his or her life.

Adair Hallman, a middle school teacher who coaches volleyball and tennis, went to see Vladimir nearly two years ago. She came with a humped back from a genetic condition called Scheuermann's kyphosis, which was slowly crushing her vertebrae. A friend told her about Vladimir and when she read about him on the Internet, she thought he was a joke. But after 16 sessions, she was lifting more than 1,000 pounds, and her torso was normal again. "I can get up in the morning now," she says. "I can hold a job. I have all this energy, and I'm so much stronger and healthier. I can just feel his presence."

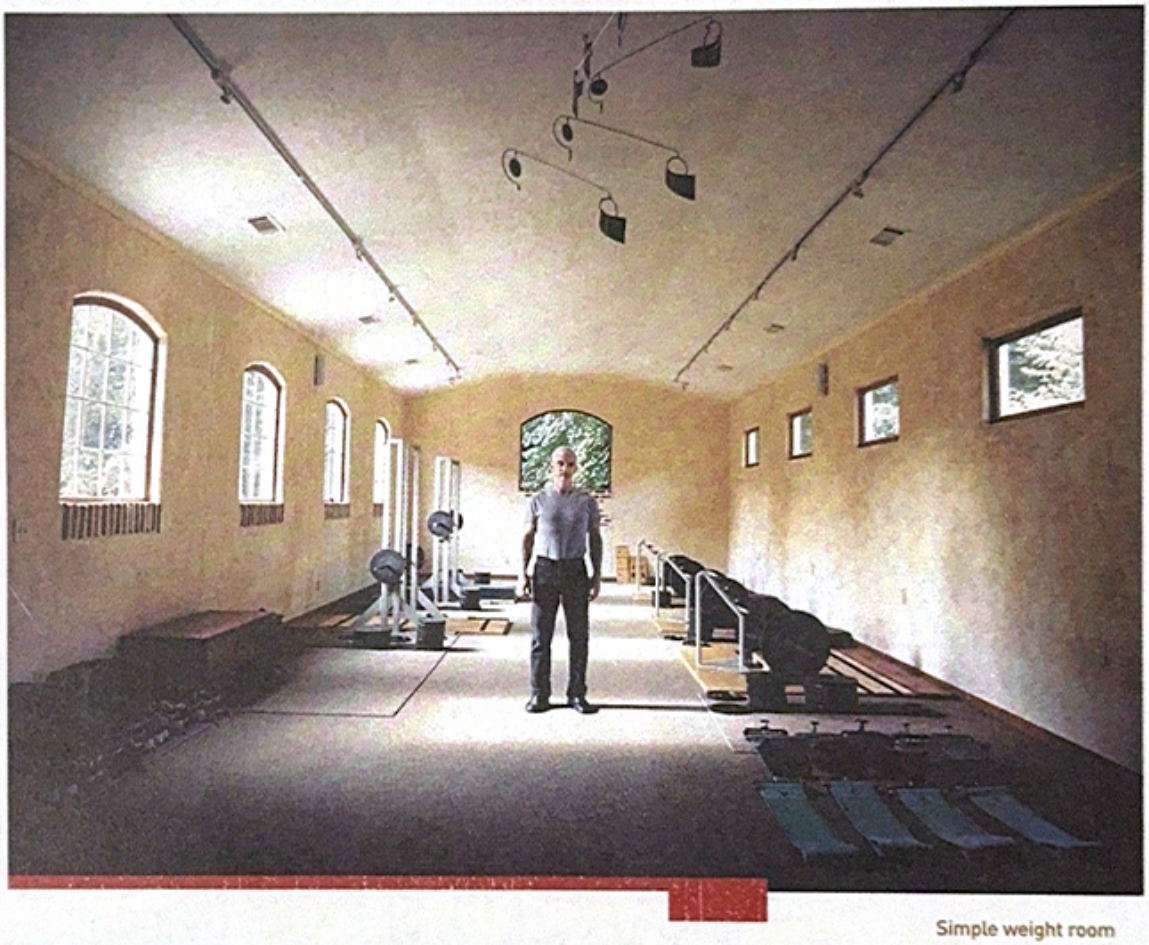
Mike Grant, told he was terminally ill with metastatic renal-cell carcinoma, went to Vladimir, and he claims the weights, coupled with surgery and faith, healed him; Robby Wynne's nerve pain disappeared from his leg; Gail Kurlansky's "nine months of living hell" are over, that dislocated disk back in place; Carole Addlestone, 60, has new energy. Dee Clement, suffering from fibromyalgia, wrote Vladimir a testimonial, which the Russian keeps in the same folder as his rejections: "I started gravitational gymnastics with Vladimir Chubinsky in April 2000 during a horrible three-month flare-up. I was desperate. Ten sessions later, not having to deal with daily pain, debilitating fatigue and legs of lead has truly been a godsend."

VLADIMIR LOVES to show a DVD of four Russian women lifting nearly 3,000 pounds each. The video is remarkable—the women, their legs lodged in boots, are no bigger than elves, yet bars larded with weight rise easily off the floor. A tiny man with short arms works with the women; he carries the weights to the bars like a crab carrying rocks from the water. He is Anatoly Samodoumov, a Russian physiologist, a self-proclaimed healer and the inventor of gravitational gymnastics. He trained Vladimir. The video alone is an effective sales pitch, but then Vladimir starts talking about how the women's "energy fields" help them to lift, and how the "power of the mind is beyond normal understanding," and, well ...

The rejections are a double affront, as though what he's offering is being dismissed as a hoax, his sole purpose for living disregarded. "No one believe!" he says. "I see this every day. I have system here, ahead of its time. Unlike anything else, ever, and no one want to listen."

That's not quite true. Scott Gillogly listened. The team physician for the Falcons and the Thrashers visited the gym in October 2003. Two Thrashers, Ilya Kovalchuk and Slava Kozlov, had trained with Vladimir. Kovalchuk claimed that after lifting more than 1,000 pounds in the Russian's gym, he gained courage and stability on the ice. Kozlov says his migraines went away, along with his fear of flying, and that there is little else to explain why he had one of his best seasons ever.

"It appears to be done very safely," says Gillogly, who tried Vladimir's system and hoisted 1,300 pounds after nine sessions. "But professional athletes are superstitious, and they're looking for that edge. If a guy is a great salesman, he can get players to do anything, wear garlic around their necks. If it sounds too good to be true, you have to question it."



Simple weight room or place of miracles? Chubinsky in his gym.

Always the questions. This past March, a former Jets running back visited the YWBI Wellness Center. When Steve Harkey lumbered up the steps of the house with the lime-green shutters at 85 Cliftwood Dr., he was accompanied by a friend who'd told him stories that sounded too good to

be true. He came to investigate the business prospects of the system for his company, Coach's Corner, which trains coaches and amateur athletes. When Vladimir saw Harkey, his voice became powered by its usual steam. "We going to do research," he told Harkey, almost shouting. "We going to make this happen, if I ever have one team or few players agree to do this with me, on contract level. Hundreds of thousands of doctors can't do this. Just look here."

Harkey sat on a wooden bench, his eyes following the weights as they moved up and down. He stayed 30 minutes, then got in his car and drove away. "I haven't done enough research to know if what he's saying is exactly happening,"

THE REJECTIONS ARE A DOUBLE AFFRONT, AS THOUGH WHAT VLADIMIR IS OFFERING IS BEING DISMISSED AS A HOAX, HIS SOLE PURPOSE FOR LIVING DISREGARDED.

Harkey says later. "It's kind of mysterious. These stories of people who have success with it—maybe people need to change their way of thinking, including me." Harkey still isn't sure if he witnessed a miracle or a mirage.

Vladimir didn't go outside to wave goodbye. "All these people, they come one time, looking to make quick money," he says. "I cannot get through these obstacles. Everyone protect they own territory. The strength coach, doctors, they think it will take away business. They think players going to play better, do less work out with them. This mean I am threat. Like distraction technology."

SEVERAL WEEKS later, on a clear May night in a suburban Atlanta mansion, Steve Lore stands to address a crowd of the well-heeled. Although he is 49, his face is unwrinkled and, as he stands beneath the chandelier, his cheeks shine like those of a little boy. He doesn't talk long. He describes how he can lift the massive weights, how Vladimir has changed his life. At the edge of the living room, the Russian holds a folder he hopes will be filled with $200,000 in commitments to fund his latest attempt at a scientific study. A Georgia Tech professor plans to test the benefits of gravitational gymnastics on bone density. It would be an important validation for Vladimir. Still, when the Russian leaves that night, his folder is empty.

But in August, Vladimir gets his miracle: checks totaling more than $200,000 arrive in the mail, donations from 10 of his longtime clients, including one check for $150,000. Yet, he finds it difficult to muster excitement.

"This country will only pay attention if I get athlete on big team to peak performance, then higher," he says. "Nobody really cares if Steve Lore get illness cured. Even if I have successful scientific evidence in my hands, they will ask to do second study, and third." He pauses, then trails off.

"Studies take years," he says. "I've already spent enough years."

Do you believe in Vladimir's miracles? E-mail us at post@espnmag.com.