

Knuckle-hop victory follows hard work

By BILL HESS
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One thought thundered in Rodney Worl's brain as he pushed his weight up from the hard, paper-covered floor and then supported it painfully upon the knuckles of his clenched fists. He had to go farther in the knuckle hop this year than he had done last. Were he to do so, he would probably take first place, become the knuckle-hop champion of the world. But it was not victory over his friends and competitors which Worl wanted most, but only over the limitations which had stopped him before.

In 1981, Worl had knuckle-hopped for a distance of 125 grueling feet, farther than any contestant who had ever participated in the World Eskimo Indian Olympics had ever gone. Yet he was awarded second place, and first was given to an opponent who had gone only 101 feet. Worl's form had been incorrect, the judges had said.

Worl concentrated hard to turn the tension he felt into a force working for instead of against him. Then, resembling a seal bounding across a rocky beach, he hopped off. Pain burst through his knuckles and hands as his weight drove them down upon the hard gymnasium floor with each hop. Worl did not think about the pain, only about his goal.

He had studied the rules closely and had practised hard enough to feel confident that his form was good. Last year he had let his knuckles turn so that his elbows were extended outward, now he kept his fists parallel to each other so that

his elbows were tucked close to his body. His form was excellent.

Soon the pain disappeared and was replaced by numbness. Worl concentrated only on surpassing his old mark. Doubts had crept into his mind, but he resolved he would not stop, no matter how painful, until he had done it.

The knuckle hop, the announcer had said, is the most demanding, grueling sport in the Olympics; along with the ear weight. Before graduating from Humboldt State in Arcata, California, Worl had worked out regularly as a member of the school's wrestling team. Earlier, while attending Barrow High School, Worl had been the wrestling champ of Region Three. He was also the champion of the Arctic Winter Games.

In California, he had learned how to get the most out of weight lifting from the experts at Jon's Gym, and so returned to Alaska in great shape. Three weeks before the Olympics, Worl began a training regime which likely was surpassed by no athlete.

Every other day, he had run for approximately eight miles and did 200 push-ups. The days in between, he spent five hours each at the Alaska Athletic Club, pumping iron, striving to develop all the muscles in his body.

Worl can bench press 393 pounds, not bad for a little guy who stands no more than five feet six and weighs only 150 pounds, but Worl was not as interested in seeing how much he could put up as much as he was in building up strength and stamina.

On a typical bench press

routine, Worl would begin his workout by pushing 155 pounds up ten times. Then he would increase the weight to 255 pounds, and lift this 10 to 15 times. Next, he would cut the weight back ten pounds for another series of repetitions, then keep cutting back ten pounds until he was back to 155. Altogether, Worl would do about 20 sets of 10-15 repetitions each.

Then he would follow similar routines with exercises designed to build up leg, back, neck, abdomen and all the other muscles of his body.

The work seemed to be paying off as Worl reached the first turn. Most of those who had tried had not made it this far, and Worl obviously had considerable distance left in him. Suddenly, he became confused, and started his turn too early. Quickly, the judges set him right, but he had lost several feet. Perhaps even more critically, the momentum which he had built up had been broken.

Rodney pulled his mind and muscles back together. What was it that his mother Rosita had told him earlier, when his confidence had weakened? "You're going to make it! You're going to make it!" By now, some of the skin covering Worl's knuckles had broken, letting the blood out. Again, he riveted his mind on his goal, and hopped on. He had to break that 125 feet!

Some watching this competitor doing so well in an Eskimo sport probably did not realize that he was Tlingit, but had become interested in Eskimo heritage and culture during his years in Barrow. The knuckle hop had particularly



Rodney Worl knuckle-hops for a new world's record.

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

interested him.

Only a couple of other competitors had made it around the second turn, and the crowd screamed its excitement when Worl did. In practice sessions, Worl had pushed himself to the max, and had never gone over 85 feet. He had been wearing gloves then, and worked on a rug. He knew he could go further on a gymnasium floor where there was less friction and more spring, but 125 feet? Why had he gone so far last year?

Somewhere about this time,

Worl's chest pectoral muscles and his triceps, the most important in the knuckle hop, began to give out. Now, he shifted more of the burden to his back and leg muscles, a technique which he had observed other competitors using in the past, and which his extensive weight training now allowed him to use to the greatest advantage.

The photographers were battling each other as they scurried down the track in front of Worl, getting in each others' way and worrying the judges that they might disturb Worl's concentration.

But Worl did not see them; he was unaware of their presence: all Worl could see was Judge Roger Kuniyak, kneeling on the floor, pounding the 125 foot mark; encouraging him on. Worl had not expected this. It was most appreciated. He hopped past Roger, and the crowd erupted in a cheer which only grew louder with each hop.

Then Worl hit the third turn — no one had ever made it to the third turn — he rounded the corner, and there collapsed. He was the world champion. He had gone 127 feet and broken the world's record, legally, with proper form. But that wasn't what was most important.

"As time goes on, these games are going to get more and more competitive," Worl mused later. "Some young guy will come along and beat my record." Most importantly, Worl had outdone himself, had smashed old barriers.

Now, he is already planning on what to do next year. "I'll scout the course out better beforehand," he explains, so he won't make any wrong turns.



After breaking the record, Worl, who trained hard for his victory, collapses on the floor.