

# Sports Sunday

Section **8**

## Runner Is Thrilled to See Potholes as Well as His Competitors

By IRA BERKOW

In marathons in Russia, Mischa Gorbunov had been known to run into people. Run head-on into them.

"Hey!" an angry runner would say, turning around after being bumped or having his heels stepped on. "Are you blind? Didn't you see me here?"

"No," Gorbunov would say, embarrassed, "I didn't see you. I'm sorry."

And yes, he was blind.

Some runners, seeing that Gorbunov was sightless and running alone, would apologize. "Others," recalled Gorbunov recently, "swore at me and kept running."

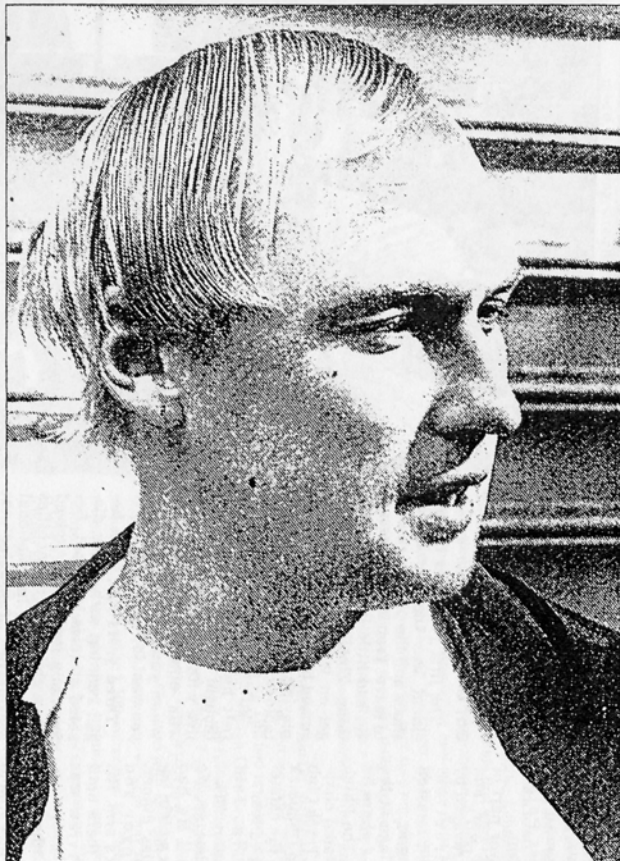
Gorbunov, in town to run in today's New York City Marathon, most likely won't be running into anyone in the field now. All because of a strange and dramatic development.

In the 1992 race, he completed the course with a volunteer alongside him. But it was another volunteer, Dr. Morris Hartstein, an ophthalmologist from New York University, who helped Gorbunov get something he had never had: usable vision.

At the suggestion of Dick Traum, a one-legged runner who is president of the Achilles Track Club of New York, Hartstein examined about 20 blind runners after the 1992 race.

Traum wondered about the quality of medical care received by Gorbunov and some of the other blind runners from Eastern European or third world countries and whether these runners might benefit from an examination here.

It turned out only one of them had a chance to be helped. That was Gorbunov, then 32 years old, who



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Mischa Gorbunov now wears a pair of contact lenses that have given him usable vision. He will run in today's New York City Marathon.

needed special lenses to correct congenital cataracts. Previous surgery, at ages 6 and 16, had proved ineffective.

Gorbunov, 6 feet tall, blond and lean, was legally blind, which, in his case, meant that he had possibly 5 percent or less sight and was able to make out little more than light perceptions.

The reason he did not run with anyone in races in Russia was because he was not totally blind. "They give the volunteers to the others who can't see anything at all," said Gorbunov. "There aren't enough volunteers for everybody."

He did not have quite enough vision, in fact, to avoid being hit by a car while crossing a street at night near his home in St. Petersburg. As one of the world's best blind runners (he usually runs the course in less than three hours), president of the Achilles Track Club in St. Petersburg and one who had run in the New York City Marathon once before and loved the atmosphere of it, especially the cheering crowds, he wasn't about to let a broken leg keep him from participating as planned in the 1992 race. While he was unable to run, he was able to walk, and covered the 26.2-mile course in 6 hours 41 minutes.

In Russia, he had been fitted with glasses that helped, but they jiggled when he walked or ran, fogged up and allowed him virtually no peripheral vision. He was hardly any better off.

So he ran, he said, with his nose, more or less smelling the other runners. He laughed when he said this. "In Russia," he said, "we have a

saying, 'In every joke there is a little joke.'"

But Traum thought there was hope that one day Gorbunov might also run with his eyes. Hartstein referred Gorbunov to Dr. Kenneth Scherick, an optometrist who has an office on Second Avenue. Gorbunov was able to delay his flight back to Russia for a few days.

On the Thursday after the '92 marathon, Gorbunov and Traum, along with a translator, paid a visit to Scherick's office to be fitted for a pair of contact lenses.

Gorbunov arrived in a blue-and-yellow running outfit and gray run-

---

A Russian can now navigate the course with new vision.

---

ning shoes. One arm was nestled for guidance in the crook of his translator's arm.

Scherick asked Gorbunov to read the eye chart.

Gorbunov said he could not see the chart.

Scherick fiddled with some mechanisms. After a few more attempts, Gorbunov was able to read the big letters.

Scherick said he could fit Gorbunov for the lenses by measuring his cornea. The lenses could be rushed through in a day.

Scherick gave him one pair of

lenses to wear for one night to see whether he was comfortable with them. He was shown how to remove them if they gave him pain.

He was told to come back to the doctor's office on the next morning. If the lenses were acceptable, he still would have to consult a doctor in Russia for further care and examinations.

When Gorbunov came into the office the next day, Scherick greeted him.

"Well," he asked, "how did it go?"

"I couldn't sleep," said Gorbunov.

"The lenses irritated your eyes?"

"No," said Gorbunov, "I was so anxious to get up in the morning light to see if I could see anything."

"Did you?"

"It was a miracle! Everything was brighter. I went to a grocery store and I could make out a Snickers bar from the shelf. And I could see oranges and bananas — and pineapples."

He smiled and said: "But in Russia even when you have 100 percent vision you can't see pineapples."

So, in the 1993 New York City Marathon, for the first time he could look and see the throngs of spectators. "I never before saw the expressions on people's faces," he said, "the excitement." He was taken by the wide range of nationalities among the crowd, and the colors of the changing leaves on the trees. And something else.

"I could see the ruts on the street," he said, "and didn't have to step in them."

And today, Gorbunov will again be running without help.

"It's wonderful," said Gorbunov. "I'm able to run in a race and not have anyone swear at me."