

The Passions of Lithuanian Basketball  
A talk to the MVSC annual banquet  
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When Lithuania recently finished second in the World Basketball Championship, losing to the United States in the championship game, a prominent visitor to Lithuania could not understand why the Lithuanians celebrated the final result so enthusiastically. Who celebrates finishing second in a competition? And Why?

The answer lies in the fact that Lithuania looks at basketball *seriously*. Although Lithuania has never won the Olympic gold medal, players of Lithuanian origin have captained three gold medal teams. I once asked Algirdas Brazauskas, then president of Lithuania, for his opinion of the significance of Lithuania's at that time finishing second in the European basketball championship. Brazauskas declared that Lithuania was a small country. (And it is getting smaller; new calculations now suggest that today it has fewer than 3,000,000 inhabitants.) As a small country, Brazauskas continued, it has only limited opportunities to be noticed favorably on the world stage – basketball gives Lithuania such an opportunity.

Some have joked that basketball is Lithuania's second religion. This is an interesting idea, because basketball actually has religious roots, and for just that reason Lithuanians were slow to accept it. Basketball grew out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of "muscular Christianity," a sound body braced by Christian principles. One part of this movement was the YMCA, the Young Men's Christian Association, which sponsored sports so as to attract young men and then present them with Christian teachings. It was at the YMCA's Springfield College, in Massachusetts, that James Naismith, a Canadian, invented the sport of basketball. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the YMCA, now an international organization, used basketball as a come-on for proselytizing young people throughout the world.

The godfather of basketball in Lithuania was Steponas Darius, the pilot, who tried to introduce both basketball and baseball. (He was a military man, not a missionary.) Baseball simply did not take root. On the other hand, just a month ago, on April 23, 2011, Lithuania observed the 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its first basketball game, played in Birzai. (Darius played in that game.) One might presume from the surrounding publicity that basketball developed unimpeded thereafter. It did not: The Lithuanian Catholic clergy did not approve of its YMCA connections, and the sport languished.

1935 marked the turning point in Lithuanian basketball. In January, the Latvian national team, which subsequently won the European championship, beat the Lithuanians 123-10. Later in the year, a team of Chicago Lithuanians came to Kaunas for a world Lithuanian congress and defeated all opponents, beating a team of Kaunas all-stars 36-5. (Ed "Moose" Krause/Kriauciunas of Notre Dame fame was one of the Americans.) The sport immediately became more popular. Two or three

Americans stayed on to coach the Lithuanians, and in 1936 the Lithuanians showed improvement against the Latvians, losing by only 31-10.

Basketball became an Olympic sport at the Berlin Games in 1936. The Lithuanians did not participate, but the captain of the American team, which won the gold, was an American Lithuanian, Frank Lubin, or Pranas Lubinas, who played in the Hollywood movie studios' league. (Frank was known in Hollywood as Frankenstein Lubin, because his coach, Jack Pierce, the makeup man for the first Frankenstein movie, would dress Lubin, 6 feet, 6 and 5/8 inches tall, in a Frankenstein costume to mingle with the fans before the games.) After the Berlin Games, Lubin traveled to Lithuania and helped develop Lithuanian basketball.

In 1937, the Lithuanians sent a team to the European championship in Riga, and with three Chicago Lithuanians on the court, they won the title and the right to host the competition in 1939.

In 1938-1939 the foreign policy of the Lithuanian regime was suffering one defeat after another, and the Smetona government decided to spare no expense in hosting the 1939 championship. It spent 400,000 Lits to build a new sports hall in Kaunas that could seat 3600 spectators and crowd in another 7000 standees. (The stadium just this week hosted its last event when Kaunas Zalgiris crushed Vilnius Lietuvos Rytas for the men's basketball championship.) By 1939 basketball had already become an icon of national honor with Lubin and other American Lithuanians playing on the national team.

There was, to be sure, controversy. Latvians and Estonians protested the Lithuanians' use of émigrés. The Lithuanians, while claiming that anyone of Lithuanian origin had the right to play for the national team, allegedly produced a document recording Lubin's birth in Lithuania. In 1984 I asked Frank where he was born; he responded "America." The Latvians and Estonians, moreover, both demanded that no one over 6 feet 4 should be allowed to play. When I asked about this, Lubin declared that he had never heard of this controversy.

The key game in the 1939 championship was Lithuania's opener against Latvia. The Lithuanians won it on a last second goal by Lubin. The Latvians claimed the Lithuanians had cheated on time. Saliamonas Vaintraubas, a well-known sports journalist who was present at the game, told me that the official timer had used a chess clock, and it was quite possible that there was an "error." After the Lithuanians had then repeated as European champions, the Latvians, reiterating their protests, broke off all sports relations with Lithuania, claiming among other things that the fans in Kaunas had been rude to the Latvian athletes.

The Soviet invasion of the Baltic republics in 1940 buried such controversies, and after World War II, Baltic basketball players competed on behalf of the Soviet Union. When the Soviets won the European championship in 1949, there were three Lithuanians on the Soviet team.

In the 1960s, another group of American-Lithuanians visited Lithuania to play basketball. This was a controversial act because émigré organizations opposed any contacts with official Soviet Lithuania. Nevertheless, with clearance from the American government, the group went, and with this began a remarkable program of smuggling books into Lithuania. In 1993, at the first session of Santara-Sviesa in Lithuania, which I chaired, a number of Lithuanian writers spoke warmly of the impact of the basketball adventure and of the succeeding smuggling program.

In Soviet times, the Lithuanians constituted a major presence in Soviet basketball, usually having two teams in the 12-team Soviet major league (this with but one percent of the country's population). A Lithuanian, Modestas Paulauskas, captained the Soviet team that won the disputed Olympic title in Munich in 1972, and another, Valdemaras Chomicius, captained the Soviet team that took the gold in the Seoul Games in 1988. In turn, basketball provided a unique focus for Lithuanian national feeling under Soviet rule. When I was in Lithuania in 1988, I was struck by the fact that while men overwhelmingly predominated at football games and young women predominated in theater audiences, at basketball games male and female fans were roughly equal in number.

In the 1980s, Lithuanian basketball came into its golden age, as Arvydas Sabonis, Sarunas Marciulionis, Rimas Kurtinaitis, and Chomicius all played at a world-class level. Zalgiris-Kaunas won the Soviet national championship in three consecutive seasons, 1985 to 1987, before Sabonis tore his Achilles heel. Helped by Ted Turner, the American billionaire and former husband of Jane Fonda, Sabonis came to the US for rehabilitation with the Portland Trailblazers, and in 1988 he was able to play for the USSR in the Seoul Olympic Games. I was in Lithuania during these Games, and one morning a phone call awakened me: A friend reported, "The Lithuanians beat the Americans in Seoul." At one point all four Lithuanians had been on the floor at the same time.

Eventually Sabonis and Marciulionis played in the NBA. Chomicius and Kurtinaitis did not play in the NBA, but I would note that they are now both coaches in the Russian major basketball league.

The way Sabonis and Marciulionis made their journeys to America is interesting. After the Seoul Games, NBA teams were interested in both players. But there was the obvious question: Who gets what? Moscow wanted to control the exodus of Soviet athletes seeking fortunes abroad, but the Lithuanians wanted their share. Also, Olympic basketball was still officially "amateur"; Soviet officials did not want to drain their Olympic talent. Only in April 1989 did FIBA, the international basketball association, declare that professionals could play in the Olympic Games. Therefore, in the winter of 1988-1989 both Sabonis and Marciulionis remained in Lithuania.

In the fall of 1988, the head of the Zalgiris sports organization in Vilnius asked me to contact the Trailblazers, who had been negotiating with Sabonis, and the Atlanta Hawks, who had drafted Marciulionis, explaining the Lithuanians' concerns.

Stan Kasten of the Hawks informed me that his team had its own channels. Ted Turner had sunk considerable support into Soviet basketball, helping them prepare for the '88 Olympics, and the Hawks were sure that Moscow would deliver Marciulionis to them. But for reasons too complicated to explain here, the Golden State Warriors entered the picture, and Donnie Nelson, the son of Don Nelson, went to Lithuania where, as he later told me, he sat in Sarunas's living room and asked him every day whether he was ready to come to San Francisco. The Hawks expected to deal with Moscow; Donnie appealed directly to the Lithuanians.

In the summer of 1989 Sarunas became the first former Soviet player in the NBA when he signed with Golden State, and using a tactic developed by the chess champion Gary Kasparov, he stashed his money in a German bank, out of Moscow's reach. Sarunas, I want to note, is the only world-class basketball player who has ever taken and used my advice. In the fall of 1988 we had occasion to talk at length during the Sajudis constitutional convention. Because I was upset when *The Wisconsin State Journal* had insisted on writing his name as an English transliteration of the Russian transliteration of the original Lithuanian (i.e., Marchulenis), I advised him to insist on the proper spelling of his name when he signed a pro contract. In the summer of 1989, when he signed, I was in Palo Alto, and I read in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that Sarunas had made a special point of how his name was to be written.

Sister Cities had a certain involvement in my further experiences in this area. When Sarunas joined Golden State, the Warriors as a team were owned by a consortium headed by a man living in Janesville. Part of the consortium was Dan Neviasser, a Madison realtor who came to a couple of Sister Cities meetings in the early days, and Dan got me credentials to go to Milwaukee as a journalist to cover Golden State's appearance there. The Bucks seated me at the press table as a member of the Golden State delegation. I felt a tingle as the loudspeaker introduced, "*At guard, from Lithuania, Sarunas Marciulionis.*"

Sabonis was a different story. In 1989 he chose to play in Spain, not Portland. Portland was shocked. Harry Glickman, then the President of the Trailblazers, told me that they had had a deal, and that Sabonis had reneged. Only several years later did he come to play for the Trailblazers, and belatedly he said that he wished he had come earlier.

The presence of the two Lithuanians in the NBA then influenced the NBA to notice me. In the fall of Sabonis's first season with the Trailblazers, the NBA asked me to write an article on him for one of its publications. I naturally agreed, and for

this purpose I had to attend Trailblazers' games in Chicago (against Michael Jordan) and Milwaukee.

All work should be such fun. In Chicago I asked Phil Jackson, then the Chicago coach his thoughts about Lithuanian basketball. (P. J. Carlissimo, the Portland coach, had just given me an extensive interview.) Phil said he knew nothing about Lithuanian basketball, but he began talking about an Estonian and a Latvian with whom he had played. Then he asked me the relationship between the Estonian and Russian languages. My father was a specialist in Indo-European linguistics, and off I went. Ever since, I have been a devoted Phil Jackson fan. Needless to say, I enjoyed my brief career in the NBA.

Both Sabonis and Marciulionis had notable NBA careers, and upon retirement they both returned to Lithuania and founded basketball schools, Sarunas in Vilnius and Arvydas in Kaunas.

And after my NBA experience, I received another strong serving of the Lithuanian enthusiasm for basketball when I next went to Lithuania. I had to give interviews on the topic of my talks with Sabonis and Marciulionis, and at a meeting of the Academy of Sciences academicians, I spent considerable time answering their questions on the same subject. Lithuanians are passionate about the sport.

In August-September of this year, Lithuania will again host the European basketball championship, this time in a new stadium in Kaunas. Tickets officially costing 89 Lits and more are already selling at more than 10 times face value. But I had better quit here. I have struggled to keep this talk fairly short, and in recent years I have not had much contact with Lithuanian basketball. As a fill in speaker, I just wanted to give you a sense of this particular facet of Lithuanian national feeling. When Lithuanians play basketball, there is a lot of history packed into the atmosphere.

Aciu uz demesi; Thank you for your attention.

Professor Emeritus Alfred Senn.