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# The Motherland, the Godfather, and the Birth of a Basketball Dynasty: American Efforts to Promote Basketball in Lithuania

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## **The Motherland, the Godfather, and the Birth of a Basketball Dynasty: American Efforts to Promote Basketball in Lithuania**

The opening game of the 1939 European Basketball Championship (Eurobasket) tournament stands as a shining moment in Lithuanian history. The host Lithuanian team defeated its archrival and geographic neighbour, Latvia, 37-36. The game added to the animosity that had developed through basketball between the former Russian territories. Latvia complained of poor Lithuanian fan behaviour towards their team and, more importantly, that their conquerors composed an international rather than Lithuanian team. In fact, the Lithuanian squad employed five American-born players including Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and United States national team star Frank Lubin.<sup>1</sup>

While this questionable use of players technically broke International Basketball Federation (FIBA) rules, Latvia had no supporting documents proving that the players were indeed American.<sup>2</sup> FIBA, a European-based organization, received no hard evidence either – letters sent to the United States to verify birth records were in transit – and even the American players spoke Lithuanian. Lubin, a lifelong Californian, admitted that the only time he spoke English during the tournament was at the end of the Latvian game when his team trailed by one point. Lubin recalled shouting at his Lithuanian-American teammates to get him the ball so that he could score and win the game. They got him the ball and he scored the winning basket.

At 6'6", Lubin had height that few European teams at that time could match; and as an AAU All-American, he had agility and basketball skills that European teams had never before seen from a man of his size.<sup>3</sup> As the star player and coach of the 1939 Eurobasket-winning Lithuanian team, Frank Lubin helped build the infrastructure of what eventually became

Lithuania's basketball factory. In an era when basketball, an American game, took root in the 'Old World,' Lithuania continually stayed at the front of the European basketball curve.<sup>4</sup>

Americans transported basketball abroad in many different ways with varying degrees of success during the early decades of the twentieth century. The United States hosted basketball-seeking delegates from some nations, others learned from citizens returning from studies in the U.S., but most learned from Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) missionaries.

Lithuania, however, did not fit the mould. The efforts of Lubin and other Americans in Lithuania proved wildly successful and wove basketball into the fabric of Lithuanian national identity.

Indeed, Lubin and his Lithuanian-American colleagues were far more successful than YMCA missionaries in Lithuania despite the latter's success in teaching basketball to millions of people in other areas of the world. Throughout the 1930s, members of the Lithuanian community in the United States spent a great deal of time in their motherland and changed local perceptions of basketball to the point at which it became their national pastime.<sup>5</sup>

This Lithuanian model of American basketball dissemination enjoyed great durability as opposed to other methods created and licensed by either individual Americans or organizations with political or religious motives. The Lithuanian-Americans that played and coached in Lithuania not only developed interest in the sport in their ancestral homeland but also provided the groundwork for Lithuania to produce top-level talent for Soviet and independent teams throughout the Cold War and beyond.

Baltic Studies scholar Alfred Erich Senn has written prolifically on early and modern Lithuanian basketball, but American involvement and perceptions from the Lithuanian-American diaspora during the 1930s remain unexplored. The US federal government largely ignored this

extended basketball mission taken up by Lithuanian descendents but the Lithuanian-American community in the U.S. embraced early Lithuanian basketball feats and inspired future successes.<sup>6</sup>

Lithuania provides a rare and successful example of American efforts to spread basketball beyond its own borders. In almost every other case the YMCA, the federal government, or both sponsored those diffusion efforts. In Lithuania, however, a unique history unfolded. Neither the YMCA nor the U.S. government pushed basketball in the Baltic Republic. Instead, Frank Lubin and the cadre of American basketball players of Lithuanian descent that took the game to their ancestral homeland turned it from an American leisure time activity into a crucial component in the development of Lithuanian nationalism. The very success of the Lithuanian-Americans' endeavour reveals the varied contours of Americanization through basketball, shedding new light on the success of missionary agencies, government programs, and private efforts in the quest to build American sporting cultures in foreign nations.

### ***Basketball's Missionary Origins and Americanization Dynamics***

Originally invented in 1891 by an American social and religious organization, the game of basketball caught on right away. As a teacher at the Springfield (Massachusetts) YMCA College, Canadian-born James Naismith came up with a game that the school's unruly football players could enjoy indoors during the long, cold winter months. Basketball captured the hearts of the eighteen players who squared off in the first game in December 1891. Although Naismith created the game for his students, it did not remain local for very long. By the end of that first winter, people all over the northeastern United States played basketball. The *New York Times* featured the new game and its rules in 1892, documenting its existence across much of the nation.<sup>7</sup> YMCA missionaries took the game to France in 1893, and it reached China in 1894. By 1900, the YMCA had extended basketball to Japan and present-day Iran; Russia received its

introduction in 1905; and during the 1910s, graduates of Naismith's Springfield YMCA College took the game to the rest of the four corners of the earth – Central and South America, Africa, and Oceania.<sup>8</sup>

Historian Maarten Van Bottenburg argues that the specific contexts through which sports developed differed between countries, and this either fostered or resisted growth. Basketball is no exception to this theory. France, for example, sent physical educators to the U.S. to learn the game, but brought it back to a nation that was less than eager to embrace American culture. Many Eastern European nations learned the game as a new wave of students returned from semesters at American universities. The social context through which basketball grew in Lithuania was unique; indeed, it differed from those of even the country's closest neighbours Russia, Latvia, and Estonia.<sup>9</sup>

In most nations, the YMCA helped shape the social contexts as it spent more time and energy disseminating basketball across the globe than any other organization in the early decades of the game's existence. Indeed, it is no coincidence that a YMCA instructor invented the game. As a missionary organization, the YMCA aimed to spread Protestant Christianity across the world by giving young men physical activities in which they could participate that would keep them from succumbing to the 'devil's' distractions. Accordingly, the YMCA sent Springfield College graduates out to the world armed with Bibles and sporting equipment, charging its missionaries with using sports to Christianize the masses. Basketball became a great export from this progressive social organization, as Springfield graduates eagerly spread the new basket game across the globe and into various social contexts.<sup>10</sup>

Following Van Bottenburg's ideas, the YMCA presented basketball to countries all over the world with varying degrees of success that can only be explained by a theory as broad and

generalized as his. Indeed, what theory other than one based on independent and specific social context can explain that the YMCA had success with basketball in the Philippines but failure in Japan; that Australia caught on but neighbouring New Zealand did not; and that European nations found themselves littered inexplicably all over the spectrum of early basketball popularity depending on any number of factors?<sup>11</sup>

Lithuania happened to be ripe for basketball when hoops entered its borders. As a young independent nation, Lithuania sought international recognition and received it as the Lithuanian basketball team starred on the European stage in the late 1930s. This success solidified basketball at the centre of Lithuanian national identity.

### ***The Great War and the YMCA-Federal Government Partnership***

During the Great War Americans augmented their attempts to spread their culture through sport. When the United States entered the war in 1917 they sent millions of men to Europe. The military commanders hired the YMCA to join the American soldiers in order to boost the morale of U.S. troops and to spread American pastimes to war-torn Europe. Sport and athletic competitions became especially popular among the soldiers as they chose to spend time on the playing fields when they were not on the battlefields.<sup>12</sup>

YMCA missionaries in Europe during the Great War largely spent their time using sports as diversionary tactics to keep men out of brothels and bars. As the fighting stopped in late 1918 and the soldiers enjoyed more down time, the YMCA's distractions became more important than ever. The men that had grown so accustomed to intense training exercises and daily competitive combat needed to find an outlet for their physical energies. Elwood Brown, YMCA director of physical activity in France at the time, developed the Inter-Allied Games – an Olympic-like sporting festival for the soldiers of the Allied forces. Of the 29 nations with troops in France, 18

accepted the invitation to Brown's games and entered contestants. Modelled on the Olympic Games, the Inter-Allied Games encouraged participation and spectatorship along with competition so that great masses of soldiers could enjoy (and be distracted by) the events.<sup>13</sup>

The YMCA closely monitored the sporting interest of American Expeditionary Forces in France during the first half of 1919 to determine the events of the mid-summer games. Brown and his committee of Americans governing the international competitions decided on eighteen sports that supposedly did not over-represent the sporting interests of any particular nation. Predictably, two of America's 'Big Three' – baseball, basketball, and American football – made the cut. Baseball and basketball became medal sports but American football did not. None of these three, however, drew much international participation. The American baseball team defeated the only other entrant, Canada, in three out of four games for the top award. The American basketball team easily defeated its only two competitors, France and Italy, to also claim the top spot. Clearly, Europeans showed less willingness than Americans to participate in basketball.<sup>14</sup>

However, the Inter-Allied Games revitalized the efforts of Americans to promote basketball in Europe. Despite a 55-17 victory over runner-up Italy and a 93-8 win over France in which American reports explained that 'the French players were helpless and seldom had the ball', spectators and participants alike curiously seemed to take the American drubbings as encouragement. Instead of writing the hoops game off as parochially American, France and Italy became the European leaders in basketball into the mid-1930s.<sup>15</sup> Even the nations without basketball teams received a taste of hoops as large crowds gathered at the new Pershing Stadium in Paris to watch the high calibre soldiers-turned-athletes. No Eastern European nation participated in basketball at the Inter-Allied Games but all four of the region's representatives at

the games – Czechoslovakia, Greece, Romania, and Serbia – claim 1919 as a cornerstone year in their development of basketball.<sup>16</sup> Further, Latvia and Lithuania, the Eastern European nations that would eventually usurp the title of European basketball leaders from France and Italy by the late 1930s, gained independence from Russia the same year the U.S. government and the YMCA staged the Inter-Allied Games. Over the next two decades these two Baltic States became basketball powers before the Soviets re-conquered them in 1940 at the outset of the Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Federal Programs to Push Basketball and Other Sports as Americanizing Agents***

In the wake of the Great War and the Inter-Allied Games the American sporting push resumed. Both the YMCA and the U.S. government continued their quest to remake the world in an American fashion through basketball and other sports. Historian Mark Dyreson proclaims that through their early successes at the Olympics, Americans showed an attitude of ‘exceptionalism’ – that is, Americans thought that since they showed the greatest sporting prowess they had a right to use sport as a technology to change the world. This sense of exceptionalism extended far beyond sport. Indeed, it served and continues to serve as one of the cornerstones of American political ideology. Dyreson notes that during the 1920s the American government took political and financial interest in exporting sports to foreign markets. The federal government sent messages to its embassies across the globe inquiring about the interest in American sports and the marketability of those sports and their equipment. When the U.S. State and U.S. Commerce Departments asked about sporting interests, they were, of course, most interested in the ‘Big Three.’ Dyreson argues that the government discovered that the ‘Big Three’ generally suffered from a severe lack of interest abroad, inhibiting but certainly not destroying American attempts at cultural imperialism through sport.<sup>18</sup>



In some ways, the United States followed Great Britain's lead in using sport as an assimilating agent for its colonies and dominions. Throughout the nineteenth century, the British sent its 'Big Three' – cricket, rugby, and Association football – to the far reaches of its global empire and beyond. The British used sport as one among many tools geared toward maintaining hegemony over their colonies through sport. As the West Indian historian C.L.R. James implies in his monograph, *Beyond a Boundary*, affection for the game of cricket made him, as a black Trinidadian native, an Anglophile before he even knew what that meant. In that sense, sport had a profoundly powerful ability to shape culture.<sup>19</sup>

American observers watched this British use of sport for imperial purposes with envy and wanted to see American sport influence culture as well. As an emerging world superpower, the US sought to flex its cultural muscles. Yet its empire was considerably smaller than that of the British and its imperial efforts emerged in a more modern era, characteristics that resisted the flow of American culture. The YMCA did all it could to spread American sports but it had more of a religious and social rather than political agenda. The YMCA sent missionaries to nations all throughout the world to use sports such as basketball to Christianize and Americanize the masses while the British used their educational systems and overseas trade links. British colonizers brought British sport to British colonies that had no modern sport to begin with, while the YMCA brought American sport under the auspices of religion to mostly non-American lands that had very little sport but plenty of religion already. Obviously, the United States could not simply mimic Great Britain.

### ***Prolegomena to Lubin***

The new Baltic Republics would prove an exception when it came to an appetite for the American cultural export of basketball. Latvia, the middle of the three Baltic States, along with

its northern neighbour Estonia, learned the game before World War I from YMCA missionaries.<sup>20</sup> Once liberated, Latvia took ownership of the game and became a founding member of FIBA in 1932.<sup>21</sup> Lithuania, the southernmost Baltic State, did not receive early basketball blessings from the YMCA. A largely Jewish and Catholic state in the early twentieth century, Catholic administrators who then dominated the government denied YMCA missionaries entrance into the country. Nevertheless, the game reached Lithuania a few years after it arrived in Latvia. Lithuanian-American Steponas Darius has received most of the popular historical credit for introducing basketball to his homeland.<sup>22</sup>

Darius was born in Lithuania in 1896, moved to America at the age of eight, served in the American Expeditionary Forces as a pilot during the Great War. Afterwards, he served in the Lithuanian Air Force. He died in a 1933 plane crash while attempting to make the longest transatlantic flight in history—transforming himself into a Lithuanian national icon. His two-passenger airplane plummeted to the ground in Germany en route from New York City to what was then the Lithuanian capital of Kaunas. As an avid sportsman, Darius spent a great deal of his leisure time organizing and playing basketball, soccer, and hockey. Through Darius' efforts, sports became popular enough that Lithuania built a national stadium to host its sporting events.<sup>23</sup>

The new stadium, modest even by contemporary standards, failed to immediately stimulate public interest in basketball. Initially, the newly independent Lithuanians showed little interest in basketball. Soccer became their passionate pastime and remained the national favourite into the 1930s despite the Lithuanians' limited success in their few international contests.<sup>24</sup> Lithuanian elite athletes did not fare much better in the Olympics. In 1924, the Baltic State sent a soccer team and four cyclists to Paris. In the 1928 Amsterdam summer and St.

Moritz winter Games they sent five track athletes, two boxers, two cyclists, a weightlifter, and a figure skater. All of Lithuania's Olympians returned home empty-handed.<sup>25</sup> By 1936, Lithuania had yet to win an Olympic medal or any international sporting event of renown. The Lithuanian Sports League did not even field an Olympic squad in the 1932 and 1936 Olympics due in part to the Great Depression and rising geo-political tensions with Poland.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Basketball Becomes an Olympic Sport***

As Lithuania struggled to field Olympic teams, the sport of basketball struggled to join the Olympic movement. In 1932 at the behest of the Swiss, basketball boosters developed an international federation, FIBA, as the first step toward Olympic recognition and international coherence.<sup>27</sup> FIBA had two western European-based sporting organizations from which it could base its model. The French-founded International Olympic Committee (IOC) began in 1894 and, although the eastern European nation of Greece hosted the IOC's first international event for symbolic reasons, the United States, Great Britain, and Western European nations dominated the events. The IOC invited non-Western nations into its governing body at an early stage to appear ecumenical, but the nexus of power and success remained firmly in between the United States in the west and Germany in the east.<sup>28</sup>

The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), soccer's international governing body, showed a broader locus of power in its early years despite the sport's clear conception in Great Britain. The British thwarted early French attempts to universally organize soccer because the British had a parochial view of themselves as the leaders and teachers of modern sport and saw no reason to include nations which they believed possessed lesser skills and experience. The British eventually obliged but not before FIFA, chartered in 1904, saw its first world champion come from South America in 1930.<sup>29</sup>

FIBA's inaugural meeting in 1932 featured a geographically diverse set of founding members from Argentina, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Latvia. Somewhat more globally aware than its predecessors from the start, the association aided two U.S.-based organizations, the AAU and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, in an effort to include basketball as an Olympic medal sport in the 1936 Berlin Games. In the lead up to the Olympics, FIBA held its first European basketball championship tournament in 1935 as a test event for the Berlin Games.<sup>30</sup> Naturally, Switzerland, FIBA's founding nation and one that has always been politically neutral, hosted the inaugural Eurobasket Championship. In a drastic increase from the 1919 American-organized Inter-Allied Games, ten nations from all over Europe came to participate in 1935. The Baltic nation of Latvia defeated Spain in the final game of the single elimination tournament.<sup>31</sup>

The year 1935 marked the point at which basketball took a stronger hold not only in Eurobasket-champion Latvia but also in neighbouring Lithuania. The impetus for the explosive growth of the game in the latter nation came not from any federal foreign policy initiative but from the private efforts of the Lithuanian immigrant community in the United States. Lithuanian-Americans fostered a very strong relationship with their former homeland.<sup>32</sup> Pockets of Americans with Lithuanian heritage settled across the Northeast, East, and Midwest and maintained strong ties to their motherland through sport. Indeed, Lithuanians living in the US aided greatly in the emerging identity of the newly independent Baltic State. Lithuanian emigrants clustered together in small towns and big cities from New York to Nebraska and fostered a strong collective character that caught on in their homeland as well. These immigrants and their children dove into American sports without forgetting about their ancestral roots.<sup>33</sup>

Basketball became a popular pastime in Lithuanian-American enclaves, where émigrés had established strong, ethnically-exclusive sports movements.<sup>34</sup> In early 1935, Lithuanian-American politician Jack Jatis of Chicago (the city with the largest Lithuanian-American population) organized a group of notable Lithuanian-American athletes to travel to the World Lithuanian Congress and participate in sporting demonstrations. These athletes, led by Notre Dame standout American football player and future athletic director Ed ‘Moose’ Krause, played in a number of exhibition basketball games. They trounced Lithuania and the soon-to-be European champion Latvia in what became the first basketball games of any prominence involving players from either of the participating Baltic countries. Three of the participating American athletes remained in Lithuania after the exhibitions to help develop basketball from the primitive version that aviator Steponas Darius brought more than a decade earlier. Each of the three Chicago-area athletes – boxer John Knasas, tennis player Joe Zukas, and basketball player Connie Savickas – helped increase the popularity of the game by coaching and playing basketball along with their other sports throughout the Baltic nation over the next year and a half. However, by the summer of 1936, one of the three coaches had returned to the United States and another died in an accident, leaving the tennis player, Zukas, as Lithuania’s only remaining American basketball coach.<sup>35</sup>

### ***The Berlin Olympics and the Lithuanian Sojourn of Frank Lubin***

In August of 1936, only months after Lithuania lost two of its three American basketball coaches, basketball made its Olympic debut in Berlin as an official medal sport.<sup>36</sup> This addition marked a great step in the sport’s international standing, as 22 nations competed for the gold medal and title of world’s best cagers. Lithuania did not enter a team, although some Lithuanians

did travel to Berlin as spectators. Coincidentally, their paths crossed with Lithuanian-American Frank Lubin, captain of the U.S. basketball team.<sup>37</sup>

Lubin and his American teammates played the entire Olympic tournament outdoors on a court made of salt, sand, and sawdust. The U.S. beat Spain, the northernmost Baltic state of Estonia, the Philippines, and Mexico before its convincing win over Canada in the gold medal game during a rainstorm that left two inches of standing water on the court. Despite the inclement weather, the outcome was never in doubt as the Americans won the gold medal game, 19-8. With Canada taking second and Mexico winning the bronze, this inaugural basketball tournament showed North American dominance. Of the eleven European teams in the bracket only Poland finished in the top six, and 1935 Eurobasket champion Latvia did not even reach the round of sixteen.<sup>38</sup>

The Lithuanian spectators at the Berlin Games took a liking to Lubin. Once the Olympic basketball tournament ended, the Lithuanians invited Lubin to visit his motherland. Accompanied by his parents, wife, sister-in-law, and his gold medal, Lubin accepted the offer and headed northeast.<sup>39</sup>

In Lithuania, what started as a three-week tour for the Lubin cohort became a three-month hiatus after Lubin's sister-in-law broke her leg during their travels. This bad luck for the Lubin family became good luck for the Lithuanians. With nothing to do but wait for the broken leg to heal, Lithuanian sport officials coaxed the American centre into putting on basketball clinics and even suiting up for games as a Lithuanian player and coach. Lubin joined the Lithuanian-American tennis player Joe Zukas, who also served as a basketball player and coach, on a Lithuanian club team that upset a Latvian team in November 1936. With this surprise victory, Lubin quickly became a star in his parents' homeland, generating increased national

interest in basketball and subsequently increasing interest in Lithuanian-American willingness to help its motherland. Lubin's three-month stay turned into an unofficial three-year period of dual citizenship, as the 6'6" post player travelled back and forth between the two countries – playing basketball both for an AAU team in Los Angeles and for Lithuanian national and club teams.<sup>40</sup>

Lubin and his family returned to the US after the upset victory over Latvia, leaving Zukas once again as the lone American basketball (and tennis) player in Lithuania. In February 1937, Zukas and the Lithuanians lost in an exhibition game to Latvia, motivating Lithuanian government officials to solicit two more American players for the impending 1937 Eurobasket tournament. Chicago-natives Frank Talzunas and Phil Krause, 'Moose's' brother and a former member of the DePaul basketball team, joined the Lithuanian side shortly before the tournament.<sup>41</sup>

Reigning European powerhouse and Lithuanian rival Latvia hosted the spring 1937 tournament, forcing competitors to make the difficult trek north along poor railroad lines that required frequent stops at Baltic hamlets. Only seven nations sent their teams to Riga, four of which enjoyed geographic proximity to Latvia. Only France and Italy, two of Europe's top teams, represented Western Europe. Egypt curiously wedged its way onto the European map and also entered a team. The host Latvians finished in sixth place, routed by their neighbour to the north, Estonia, who finished directly ahead of them. Meanwhile the host nation watched its southern neighbour surprise everyone by beating Poland (Lithuania's then-political rivals) and Italy (a team that reportedly used the services of an American player/coach) in the finals to take home the title. Lithuanians erupted with celebrations of nationalistic pride upon hearing the news of the championship, even though the Americans – defensive-specialist Krause and leading scorer Talzunas – clearly provided the talent needed for the victories.<sup>42</sup>

Lithuania's national pride from its 1937 European basketball championship took at least a small hit only a few months later as Paris hosted a basketball tournament during the World's Fair in the fall of 1937. France won the tournament, defeating Latvia by a single point in the championship game. Since Lithuania did not compete in this tournament, France's victory gave it a share of the mythical crown as Europe's best basketball team, in popular opinion. Thus the two nations set up a two-game series for bragging rights. Lithuania, with the aid of Phil Krause and two new Lithuanian-American recruits, Juozas Jurgela and Walter Budrunas, travelled to France in February of 1938 with the Lithuanian team and lost a tight matchup. Three months later, in a return match in Lithuania, the home team beat the French and evened the series.<sup>43</sup>

As 1937 Eurobasket tournament champions, Lithuania won the right to host the tournament's third instalment – an eight-team round robin style championship – in the spring of 1939. Anticipating increased competition from improved teams such as France, Italy, and Latvia, Lithuania brought Lubin in as the team's coach and star player, along with Krause, Budrunas, Jurgela, and fellow Chicagoan Mike Ruzgys, to increase its chances of victory. The opening game pitted the previous two champions, Baltic neighbours Latvia and Lithuania, in a grudge match for national pride. Lubin and his fellow Americans helped just enough, as the big Californian scored the winning basket for a 37-36 victory in front of a raucous, partisan crowd. At one point in the second half the Lithuanian squad was comprised by all five of the Americans. After the opener, the host nation coasted to its second straight title, outscoring its six subsequent opponents by 258 points. Baltic Studies scholar Alfred Senn explains that the Lithuanian fans revelled in the glory of the championship, parading the players around like heroes and using public loudspeakers to trumpet nationalistic propaganda through its basketball feats. With each



new victory after this seminal event, basketball became increasingly prominent among the factors that fertilized the sense of national identity in this young country.<sup>44</sup>

R. William Jones, secretary general of FIBA, watched Lithuania's domination of the 1939 tournament field with a growing sense that Lubin's citizenship credentials were illegitimate. Jones, who was born to an Italian mother and a British father, helped FIBA decide in the weeks before the tournament to ban American mercenaries who claimed to have dual nationality in European countries. Lubin stood out among the potential members of this group, not only because of his height, but also because he was the best player.<sup>45</sup>

Although Lithuanian officials produced a Cyrillic birth certificate stating that Pranas Lubinas (Lubin's Lithuanian name) was born in 1911 in a small farming village in Lithuania to avoid FIBA penalties, Jones had his doubts. All of the Americans playing for Lithuania spoke Lithuanian, but Jones had watched Lubin win gold as an American at the 1936 Berlin Games. Jones immediately requested a birth certificate for Lubin from the United States. Lubin's real home country provided his real birth certificate stating he was born in California, but it did not reach Jones' hands until a few weeks after Eurobasket 1939 ended – and after the onset of World War II. With Europe's descent into another world war, no one formally appealed Lubin's status in the tournament and the Lithuanian team held on to its title until the tournament resumed in 1946.<sup>46</sup>

### ***American Reactions***

From the early 1930s, Jones oversaw and had a direct impact on the growth and global organization of the increasingly popular American-born game. By the late 1930s, American periodicals proclaimed that over twenty million people played basketball around the world.<sup>47</sup> Although this estimate had no actual empirical basis, the game's founding father concurred with

its sentiments. James Naismith declared only months before his death in 1939 that a great multitude of people had fallen in love with the hoops game.<sup>48</sup>

Basketball clearly enjoyed an international status in Europe above that of America's other major sports in the late 1930s. Dyreson notes that basketball, baseball, and American football received resistance abroad during America's imperialistic sporting enterprises. He reports that the United States Department of Commerce, through consulate surveys in the early decades of the twentieth century, received information that most countries around the world had very little interest in exported American sporting equipment.<sup>49</sup> This apathy lessened only slightly in the years leading up to the Second World War. American officials in Lithuania at the time noted that Lithuania, like most European countries, produced leather goods for basketball domestically – leaving no market for Spalding or any other American sporting goods manufacturers in the geographically small and resourcefully poor Baltic nation.<sup>50</sup>

In 1930, the American Vice-Consul in Lithuania replied to a Commerce Department request in the form of a seven-page report on the status of sports in Lithuania. The detailed document explained the sporting associations in charge of Lithuanian physical culture and also the appeal of particular sports. At this point in time basketball ranked fourth in popularity behind soccer, track and field, and tennis.<sup>51</sup> By 1939, however, the intermittent presence of Lithuanian-Americans Krause, Talzunas, Ruzgys, Zukas, Budrunas, Jurgela, and superstar Lubin helped provide two Eurobasket championships, and Lithuanian officials revealed to the U.S. Secretary of State that basketball had become Lithuania's national pastime.<sup>52</sup> Outside of its commercial appeal though, the U.S. federal government had very little internal interest in basketball's rise in Lithuania even though the status change came largely from the influence of American players. Once American officials received notification in 1930 that domestically-made sporting goods

were largely unnecessary abroad, government officials turned their attention away from popularizing American sports internationally and focused their sporting interests on the ensuing Olympic Games. Once the 1939 report of basketball's prominence in Lithuania reached American shores, the world had drawn battle lines, and the war simply eclipsed all other concerns.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the American government's apathy, Lithuanian-Americans led basketball's meteoric rise in popular Lithuanian culture in the 1930s. The growth of this American game abroad provided what could have been an early avenue for American state and diplomatic (and eventually commercial) interests. With more pressing international issues, though, the United States government did not even give a second look to basketball interest in this small Baltic nation.

Individual Lithuanian-Americans played the largest role in this increased interest in Baltic basketball. Lubin, Krause, Talzunas, Ruzgys, Budrunas, Jurgela and others helped teach basketball to the Lithuanian people, and their on-court efforts inspired the next generation of Lithuanians to take up the sport. Lubin explained his efforts as culturally developed, humbly stating that 'no matter where Lithuanians are, they want to help Lithuania get established'. He also admitted, this time with less modesty, that his Lithuanian-American compatriots taught the Lithuanians a fancy, 'Globetrotter style' of basketball and that he was responsible for teaching the fundamentals that allowed the Lithuanians to subsequently flourish on the hardwood.<sup>54</sup> One Lithuanian sports official corroborated this claim by saying, 'If while [other Lithuanian-Americans were] in Lithuania our basketball players finished grade school fairly well, during Lubin's visit they hurriedly finished higher basketball school'.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, Lithuanian basketball made a big leap after ‘Moose’ Krause’s team exhibited their skills in Lithuania in 1935 and took more steps forward through the leadership of Phil Krause, tennis player Joe Zukas, and other Lithuanian-Americans. However, Lubin’s sporadic presence coincided with the lead up to the 1937 Eurobasket championship and the actual victories during the 1939 Eurobasket championship – an indication that he may have provided the greatest stimulus for the emerging nation to reach a new level of excellence. Lithuanians received a great deal of motivation as a result of his star power.

Regardless of who should receive the most credit for popularizing basketball in Lithuania, Lubin clearly hit the mark with his proclamation about the interest that Lithuanians around the world exhibited in helping each other get established. Following the 1937 Eurobasket tournament, Lithuania sent its victorious team – with Talzunas and Phil Krause – to play exhibition games against Lithuanian-Americans in Chicago, Cleveland, and New York. Although each game was competitive throughout, the Lithuanian team fell on the short end each time. Nevertheless, newspapers in Lithuania filled their sports pages during this goodwill tour with praise for Lubin and the other Lithuanian-Americans who made efforts on behalf of the basketball fortunes in their motherland. These periodicals also, and more importantly to Lithuanians, featured articles and advertisements exuding pride in the fact that their 1937 Eurobasket championship team held its own against its American compatriots during the tour.<sup>56</sup>

Lithuanian-Americans highly valued the 1937 basketball tour of the US by their brethren and reciprocated in the summer of 1938, entering the newly-formed and short-lived Lithuanian Olympics and cementing basketball at the heart of Lithuanian national identity. As a result of the camaraderie at the Lithuanian Olympics, numerous American athletes stayed in Lithuania to promote sports in their motherland. These Lithuanian-Americans saw basketball as the crown

jewel of Lithuania's emerging national identity, and they helped the game become a national obsession by the late 1930s.<sup>57</sup>

### *Epilogue*

Lubin returned to the US shortly after the onset of war in Europe, trading his lifestyle as a Lithuanian basketball hero to one of rank and file G.I. in the United States military.<sup>58</sup> The war changed everything but it could not kill the passion that Lithuanians had developed for basketball. Although Darius brought the game to the Baltic State, Lubin and his teammates sowed the seeds of basketball in Lithuania by teaching the necessary skills and by winning games that brought national pride to their ancestral homeland. The tight-knit Lithuanian-American community across the US quickly caught wind of this success and encouraged their ancestral brethren to nurture the emerging relationship with basketball until it became the centre of Lithuanian national identity. These factors constitute the specific social context for the dissemination of basketball in this particular Baltic State. While basketball gained mass followings in many other nations, the specific context through which basketball evolved in Lithuania set it apart from other nations – even its fellow basketball-loving Baltic nations.<sup>59</sup>

Although many soldiers from many nations continued playing sports while serving in the Second World War, the structure of these sports changed. In Lithuania, Josef Stalin and the Soviet regime took over in 1940 and changed the nature of the sporting culture, forcing American coaches and players to flee back home. Instead of playing basketball to promote Lithuanian patriotism, the Stalinists forced the Lithuanians to undertake sport as a means to produce better Soviet soldiers and citizens. In 1941, Hitler invaded the Soviet empire and held power over Lithuania for the next three years – a period that brought back traces of the original sport structure – but only temporarily, as the Soviets returned to power after the war.<sup>60</sup>

During the Cold War Lithuania continued its development as a basketball hotbed. Lithuanians claimed numerous roster spots on the Soviet Olympic basketball teams between 1952 and 1988 despite being the least populous Soviet state – tangible evidence of the success of the fundamental basketball structure that Lubin and others developed in Lithuania.<sup>61</sup> Americans could have trumpeted their major role in producing some of the top Soviet basketball talent during the Cold War but Cold War political tensions proved too strong and the US government encouraged a hostile stance towards everything Soviet.

The Cold War shaped post-1945 international basketball, as it shaped practically every other aspect of life in that era. Indeed, a Lithuanian played a crucial role in the most dramatic Cold War basketball confrontation between the two super powers. In 1972 Modestas Paulauskas, a Lithuanian ball handling wizard, captained the Soviet Olympic basketball team that broke American hearts by winning the USSR's first basketball gold medal in a controversial upset of the US. Sixteen years later, the 1988 Soviet gold medal team started four Lithuanians including future NBA stars Sarunas Marciulionis and Arvydas Sabonis.<sup>62</sup> After liberation in 1991, the Lithuanians freely formed a national basketball team for the first time since the Lubin-led 1939 Eurobasket champs. Marciulionis, then an NBA veteran, organized and played for his homeland in the 1992 Olympic Games. Aside from leading the team on the court in Barcelona, he also controlled the logistics of the team's operations. Marciulionis garnered American sponsors and designed the famed tie-dye warm up shirts – a lucrative deal he struck with the American band, Grateful Dead. Only the deified American 'Dream Team' stood in the way of gold for Marciulionis, Sabonis, and the Lithuanians. Lithuania lost a semi-final match to the 'Dream Team' but the 'Dead-heads' regrouped to win the bronze.<sup>63</sup>

The Lithuanians won bronze at each of the next two Olympic basketball tournaments – a remarkable feat for a nation with less than three and a half million citizens – and Marciulionis and Sabonis set off a mass-migration of Eastern European basketball stars to wealthy NBA teams. The NBA is now littered with players from all over the world – including Lithuania’s Darius Songaila, Linas Kleiza, Sarunas Jasikevicius, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas. While the legacy of Lubin and his Lithuanian-American counterparts has largely been forgotten in the United States, it remains very much alive in the Lithuania today. Lubin’s name is still in the daily Lithuanian lexicon, although its meaning has grown in dimension: ‘Lubinas’ is today synonymous with Goliath or a Leviathan.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, today’s Lithuanians understand the mark Lubin left on the game in their nation. Lubin is acknowledged as ‘the Godfather of Lithuanian Basketball’. Lubin himself referred to the players of the 1980s and 1990s as ‘students of my students’. Lubin even claimed that the post-Cold War teams played an American style of basketball that he originally taught them.<sup>65</sup>

Sarunas Marciulionis, one of the students of Lubin’s students, is now the head of all basketball in Lithuania – a powerful position. When asked why basketball is so important to his country, the former Golden State Warrior responded immediately in a tribute to Lubin and his peers by proclaiming, ‘because of its history’. In 1988, another student of Lubin’s students, 7’3” Lithuanian centre Arvydas Sabonis – then Europe’s best big man – explained after being drafted by the Portland Trailblazers that he was interested in visiting Pranas Lubinas in Los Angeles.<sup>66</sup> The two men eventually met. In Sabonis’ broken English and Lubin’s rusty Lithuanian, they exchanged pleasantries. At this short meeting, the elder imparted one more bit of American basketball knowledge on to the Lithuanian people through the giant centre. Lubin explained that

through basketball, ‘you can become a millionaire’ – a quotation that Sabonis, Marciulionis, and many other Lithuanians have since seen come to fruition.<sup>67</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lubin Oral History (1988) conducted by George A. Hodak; Senn, ‘American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball in Lithuania, 1935-1939’, pp. 146-156.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.; Rubien, *Report of the American Olympic Committee*.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on Lithuanian sport in general – and basketball in particular – remains underdeveloped. For works that address the subject, see Edelman, *Serious Fun*; Wolff, *Big Game, Small World*; and Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games*.

<sup>5</sup> The information on basketball’s diffusion throughout the world is largely based on the work done by Guttman in *Games & Empires*; Baker, *Sports in the Western World*; and Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*.

<sup>6</sup> Guttman, *Games & Empires*; Maarten Van Bottenburg, *Global Games*, is the source most heavily used for the theory on the globalization of sport.

<sup>7</sup> Naismith, ‘Basketball – A Game the World Plays’. Between text and photos in this article is a copy of the 1892 article that appeared in the *New York Times* entitled ‘A New Game of Ball: A Substitute for Football Without its Rough Features’.

<sup>8</sup> Colbeck et al., *The Basketball World*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Naismith, ‘Basketball – A Game the World Plays’; Van Bottenburg *Global Games*; Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*.

<sup>11</sup> Van Bottenburg, *Global Games*.

<sup>12</sup> Wakefield, *Playing to Win*; Pope, ‘An Army of Athletes: Playing Fields, Battlefields, and the American Military Experience, 1890-1920’.

<sup>13</sup> Wythe and Hanson, *The Inter-Allied Games*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 201-202.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Edelman, *Serious Fun*.

<sup>18</sup> Dyreson, *Crafting Patriotism*. Other scholarship regarding the place of sport in American nationalism and cultural imperialism includes but is not limited to Dyreson, *Making the American Team*; Pope, *Patriotic Games*; Gems, *The Athletic Crusade*; Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes*; and Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out*.

<sup>19</sup> James, *Beyond A Boundary*.

<sup>20</sup> Senn, ‘American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball’, pp. 146-156. While Senn makes this claim, various reports from the folder ‘YMCA work: Estonia and Latvia, 1920-1933’, Box 14, ‘YMCA International Work in Russia and the Soviet Union and with Russians: Russians: An Inventory of Its Records’, Kautz Family YMCA



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Archives, University of Minnesota Library, Minneapolis, MN (hereafter, UM) corroborate the evidence; *The Christian Democrat*, No. 145, June 15, 1939. State Department Records Division, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Lithuania, 1910-1944, Document 811.4063/4, M1178. National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD. (Hereafter, NARA II).

<sup>21</sup> Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*.

<sup>22</sup> Senn, 'American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball', pp. 146-156; Rutkis, *Latvia*. While counterintuitive, Lithuania did not have a large Orthodox Christian contingent like Russia. Religious historians believe that most Orthodox Christians left Lithuania or were converted to Catholicism in 1596 with the union of Brest-Litovsk. Concerning Darius, it is unclear whether he should receive all the credit for introducing basketball to Lithuania or not, but it is clear that Lithuanian-American World War I veterans brought sports with them when they traveled to their fatherland.

<sup>23</sup> Jasiunas, *Darius – Girenas*.

<sup>24</sup> Bertel E. Kuniholm, American Vice-Consul in Lithuania, Report regarding the Olympic Games, July 1, 1930. State Department Records Division, Record Group 59, State Department Decimal Files 811.4063 Box 5026, Document 93. NARA II.

<sup>25</sup> 'From the beginning of Olympism in Russia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia', pp. 558-560.

<sup>26</sup> Senn, 'American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball', pp. 146-156; Ivan Goodner, Special Representative of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, letter to the Visa Division, State Department Records Division, Record Group 59, State Department Decimal Files 811.4063 Box 5026, Document 93. NARA II.

<sup>27</sup> Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*.

<sup>28</sup> Young, *The Modern Olympics*.

<sup>29</sup> Galeano, *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*.

<sup>30</sup> Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> This claim is based on a perusal of State and Commerce department archives and those from the Jack Jatis Collection at the University of Illinois - Chicago.

<sup>33</sup> This claim is based on a perusal of contemporaneous Lithuanian periodicals published across the United States, such as Amerikos Lietuvis (The American Lithuanian, 1936), Naujienos (Lithuanian Daily, 1938), Darbininku Kalendorius (Worker's Almanac, 1935-1936), Susivienijimo Lietuviu Amerikoje Raportai ir Darbai (Lithuanian Alliance of America Report of Accomplishments, 1936, 1938), Sviesa (Light, 1934-1937), The Voice of Lithuanian Americans (1938), Zvaigzde (The Star, 1936).

<sup>34</sup> Stulgis, 'It's About Time', pp. 19-20; Stulgis, 'Building a Sports Movement', pp. 21-22.

<sup>35</sup> 'Playing for the Yellow, Green and Red,' (unknown newspaper), Box 18, File 6, Jack Jatis Collection, University of Illinois-Chicago Library. Chicago, IL; 'Sportininkas Jurgela Isvyko Lietuvon,' unknown newspaper, October 6, 1937, Box 18, File 6, Jack Jatis Collection, University of Illinois-Chicago Library. Chicago, IL (hereafter, UIC); Senn, 'The Jack Jatis Collection at the University of Illinois at Chicago', pp. 1-3.

<sup>36</sup> Although the United States claimed that they organized a basketball tournament at the 1904 Games, 1936 marked the first official international Olympic basketball tournament.

<sup>37</sup> Rubien, *Report of the American Olympic Committee*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Fernando Dominguez, 'Original Trail Blazer; Long Before the NBA Entered the Olympics, Lubin Helped the U.S. Strike its First Gold', *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1996, p. 8, accessed at [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com), 3 November 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Lubin Oral History (1988) conducted by George A. Hodak.

<sup>40</sup> Senn, 'American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball', pp. 146-156; Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*; James F. Tobin, Jr., 'International Basketball', in *The Official A.A.U. Basketball Guide: Amateur Athletic Union of the United States*, (Published by the A.A.U., 1938/1939), p. 48, found in the Ron Smith Collection, Special Collections, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Pattee Library and Paterno Library, Pennsylvania State University. University Park, PA (hereafter, PSU).

<sup>43</sup> Senn, 'American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball', pp. 146-156.

<sup>44</sup> Colbeck, et al., *The Basketball World*; Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid; Wolff, *Big Game, Small World*; James F. Tobin, Jr., 'Olympic Tournament At Berlin, 1936', in *The Official A.A.U. Basketball Guide: Amateur Athletic Union of the United States*, (Published by the A.A.U., 1937/1938), pp. 42-43, found in the Ron Smith Collection, Special Collections, PSU. If anyone had the power to nullify Lithuania's

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victory, it was Jones. In 1932, at the age of 26, he helped found FIBA and became its first secretary general. Although not known for his on-court hoops abilities, Jones' spoke ten languages which helped his authority over international basketball. He was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1964 and posthumously in 2007 into the FIBA Hall of Fame. Jones' brush with Lubin in 1939 may have jaded his perception of American hoops stars. Lubin's presence on the Lithuanian team bothered Jones enough that he petitioned the U.S. government for his birth certificate. Thirty-three years later, after much more American domination of international basketball, Jones used his authority as a FIBA executive to convince the referees in an IOC-governed match to add three seconds to the clock two different times at the end of the Soviet Union's controversial gold medal victory over the United States in the 1972 Olympics. After this Jones-authorized controversy, he explained that 'Americans need to learn how to lose at basketball.'

<sup>47</sup> 'Basketball: Favorite of 20,000,000'.

<sup>48</sup> Naismith, 'Basketball – A Game the World Plays', pp. 33-36.

<sup>49</sup> Dyreson, *Crafting Patriotism*.

<sup>50</sup> Kuniholm, Report regarding the Olympic Games.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard Gufler, Charge d'Affaires ad Interim, Document to the United States Secretary of State, 10 June 1939, State Department Records Division, State Department Decimal Files 811.4063/3 Box 5026, Document 474. NARA II.

<sup>53</sup> Norem, *Timeless Lithuania*.

<sup>54</sup> Lubin Oral History.

<sup>55</sup> Senn, 'American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball in Lithuania', p. 147.

<sup>56</sup> 'Lithuanian Cage Stars Begin Season Tonight', *The Southtown (Chicago) Economist*, 13 January 1938, p. 11.

Furthermore, many unknown articles including: 'Lithuania Beats Italy; Wins European Basket Tourney', 'Krepsinio Zaidimas Buvo Gyvas ir Idomus', "'All Stars" Grumsis Su Europos Cempijonais', 'Si Vakara Basketball Rungtynes Tarp Lietuvos ir Amerikos Lietuviu Cempijonu', 'Europos Cempijonai Kenoshan: Lietuvos Sportininkams Ir Sveciams Atsilankius Liepos 19 d.', and 'Europos Cempijonai', appear in Box 18, File 6 of the Jack Jatis Collection, UIC, corroborating the claim.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; Kuniholm, Report regarding the Olympic Games.

<sup>58</sup> Michael D'Antonio, 'First Dream, First Love, First Gold; In Another Time, in a Forbidding Place, a Team of Universal Studios Employees Played Its Way to the First Olympic Gold Medal in Basketball', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 August 2000, p. 18, accessed at [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com) on 3 November 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Eidintas, 'The Presidential Republic', in *Lithuania in European Politics*.

<sup>60</sup> Senn, 'The Sovietization of Lithuanian Sports, 1940-1941', pp. 73-80; Cingiene and Laskiene, 'A Revitalized Dream: Basketball and National Identity in Lithuania', pp. 762-779.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Senn, 'Perestroika and Lithuanian Basketball', pp. 56-61; Wolff, *Big Game, Small World*. In the game against the United States in Seoul, the Lithuanian members of the Soviet team scored 62 of the team's 82 total points.

<sup>63</sup> Wolff, *Big Game, Small World*.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Dominguez, 'Original Trail Blazer'; Karen Allen, 'Historic gold didn't dawn on Lubin, Biondi at first', *USA Today*, 8 May 1996, p. 12C, accessed at [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com) on 3 November 2008; Jeff Meyers, 'Recalling a Distant Dream Team Lubin Played on '36 U.S. Olympic Basketball Squad That Swept to the Gold in an Era of Far Less Glitter', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1992, p. 8, accessed at [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com) on 3 November 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Chris Baker, 'Frank Lubin, a Big Man in Two Countries Basketball: He helped U.S. win Olympic gold medal in 1936, and later introduced the sport to Lithuania, where his parents were born', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 1990, p. 2, accessed at [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com) on 3 November 2008.

<sup>67</sup> A.D. Horne, 'Gold-Medal Lithuanians Have a U.S. Godfather; 1936 U.S. Basketball Olympian Showed How', *Washington Post*, 4 October 1988, p. E6, accessed at [www.proquest.umi.com](http://www.proquest.umi.com) on 3 November 2008.

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