

# Perestroika and Lithuanian Basketball

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Lithuanian sports fans proudly speak of their land as basketball country. Of twelve Olympic basketball championships, the United States has won nine, the Soviet Union two, and Yugoslavia one, but the Lithuanians claim the captains of three of those teams—Frank Lubin (US 1936), Modestas Paulauskas (USSR 1972) and Valdemaras Chomicius (USSR 1988). In 1937 and 1939 the Lithuanians won the European basketball championship; until the building of Luzhniki in the 1950s, the Lithuanians had the only hall in the Soviet Union constructed for basketball. In the 1980s led by Arvydas Sabonis, the Zalgiris team of Kaunas won the Soviet championship three straight years, 1985-1987, and finished second in 1983, 1984, 1988, and 1989. In 1988 four Lithuanians played on the Soviet gold medal team in Seoul, and in 1989 a Lithuanian, Sarunas Marciulionis, was the first Soviet player to sign a contract in the NBA. The program had the firm support of the Lithuanian political and cultural establishment.<sup>1</sup>

Perestroika had a devastating impact on this program. In the fall of 1989, Lithuanian basketball found itself in a period of uncertainty, even a moment of crisis. Even in success, the Lithuanian basketball program had suffered economic problems. When Rimas Kurtainaitis was invited to participate in the NBA shootout in February 1989, for example, he had trouble assembling twenty-five basketballs with which to practice. The term “perestroika” itself evoked differing interpretations: over the New Year of 1989 the Lithuanians traveled in Western Europe earning hard currency, and the Soviet national coach, Yuri Selikhov, complained that they were not acting “in the spirit of perestroika” in refusing to travel with the national team.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 1989, five outstanding players went abroad—Marciulionis to the Golden State Warriors, Chomicius and Sabonis to Spain, and Rimas Kurtinaitis and Sergeius Jovaisa to Germany. The cases of Sabonis and Marciulionis, well publicized in this country, offer the best examples of perestroika’s workings.

Sabonis gained international note when he came to the United States in the fall of 1983 with a touring Soviet team. Soviet journalists insist that his matchup

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1. On the history of Lithuanian basketball, see my articles in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, “American Lithuanians and the Politics of Basketball in Lithuania, 1935-1939,” 1988 (19): 145-156, and “Lithuania’s Representative in Soviet Basketball: Zalgiris-Kaunas,” 1985 (16): 138-144.

2. See *Sovetskii sport*, January 8 and 10, 1989.

with Ralph Sampson, then playing for Virginia, may well still stand as the highpoint of his international competition. A few years later, Dale Brown, coach of LSU, won a great deal of newspaper space by insisting that Sabonis should have the opportunity to attend school in Louisiana, but Sabonis remained in Lithuania. (He was not called into the Soviet army because he was registered in the Agricultural Institute in Kaunas.) Voted several times the outstanding basketball player in Europe, Sabonis seemed a prime candidate for the NBA, and his coach, Vladas Garastas, repeatedly declared that he would like Sabonis to have the experience of playing in America.

The possibility of going abroad opened up in 1987, when Goskomsport approved the thought of selling athletes' contracts to foreign teams, of course for *vuliutu*, hard currency. Goskomsport at the time was thinking primarily of soccer and hockey players, and only of athletes over 29 years of age who presumably had already entered the downside of their careers. What basketball players could expect was unclear.

Sabonis tore his Achilles heel twice in 1987, and in 1988, Ted Turner, owner of the Atlantic Hawks, helped him come to the United States for rehabilitation under the aegis of the Portland Trailblazers, who held the draft rights to him. By the time he returned to the Soviet Union in August of 1988, Portland was convinced that he would soon play in Oregon: "We shook hands on a deal and agreed that I would send a copy of a contract that we also had translated into Russian with the thought that Sabonis would report to Portland by October 15," Harry Glickman, Trailblazers' president, later told me.

This was not to be. When Sabonis returned home, controversy broke out; the Lithuanians, who looked on him as a national treasure, protested that Sovintersport, Goskomsport's agency for international trade, could not sell Lithuanian athletes without the approval of their home clubs.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, although Trailblazers' doctors had recommended that Sabonis not play in the Seoul Olympics, Aleksandr Gomelsky, the Soviet Olympic coach, took him to Seoul, and Sabonis starred on the Soviet champions.

Soviet basketball authorities in any case were leery of sending basketball players to the NBA until FIBA, the international basketball federation, changed its rules so as to allow professionals to play in world championships and in the Olympic Games. Therefore Sabonis's club, Zalgiris of Kaunas, persuaded its stars—Sabonis, Chomicius, Kurtinaitis, and Jovaisa—to remain together for one last grand effort to win the Soviet national championship and the European Cup of Cup Champions in 1989. Zalgiris failed in both these aims, but that is another story.

Marciulionis's case was different from Sabonis's because he played for Statyba of Vilnius. Some years earlier, Garastas had bypassed him for Zalgiris, and he in turn subsequently rejected invitations to come to Kaunas. This made him a hero in Vilnius but he was probably much later in achieving the status of a Lithuanian

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3. On the controversy in Lithuania, see *Kauno aidas*, August 8, 1988: *Sportas*, August 11, 18, 30, and September 3, 1988; *Moskovskie novosti*, 35 (1988). See also Alfred Erich Senn, "Sabonis audru verpete," *Akiracai*, 7 (1988): 1-3.

“national treasure” than he would have been in Kaunas. In 1986 he was the last man cut from the Soviet team in the World Championships. When the Atlanta Hawks began looking him over in 1987-1988, Marciulionis was interested, but without him, Statyba faced the threat of relegation from the Soviet major league. The Lithuanians therefore wanted assurances from Moscow that Statyba could be somehow protected if Marciulionis left, and on the other hand, the Lithuanians thought that Atlanta’s offer was too small. (The Lithuanians understood nothing of NBA salary caps and really did not care to learn.) As a result, Marciulionis too remained in Lithuania for the 1988-1989 season.

As of the end of 1988 Sabonis seemed destined for Portland and Marciulionis for Atlanta. FIBA was expected in April to approve professionals’ participating in the Olympic Games, and the two Lithuanians would probably sign contracts soon thereafter. The two men, however, decided differently.

While still in Portland, Sabonis had seemed eager to play in the NBA, but once back in Lithuania he cooled on the idea. A Lithuanian newspaper, as an April’s fool joke, declared that Sabonis had signed with Portland, but Sabonis chose to play in Spain with his friend Chomicius: Forum of Vallidolid agreed to pay \$800,000 for Sabonis’s services for one year and \$75,000 for Chomicius’s. Portland was left with the consolation that it had at least helped Sabonis prepare for the Olympics in Seoul.

In Marciulionis’s case, the picture changed when Donn Nelson, the son of the coach of Golden State, came to Vilnius. Nelson, as a member of Athletes in Action, had met Marciulionis several years earlier, and now he made repeated visits to Lithuania, reportedly learning enough Lithuanian to keep asking, “When are you coming to America?” Nelson also staged coaching clinics in Lithuania, and Marciulionis began to lean toward Golden State.<sup>4</sup>

According to NBA rules, Marciulionis was a free agent. Golden State had earlier claimed him in the NBA draft, but this was invalidated because of confusion over Marciulionis’s birth date. Atlanta’s claim to him was based on Ted Turner’s investment in the Goodwill Games and other activities in Moscow, reinforced by a general agreement among other NBA owners-apart from Golden State-that they would not compete with him in this particular venture.

Upon hearing that Golden State was winning Marciulionis’s attention, the Atlanta Hawks and TBS, Turner Broadcasting System, complained to Moscow: “We ask that *Sovetskii sport* interview TBS First Vice-President Robert Wussler, President and General Manager of the Atlantic Hawks Stan Kasten, or the team’s coach Mike Fratello.” Wussler told the Russians, “I hope that the Soviet side, before making its decision, takes into consideration our friendly relations and above all cooperative organization of the Goodwill Games of 1986 in Moscow.” Kasten asked that *Sovetskii sport* send greetings to Marciulionis from Hawks’ players and promised “steps aimed at the development of basketball in the USSR generally and in the Lithuanian SSR in particular.” Marciulionis, Kasten added, would also have the unique oppor-

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4. See the report on Nelson’s activities in Lithuania in *Sportas*, April 22, 1989

tunity with the Hawks of playing with another Soviet player, Aleksandr Volkov.<sup>5</sup>

When Moscow officials inquired about the situation in Vilnius, Marciulionis's coach, Rimas Girskis, noted that Nelson had already conducted training sessions with children and specialists, "and we value this attention." According to Soviet journalists, he added, "Up to now the Atlanta Hawks have only sent us telegrams and talked with Sarunas by phone." A Lithuanian journalist, however, quoted Girskis as saying of Sovintersport, "an organization that has done nothing, facilitated nothing, helped no one, but still sends telegrams, 'Carry on no talks without us.' A typical decree of the Center, with the desire to make a profit without contributing anything!"<sup>6</sup> With the Hawks solidly identified with Moscow, Golden State had a direct route into the hearts of the Lithuanians, amid jokes about how the Lithuanians had to protect Marciulionis against being kidnapped by Moscow and Atlanta acting in concert.

The next question to be decided was who should be the agent in the contract and who should share in the money. Goskomsport presumed that Sovintersport should handle all Soviet athletes' contracts, that the Soviet State Budget would take 20% of the price of the contract, and that Moscow and the local club would split the rest. (The athlete's pay would be established in a separate agreement.)<sup>7</sup> In the winter and spring of 1989 the Lithuanians declared that a Lithuanian agency, Litimpeksas, should handle the deal, and they asserted that Moscow deserved nothing. Marciulionis took this matter into his own hands, signing a contract with the American firm IMG; through IMG's efforts he would control the money himself.

Even after having decided on Golden State and IMG, however, Marciulionis had new concerns, this time within his own camp. His club, Statyba, declared itself a self-financing sports club and Girskis pressed him to sign a contract. Girskis then demanded that Marciulionis's proposed contract with Golden State be not for more than two years. Marciulionis responded that he had agreed that after his time with Golden State, he would play for no other team than Statyba until 1995, but he admitted to not having read the document that Girskis had persuaded him to sign. The document was in any case voided because of a legal technicality.<sup>8</sup>

Marciulionis finally signed what he wanted, a three year contract with the Warriors. In a statement to *Sovetskii sport* of July 21, he refused to reveal the total payment, but reported that he was giving \$300,000 to his club, Statyba. This money could be used to bring players from North America to replace him. Six Statyba players would annually go to the Golden State Warriors' summer camp, and the Warriors would provide Statyba with equipment. (Golden State officials later informed me that these were Marciulionis's arrangements and not theirs; as Golden State President Dan Fennane told Soviet journalists, "All

5. Quoted in *Sovetskii sport* May 14, 1989.

6. See *Sovetskii sport* May 14, 1989, and *Sportas*, May 11, 1989.

7. *Sovetskii sport* April 16, 1989.

8. For a detailed summary of the legal maneuverings, see *Respublika*, November 25, 1989,

contracts concern only the player.”<sup>9</sup>) Marciulionis would give \$150,000 to the Lithuanian Children’s Fund—this is a legal device recommended by chess champion Garry Kasparov to avoid Moscow’s financial tentacles—and provide various kinds of office equipment to institutions like the Journalism School of Vilnius University and the Lithuanian Journalists’ Union. After US taxes, Marciulionis expected to have about 30% of the payment for himself, and he declared that 14 of the 16 members of the Statyba council had approved these arrangements.

Girskis remained a dissenter. He joined six of his players in going to New England in August to participate in the Warriors’ summer camp, but once back in Vilnius he complained about the three year term of Marciulionis’s contract and snorted that Marciulionis had only agreed to pay \$100,000 annually, “about 8% of the value of the contract,” and that not immediately but only “when he saw fit.” Girskis took his campaign into both the Moscow and the Vilnius press,<sup>10</sup> eventually evoking sharp criticism of his own behavior. He nevertheless obtained a percentage of Marciulionis’s *valiutu* payment to Statyba.

In the fall of 1989 Lithuanian basketball presented an entirely new appearance of chaos. Zalgiris-Kaunas, the pride of the republic’s basketball program, had a new coach, Henrikas Giedraitis, and it sorely missed its old constellation of stars. Garastas, coach during the glory years of the 1980s, had become national coach. He had at first spoken of making Zalgiris the core of the national team, but now there was no Lithuanian practicing regularly with the national team. His own departure from Kaunas was not without controversy: when his resignation was first announced, he denied having said any such thing. Then he himself had to agree to restricting his work to that of coaching the national team, where he had to face a new complex of intrigues—but that too is another story.

Zalgiris-Kaunas also had severe administrative and financial problems. It had declared itself a self-financing club and immediately clashed with its former sponsor, the Kaunas city organization of the republican Zalgiris sports society. The head of the city organization, Simonas Tokeris, refused the club funding and even held on to the bus that the German club Hagen Gold Star had given as part of its payment for Rimas Kurtinaitis’s services. Lithuanian sports writers bitterly denounced Tokeris’s actions, and the Zalgiris republican council anxiously struggled to establish peace.

In the fall of 1989, without Marciulionis, Statyba came on bad times and quickly fell into last place in league play. It lost one of its key players to Zalgiris-Kunas, and not even the addition of a Canadian-Lithuanian, Jonas

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9. See *Sovetskii sport*, May 14, 1989.

10. Cf. *Sovetskii sport*, July 20, 1989

Karpis, helped.<sup>11</sup> Relegation loomed, and with it threatened further raids by the Kaunas club.<sup>12</sup>

In 1990 the situation entered yet another stage of confusion when the Lithuanian legislature declared their republic's independence of the Soviet Union. The Lithuanian sports authorities announced that in accordance with this decision, Lithuanian teams should not compete in Soviet leagues. The Zalgiris and Statyba teams accordingly ended their play in the Soviet major basketball league forthwith. At the end of March 1990, Soviet troops began seizing control of key points in Lithuanian life, and it remains to be seen what path Lithuanian basketball would now take.

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11. Karpis was paid with money from Marciulionis, deposited in a German bank, to avoid the grasping hand of Moscow. In April 1989 Goskomsport approved paying for foreign players with money obtained from the sale of Soviet player contracts for hard currency. See *Sovetskii sport*, April 16, 1989, and *Respublika*, November 25, 1989.

12. On Zalgiris's designs on Statyba's players, see Alfred Erich Senn, "'Zalgirio' pergale ir krizes zenklai," *Akiraciai*, 4 (1987).