trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



The 1972 Olympics Basketball Final between the Soviet Union and the United States

Fabien Archambault

The game marked a turning point in the sport's history on both sides of the Atlantic. Due to linguistic misunderstandings between the American players, the Soviet coaches and the Brazilian referee, the sport spoke a little less English after 1972.

TRANSLATION	Glenn Naumovitz
PUBLISHED	May 7, 2023
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	French
AVAILABLE IN	English, French
TOPICS	Sport
SPACES AND PLACES	Europe · South America · North America
PERIODS	The Atlantic Space Within Globalization · The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	basketball
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/la-finale-olympique-de-basket-ball-urss-etats-unis-1972/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fabien Archambault

Assistant Professor of Contemporary History · Centre d'histoire sociale des mondes contemporains (CHS-UMR8058) · Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne · France

A former student of the École normale supérieure de Fontenay/Saint-Cloud (1996) and the holder of an Agrégation in history (1999), he prepared his PhD thesis on Football and Politics in Italy at the University of Grenoble II, then at the École française de Rome of which he was a member from 2005 to 2008. Then elected as an Associate Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Limoges (2008), then at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (2020)

In 1973, in his introduction to *The Legend of Bouvines*, medievalist Georges Duby recalled that the historian's primary objective was to "establish what really happened at this place on July 27, 1214." The place was in Flanders, where the armies of the King of France, Philip Augustus, won a decisive victory that subsequently enabled the Capetian to proclaim himself "emperor in his realm." Duby wrote that this goal was "unreachable … because all those who witness a battle, no matter how eminent they are… only see a confused jostling. No one has ever perceived, nor will anyone ever perceive in its total truth, the whirlwind of a thousand acts that were inextricably intertwined on the plain of Bouvines that day between noon and five o'clock." [1] The same can be said of contemporary events, notwithstanding the many traces they leave. Gérard Bosc, who, as national technical director of the French basketball Federation, attended the sport's 1972 Olympic final between the United States and the USSR in Munich, was well aware of this. Like Stendhal's hero, Fabrice, at Waterloo, he "saw nothing and understood even less." [2] What happened in Munich's Rudi-Sedlmayer-Halle between 11:45 p.m. and 1:14 a.m. on the night between Saturday and Sunday, September 9 and 10, 1972?

The event which took place that night was extraordinary on two counts. First, the US basketball team was defeated by the USSR, losing the gold medal for the first time. Second, the end of the game was mired in controversy. As the Americans led by one point (50-49), the last three seconds were replayed three times, with the Soviets scoring the decisive point that handed them victory in the final tenth of a second (51-50). The master's defeat at the hands of its best student was as stunning as England's loss to Ferenc Puskas's Hungarian team during the football match at Wembley in November 1953 (6-3) – a first on home soil. All things considered, these losses are unremarkable from a strictly technical perspective: each signaled the standardization of a sport's playing levels after the dissemination and appropriation process that takes place once it leaves its country of origin. However, they can be interpretated as something much more significant than the mere loss of a game. They give the event meaning and fit it into an interpretive scheme that can be used to explain, justify, accept or denounce it. In 1950s Britain, the loss to an Easter bloc nation was not so much interpreted within the framework of the Cold War, but rather as a sign of the country's overall decline. In contrast, the narratives constructed around the 1972 final on each side of the Iron Curtain raised the event to the level of a major episode in the geopolitical standoff between the world's two great powers.

Two factors underpinned this interpretation. First, the game took place during the Olympics, in which the USSR began participating in 1952. From then on, as has been documented, the Games became part of a cultural Cold War framework. Created in 1953, the United States Information Agency, which centralized propaganda programs abroad, considered sports an ideal means of winning over the hearts and minds of the masses. The agency widely circulated a popular pamphlet, *Sport Behind the Iron Curtain*, which lambasted what had come to be known as the "the big red machine". On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the Soviet authorities considered topping the medals table, which the USSR always did except at the 1968 Mexico Games, a matter of proving Communism's ideological superiority. Second, the game was basketball, the only team sport with a wide international audience which allowed direct confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 20th century: European football played a marginal role in US mass culture, while ice hockey was played in very few countries. Munich was a milestone because it marked the climax of a process in which basketball reflected the competition in culture and sports between the two countries. The game was invented in the United States in 1891 and spread through the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Soviet Union was constantly striving to beat the US at its own game, which it did in the 1972 Olympics final.

The Munich game must first be dissected from every angle, first as an event revealing long-term mechanisms that operated over two decades. Then, a close look must be taken at the way the drama unfolded, second by second, leading to what the United States considered a tragedy, a perception that must be taken into account to assess, ultimately, the consequences of the game.

Deep forces at work

Basketball's emergence in the dynamics of Cold War cultural confrontation was primarily the result of the Soviet Union's about-face with regard to the Western sports movement. In the immediate postwar period, the USSR ended its isolation by joining global sports organizations: the international football and athletics federations in 1946 and the basketball federation in 1947. This shift seems like the logical continuation of the participation of the Soviet Union, which played a decisive role in the Allied victory, in shaping the new world order, for example with the founding of the United Nations in 1945. In fact, the rapprochement began in the mid-1930s, when, after dropping the "class against class" line, the USSR allowed the Red Sports International, founded in Moscow in July 1921, to wither before disbanding it altogether in 1937. From then on, the country considered sports competitions with capitalist nations a way of boosting its prestige. It was at this point that the groundwork of the Soviet sports system was laid, combining the mass participation of both men and women – an exception compared to the West – and the State-backed training of a competitive amateur elite. This proactive policy involved almost all disciplines, provided that they were part of the Olympic program, which would foster the establishment of relations through sport. [3]

Basketball, included in the Olympics for the second time in 1936 in Berlin (after a fleeting appearance in Saint Louis in 1904), was obviously no exception. While not popular with the working class, which preferred football and ice hockey, it was nevertheless the third most practiced team sport in the USSR, attracting the emerging urban middle classes and students in particular. It was therefore not a surprise, when the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), founded in 1932, invited Soviet teams to compete in the men's and women's European championships in 1947 and 1950, respectively, to see the newcomers win both titles. The immediate supremacy of the men's team, confirmed in 1951 and 1953, was partly due to a geopolitical factor, i.e. the integration of players from the Baltic States. The Latvians, the first European champions in 1935, and Lithuanians, excellent shooters who won the title in 1937 and 1939, combined with the speed of the Georgians and the brawn of the Russians, made the Soviet team a multinational powerhouse. Basketball could contribute to the goal, set out by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in December 1948, of achieving global supremacy in all the major sports. As soon as the USSR joined the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in January 1952, it filed a request to include women's basketball in that year's Helsinki Summer Games. The bid was turned down because it came too late, but it was repeated every four years until being accepted for the 1976 Montreal Games. [4]

In Helsinki, the United States won the first games with the Soviet team, from the qualifying round (86-58) to the final (36-25). Neither camp's narrative contained a trace of Cold War rhetoric. Journalists on both sides limited themselves to descriptive, technical reports, while neutral observers praised the "friendly" atmosphere and good sportsmanship. In this sense, the Helsinki Olympics were the first manifestation of peaceful coexistence at the end of the Stalinist era. [5] The Eastern European participants aimed to play a role as model promoters of the Olympic spirit and "ambassadors of peace and friendship between peoples." The way the games unfolded had two consequences on the playing itself. First, after the first game, aware that their opponents were much better, the Soviets adopted an ultra-defensive strategy in the

final, relying on their passing game to keep hold of the ball – their longest possession lasted an astonishing 12 minutes – and concede as few points as possible. This delaying tactic led FIBA to establish the 30-second limit before a shot. Second, Soviet coaches attributed their team's defeat not to the American players' tactical or technical superiority but their height. They included "giants" such as Bob Kurland (2.13 m/6′11″), Markus Freiberger (2.10 m/6′10″) and Clyde Lovelett (2.09 m/6′10″). In the following years, Soviet scouts scoured the country looking for men over two meters (6′6″) tall in order to teach them the basics. soviet coach Alexander Gomelsky spotted Jan Kruminch, a 2.18m/7′1″ Latvian lumberjack who participated in the 1956 Melbourne Games, as he was riding his bicycle in a Riga suburb. In the 1950s and 1960s, the systematic selection of a tall center whose skills were inversely proportional to his or her height became a trademark of Soviet men's and women's teams.

These efforts helped the USSR to win the silver medal at the Melbourne, Rome and Tokyo Olympics and the bronze in Mexico City, where Yugoslavia beat them in the semi-final, but they never defeated the United States, which remained the sport's undisputed leader. A seemingly intangible and self-evident hierarchy of values had been established. This explained why the games between the US and Soviet basketball teams at the Olympics every four years were not part of the symbolic and cultural opposition mechanisms between the two great powers that were typical of each Olympiad. As a result, basketball players in the USSR were low in the hierarchy of sports heroes who were celebrated after returning from the games, ranking well below gymnasts, wrestlers, weightlifters, athletes and marksmen. In the United States, the national Olympic team was formed under the authority of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), an offshoot of the American Athletic Association (AAU), the institution in charge of amateur sports, which had long drawn on players from the ranks of its own championships. Military teams, YMCA squads and company-sponsored sports teams participated. However, the rising popularity of the National College Athletic Association (the NCAA, created in 1936) basketball championships led the AAU to gradually agree to recruit the best college players. In 1952, for example, six spots were attributed to the AAU and the rest to the NCAA. Twenty years later, it was obvious that most of the Olympic team would be made up of NCAA players, although the AAU-dominated selection committee imposed one of its members. The 11 others were students awaiting recruitment by the professional teams of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and its rival league, the American Basketball Association (ABA), created in 1967. The Olympic team did not strike a chord with the public. Their performance in the Games was hardly anything more than a triumphant exhibition tour, a mere reminder of the natural order of things. In fact, the North American sports system operated self-sufficiently. The NBA championship mattered much more, since it determined the "world champion" rather than the country's best team. To everyone's surprise, all this changed in Munich.

However, the 1972 loss cannot be considered a bolt from the blue. AAU leaders were particularly concerned about tensions between the NBA and ABA, which, to gain a competitive edge, began aggressively recruiting the best college players before they graduated. This shattered the consensus that, in Olympic years, NBA work contracts should not begin until September in order to remain within the bounds of the IOC's rules on amateur players. In March 1972, at the end of the college season, three NCAA stars joined ABA teams: Julius Erving, George McGinnis and Jim Chones, the center at Marquette University (Wisconsin), which was undefeated that year. They would have been able to try out for the Olympic team had they remained amateurs. The US coaching staff were also wary of the Soviets' level of playing and repeatedly warned that beating them was not a foregone conclusion. The selection committee's 49 members took precautions to avoid any blunders, which in their eyes implied military-style planning. These considerations guided the choice of coach, which initially led to ruling out the country's

most prestigious one, UCLA's John Wooden, by a wide margin (38 votes to 11). While Wooden's record made him the ideal candidate, his liberal political views did not sit well with the committee, which preferred the University of Oklahoma's Henry Iba. Although his last NCAA title dated back to 1946, he had proven his "patriotism" during the 1964 and 1968 Olympic campaigns.

In June 1972, 60 of the top amateur and college players in the United States tried out for the Olympic team at a naval air station near Colorado Springs and AAU headquarters. Only one of the 12 selected was from the AAU: Kenny Davis of the Marathon Oil Team, who became captain. The recruits spent the summer at the Pearl Harbor and San Diego naval bases before being housed at a CIA camp 75 kilometers from Munich. Iba preferred this location to the Olympic village and its training facilities because he feared that Soviet spies would infiltrate the village and try to find out their tactics. The US coach also wanted to have docile team members whose "patriotism" was beyond question, even if that meant having to do without politically unreliable UCLA players. In 1972, UCLA had won its sixth consecutive NCAA championship but, at the height of the Vietnam War, most of its players were against the idea of representing a nation whose foreign policy they opposed. This was notably the case for the best of them, center Bill Walton, an anti-war activist who preferred taking his exams and used an ankle injury as an excuse. "If they wanted me to live in army barracks, sleep in tiny beds and eat at the mess hall," he wrote in his 1994 autobiography, "I wasn't interested." [6] In any case, he felt supported by his coach, the popular Wooden, who thought that anti-Sovietism had perverted the Olympic spirit and, four years earlier, had refused to punish Kareem Abdul-Jabbar after he boycotted the Mexico City Games. [7] Lastly, the coaches conducted background checks on the 1972 team's six black players – half the roster – to ensure their "morality" and avoid a repetition of John Carlos and Tommie Smith's raised-fist protest on the winners' podium after the 200-meter race in 1968. They even ruled out the best center of the selection trials, the University of Maryland's Marvin Barnes, who was suspected of Civil Rights activist.

While the U.S. did not send its best possible team to Munich, the Soviet Union's squad was, as usual, a very strong, multinational group, including forwards Modestas Paulauskas from Kaunas's Zalghiris and Mikhail Korkia from Tbilisi's Dinamo, rear guard Sergei Belov and point guard Ivan Edeshko from Moscow's CSKA and the star, Alexander Belov, the 2.03m/6′7″ center, from Leningrad's Spartak.



The Soviet basketball team selected for the 1972 Olympic Games

Source: © Droits réservés / Rights reserved

A three-act drama

The game began shortly before midnight, allowing for a primetime broadcast in the United States on the ABC network. This was exceptional during the competition. Three qualifying round games were not aired in North America at all, and for the other five, including the semi-final against Italy, only the highlights were shown to US viewers. This showed the symbolic importance of the final against the USSR, the first basketball game ever to be aired worldwide. After the 1970 World Cup in Mexico City, the 1972 Olympics were only the second sports event with truly global television coverage. From 10 to 13 million viewers were glued to their screens in the United States, a respectable figure and the highest ever for basketball, although far behind the number for American football.



Jim Forbes (left) and Alexander Belov (right) during the first half

Source: © Droits réservés / Rights reserved

The game can be easily watched on the Internet, including the last, still-controversial minute. Until then, the USSR had been leading comfortably. Iba had adopted defensive tactics consisting of playing very slowly and containing the Soviets' offense. What they had not counted on was the outstanding skill of Sergei Belov, the final's best scorer with 20 points. At the end of the second half, the United States picked up the pace, reducing their opponents' lead to one point (49-48), 38 seconds before the end of the game. The Soviets held on to the ball as long as they could. When the 30-second time limit was up, Alexander Belov launched a shot. It was blocked, but he recovered the ball on the rebound with eight seconds left to play. As Belov started losing his balance on the baseline, not seeing his partner Sergei Belov four meters away, he threw a risky pass to Zurab Sakandelidze at half court. It was intercepted by US shooting guard Douglas Collins, who was fouled by Sakandelidze. There were three seconds left to play.

The first turning point at the end of the game, which had to do with how Soviet coach Vladimir Kondrashin asked for a timeout, occurred as Collins prepared to shoot the two free throws, which could have put the United States ahead. Kondrashin's decision was logical: the game was stopped for one minute, giving him time to set up a play and substitute several players to execute it. The time-out could have been requested before the first free throw or – and on this point, the FIBA rules at the time diverged from those in effect in North America – between the first and second free throws. To do that, coaches had to press a button that lit up a red light on the scorers' table, which had just been introduced for the Olympic tournament.

That is when the incident began, with the Soviet technical team and the referees as the protagonists. When paying attention to the final's sound footage, the buzzer announcing a timeout can be heard just as Collins is about to make his second free throw and the ball is still in his hands. He scored the shot, putting the

United States ahead for the first time (50-49). But the main referee, Brazil's Renato Righetto, was looking away from him and at the scorers' table to understand what the buzzer meant. The judges said nothing and the second referee, Bulgaria's Artenik Arabadjian, ordered the Soviets to resume playing, which they did, with Alzhan Zharmukhamedov passing the ball to Sergei Belov. Kondrashin left his bench and headed for the scorers' table, where he joined his assistant Sergei Bashkin, who had been there since Collins had made the free throw. They vehemently requested a time-out and forced Righetto to interrupt the game with one second left to play.



Collins making his second free throw with three seconds to go before the end of the game

Source: © Droits réservés / Rights reserved

There is still disagreement on whether Kondrashin requested the time-out too late. The head scorekeeper, West Germany's Hans Tenschert, thought he did: having misplaced their signaling device under their bench, they were late in pressing the button between the two free throws. Kondrashin, who died in 1999, said that the time-out was requested just after the referee blew the whistle on the foul against Collins. According to international rules, coaches could request a time-out either before the first free throw or between the first and the second. Kondrashin told the scorekeepers that he preferred to wait for the latter. [8]

Several arguments back up the Soviets' claims. The first involves Kondrashin's decision to request the timeout between the free throws, as the first one determined what play should be set up for the last three seconds. If Collins missed his first shot and the score could only be tied at best for the US, Kondrashin would opt for a defensive tactic aimed at keeping the result with the expectation of victory or overtime. If he succeeded and the United States were likely to take the lead, the Soviets might have to go on an all-out offensive tactic and gamble everything on the game's last play. Inexplicably for them, the timeout buzzer

did not sound after the first free throw. On the television footage, whether from the West German, American or Soviet production crews, assistant coach Sergei Bashkin can be seen jumping up from his bench and shouting in front of the scorers' table that he had called for a timeout. One of the officials seems to agree with him, but it was too late. In fact, only Kondrashin's interpretation makes it possible to account for the confusion. If the time-out had been requested too late, there was no reason for the officials to sound the buzzer. Or, the timekeeper at the scorer's table made a mistake and hastily tried to fix it. In fact, as Robert Edelman wrote, the language barrier caused a series of misunderstandings. Kondrashin and his assistants spoke Russian, which the scoring officials, all of whom were German, could not understand. They in turn had trouble communicating with Righetto, who spoke only Portuguese, and Arabadjian, whose only language was Bulgarian. The judges probably mistakenly thought that when Kondrashin told them he wanted to request the timeout after the first free throw, he was actually waiving his right to it. [9]

The intervention of FIBA secretary-general Renato Williams Jones was decisive. Sitting in the front row of the stands between the Soviet bench and the scorers' table, he could follow the discussions between both sides and, being multilingual, identified the developing imbroglio. Jones stood up, walked over to the scorers' table and resolved the conflict in a way that harmed neither team. The most logical thing would have been to award the time-out the USSR requested, starting when it should have been granted, i.e. between the free throws. The drawback was that this would have deprived the United States of Collins' second point and required him do the second throw over, with the risk of missing. Jones compromised and stipulated that play would resume after the second free throw – the score in favor of the United States (50-49) therefore remained unchanged – but for three seconds instead of one. In addition, both teams had the option of replacing players, as they would have been to do during the timeout. In this way, the wrong done to the USSR was partially repaired, while the United States kept a valuable one-point advantage. Kondrashin benched Alzhan Zharmukhamedov and brought in Ivan Edeshko with a specific plan in mind. Edeshko was to toss a long pass from the baseline to center Alexander Belov at the other end of the court. The Soviet coach had become familiar with this tactic, which required uncommon, powerful yet accurate passing skills, but at his own expense in the USSR championship final two years earlier. In the last seconds of the game between Moscow's CSKA coached by Alexander Gromelski and Leningrad's Spartak by Kondrashin, Edeshko had made a similar play, clinching the Moscow club's victory. Some in the US camp were aware of the danger. ABC commentator Frank Gifford said live, "There's still time to go to their big man, Alexander Belov. They're going to try." On the bench, Tom Burleson (2.21m/7′2″), who had not played during the final, insisted on entering the game, but Iba motioned for him to remain seated, as the penalty for inviting his girlfriend to admire the sunset from his bedroom balcony was still in force.

The game resumed with Edeshko back in play. Pressured by Thomas McMillen, he could only throw the ball sideways to Paulauskas, who immediately aimed for the free-throw lane. However, before his pass could reach Alexander Belov, the siren indicating that time was up sounded. The jubilant Americans began celebrating their eighth consecutive Olympic title as journalists and spectators flooded the court. But something was wrong. The siren blew three times and, in the confusion, Arabadjian held up three fingers for three seconds. As the Longines clock had not yet been rewound when the Bulgarian referee rushed to restart the game, the three seconds had not been played. On film, moments earlier an official standing to the left of the scorers' table can be seen waving to Arabadjian, asking him to wait before giving the ball to Edeshko, but probably in German or English, which neither Arabadjian nor Righetto could understand. In any case, even if they could, the din would have drowned him out. The only way to grab the referees' attention was to sound the siren, which did not announce, as most US commentators still believe, that the last second of play had elapsed. Righetto then sounded the siren several times, in the unsuccessful hope of

ending the disturbance. Meanwhile, the timekeeper was busy under Jones' supervision. To return to three seconds, the clock had to be rewound to one minute before removing the seconds first by tens, then by single digits, as the ABC footage shows. On the network's fixed shot of the scoreboard, where the erroneous mention "Final Score" is seen on the screen, the remaining time is back to 50 seconds. The timekeeper had barely begun to rewind the clock when play resumed and the operation continued slowly. For the third time, the timekeeper had to be engaged.



Play resumes for the second time: blocked by McMillen, Edeshko (left) had to throw the ball to Paulauskas (right)
Source: © Droits réservés / Rights reserved

Despite the US team's protests, the court was cleared and the ball returned to Edeshko. This time, he threw it over the heads of two American players to Alexander Belov, who scored the winning basket (51-50). After jubilantly sprinting to Soviet bench, Belov was mobbed by his delirious teammates, who piled on top of him in celebration.

The United States immediately filed a complaint with the IOC, basing their argument on the fact that Jones should have remained seated in the stands instead of coming down. His repeated interventions were considered undue pressure on the judges and referees that distorted the result. In short, the Soviets cheated and were helped in this by Jones, who was accused of indulging them. This was an unfair reproach to make against the FIBA secretary-general, who could hardly have been suspected of harboring sympathies for the USSR. His real motive was that he wanted to assert FIBA's rights in a sport dominated by North America. Since the late 1940s, the institutionalization of international amateur basketball was the story of a constant struggle to break free from the grip of the United States. Jones's intervention was a matter of establishing FIBA's legitimacy and asserting its predominance over the NBA, perceived as hegemonic and trying to impose its development model. It was intended to enforce an international rule on the procedure for requesting a timeout that did not exist in the United States. Afterwards, Jones said that "the Americans must learn to lose, even when they think they're right." He explained his position to the FIBA appeals jury: for all technical matters, the IOC delegated its prerogatives to international

federations, which met that very night. Without dwelling on the regulatory innovation he made up in the heat of the action – the semi or near-time-out awarded to the USSR – Jones justified himself by saying the that the Soviets were treated unfairly at a decisive moment.

Had this mistake not been rectified, they would have filed a complaint to the body before which he was speaking, with a good chance of winning. In short, as the technical organizing committee's chairman, he only stepped in to enforce respect for the spirit of the game. The five-man panel sided with him by a vote of three to two that broke down along the Cold War's ideological fault lines: the Cuban, Hungarian and Polish representatives voted for, the Italian and Puerto Rican judges against. [10] US journalists never had any doubts about the decision's political nature. However, an initial review of specialized basketball publications reveals that, while opinions were divided, the arguments strictly technical. A good example is the December 1972 report published in FIBA's magazine, *Basket International News*, by Robert Busnel, president of the *Fédération française de basketball*. For this great admirer of American basketball, no irregularities were committed and Jones was right to intervene to correct the errors committed at the scorers' table. However, Busnel added that if he had been asked to vote, he would have hesitated, as he felt the game probably should have been played over but with different referees. [11] In reality, the US team's defeat could be partially explained by the climate of mistrust instilled by American officials from day one of the Olympics. Suspicion hovered over the players' relationship with everything and everyone outside of the US team, and ended up affecting them at key moments in the game, when a string of technical mishaps required them to keep their cool. In addition, the great Bill Walton was probably never missed more sorely by the American team than when Alexander Belov scored the game's final point. Ultimately, the final outcome was determined by the skill of the Soviet players, starting with Alexander and Sergei Belov, and their coach Kondrashin, who had been thinking about tactics to beat the Americans since the 1950s. In a difficult context, as the referees lost control of the game, they were able to maintain their composure, unlike the weak team the United States sent to Munich.



L'arbitre brésilien, Renato Righetto, accorde le panier de la victoire à Alexander et Sergeï Belov, sous le regard désemparé de Doug Collins et Thomas McMillen

Source: © Droits réservés

A defeat that did not go down well

The soviet players not only joined triumphantly the pantheon of socialist sports heroes; their victory also accelerated the growth of basketball's popularity in the USSR. Attendance had been rising since the late 1960s, without, however, reaching exceptional figures. Articles in the press were now longer and more detailed, the local league's games were televised more frequently. The 1972 gold medalists became stars on a par with football and hockey players, and their example inspired many young people to take up basketball. [12] However, there was no mention of the controversy surrounding the final's last seconds. One image in particular would live on in collective memory, when former international player Nina Emerina, who called the game live for 10 million viewers, sat down and cried at the end of the match as Soviet TV cameras turned towards her for a postgame analysis.

The 1972 final was one factor that led sports and political leaders in the United States to take a more aggressive approach to sports diplomacy. First, the USOC threw fair play out of the window when they ordered the players to stay away from the Sunday night medal ceremony in the Olympische Stadion. In a fit of anger, its president Clifford Buck told journalists that the United States would never play another Olympic basketball game. Even Richard Nixon was apparently irate. During an Oval Office meeting on September 11, he reportedly told his chief of staff Bob Haldeman and press secretary Ron Zeigler, "We got screwed" several times. Haldeman advised him to avoid giving the impression of being a sore loser. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who arrived in Moscow on the same day after meeting with Willy Brandt in Munich the day before, told Leonid Brezhnev that this was the last time Soviets would beat Americans "in the final three seconds." [13]

In the ensuing weeks and months, Kissinger put US diplomatic staff at the USOC's disposal to back up a second appeal, this time to the IOC executive board, with the aim of having the FIBA jury's decision invalidated. For example, on September 16, the US vice-consul in Düsseldorf took sworn testimony from the four Germans who sat at the scorers' table during the final. The next day, a representative of Swiss watch company Longines testified in Saint-Imier. Lastly, on November 10, the lead referee, Righetto, stated from Campinas, Brazil that "the whole thing was illegal." [14] The apparent aim of this diplomatic muscle-flexing was to give the sworn depositions legal value to convince the IOC. Basically, it was always a matter of proving that Jones had intervened when he had no authority to do so, which all the testimonies more or less explicitly agreed with.

The USOC knew it could count on support from a fellow citizen, former IOC president Avery Brundage, who had become its honorary president during the Munich Games. Had it been up to him, the medal ceremony would not have been held on September 10 but postponed indefinitely until the IOC executive board decided whether or not to validate the game's result. That is what he told his Irish successor, Michael Morris, the third Baron Killanin, in a letter dated January 19, 1973. [15] In the corridors of Munich's Olympic stadium, Lord Killanin, who had just become president of the IOC, disagreed and seemed reluctant to review the United States' request. Brundage must have reminded him that during the Games' closing ceremony Buck had officially asked for the request to be put on the executive board's agenda on February 4, 1973. [16] In late December 1972, Lord Killanin made no secret of his position. He implied to Brundage that the United States could be banned from the 1976 Montreal games, [17] saying that the Americans' refusal to accept the silver medals was an offense serious enough to merit such a sanction. When Buck appeared before the IOC commission executive board, Killanin rebuked him for his "discourteous" attitude. Buck tried to expand on his arguments, but most of the hearing was taken up by contrived excuses. For example, he claimed that the US team was not informed of the ceremony's time,

which Killanin considered preposterous. Far from being paragons of virtue, the United States should have accepted the USSR's win, which was made official, and should consider themselves lucky that they were not disqualified. [18]

Lord Killanin, an Eton alumnus, was no more pro-Soviet than Jones. What mattered most to him was keeping the boundary between amateur and professional sports hermetically sealed. On a visit to the United States in late October, he was alarmed by what he heard from a congressional investigation committee. After the USSR's victory, the US congress looked into the USOC, accusing it of failure in the management of American sport. Some recommended disbanding the organization, while others requested the possibility of selecting professional basketball players because amateurs no longer made the grade. A review of Lord Killanin's correspondence in late 1972 indicates that he had come to consider basketball the Trojan horse of professionalism in the Olympic movement, which explains his intransigence towards the steps taken by Buck, who was himself under great pressure and sought to demonstrate his commitment to American sport.

In any case, Buck's efforts and the congressional committee's recommendations were adopted by the State Department, which began taking control of the IOC to ensure the defense of American interests. Promoted by conservatives, the first step in this policy was the passage of the1978 Amateur Sports Act, which officially placed the USOC under Federal supervision. The process of institutionally reorganizing basketball had begun in 1974 with the creation of a federative body based on the European model, the ABAUSA (Amateur Basketball Association of the United States of America), recognizing the NCAA's rise and the AAU's loss of influence. The process was completed in 1989 with the integration of the NBA, with the federation taking the name USA Basketball. Internationally, Kissinger's policy led to the Olympics' financial dependence on US media. It led, among other things, to the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games (which some USOC officials opposed) and the attribution of the 1984 Games to Los Angeles. [19] In short, the United States went from containment to roll back.

The United States found an ally in Juan Antonio Samaranch, who succeeded Lord Killanin in 1980 and worried about the USSR and Yugoslavia's proposal to put UNESCO in charge of organizing the Olympic Games. In return for the continued existence of the institution he headed, Samaranch accepted the Games' commodification, a prelude to the abandonment of amateurism. Envisioned in 1981, this transition began in Los Angeles in 1984 with football players and continued in 1988 with tennis. The USSR's victory over the United States at the Seoul Games' semi-finals, Soviet basketball's last hurrah, prompted US officials to shift into higher gear. In 1989, a congressional committee led by Thomas McMillen, the American center in the 1972 final who in the meantime had become a Democratic congressman from Maryland, prompted the USOC to officially ask the IOC to allow professional basketball players to participate in the Games. The request was approved and in Barcelona in 1992, the famous Dream Team, composed of NBA stars, allowed the first professional US basketball players to compete in the Olympics. The aim was to wash away the symbolic stain suffered in Munich 20 years earlier and to restore American supremacy in a sport it considered its private fiefdom.

Conclusion

Dissecting the Munich Olympic Games basketball final has led us to explore, on each side of the Atlantic, the mechanisms set in motion by the American and Soviet societies leading up to this event. As early as 1945, the USSR began working patiently and methodically to make the 1972 win possible. The result was immense sports and political pride, two spheres that were hard to separate when it came to Olympism in

the Soviet Union. The defeat stunned the United States to such an extent that the country seemed not to have gotten over it 20 years later. Before and after Munich, both nations worked to fit a lackluster, poorly refereed basketball game with a muddled ending into the broader narrative of the cultural Cold War. September 1972 saw the two superpowers' victories in areas to which their adversary was perceived as having an intimate connection. On September 1, Bobby Fischer dethroned Boris Spassky as the world's top chess player after a seemingly endless championship in Reykjavik. For seven weeks, over a million people in the United States watched the duel's slow progress on television. Around mid-August, at the same time that Iba was fretting about Soviet spies infiltrating the Olympic village, in Iceland, Boris Spassky's entourage requested postponement of game 17, accusing the Americans of using electronic devices and a chemical substance to destabilize the reigning world champion. In Munich, the USSR ended the Americans' 36-year winning streak in Olympic basketball, while in Reykjavik Bobby Fischer interrupted 35 years of absolute Soviet domination in the world of chess. Munich 1972, the *New York Times* wrote the day after the final, was "Spassky's revenge."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Walton, Bill. *Nothing but Net: Just Give Me the Ball and Get out of the Way*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

Wagg, Stephen, and David Andrews, eds. *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012.

Richmond, Yale. *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain*. Penn State University Press, 2003.

Parks, Jenifer. *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War: Red Sport, Red Tape*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018.

Malz, Arié., Stefan Rohdewald, and Stefan Wiederkehr, eds. *Sport zwischen Ost und West: Beiträge zur Sportgeschichte Osteuropas im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Osnabrück: Fibre, 2007.

Gygax, Julien. *Olympisme et Guerre froide culturelle. Le prix de la victoire américaine*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012.

Edelman, Robert. *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Munich 1972: Sport, politics and tragedy. Purdue University, 2004. https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/dissertations/AAI3166617/.

Dufraisse, Sylvain. *Les héros du sport: une histoire des champions soviétiques : années 1930-années 1980*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2019.

Chapin, Dwight, and Jeff Prugh. *The Wizard of Westwood; Coach John Wooden and His UCLA Bruins*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973. https://archive.org/details/wizardofwestwood00chap.

Brokhin, Yuri. *The Big Red Machine: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions*. New York: Random House, 1978.

Brewster, Mike, and Taps Gallagher. *Stolen Glory: The U.S., the Soviet Union, and the Olympic Basketball Game That Never Ended*. Los Angeles, CA: GM Books, 2012.

NOTES

1. Georges Duby, *Le Dimanche de Bouvines. 27 juillet 1214* (Paris, Gallimard, "Folio" collection, 1985, 1st ed. 1973), 19-20, translation by Glenn Naumovitz
2. Author's interview with Gérard Bosc, May 28, 2010
3. Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun. A History of Spectator Sport in the USSR* (New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993), 79-124
4. Archives of the international Olympic Committee (AIOC), basketball section, 1932-1960 correspondance, letter from Otto Mayer to Renato Williams Jones, January 28, 1952.

5 Nicholas Niggli, « Diplomatie sportive et relations internationales : Helsinki 1952, les “Jeux olympiques de la Guerre froide” ? », *Relations internationales* 112 (winter 2002): 467-485.

6 Bill Walton, *Nothing but Net. Just Give Me the ball and Get Out of the Way* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 112.

7 Voir Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *Giant Steps. The Autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar* (New York: Book Sales, 1987).

8 Voir Yuri Brokhin, *The Big Red Machine: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions* (New York-Toronto: Random House, 1978 – 1e éd. russe 1977), 132-135.

9 Edelman, *Serious Fun,* 147.

10 AIOC, Jeux olympiques de 1972, Résultats officiels des Jeux olympiques d'été de Munich 1972 par jour, 9-11 septembre 1972.

11 Robert Busnel, « Trois secondes... pour un titre olympique ! », *Basketball International News* 84 (1972).

12 Edelman, *Serious fun*, 146.

13 Daniel Golden, “Three Seconds at 1972 Olympics Haunt US Basketball”, www.bloomberg.com, on-line since 2012, July, 23.

14 AIOC, Fonds Commission exécutive du IOC, février 1973.

15 AIOC, Fonds Commission exécutive du IOC, Correspondance 1973, Lettre d'Avery Brundage à Lord Killanin, 19 janvier 1973.

16 AIOC, Fonds Commission exécutive du IOC, Correspondance 1972, Lettre de Lord Killanin à Avery Brundage, 4 novembre 1972.

17 AIOC, Fonds Commission exécutive du IOC, Correspondance 1972, Lettre de Lord Killanin à Avery Brundage, 28 décembre 1972.

18 AIOC, Fonds Commission exécutive du IOC, Procès-verbal de la séance du 4 février 1973, p. 36-37.

19 Jérôme Gygax, « Diplomatie culturelle et sportive américaine: persuasion et propagande durant la Guerre froide, » *Relations internationales* 123 (2005), 87-106.