

A POWERHOUSE IN BASKETBALL

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The European sport circles were rocked by a nuclear explosion during the Second European Basketball Championship. The date was May 1937, and the place — a sport hall in the Latvian capital, Riga.

Regarded as not even a moderate rival, the unknown national team of Lithuania paved its way throughout the international event with poise and ability and captured the greatest honor in European basketball.

Only two years before, in 1935, the Lithuanian All-Stars had been guests at Riga and had taken the worst beating ever to befall the team. The Latvians subdued the visitors mercilessly. The one-sided game terminated with the unusual score of 123—10.

But only a short time had to pass before the picture changed completely. Latvia's national team, which was crowned as the first champion of Europe in 1935 at Geneva, couldn't reach the final round of the games at home. However, Lithuania's five, participating for the first time in such an event, took Latvia's place and thus established a sparkling example for all Lithuania's youth to reach for greater honors in European sports than ever before.

Basketball in Lithuania dates back to 1921 when an American-Lithuanian, Steponas Darius, got together with several friends to form a basketball team in Kaunas. Interest was limited. Basketball made little headway among the Lithuanian youth at that time. Later Darius went back to the United States. In 1933, together with another flyer, Stasys Girenas, Darius successfully crossed the Atlantic only to find mysterious death in Germany.

Nevertheless, in 1925 the Lithuanians dared to play with the Latvian All-Stars, already well advanced in the game. Latvians were hosts at Riga and won easily, 41—20. The second meeting between these two national teams once again showed the superiority of the Latvians as they edged the visitors, 47—12.

It was not until 1934 that basketball in Lithuania came into some prominence. The establishment of the Sport Palace in Kaunas solved the problem of suitable accommodation for indoor playing. Now another problem developed — a lack of experienced players and coaches. The solution was offered by American - Lithuanians who came back to Lithuania. These visitors demonstrated the technique of the game and were greatly interested in teaching the youngsters the basic principles and many fine points of modern basketball. After this, basketball developed rapidly, both in its appeal to the public and in the skill of its players who at last were able to practise on a large indoor court.

In 1935 the Lithuanian All-Stars visited Riga. The Latvians went right on the war path and they scalped their neighbors, 123—10. The losers weren't such a bad team but, playing in a narrow court, they wouldn't find themselves and faltered rapidly. After this painful experience the Lithuanians went home, nursed their moral bruises and vowed that the next year must bring forth a new picture.

In 1936, two American-Lithuanians, Dr. Kostas Saviskas and Juozas Knasas, came to Lithuania and helped to boost the game. Then, after the Olympic Games at Berlin, the captain of the winning United States quintet, Frank J. Lubinas, visited Kaunas; and this American trio helped to form the modern facade of basketball in Lithuania.

During the same year, Lithuania's foremost international rival the Latvians, paid a visit to Kaunas for the first time. The duel went to the Latvian five again but the final score was only 31—10. The next step was an international game with Estonians, again at the Sports Palace in Kaunas. The Northerners whipped the much improved hosts, 30—11. These last two games marked the changing point in Lithuanian basketball. The fans were thrilled and the youth much more interested. Early in 1937, the Lithuanians made a journey to Riga and lost only after a bitter fight, 41—29.

The same year the Latvians were hosts for the Second European Championships in Basketball. Lithuania's national team was reinforced with a couple of American-Lithuanians, Feliksas Kriaučiūnas and Pranas Talzūnas.

In the first big surprise of the first day's games, the Italians were clipped by the under-rated Lithuanians, 22—20. The second day, the Lithuanians triumphed against the Estonians, 20—15. The Lithuanians had an easy time with the next opponent, the Egyptians, and won, 21—7. The sons of the Pharaohs appeared to have difficulty finding the range throughout the entire game and sank only one full basket while collecting only five other points from charity tosses.

After three straight victories, the Lithuanians suddenly found themselves in the favorite's seat of the tournament. It looked as if they could go in only one direction — toward the championship. Formerly sceptical foreign sports writers started issuing such headlines as: "Lithuania — the New European Champion?"

Calm and modest in their predictions, the followers of the Lithuanian team started getting ideas, but the prospects of victory still looked so fantastic that the speculations were quickly discarded.

The next day Lithuanian players continued their march of triumph and whipped Poland's quintet, 32—25. And finally, in the championship playoff against Italy, the Lithuanians won in a hectic finish when they staved off a last minute rally by the Southerners. With the score of 24—23 in favor of the Lithuanians, the Italians had a chance to overlap the opponents with three free throws. Nervousness overcame the shooter, Giasetti, and didn't connect even once.

Thus Lithuania became the champion of European basketball. It sounded too beautiful to be true but this time it was. Lithuanian players became national heroes. The champions were honored at a huge rally and demonstration in Kaunas and all over the jubilant country. Lithuania came to be one of the newest meteors to streak across the basketball horizon.

Overnight the country became basketball-conscious to such an extent that the game now outranks the all-time favorite, soccer. Baskets were hung from barn doors and telephone poles. Basketball became the national game.

Crowned as champions, the Lithuanian quintet went to Paris to accept a defeat from the speedy French All-Stars, 25—18. The French press hailed this victory against the best five in Europe as a huge surprise. After the pilgrimage to the capital of France, the Lithuanians traveled to Tallinn, won against the Estonians 36—24 and at home defeated their ancient rivals, the Latvians, 24—19. In the second clash between the French and Lithuanian All-Stars, the Lithuanians came out on top, 36—24. A crowd of 5,000 sat in on the proceedings at the indoor court in Kaunas Stadium.

In 1939, a huge new sport hall, with a capacity of 13,000, was erected in Kaunas; the Third European Championships in Basketball were held here.

The Lithuanian team had only one close call in retaining first place. In the first game the Latvians were beaten in a tightly contested play, 37—36. Frank J. Lubinas, former Universal Pictures and United States Olympic five star, scored the pivotal basket for the Lithuanians with only a few seconds left before the final horn. After that, the other opponents were overwhelmed with more comfortable margins: Estonians, 33—14; Poles, 46—18; French, 47—18; Finns, 119—9; and Italians, 48—15.

The next European Championships were held at Geneva, 1946. The Lithuanian team couldn't participate and Czechoslovakia took the honor of being the first champion after the Second World War. Later on, the Soviet Union entered this international competition, largely because the Russians were certain of winning. They did all right, and it is worth noting that the backbone of the Soviet Union quintet has been formed by Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians.

During the championship games at Paris in 1951 the Russians repeated their first victory, achieved at Prague in 1947. A Lithuanian, S. Butautas, and an Estonian, Lissov, were close runner-ups to the most valuable player of the games, a Czech, Mrazek. In 1953 at Moscow, four Lithuanians — Butautas, J. La-gunavicius, K. Petkevičius, and A Lauritenas — a Latvian, Zy-linš, and an Estonian, Kullman, helped the Soviet Union to re-mam on the top of European basketball. The same story was repeated at the Olympic Games at Helsinki and most recently at Melbourne. Down under the Soviets took the silver medal after twice losing to the United States. Here again three Lithuanians were to be found in the Russian quintet: S. Stonkus, Petkevičius, Lauritenas and a seven-footer Latvian, J. Kruminš.

It is fair to believe that if Lithuania and the other Baltic countries had not lost their sovereignty, the supremacy of European basketball would have remained with the Baltic States.

In Eastern Europe there is the dawning of a new day. It has not been short or easy in coming. After World War II the Soviet Union used military force to impose on the nations of Eastern Europe, governments of Soviet choice — servants of Moscow. It has been consistent United States policy without regard to political party to seek to end this situation. We have sought to fulfill the wartime pledge of the United Nations that these countries, overrun by wartime armies, would once again know sovereignty and self-government.

President Eisenhower