

AUTHOR: Micah Spatz

TITLE: Dank Diplomacy: Peacemaking Through Basketball in the United States, China, and Eastern Europe in the Cold War Era, 1972-1992

DATE: April 23, 2024

PERMISSION TO COPY UNPUBLISHED WORK

As author of the above unpublished work, I grant permission to the Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526 to make copies of the work in its entirety:

Only for individuals  
Signed: Micah Spatz  
Date: 4/23/24

Only for deposit in other libraries or archives  
Signed: Micah Spatz  
Date: 4/23/24

Either for individuals or for deposit in other libraries or archives  
Signed: Micah Spatz  
Date: 4/23/24

I further grant permission to Goshen College to make the content of this unpublished work available electronically (via Internet or other means)  
Signed: Micah Spatz  
Date: 4/23/24

NOTE: Researchers wishing to quote extensively from the above work must still follow normal copyright guidelines in seeking permission from the author.

DENIAL OF PERMISSION TO COPY UNPUBLISHED WORK

The Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526 does not have my permission to make copies of this work in its entirety. Individuals or libraries interested in copying this work in its entirety should direct their requests to me or my heirs.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dunk Diplomacy: Peacemaking through Basketball in the United States, China, and Eastern  
Europe in the Cold War Era, 1972-1992

By: Micah Spatt

What first comes to mind when thinking about basketball? Perhaps, it is the games, the squeaks of the shoes, the bouncing of the basketball, the roar of the crowd, or artistry in the form of teamwork and passion. Perhaps it is the stars of the game itself. When thinking about basketball, do peacemaking and diplomacy come to mind? Basketball is an American invention. However, since its inception basketball has spread across the globe and has become a worldwide sport. The United States, Europe, and China, in particular, are hot spots for basketball. In recent decades, a large amount of European talents have come overseas to the United States to play in the National Basketball Association. Superstars like Dirk Nowitzki from Germany, Yao Ming from China, Andrei Kirilenko from Russia, and more recently Luka Dončić from Slovenia and Nikola Jokić from Serbia are all stars who have amplified the game in their countries and galvanized the sport overall. While Chinese players are not as common European players on NBA rosters are and have been so for the last couple of decades now. Since 1990, over one hundred players who have played in the NBA have come from countries that were part of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and China.<sup>1</sup> Why is it important that so many NBA players have come from these countries? When looking at the context of the Cold War broadly, and the issues that accompanied relations with the U.S.S.R, China, and supporting countries such as Yugoslavia it is telling to see so many of these players come over and play in the NBA post-Cold War.

However, during the tumultuous period from the 70's to the 90's basketball emerged as more than just a sport in these countries. It was a peacemaker. The term "Dunk Diplomacy" will be used as a term frequently in this thesis as a way of describing the peacemaking role basketball played during this time. The term "Dunk Diplomacy" derives from the term "Ping-Pong Diplomacy". This term was used when the sport was able to break down barriers and stigmas

---

<sup>1</sup> "NBA Players by Country 2024" n.d.

between China and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Dunk Diplomacy transcended national boundaries during this time including countries that were involved in the Cold War on both sides of the issue. The rise of basketball within countries such as the United States, the U.S.S.R., Yugoslavia, and China had an influential role in diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and the collective identity of these countries. Diplomatic initiatives on the surface were often facilitated through basketball events which created opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between countries. Along with this an even more important, but less recognized part of this period was the involvement of the individuals and associations affiliated with basketball during this time. Although peacemaking through basketball was not always the only intention of these groups. The impact they had on the game was through how they carried themselves on and off the court, drew attention to the game, and helped grow basketball as a global peacemaker.

### **Historiography**

Historians have documented basketball since its inception. The focus of most of these historical works has been on a wide range of topics within the sport. Some have explored the complexities of race, politics, and economics within the basketball world. Others are simply biographies covering the legends of the game. Overall, historical works on basketball range from simple narratives to nuanced examinations of cultural, social, and economic significance. The secondary sources being used will be wide and will vary through different sections of the paper. Some will go into certain basketball events such as Kevin Witherspoon's *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports* which covers the 1972 Olympic Basketball final between the United States and U.S.S.R.<sup>3</sup> Along with this are other sources that

---

<sup>2</sup> "Ping-Pong Diplomacy | American Experience | PBS" 2019

<sup>3</sup> Witherspoon, Kevin. "The 1972 U.S.–U.S.S.R. Olympic Basketball Final." In *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*, edited by Steven Gietschier, 129–36. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

cover the lives of some players who are important figures in this thesis. Other sources are recent interviews that would be classified with secondary sources just based on the date of the interview.

The number of primary sources being used will capture the essence of what is going on during this time as well as help prop up how much basketball has grown since 1972. The use of various newspapers during the period as well as official statistics will be used.

However, there has not been a comprehensive text on basketball becoming a peacemaker culturally, socially, and economically. That is where this thesis makes its impact on basketball history literature. There is not one form of literature that has presented itself as basketball being a peacemaker specifically during the Cold War Era this thesis is covering.

### **The 1972 Olympic Basketball Controversy**

First, it is important to understand the full context of the political turmoil caused between countries with basketball being involved. No Cold War basketball controversy is bigger than the championship game that was played between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The 1972 Olympic Basketball final between the United States and Russia on its own was a dramatic and controversial event. With the two sides heavily involved in the Cold War it added political implications. At this point, the United States had never lost in an international competition standing at 63-0. Their team, made up of amateur college basketball players, was set to play the U.S.S.R in the Gold Medal competition. The U.S.S.R team, made up of older professional international athletes ranging from the ages of twenty to thirty-three, were determined to pull off an upset. The U.S. at this time was favored to win, and news media at the time expected the game to be a blowout.<sup>4</sup> However, as the game came to its final seconds, it was

---

<sup>4</sup> Witherspoon, Kevin. "The 1972 U.S.–U.S.S.R. Olympic Basketball Final." In *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*, edited by Steven Gietschier, 129–36. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

far from a blowout. In reality, the Soviets had dominated the game being up by as much as ten points in the game. The United States had battled back and after some free throws, they were able to build a one-point lead with three seconds left. The controversy would ensue shortly.

What largely contributed to this controversy was a peculiar Federation of International Basketball Association rule. The Soviets, trailing by one point, hurriedly advanced the ball as the clock ticked down. However, their protest about an ungranted timeout led to a referee halting the game with just one-second remaining. Renato William Jones, the head of FIBA, ordered the clock reset to three seconds, creating an atmosphere of bedlam.<sup>5</sup> The Americans celebrated what seemed like a historic win, but the scoreboard discrepancy granted the Soviets another chance. Amid a language barrier confusion, Soviet player Ivan Edeshko capitalized on a clear passing lane to Aleksander Belov, who executed a game-winning layup. *The Washington Post* described it as one of the most bizarre events of the 20th Olympiad, concluding the game with premature U.S. victory celebrations followed by Soviet jubilation.<sup>6</sup> With this massive upset many conversations and debates went into the decisions by the refereeing. Ultimately, the result still stands. Along with the result, the United States players have not accepted their silver medals to this day.<sup>7</sup>

The political impact of the event was significant. First, the U.S. tried to protest the match; they were met with what seemed to be extreme bias against their ability to appeal the match. A jury of countries was put together to vote on whether the match should be played again and ended in a 3-2 vote against the Americans. The three countries that voted against them,

---

<sup>5</sup> Witherspoon, Kevin. "The 1972 U.S.-U.S.S.R. Olympic Basketball Final." In *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*, edited by Steven Gietschier, 129–36. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic J. Frommer, "50 Years Later, the Chaotic End of a U.S.-USSR Basketball Game Still Stings," September 8, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Frommer.

Hungary, Poland, and Cuba, were countries that were a part of the communist bloc and were allies with the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

Within this, the game could be seen as a symbol of the ideological and political competitiveness between communism and capitalism. The loss extended into the hate between the two sides growing even stronger, with the U.S. calling the Soviets cheaters and illegitimate champions, and the Soviets calling the U.S. courageless and unable to accept defeat. The political divide between the two sides had grown even larger because of this game. The impact of basketball on political agendas can be seen with just this game alone. Ironically, just a year after the controversy the first sign of “Dunk Diplomacy” emerged.

### **Krešimir Ćosić and “Dunk Diplomacy”**

Kresimir Cosic was a six-foot eleven-inch Yugoslavian basketball player who played at Brigham Young University. Born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, now Zagreb, Croatia, he was ahead of his time as a player being as tall as he was, he was also known for his ability to be positionless in basketball with a keen ability to pass the ball.<sup>9</sup> A trait during that time of basketball was viewed as a weakness, but in today's game would be seen as a strength. Before joining BYU he was already a star basketball player, touring the entirety of Europe. He was invited to join BYU in 1969 and had an illustrious career becoming an All-American. During his time at BYU, the NBA took an interest in him being drafted twice, during his junior year and senior year. Cosic is the first European to be drafted into the NBA but surprisingly rejected playing in the NBA. Cosic was regarded as very loyal to his country and returned home after his four years at BYU. One would point to the social and political context previously mentioned as his reason for rejecting

---

<sup>8</sup> Witherspoon, Kevin. “The 1972 U.S.–U.S.S.R. Olympic Basketball Final.” In *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*, edited by Steven Gietschier, 129–36. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Joe Watts, “Cosic’s Passing Kept The Fans Buzzing,” January 12, 1973.

the NBA and returning to Yugoslavia. However, Cosic did not just play for four years in America and come back with nothing. Cosic brought a newfound faith back with him. Cosic in his time at BYU had become a devoted member of the Church of Latter Day Saints.

In his early years at BYU. Cosic struggled to adhere to the honor code at BYU. He did not know about the school's faith when arrived and had resisted the rules his first year at BYU. Cosic's daily life before he came to BYU consisted of philandering, and using substances such as drugs and alcohol. Cosic' talked about the way he lived in Yugoslavia in a blog covering his life, "In Yugoslavia most of the young people are completely atheistic, and that's the way I lived. When I came to Provo I didn't change. I was an atheist for two years while I was in Provo. Nobody was farther from becoming a Mormon than I was..."<sup>10</sup> However, through slight encouragement from those on campus and studying the Mormon faith himself, he seemingly had converted himself into a man who had fully committed himself to the church. He had become close with one of the key figures at BYU, Hugh Nibley, and met with him weekly. In Cosic's own words, he saw what conflicts could arise while committing himself to the church and emphasized how much the church meant to him. "There are a hundred reasons why I should not join the Church, and only one reason why I should - *because it is true.*"<sup>11</sup>

When examining his time at BYU from the perspective of Dunk Diplomacy, it's clear that Cosic was presented with the opportunity to play in the United States. Through his time at BYU, he not only was a successful basketball player but also converted into a faithful man. He had cleansed himself of alcohol, drugs, and philandering, and had committed himself to taking care of his body and honoring his faith. None of this would have been possible for Cosic without the

---

<sup>10</sup> Dennis & Dionne Newton, web log, *Newton Mission Blog Spot* (blog), May 21, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Nibley, Hugh (2008). *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News. p. 261.

presence of basketball taking him to BYU. When learning more about his time from Dunk Diplomacy's perspective, at BYU as a person and not just a player, his choice to return to Yugoslavia was driven by an opportunity to spread his faith to his people. It had helped Cosic as an individual and he took the opportunity to be a basketball diplomat through his faith and his actions.

Cosic's impact on his country expanded beyond just the basketball court. During his time as a player in Yugoslavia, Cosic won a silver medal at the Olympics in 1976 and won the Gold in 1980. Cosic was also the captain of these teams and had a large influence on the overall success and expansion of the sport in Yugoslavia.<sup>12</sup> His influence and leadership on Yugoslavian basketball expanded to his club team as well. While playing for his club team, KK Zadar, Cosic was able to convince them to sign his old teammate, an American, Doug Richards to the team. Richards was one of the first, if not the first, Americans to play in Yugoslavia therefore benchmarking a moment between East and West borders being broken down.<sup>13</sup> Without Cosic's influence and the obvious trust his club had in him this would not have happened. Cosic's display of Dunk Diplomacy that was needed for the people in that area as the interactions of Richards and his teammates as well as spectators surely saw the stigma between the two sides be broken down in the hearts of the people around them. Cosic's influence as a player was not just confined to the basketball court; he also became a trailblazer for his country when Yugoslavia dissolved.

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Cosic was now considered Croatian and did not hesitate to help his country. Cosic, turning down several offers to coach, instead decided to become a diplomat during the Yugoslav Wars for Croatia. He was the deputy ambassador and

---

<sup>12</sup> Will Grimsley, "Russian Basketball Team Is Big Surprise of Games," July 31, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Madsen, "Krešimir Ćosić Honored in Adriatic North Mission," Church News, July 23, 2015,

stood alone in telling the truth about the war in his country. Cosic's involvement as a leader, coach, player, and minister held much influence within the United States just as he did in Yugoslavia. While he is not largely remembered for his diplomacy because of how short his career was due to his death in 1995, it should be noted that Cosic's impact on his country is massive.

Cosic ability to break down barriers in his country on the court through his display of leadership and commitment to help grow the sport in the country. He broke down barriers by being more than just a star basketball player in his country, he spread Mormonism and helped turn many Yugoslavs to the religion and take up the lifestyle of the Latter Day Saints.<sup>14</sup> Through those two aspects of his life, he was trusted to become a diplomat for his country. That is not a small feat and should be talked about more when talking about basketball figures. Cosic's Dunk Diplomacy impact is not talked about due to a lack of recognition outside of BYU, and some might see his basketball, religious, and diplomatic impact as all separate; they coincide due to his values changing completely while he was at school. Kresimir Cosic is the most notable figure of Dunk Diplomacy, and his actions from college to the end of his life showed his part in using the sport to be an effective peacemaker.

### **The Late 70's and Yugoslavian Success**

With the emergence of someone like Cosic leading the Yugoslavian National Team, there is no coincidence that Yugoslavia was so successful in basketball in the late 70's. From an international basketball success perspective, the Yugoslavians were one of the best in the world. From 1976 to 1980 the Yugoslavians finished with gold medals in all three FIBA tournaments they participated in, and won a Gold Medal in the Olympics in 1980.<sup>15</sup> They defeated the Soviet

---

<sup>14</sup> Gary G. Roe, "Its a Long Way from Basketball Star to Diplomat," April 5, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Archive.fiba.com: Yugoslavia.

Union several times on their way to achieving these Gold Medals, but never played the United States in this tournament due to the United States boycotting this event. Their success however had many questioning whether they could truly contest the United States, and during this time shows how successful Yugoslavia had become to be able to beat the USSR and maybe even beat the United States.<sup>16</sup>

In the political context, from after WW2 to 1970, Yugoslavia was seen as a model country. The general international perception held Yugoslavia as a success because they were able to uphold communism in the vision of the Soviets while still adhering to Western idealized economics. By the materialization of the late 70's, the cracks in the country had started to show. In Yugoslavia, many diverse, multicultural, and multi-ethnic people were all harbored within one country. As such, the people of Yugoslavia very rarely categorized themselves as "Yugoslavs". For the most part, many categorized themselves by where they lived within the country.<sup>17</sup> This excerpt by Paul Lendvai and Lis Parcell gives a great example of what Yugoslavia's national identity was like at this time: "According to the last census in 1981, only 1.2 million people out of a total population of 22.4 million described themselves as Yugoslavs..."<sup>18</sup> They were mainly individuals who were either born into 'mixed marriages', such as those between Croats and Serbs or Slovenes and Macedonians. Some others held positions in the military as officers or non-commissioned officers, as well as in civil service and diplomatic roles. Initially, more people were identifying as 'Yugoslavs', but the recognition of the Muslim community in Bosnia as a

---

<sup>16</sup> Will Grimsley, "Could Yugoslavia Cagers Have Surprised U.S., Too?," July 31, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Lendvai, Paul, and Lis Parcell. "Yugoslavia without Yugoslavs: The Roots of the Crisis." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 67, no. 2 (1991): 251–61.

<sup>18</sup> Lendvai, Paul, and Lis Parcell. "Yugoslavia without Yugoslavs: The Roots of the Crisis." *International Affairs*.

distinct nation in 1971 resulted in a decline. By 1981, 40% of Bosnia-Herzegovina's population identified themselves as 'Muslim' in terms of nationality rather than merely religious affiliation.<sup>19</sup>

When looking at some of the players on the 1978 Yugoslavian National Team their in-country diversity is prevalent. Kresimir Cosic was a Croatian Yugoslavian, as well as his teammate Andro Knego. Another one of their teammates, Rajko Zizic, was Montenegro Yugoslavian. Two more of the players on that team were from Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the complete list of the players' nationalities on that team is not completely available it is seen that the men that represented the team were very diverse themselves, but when it came to basketball they all donned the Yugoslavian jersey during this time of major success for the country. This is the presence of Dunk Diplomacy within the borders of Yugoslavia, while the country slowly started to fall apart, basketball united the country by who represented them. Having these individuals choose to represent their country shows the willingness and pride to represent their families in a time when they could have chosen to sit out. Dunk Diplomacy was ingrained in the positive international image as well as creating a sign of a positive future with their success.

While Yugoslavia would eventually collapse and split into several different countries, the impact of basketball is still present in those countries. Out of the 450 NBA players today, fourteen of them come from those countries. Of those fourteen players, two players share a last name, Bogdan Bogdanovic and Bojan Bogdanovic, but do not share nationalities.<sup>20</sup> Two of those fourteen players, Luka Doncic of Slovenia and Nikola Jokic of Serbia are two of the NBA's best. Nationalism within basketball in these countries is also still very fierce. The best case of this

---

<sup>19</sup> Lendvai, Paul, and Lis Parcell. "Yugoslavia without Yugoslavs: The Roots of the Crisis." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 67, no. 2 (1991): 251–61.

<sup>20</sup> NBA players by country 2024, worldpopulationreview.com.

pride can be seen recently when Nikola Jokic who was recently the MVP of the NBA was not voted as the best Serbian player in the country because he did not play for Serbia in the FIBA World Cup this past year.<sup>21</sup>

Dunk Diplomacy in these countries is surely prevalent now, but in the late 70's it fostered pride within a country that did not have much pride within itself. While Yugoslavia was a communist powerhouse, and had a rich history in basketball, the country does not exist anymore, and the countries that made up the former country are not as involved with the United States as other countries that will be addressed. Another communist powerhouse that is still deeply involved with the United States is China.

### **Chinese Basketball and Its State Today**

Before going over China's basketball history it is important to address the state that Chinese basketball is in today. While table tennis is China's national sport, basketball is played by almost twenty percent of the country. It is the most watched sport in the country, and the country takes deep pride in the sport just like European countries do.<sup>22</sup> However, Chinese success in professional basketball, especially at the NBA and FIBA levels has not been nearly as successful as the European countries addressed in this paper. While China dominated the FIBA Asian Cup tournaments, their placements against the rest of the world were very poor in comparison to Yugoslavia. While Yugoslavia finished first, the Chinese team finished 11th. While they have always been a powerhouse in Asia, they have never finished higher than ninth in the FIBA World Cup, and recently in 2023 finished in 29th place losing to Asian rival

---

<sup>21</sup> Bogdan Bogdanovic claims title of Best Serbian player for 2023, [basketnews.com](https://basketnews.com).

<sup>22</sup> [Archive.fiba.com](https://archive.fiba.com): China.

Philippines in a massive blowout.<sup>23</sup> For a country that loves basketball and has a passion for it, the country has seemed to have gone backward in success.

When looking at famous Chinese basketball players there are not many in their history that were successful in the NBA either. The only obvious selection for Chinese stars who had success in the NBA is Yao Ming. Yao had an amazing career being one of only a few players in NBA history to be an All-Star in every year of his career. Yao Ming had much success in the NBA. However, overall Chinese success in the NBA has been slim and no player from China has been able to stick in the league since. Yao, who is now president of Chinese Basketball Operations, stated in a recent interview how Chinese basketball had fallen behind due to a lack of players wanting to go international. Observing the swift evolution of global basketball, Yao recognized China's significant influence and framed the existing gap as a transitional phase from being less competitive to becoming more formidable. Failing to acknowledge this transformation, he warned, could result in China lagging further behind in the global basketball landscape. He would state in that same interview that if he did not join the NBA and instead stayed in China and played basketball there he would not have been the same person he is now.<sup>24</sup>

When looking at the commercial impact of the NBA on Chinese basketball, it has been more of a negative than a positive. The Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) has adopted NBA rules which are different from FIBA rules. The NBA's format has worked for the NBA because it has the best talent in the world. However, the CBA does not have the best talent in the world and the quality of the product has been poor as well. It is argued amongst mediums that the reason why Chinese basketball is so poor is because its domestic league overpays its domestic players, encouraging them to stay in China instead of challenging themselves overseas. When those

---

<sup>23</sup> "Yao Ming Says Chinese Basketball Needs 'Major Operation' to End the Pain of Failure," South China Morning Post, October 7, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> South China Morning Post, October 7, 2023.

players aren't as exciting, the CBA brings in former NBA players who dominate the league due to the rules allowing them to score easier, therefore making the league less competitive and therefore less watchable as well.<sup>25</sup>

Different international cultures need to learn from each other and basketball is no different. A huge reason behind some European countries' success in basketball is their capability to watch the game in America and make their critiques of the game to make themselves better. It seems China has not caught up to that and therefore has fallen behind in the basketball race. When comparing China to the likes of European countries like Serbia the population of China outweighs Serbia massively, but Serbia has had many more Serbians in the NBA than China. While, as stated previously, China has not. As China seems to be drifting away from trying to compete with the rest of the world it would seem during Cold War times, China wanted to try and compete with the rest of the world and involve itself in a sport like basketball. With this, Dunk Diplomacy would insert its quiet voice into the country through interactions between the NBA, a United States entity.

### **The NBA's First Encounter With China**

In the context of the 70's leading into the 80's NBA was a huge part of Dunk Diplomacy between the United States and China. At the time Chinese and United States relations were overall starting to become diplomatic, and an invitation to the NBA champions at the time, the Washington Bullets, to play in China would be the first form of interaction between the NBA and China.<sup>26</sup>

Due to the Washington Bullets being the NBA champions, and China wanting to spread basketball further within the country. The country and the NBA collaborated to host the NBA

---

<sup>25</sup> South China Morning Post, October 7, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Connie Unseld, On the road through China with Connie and Wes Unseld, September 22, 1979.

champions for twelve days. The Bullets would play a couple of exhibition games against Chinese opposition. However, from first-hand accounts of players and citizens from that Bullets team were able to find a culture much different from their own and unite the two people of two countries that did not know much about each other at that point. Connie Unseld, the wife of Wes Unseld, a star player for the Bullets at the time, gives us a first-hand account of their time in China. From Unseld's perspective she noted that as "interested and curious" they were of the Chinese, the Chinese shared the same energy towards them.<sup>27</sup> There was not any animosity or fear shared between the two groups. They were seen as the center of attention everywhere they went on their twelve-day trip. In her journal, she noted, "The Chinese fascination with our group had mostly to do with the size of the players, of course. The Chinese are not used to seeing people so tall walking their streets. And they were struck by our individuality -- the fact that we wore different clothes and looked so distinctive from one another."<sup>28</sup>

This followed with the Bullets choosing to dress modestly so they stayed away from American stereotypes, trying to draw as little attention in respect of the Chinese culture they had observed. From this small part of the journal from Unseld, this form of Dunk Diplomacy was shown through first-time interactions of people who had not experienced or had little experience of each other's cultures. For the Bullets organization to show respect for their hosts breaks down barriers between the Chinese citizens and the members of the Bullets. However, even with the Bullets trying to dress modestly they still drew massive crowds at every event the Bullets took part in. As the Bullets took in Chinese culture such as shadow boxing, and table tennis Chinese citizens gathered around to see the Bullets take in that culture:

---

<sup>27</sup> Connie Unseld.

<sup>28</sup> Connie Unseld.

Drawing large crowds took some getting used to. The gathering at the shadow boxing session in the plaza outside our hotel became a small throng, perhaps in the thousands. They enjoyed watching Wes join in the shadow boxing exercises, but the enormous gathering of people became almost frightening. We returned all the attention by passing out American flags, and by using our very limited Chinese (hello, how are you?), which they seemed to appreciate. Wes led groups of Chinese in saying hello and goodbye. And we smiled a lot.<sup>29</sup>

While Chinese citizens were raucous outside the basketball court the environment that the Bullets had played was notably quite tame. Just as they were on the outside, the crowd would be compared more to an opera than an excitable crowd seeing giants take on their home countries team:

There were 19,000 people on hand in Peking, for example, about the number it takes to fill the house at the Capital Centre. But there was none of the bedlam of the center. At halftime, most of the people stayed in their seats, which was understandable since no refreshments were served in the building. And when the game was over, a series of bells rang, cueing various sections of the audience to leave the building. Within five minutes, the coliseum was empty.<sup>30</sup>

While the crowd itself was tame, the game itself was the continuation of Dunk Diplomacy translating from off the court to on the court. A newspaper journal recounting the games showed the amount of positivity that game brought to China and the Washington Bullets. The game was seen as comedic as it was competitive for the two teams. The Chinese team had a massive man on their team Mu Tiejun who the Bullets said could have possibly been up to seven foot eight. Despite Mu's early dominance, the Bullets made a comeback with standout performances from players like Kevin Porter and Roger Phegley. The game included humorous

---

<sup>29</sup> Connie Unseld.

<sup>30</sup> Jay Mathews, Bullets in China, meet a mountain - The Washington Post, August 25, 1979.

moments, such as the Bullets' coach amusingly arguing with Chinese referees through an interpreter. Despite the Bullets' eventual victory, Mu Tiejun's size and skill left a lasting impression on players and fans alike. The Bullets' players reflected on the intense match, with a coach even receiving a technical foul for disputing a referee's decision. Assistant Coach Bernie Bickerstaff made light of the situation, joking about not starting another revolution amidst the large Chinese crowd.<sup>31</sup>

As stated before, the game was very competitive and very comedic, but the impact of this game can also be emphasized through the competitiveness being mixed with everyone having a good time during the game as well. Not too long ago a basketball game between the United States and a different communist power ended very differently and had very negative ramifications. While the implications and consequences of this game were different the Bullets easily could have seen the Chinese opponent as hostile. The Chinese easily could have seen the Bullets as hostile. Both teams wanted to win not just for themselves but also for their own countries. The Bullets were impressed by the Chinese team's competitiveness and ability to stay close instead of being offended. The coaches were able to make jokes and not be uptight in a hostile environment. Diplomacy was made during this time for the Bullets, and it was obvious they knew the weight of representing themselves in a positive way for their country.

The Chinese people also made the experience for the American side diplomatic as well. The kindness and politeness they showed as well as the amount of amazement instead of fear showed the country that diplomatic relationships between the two sides were more than available. Basketball presented the opportunity for the two sides to take part in culture connecting, and that was done. With both sides having a positive experience the country and the

---

<sup>31</sup> Jay Mathews.

NBA decided to keep expanding the game of basketball between the two sides. In 1980, the TV rights of the NBA were given to China for free. Since the rights were given away the relationship between basketball and China has grown tremendously.

Within the growth of basketball in China is the relationship between the United States and China as well. While politics has played a part in diplomacy between the two sides, basketball's impact needs to be acknowledged as being a diplomatic force. Politicians are not idolized like NBA stars are. Chinese citizens probably couldn't name any United States politicians, but they could name NBA players. On an economic level, the relationship between the NBA, the United States, and China is very important as well.

Dunk Diplomacy is not one-sided in its approach to building bridges. Money has been a huge part of why basketball has made relationships between the two sides easier. It is a massive part of Dunk Diplomacy. The NBA's intentions to make global outreach are two-fold. One side of the reason is to expand the game to every part of the world, but the other side is the opportunity to create more fans and therefore create more revenue as well. By no means is Dunk Diplomacy a pure form of Diplomacy. In its purest form basketball is a peacemaker. When it is applied by associations such as the NBA, for peacemaking to continue to grow money also has to be made. A part of Dunk Diplomacy and its impact that has not yet been covered in this timeline is how it affected the United States during this period. As mentioned, basketball has played an important part in diplomacy for the world, and diplomacy between countries and within countries themselves. This also includes the United States and the many issues that accompanied it during this time.

### **Dunk Diplomacy in College Basketball**

Basketball in the United States during the 70's and 80's was overridingly dominated by Civil Rights issues and the growth of college basketball and the NBA during this time. Key figures such as Bill Russell and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar were outspoken NBA stars during this time of unrest in the United States. Furthermore, those stories have been covered, fleshed out, and analyzed. Those are big parts of American basketball and American political history. College basketball and its social and diplomatic moments are also key in how basketball has become a peacemaking agent. There are many key moments in college basketball that occurred socially and politically that helped diplomacy be achieved in the country.

Before the timeline, there are a couple of key moments in college basketball that need to be addressed first. The first event would be the 1963 national championship game between Loyola Chicago and the University of Cincinnati where seven of the ten starters in that game were Black. Loyola had four Black starters and Cincinnati had three Black starters. Another historical event was the 1966 National Champions the Texas Western Miners who are now the UTEP Miners. This college basketball team was the first team in college athletics to have a team composed of a majority of Black players to white players. Among that milestone, the Miners also came out with an all-black starting lineup during the national championship game. While that team were trailblazers for all college basketball and for the country overall they still dealt with many racially involved issues that would be covered in the movie *Glory Road*. Their achievement and bravery to do what they did needs to be acknowledged as they were a big part of how basketball has played its part in peacemaking and breaking down racial barriers within the United States.<sup>32</sup>

Even after the events of *Glory Road* the racial barriers within college basketball still stood strong. Within college basketball there still was the notion of white vs. black within college

---

<sup>32</sup> *Glory Road* (Milano: Buena Vista, 2006).

basketball. One of the most famous college basketball storylines was the rivalry between Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. This rivalry was not a rivalry between the two men. This rivalry was the rivalry between people on the outside making this time about white and black. A book published by Nelson Murry in 2017 gives the reader a glimpse into what the game meant to many on the outside of the National Championship game between Larry Birds' Indiana State and Magic Johnsons' Michigan States:

Because Bird had appeared on television so few times, a considerable number of fans thought he was African American. Once it became widely known that Bird was white, a number of easy dichotomies appeared... There was the black-white difference, but, in a reversal of stereotype, there was also Bird, the boy raised by a single parent or grandmother, versus Johnson, from a stable family. Promoters played up the urban-rural contrast. Johnson was a city lad from Lansing while Bird hailed from French Lick, Indiana, and played basketball in jeans and tennis shoes for much of his youth ... Then there were their personalities, with the ebullient Johnson contrasted with the shy, introverted Bird. A corollary of this was Bird's refusal to engage with reporters, while Johnson was always ready to provide quotes or a publicity photo.<sup>33</sup>

Within the Bird and Magic timeline, this is the very beginning of their story together, and is worth mentioning the impact that they made in their careers in the NBA. Dunk Diplomacy in the United States has been best made when looking at the NBA. The biggest part of Dunk

---

<sup>33</sup> Nelson, Murry. "Larry Bird vs. Magic Johnson, 1979." In *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*, edited by Steven Gietschier, 153–60. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Diplomacy is the rivalry that was carried between Bird and Magic as Bird was drafted to the Boston Celtics and Magic was drafted to the Los Angeles Lakers.

### **Early 80's NBA: Bird, Magic, and Dunk Diplomacy 1979-1984**

Before going into the dynamics of Bird, Johnson, and their relationship it's important to mention that the NBA at this point did not have a racial barrier within the league itself. The greatest and most famous players in its history at this point were Jerry West, Oscar Robertson, Bill Russel, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Russel and Abdul-Jabbar were both trailblazers within the NBA as activists. Russel, a star in Boston, a known racist sports town, and Abdul Jabbar, a Muslim basketball player were both individuals who showed their ways of breaking down barriers in the NBA and in the country.<sup>34</sup> The rivalry between Bird and Magic would not even be considered the first “racial rivalry” with Jerry West and Oscar Roberston predating this. What made the rivalry between Bird and Magic so special was their personalities that accommodated the growing media circus that the NBA was starting to grow into. The two players had competed against each other at a high level in college and Bird being from the basketball-loving state of Indiana exemplified the rivalry between the two in a big way.<sup>35</sup> The two made an interesting story in the NBA and during this time was something the NBA desperately needed at this time. With Bird being drafted to Boston the city seemingly had a star that it could get behind. With Magic being drafted by Los Angeles the city also had obtained a star that it could get behind as well. The rivalry played into media stories, and the racial part of the rivalry only exemplified it more.

Larry Bird, his “whiteness”, and how he was perceived by the general public during this time were as exemplified as one would think during this time. “The Great White Hope” was a

---

<sup>34</sup> Jordan Greer, “NBA on MLK Day 2023: How Bill Russell Inspired Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to Carry Social Justice Torch,” *Sporting News*, January 16, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

term used by everyone when talking about him and his impact on the game. Many made jokes about how white he looked and acted. Jim Murray, a reporter who covered Larry Bird heavily during this time, joked about Larry Bird and his ability to be white, but also his ability to be the best player on the floor:

You look at No.33 of the Boston Celtics and you think you got the picture. Big white kid. All that goldilocks blond hair, scraggly moustache. Skin so fair you could almost see through it... No player from the glory years of the Celts ever put on a better exhibition against the championship club (referencing the Lakers) than Larry Bird...He threw in 36 points, eight field goals, some 2 point range, and he pulled down 21 rebounds. He had six assists... The press watched while he pulled on a pair of work pants, a lumber shirt, and jogging shoes... Around him, the street boys were putting on their spangled night costumes they most prefer. Jewelry flashed in the lights. Bird didn't even have a wristwatch. In French Lick, they tell time by the cows.<sup>36</sup>

The most “white” of nicknames that stuck with Larry Bird was the moniker that came before he was even in the NBA. His title of being called “The Great White Hope” came from his time playing at Indiana State. It seemed it was moreover a joke of a nickname but some people took the nickname more seriously than others.

When looking at how Larry Bird handled being the “Great White Hope” he shows why he was a huge connector of the racial barrier created by media and fans in the NBA. When asked about his nickname Larry Bird was unphased by the racial complications that could have come with that name. “I'm not a racist...”, was all he said when it came to that name. Bird found it more annoying than anything because all he wanted to do was focus on basketball. “...there aren't many great whites left because there are so many good, great black basketball players. I

---

<sup>36</sup> Jim Murray, “NBA Fans Find Larry Strange Bird,” February 16, 1981.

hope I can hold myself up with them. I know they're waiting for me."<sup>37</sup> Within this singular quote, Bird was not necessarily an active political advocate for Civil Rights, but that's what makes Larry Bird so important in this history of the NBA and Dunk Diplomacy. He was a great basketball player who happened to be white. On the other side of the rivalry was Magic Johnson, who had a personality that matched the City of Los Angeles.

Magic Johnson's impact on the Lakers and the City of Los Angeles was exactly what the NBA itself needed to make it a money-making league. Johnson's personality made the Lakers instantly marketable to the wider audiences and it was Johnson's play that had helped the Lakers have instant success. A Tennessee newspaper says it simply, "Magic Johnson Jr. has brought his winning smile to the NBA, turning a staid, stodgy team into a happy, victorious one"<sup>38</sup> The Lakers with Magic had instantly become winners, and within his first year in the league they had won an NBA championship. Magic's impact in the championship is considered his greatest moment in the NBA as a player. In the game-clinching game six of the finals Magic had a tremendous stat line and had played the center position because the Laker's other star, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, had sustained an injury and was unable to play. Magic had been dominant as only a rookie and showed his maturity. Not only did Magic Johnson win a championship as a rookie, but it showed that the NBA had a star and a personality to rely on for the years to come.

With Magic winning a championship the very next year Bird won a championship in 1981, although he did not have the same impact as Magic did. The rivalry between the two would be quieter for the upcoming years, but the two themselves had continued to have fantastic careers. Larry Bird in 1984 would beat out Magic for his first MVP award winning it in 1984.

---

<sup>37</sup> 'Great White Hope' Tag Doesn't Bother Larry Bird," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1979.

<sup>38</sup> Jim Murray, "'Magic' Rounds up Smiles, Title," April 8, 1980.

The comparisons between Magic and Bird were heavy and an Orlando newspaper would encapsulate how these two stacked up against each other. The paper acquired several opinions from several figures in the NBA choosing between Magic and Bird.<sup>39</sup> The two were heavily analyzed, but ultimately as it always seemed they would break even with each other. However, the chance to see them go head to head would finally happen in 1984 as the Lakers and the Celtics would meet in the finals.

This series itself had massive implications. The “Showtime” Lakers versus Larry Bird and the white Boston Celtics. During this time the Celtics were the whitest team in the NBA. Statistics showed that for the Celtics the ratio between white and black was almost 50/50 while for most teams in the league it was closer to 75/25.<sup>40</sup> It was more than just a battle for the championship; it was a clash of styles, personalities, and ideologies. However, the NBA had marketed this matchup as Bird vs Magic, white vs. black.<sup>41</sup> Magic represented the glitz and glamor of Los Angeles, while Bird embodied the blue-collar work ethic of Boston. Game after game, the two superstars dazzled audiences with their brilliance. Magic's no-look passes and towering presence on the court mesmerized fans, while Bird's clutch shooting and relentless competitiveness left opponents in awe. Each possession was compared to a chess match between two master tacticians, with Magic orchestrating the Lakers' fast-paced offense and Bird dictating the tempo for the Celtics. However, in the end, it was Magic and the Lakers who would come out on top in a hard-fought seven-game series. Even though this series ended up with Magic on top in this instance the series was monumental in the history of the NBA itself. It had storylines, it had characters, and it had excitement, something the league had not had before.

---

<sup>39</sup> Roy S. Johnson, “Bird, Magic: NBA’s Best,” May 29, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> John Matthew Smith “‘Gifts That God Didn’t Give’: White Hopes, Basketball, and the Legend of Larry Bird.” *Massachusetts Historical Review (MHR)* 13 (2011): 1–30.

<sup>41</sup> John Matthew Smith.

While it is generally known that Bird and Magic changed the landscape of basketball it also changed the landscape of the United States in a smaller way. Shoe companies, news media, the emergence of China, and other factors were influenced hugely by Bird and Magic. All of these factors made money and created pathways for sides that had not collaborated before. With this rivalry, they would meet many more times and each time it would be a game to remember. Bird and Magic's part in using basketball as a peacekeeping force was not intentional. These were two men who were focused on their craft and were not necessarily focused on outside forces such as race. Bird was a down-to-Earth, simple, Hoosier man, and Magic was a charismatic, smooth, man who was a superstar in the city of Los Angeles. They were focused on winning and their inner circle and not much else. However, that focus was what made a bigger impact on the people on the outside. Bird was a white man who was one of the best players in a league that was dominated by black men. As stated before with his attitude towards his race he was also able to show his personality creating great relationships with every person on his team.

Magic's personality was what killed the stigma about him as a black man. He was a man who cared little about what others said and was going to play his brand of flashy basketball as well as be a flashy character off the court. Magic and Bird showed that there is no one way to be a superstar in the NBA and that created opportunities for any person who paid attention to pick up a basketball and create a diverse community within themselves. Bird and Magic were the two biggest peacemakers in basketball during this time and it was not due to any political movement it was through the way they played and the way they carried themselves.

### **Olympic Boycotts in the Early 80's**

Within individual countries, in the years 1979-1985, there was tremendous growth in the sport of basketball. As stated earlier the United States, Yugoslavia, and China all had

experienced different levels of growth in the sport. Other countries such as the Soviet Union had also seen much success in basketball during this timeline as well. However, the Cold War still stood in the way of effective peacemaking internationally and that was in effect because of the boycotting of the 1980 Olympics from the United States and their allies and the boycotting of the 1984 Olympics by the Soviet Union and their allies.

The United States decided to boycott the 1980 Olympics due to the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan, starting a war between the two countries. The president at the time, Jimmy Carter, initially demanded that the Olympics be moved out of the Soviet Union to make the competing worlds all safer, but was deemed impossible as it was too late to change the location. On April 12, 1980, the United States announced that they would boycott the Olympics that summer. Over sixty countries also decided to boycott the Olympics that summer taking opposition against the Soviet-Afghan War.<sup>42</sup>

The Soviet Union decided to participate in the Winter Olympics that took place in the United States that Winter. A landmark event in the history of sports happened with the “Miracle on Ice” where the United States defeated the Soviet Union in hockey and eventually went on to win the Gold in that event. While the Soviet Union had tolerated the United States enough that year they decidedly took revenge on the United States and their supporters by withdrawing from the 1984 Olympics that took place in the United States that summer. The Washington Post stated during this time, “The Soviet decision to boycott the Los Angeles Games was undoubtedly taken at the highest levels of Kremlin leadership and appeared to be aimed directly at President Reagan and his reelection campaign. The absence of Soviet athletes at the Summer Olympics seems designed to demonstrate to the American public the continued deterioration in Soviet-American

---

<sup>42</sup> Terence Smith, “The President Said Nyet,” January 20, 1980.

relations.”<sup>43</sup> Thirteen countries alongside the Soviet Union decidedly boycotted the Olympics that year. The tensions between these countries were as high as they could have been. Any chance of diplomacy between the people of these countries was unavailable. The Olympics, which were used for forms of diplomacy, were turned into political statements and opportunities for these countries to stay stubborn and stuck in their ways.

This rivalry between the two powerhouse countries would continue to be a sticking point even on the basketball court. Even though the two countries would not face off against each other in the Olympics, the two countries would face off against each other in the FIBA World Championships many times.

### **World Championships Data**

It is important to note that during this time the United States could only send college athletes to world competitions like the Olympics and the FIBA Championships. The NBA was considered a professional league, so professional players could not participate in “amateur events” as mentioned before. Every year the United States would field a new team while Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union had plenty of continuation between every competition, as the best players in their countries would play for their country’s domestic leagues and would play together every year. For example, Kresimir Cosic’s impact was felt throughout his country because he captained his team many times throughout the years as they won. This would point to the power struggle between these three countries in basketball as the Soviets and Yugoslavians would continue to get better as a team and as individuals while the United States put together several very talented young athletes who would only be together for a couple of weeks before they competed against grown men. It will be noted that while the US dominated in Olympic

---

<sup>43</sup> Dusko Doder, “Soviets Withdraw from Los Angeles Olympics - The Washington Post,” Soviets Withdraw From Los Angeles Olympics, May 8, 1984,

competition they struggled to win it all in FIBA competition, as they only won once in the history of the competition up to this point. Yugoslavia was another country that dominated world basketball and were countries that competed and medaled in almost every World Championship between these years.

Between 1974 to 1986 the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia medaled in every single championship. Yugoslavia, led by Kresimir Cosic won gold in the Philippines in 1978. The Soviets during this time could make an argument that they were the best basketball country in the world. In 1974 and 1982 the Soviets won gold and medaled in every competition between 1974 to 1986. The United States had not won the FIBA World Championships since 1954. and while they had medaled in the competitions they were the only country out of these three to miss out on the podium entirely. In 1978, the United States would lose to Italy in the quarter-finals and would finish 5th in the competition overall.<sup>44</sup> When comparing the three countries, the fifth-place finish would be a blemish on the record of the United States due to the overall success they had in world basketball during this time. In the Olympics, a competition the US had dominated, would finish with Golds in the years that they participated in, and only missed out on Gold in the 1980 Olympics due to them boycotting the event. Due to the overall competition between these teams basketball shingles through a peacemaking agent. The FIBA Championships were still happening and these countries were all still participating even between the times of the Olympic Boycotts, and the chance for these countries to have any form of contact with each other was shown on the basketball court. It is worth noting that in all these competitions there was not any type of skirmish between these teams. This showed the ability of these countries to stay civil with each other and compete in the name of their country. This is unquestionably a form of diplomacy as these countries shared experiences and shared the same ball. The Soviet Union and the United

---

<sup>44</sup> Archive.fiba.com: USA.

States severely wanted to beat each other. This was a more peaceful alternative for these countries to show which country was superior. Dunk Diplomacy is shown with the sharing of a basketball court. These countries were peacemaking through competition. Within the willingness to compete against each other, the pursuit of being the first three-time world champions was at stake for the Soviet Union with all three of these countries playing for that in 1982 in the FIBA World Championships.

### **The United States vs The Soviet Union 1982-1986**

In 1982, the United States and the Soviet Union would face off against each other in the championship game. The Soviet Union, led by teen star Arvydas Sabonis, and the United States led by Doc Rivers was a game that had implications for the best in the world. The United States was still attempting to earn its second title. This was hot off the heels of the Miracle on Ice and just a few days before these two sides would play each other. The United States won the previous matchup 99-93. This game was broadcast around the world from Columbia with a grainy Spanish broadcast, and a visual on the screen that would fit the times. The championship game was hotly contested with both sides switching leads back and forth. The game had come down to the final shot with Doc Rivers getting a clean look to win the game, but the shot fell just short and the Soviet Union won 95-94. The game meant a lot to both sides as the Soviet Union was seen celebrating massively, giving out hugs to each other and pumping their fists in the air. The United States men's anguish could be seen as soon as the game ended with multiple members of the team falling to the ground in anger and sadness.<sup>45</sup> The United States had let their country down, and the Soviet Union had given great pride to the country, becoming the first three-time champions. It would seem the Soviets had vindication, beating the United States and holding the title for the best in the world. While on a smaller scale compared to the Miracle on Ice, the World

---

<sup>45</sup> "FIBA World Championship 1982 Final: USSR VS USA," YouTube, April 14, 2017.

Championship was a monumental victory for the Soviets. With the Soviet Union withdrawing from the 1984 Olympics we would not see the two sides face off for another four years. The United States won Gold in the 1984 Olympics. The two sides would not meet again until the 1986 FIBA Championships.

The implications of the 1986 FIBA Championships do not need to be reiterated. The championship game would be the pinnacle of the tournament as the two best in the world would face off once again. The Soviets were once again led by big man Arvydas Sabonis and guard Sarunas Marciulonis. While the United States had many future NBA stars like David Robinson, Muggsy Bogues, Kenny Smith, and Steve Kerr. This time the roles were reversed in the outcome of the game. The United States men had come out victorious with their mix of athleticism and youthfulness beating out the veteran Soviet Union 95-94. The Soviet Union almost pulled off a comeback of the ages being down 78-60 and fighting back to be down two, but the men of the United States were able to pull it off. The United States men stormed the court in happiness as the Soviet Union men looked on in disappointment. This was the United States' first FIBA Gold since 1954. However, while this was an important event in the history of the basketball rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States there surprisingly is not much newspaper coverage in the United States over the FIBA Championships. There are a couple of reasons behind this worth discussing that contributed to the overall lack of popularity of this competition.

One reason behind this is the competition itself. The FIBA World Championships at most of these tournaments only held thirteen total teams from all over the country up until 1986 when the format changed to twenty-four total teams. Another reason the popularity of the World Championships did not hold much esteem was because of the lack of stars who participated on the United States teams. While the "professional athletes" of other countries like the USSR were

able to participate in the tournament, it was still considered an amateur event just like the Olympics were during this time. Basketball was still a growing sport in the world and one would bet that if the stars of the NBA like Bird and Magic had participated in the event, there would be much larger news coverage. There was no social media at the time, and many of the stars that were a part of that 1986 team were yet to have made a true name for themselves as they were still college athletes at this time. Another reason for the lack of popularity was that up to this point in the tournament history, the FIBA Championships had yet to have been held in the United States. Due to all the championships being broadcasted in local languages of the countries they took place in there is no evidence that supports the tournaments were broadcasted in the United States during this time. Therefore, creating a lack of knowledge and excitement surrounding the tournament itself. This can be shown and supported as well due to the coverage and the emphasis put on what would be the final meeting between the USSR and the United States in the 1988 Olympics

The pride of the United States and basketball ran deep in the Olympics every four years, and this year had even bigger implications for the pride of the United States. Leading up to the Olympics the selection of the coach, John Thompson, was heavily criticized. Thompson, a hall-of-fame college basketball coach known for his hard-nosed, loud tactics as a coach at Georgetown had worked in college, but many questioned if his tactics were good for the Olympic team in 1988. His strategy to mold a hard-nosed cohesive team had worked in college basketball where the players are around each other year-round and represent the same school. The Olympic team had only been together for a couple of weeks, and Thompsons' selections of the players on the team did not make up the best college basketball players. It was made of the

best players that fit Thompson's system. He was more focused on his brand and the formidable Soviets than winning a Gold for his team.<sup>46</sup>

The game itself was a less than remarkable showing from the United States youngsters as they played a seasoned Soviet Team that knew each other's strengths. The Soviet Union had played a more modern game than the United States did, shooting seventeen threes, and playing through their best players Sarunis Marciulonis and Arvydas Sabonis who finished with nineteen points.<sup>47</sup> This was not the best possible team for the U.S., and it showed as the Soviet Union, with their best possible players, put on a display in this semi-final game that helped bolster them to a gold medal as they defeated Yugoslavia in the Gold Medal match. The United States was outplayed and out-coached in every way. The game ended closer than it looked on the court, 82-76. The United States had been defeated again by the U.S.S.R., and it would be the last time as the two would never face each other again. This loss along with the emergence of several of these foreign stars being drafted into the NBA, the United States would fight to reclaim its spot at the top of the world with the emergence of the Dream Team a few years later.

While the emergence of putting NBA stars into the Olympics and FIBA Championships was inevitable the reaction was probably too soon. The reason behind the defeat to the USSR was the lack of preparation between the US and the selection of the Coach. Arguably, a better coach and a better system to implement within the college ranks would have made the "amateurism" of the sport last longer. However, with the domination of the USSR and the quieter but still valid success of the Yugoslavians, the best players from these countries were being signed into the NBA, therefore creating a more global game just a few years before the Dream Team was implemented.

---

<sup>46</sup> Norm Fraunheim, "Thompson Tactics out of Line for Olympics," August 28, 1988.

<sup>47</sup> Hal Bock, "Thompson Gets Heat for Loss," September 28, 1988.

The performance of several Soviets and Yugoslavians was noted by many NBA teams as both Marciulonis and Sabonis as well as Vlade Divac from Yugoslavia would be signed into the NBA. While Sabonis would not join the NBA until much later, it was Sarunis Marciulonis who would make headlines in 1989 becoming the first Soviet to join the NBA.

### **Soviets in the League**

In 1987 Sarunis Marciulonis was drafted in the NBA. In 1988 Marciulonis helped the Soviet Union defeat the United States in the Olympics for the first time since 1972, being the leading scorer for his country. In 1989, Marciulonis signed an NBA contract with the Golden State Warriors. He became the first Soviet Union citizen to join the NBA. Now, with the signing of Marciulonis, it was seen that the NBA was a widespread advocate for Dunk Diplomacy. Along with Marciulonis signing his NBA contract, there was also the drafting of other Soviet stars. In 1986, Sabonis was drafted by the Portland TrailBlazers even though he would not join the 'Blazers until 1995 when he was thirty. Although Sabonis joined later in his career he still was close to the organization leading up to those years. When he tore his Achilles the Blazers helped him with the rehab even if it caused issues within the media due to the idea of Soviets and Americans helping each other being fairly new.<sup>48</sup>

The signing of Marciulonis was a landmark event in the history of the NBA, and the relations of the two countries in basketball and the world overall. The Golden State Warriors coach and general manager at that time, Don Nelson, stated in his own words the gravity of this signing held for the world. "This is a landmark day in the history of basketball and, in a very special way, world relations..."<sup>49</sup> Marciulonis was a hot prospect from the Soviet Union and this was not just a signing for the sake of signing a Soviet player. Marciulonis had dominated the

---

<sup>48</sup> Associated Press "An NBA First: Golden State Signs Russian," *Clarion-Ledger*, June 25, 1989.

<sup>49</sup> Associated Press, "Soviet Star Says He'll Play in NBA," June 21, 1989.

Olympics the year prior and had already been in contact with the Warriors for a couple of years. Within the signing of Marciulionis, it seemed pretty straightforward with both sides of the transaction being relatively smooth. From Marciulionis' perspective, both sides had no issues with the signing and he saw no issue with the prospect of playing basketball in America.<sup>50</sup> Alongside his signing into the NBA another Soviet, Alexander Volkov, was signed by the Atlanta Hawks in the same year.

With the signing of these two Soviet Stars was finally the benchmark of the Soviet Union and the United States joining together. These two Soviet stars were both under the same agent, Marc Fleisher, who was able to facilitate and persuade both sides of the deals to make that happen. These benchmark moments were all big parts of the globalization of the game in the NBA. With the globalization of the NBA, many stars were to be found. Mentioned before was the 1986 FIBA Championships which was the tournament known for its part in facilitating the globalization of the game.

### **Globalization Through The 1986 FIBA Championship**

While the Soviets and the United States were always the favorites and the powerhouses of this tournament, the tournament had several future stars for their countries. Rik Smits, Andrew Gaze, Drazen Petrovic, and Vlade Divac were all stars for their respective countries who would become role models for the future of basketball for their countries. Smits, an agile seven-foot-four center from the Netherlands would use this tournament and his success at the collegiate level to bolster himself up to becoming the second overall pick in the 1988 draft. While the Netherlands even to today's standards are not basketball powerhouses it is important to see the growth of basketball and the NBA finding players who were coming from different countries.

---

<sup>50</sup> Associated Press, "Soviet Star Says He'll Play in NBA," June 21, 1989.

Andrew Gaze of Australia was a lesser-known player during this time and did not have the same success as the others as he only played a handful of games in the NBA. However, in Australia his impact on the game of basketball was crucial to the sport as he is a local legend in the country and had a long career in their league, the National Basketball League. He also had a strong influence and great relationship with Luc Longley, the first Australian drafted into the NBA. They played together on the national team many times and are both known as some of the first greats of Australian basketball.<sup>51</sup>

The Yugoslavians of course were another star-producing powerhouse and with the inclusion of Vlade Divac and Drazen Petrovic, they only added to their resume of being a great basketball country. Vlade Divac was the first player of the two to enter the NBA in 1989 as he joined the esteemed Los Angeles Lakers. Divac had a very long career and is an all-time great in his country of Serbia. Drazen Petrovic is a bigger star in a different way than Divac, however. Petrovic is known as one of the greatest what-ifs in the overall history of basketball. His proficiency from behind the three-point line was way ahead of his time, and his ability to compete against some of the greatest players of all time such as Michael Jordan, and look just as good or even better than them at times made him a possible future legend in the NBA.<sup>52</sup> Sadly, Petrovic's career and life would be cut short as he would get in a car accident in 1993 ending his life. He is widely regarded as one of the great European players and even considered in some circles as the greatest of all time.<sup>53</sup>

With the emergence of all of these players from all these different countries it would be hard for these countries to stay away or neutral from each other. Basketball has always shown the side of diplomacy throughout the world, especially in these specific FIBA tournaments. The

---

<sup>51</sup> "USA Claim Second Title at '86 World Cup in Spain," FIBA.basketball, April 7, 2022

<sup>52</sup> Mitch Lawrence, Nets' Petrovic dies in auto accident - The Washington Post, June 8, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Mitch Lawrence.

FIBA tournaments allowed not just NBA scouts, but also college scouts to see these international youngsters give it a go against some of their countries' own. The spread of basketball and Dunk Diplomacy itself would come to its most documented pinnacle when the 1992 Olympics came around and the United States Dream Team would come to Barcelona, Spain in 1992.

### **The Dream Team and Basketballs Evident Globalization**

While this moment in history is well documented it is needed for the conclusion of this timeline as its impact on the sport and its natural use of Dunk Diplomacy. With the emergence of the Olympics becoming a professional event it was the first year that the Olympics would have some of their biggest stars from the United States. The team put together for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona was legendary. It held eleven future hall of famers on the team and was made up of some of the greatest of all time. Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, and Micheal Jordan all represented this team as well as David Robinson, another star who was mentioned previously. The media coverage, personalities, and awe-displaying acts on the court were all moments that made up the legend of the Dream Team.

They were never contested in the Olympics as they dominated the competition. They never got the chance to take on the USSR in what would have been most likely been a highly anticipated event, but the USSR dissolved in the winter of 1991 and Yugoslavia dissolved in the summer of that same year. Interestingly enough, the two countries that finished with silver, Croatia, and bronze, Lithuania, was a country that had dissolved from Yugoslavia and the USSR, respectively. Regardless of whether the USSR or Yugoslavia took part in this event, it would have not mattered. Before, these two countries were taking on college kids. Here, the best in the world had assembled.

In 1992 the US had brought their best of the best and it would have been a blowout. The game was elevated and everyone around the world had seen these stars on the biggest stage in all of sports. The emergence of the Dream Team inspired several youngsters outside of the United States to push themselves for their own country. It is well documented the impact the Dream Team had on world basketball and the stars it had inspired because of that moment.<sup>54</sup> The Dream Team represented the pinnacle of Dunk Diplomacy. They were able to experience the spread of basketball to people around the world and in return gave people only one thing they wanted to do or think about, basketball. That need for peace to only want to be successful at basketball is what the Dream Team was and still is a goal for many in the United States and outside of it.

### **Conclusion**

With the Dream Team, it is evident that much work had been done with basketball before those two weeks in Barcelona. Dunk Diplomacy was at its all-time high. The world had come together because of basketball. The emergence of basketball in communist countries like the U.S.S.R. and China is evident throughout the timeline. The importance of the individuals and associations that acted as basketball diplomats in these countries is why basketball had momentum during these times. The FIBA Championships are and continue to be connectors for the world as they were back then. On the other hand, the United States peacemaking advocate, the NBA, was integral to Dunk Diplomacy and the growth of the sport worldwide and within their borders. Basketball contributed during the Cold War and has continued to contribute to the game ever since. The contact that led to the ability for peace between countries because of this game and its impact is evident through people and events in the sport.

---

<sup>54</sup> The Barcelona 1992 Dream Team, <https://olympics.com/en/topics/this-is-the-dream-team>.

## Bibliography

**Secondary Sources:**

- “Ping-Pong Diplomacy | American Experience | PBS.” 2019. Pbs.org. 2019.  
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/china-ping-pong/>.
- Gietschier, Steven. 2017. *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles the Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*. University Of Illinois Press.
- Frommer, Frederic J. 2022. “50 Years Later, the Chaotic End of a U.S.-USSR Basketball Game
- Still Stings.” *Washington Post*, September 8, 2022.
- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2022/09/08/us-ussr-basketball-1972-munich-olympics/>.
- Dennis & Dionne Newton, web log, *Newton Mission Blog Spot* (blog), May 21, 2017.
- Nibley, Hugh (2008). *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News. p. 261.
- Ann Madsen, “Krešimir Ćosić Honored in Adriatic North Mission,” *Church News*, July 23, 2015,
- Lendvai, Paul, and Lis Parcell. “Yugoslavia without Yugoslavs: The Roots of the Crisis.” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 67, no. 2 (1991): 251–61.
- Bogdan Bogdanovic claims title of Best Serbian player for 2023, *basketnews.com*.
- “Yao Ming Says Chinese Basketball Needs ' Major Operation ' to End the Pain of Failure,” *South China Morning Post*, October 7, 2023.
- *Glory Road* (Milano: Buena Vista, 2006).
- Nelson, Murry. “Larry Bird vs. Magic Johnson, 1979.” In *Replays, Rivalries, and Rumbles: The Most Iconic Moments in American Sports*, edited by Steven Gietschier, 153–60. University of Illinois Press, 2017.
- Jordan Greer, “NBA on MLK Day 2023: How Bill Russell Inspired Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to Carry Social Justice Torch,” *Sporting News*, January 16, 2023.
- James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- John Matthew Smith “‘Gifts That God Didn’t Give’: White Hopes, Basketball, and the Legend of Larry Bird.” *Massachusetts Historical Review (MHR)* 13 (2011): 1–30.
- “USA Claim Second Title at ’86 World Cup in Spain.” n.d. FIBA.basketball.  
<https://www.fiba.basketball/news/usa-claim-second-title-at-86-world-cup-in-spain#:~:text=Smith%2C%20whose%20nickname%20was%20>

- Iacopo Radaelli. 2020. "The Barcelona 1992 Dream Team." Olympics.com. September 18, 2020. <https://olympics.com/en/topics/this-is-the-dream-team>.

### Primary Sources:

- "NBA Players by Country 2024." n.d. Worldpopulationreview.com. Accessed April 18, 2024.  
<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/nba-players-by-country#:~:text=From%20North%20America%3A%20Canada%20%E2%80%94%2057>.
- Joe Watts, "Cusic's Passing Kept The Fans Buzzing," January 12, 1973.
- Will Grimsley, "Russian Basketball Team Is Big Surprise of Games," July 31, 1980.
- Gary G. Roe, "Its a Long Way from Basketball Star to Diplomat," April 5, 1993.
- "Archive.fiba.com: Teams." n.d. Archive.fiba.com..  
[https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/lid\\_38138\\_cp/1/rpp/100/tid/390/\\_//teams.html](https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/lid_38138_cp/1/rpp/100/tid/390/_//teams.html).
- Will Grimsley, "Could Yugoslavia Cagers Have Surprised U.S., Too?," July 31, 1980.
- "Archive.fiba.com: Teams." n.d. Archive.fiba.com..  
[https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/tid/262/\\_//teams.html](https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/tid/262/_//teams.html).
- Connie Unseld, On the road through China with Connie and Wes Unseld, September 22, 1979.
- Jay Mathews, Bullets in China, meet a mountain - The Washington Post, August 25, 1979.
- Jim Murray, "NBA Fans Find Larry Strange Bird," February 16, 1981.
- 'Great White Hope' Tag Doesn't Bother Larry Bird," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1979.
- Jim Murray, "'Magic' Rounds up Smiles, Title," April 8, 1980.
- Roy S. Johnson, "Bird, Magic: NBA's Best," May 29, 1984.
- Terence Smith, "The President Said Nyet," January 20, 1980.
- Dusko Doder, "Soviets Withdraw from Los Angeles Olympics - The Washington Post," Soviets Withdraw From Los Angeles Olympics, May 8, 1984,
- "Archive.fiba.com: Teams." 2019. Fiba.com. 2019.  
[https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/tid/379/\\_//teams.html](https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/tid/379/_//teams.html).
- "Mundobasket 1982 Final : USSR - USA." n.d. Www.youtube.com.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-PEz7vpvKg>.
- Norm Fraunheim, "Thompson Tactics out of Line for Olympics," August 28, 1988.
- Hal Bock, "Thompson Gets Heat for Loss," September 28, 1988.
- Mitch Lawrence, Nets' Petrovic dies in auto accident - The Washington Post, June 8, 1993.