

# Lithuanian Basketball - the Origins of "Gold Fever"

by Alfred Erich Senn

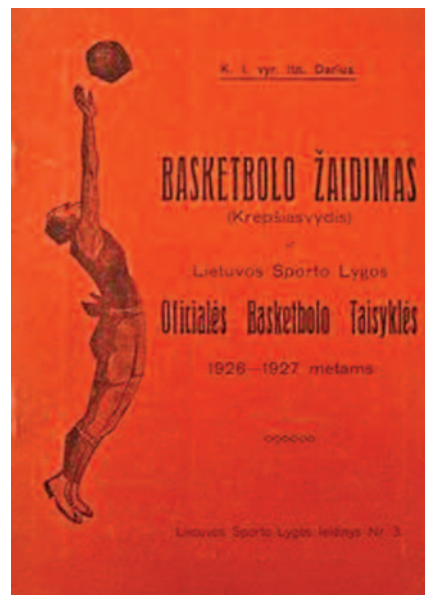
Basketball has been called the second religion of Lithuania. Since the introduction of the sport into the Olympic Games in 1936, Lithuanians have captained three gold medal teams: Frank Lubin, USA, 1936; Modestas Paulauskas, USSR, 1972; and Valdemaras Chomičius, USSR, 1988. A Lithuanian team has yet to win the Olympic gold in its own name, but in the latter days of Soviet rule, the passion for basketball was called "gold fever," *aukso karštligė*, with reference to the struggles of the Žalgiris-Kaunas club with Moscow's Central Army team (TsSKA) for the gold medals as Soviet champions. The fever recurred in 2003, when Lithuania won its third European basketball championship in its own name. Today Lithuanian basketball players are no oddity in American colleges and universities, not to mention in the professional National Basketball Association.

The sport of basketball first came to Lithuania with independence. The celebrated pilot Steponas Darius (Darašius) is usually credited with having introduced the game in the 1920s, but partly because of the sport's association with the YMCA and Protestant youth groups, it received only feeble reception in its first decade. In 1935, the Lithuanian national team lost to the Latvian national team, who soon thereafter became the champions of Europe, by the score of 123-10. The sport

would have appeared to have little prospect of developing.

But in that year of 1935 the bacillus giving rise to "gold fever" first infected the Lithuanian soul, having been brought to the country by American Lithuanians. The occasion was the basketball tournament associated with the First World Lithuanian Congress, organized by the Lithuanian government. There was controversy in the attendance of the basketball players as well as of any other delegation from the United States because of émigré opposition to the authoritarian regime of Antanas Smetona, the sponsor of the congress, but the basketball players came without political motivation, driven simply by the chance to visit the land of their ancestors.

The American-Lithuanian hoopsters were from the Chicago area. Sports, like popular music, were undoubtedly a major factor in the assimilation of Lithuanian young men in the 1930s, and one can imagine the tension that must have prevailed in immigrant households as the youth spent spare time in such a non-productive activity that seemed only to contribute to weakening Lithuanian consciousness. But with the help of other Chicago Lithuanian businessmen, Jack Jatis, a sports enthusiast and later a cog in the political machine of Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley, organized a Lithuanian team to go to Kaunas, and the athletes could point out to



Basketball instruction book authored by Steponas Darius in 1926.

their elders that they were in fact making a contribution to Lithuania. Ed "Moose" Krause, Edward Walter Kriauciūnas, a legendary figure in Notre Dame sports, led the team.

In the course of beating a Latvian-Lithuanian team 40-9 and a team of Kaunas All Stars 36-5, the American-Lithuanians easily dominated the Congress's basketball program and excited the spectators. Some Lithuanian sports officials thought of importing Americans to strengthen national performance in the sport, but Lithuanian Prime Minister Juozas Tūbelis, Antanas Smetona's brother-in-law, did not approve of the costs and insisted that Lithuania had to develop its own players.

Several of the Chicago Lithuanians – probably the best known was Connie Savickas – stayed on to instruct the new enthusiasts, but progress was of course slow. In January 1936 the Lithuanians nevertheless demonstrated considerable improvement when they lost to the Latvians by a score of just 31-10 (14-7 at half time), but they did not participate in the sport's Olympic debut in Berlin in the summer. (Latvia finished 18th in the Olympic



The Lithuanian basketball champions at the European tournament in Riga, Latvia, 1937. Photo courtesy of “Krepšinio Kelias į Lietuvą” [https://www.knyguklubas.lt/out/1/html/0/dyn\\_images/0/cdb\\_KREPSINIS\\_pavartyti\\_fl.pdf](https://www.knyguklubas.lt/out/1/html/0/dyn_images/0/cdb_KREPSINIS_pavartyti_fl.pdf)

basketball tournament.) The presence at the Games of Frank Lubin (Pranas Lubinas) as captain of the American gold medal team, however, offered a new opportunity.

Lubin, an American-Lithuanian and a graduate of UCLA, had won considerable note in southern California basketball. His official job was as a grip in a movie studio, and his AAU team had won the right to go to Germany as the United States national champions in 1936. When a Lithuanian sports official approached him in Berlin and invited him to Lithuania, he replied that he already had visas for himself, his wife, and his wife’s sister. His work in Lithuania was instantly successful, and when his sister-in-law broke her leg, he extended his stay. In November a Lithuanian team beat the Latvian championship team 35-27. In the words of one commentator, “If while Dr. C. Savickas was in Lithuania, our basketball players finished grade school fairly well, during Lubin’s visit, they hurriedly finished higher basketball school.”

The basketball bacillus erupted into “Gold Fever” in May 1937 when the Lithuanians won the championship in the biennial European tournament, now officially remembered as FIBA Eurobasket 1937. The Lithuanians prepared carefully for the competition, this time held in Riga, but progress was

slow. In February, with only one American playing, they fell to the Latvians, 41-29. A Latvian writer predicted that Lithuania would finish the upcoming championship in last place. The Lithuanians hastily brought two new players from Chicago, but they made no public announcement about this. Feliksas Kriaučiūnas (Felix Krause, Ed’s brother) became both coach and player. The Lithuanians practiced secretly for two weeks, even cancelling league games. In the tournament in Riga they played five games, beating Estonia, Egypt, and most importantly Poland, before winning the championship by beating Italy for the second time.

As news of the victories seeped into Kaunas, “gold fever” erupted. A gathering of professors in Kaunas burst into applause upon hearing of the victory over the Poles. When Kipras Petrauskas interrupted his performance in the State Theater to announce the final victory over the Italians, the audience stood and sang the national anthem. The team arrived home to a hero’s welcome. As the Americans reported to Jatis, “On returning to Kaunas, the people meet [*sic*] us like the Americans do there [*sic*] president. Drove in open cars through the town, people shouting bravo, throwing flowers and so on. Words can’t describe how much the people enjoyed the victories with us. The most important one was with the Poles.” Prime Minister Tubelis praised the team’s contribution to the honor of their “hometown,” *tevyinė*, and President Smetona decorated them with medals.

As champions, the Lithuanians agreed to host the European championship in 1939. The clouds of war were collecting, but basketball offered at least a temporary escape into a world where Lithuanians felt strong. Preparing for the new test, however, required intense work and dedication. Lithuanian basketball

players visited the United States in 1938 and came off at best with mixed results. It was clear that to defend their European title, the Lithuanians needed more American help, but the Lithuanians’ dependence on their American foreign legion was now drawing criticism in Europe, especially among the Latvians, who were commonly identified as the Lithuanians’ major rival in this sport. And while there were several Chicagoans playing on the team, international attention focused on Lubin, who had now returned to Lithuania as player and coach.

Latvians and Estonians raised two particular objections to Lubin’s representing Lithuania on the court: one that he was too tall, and the other that he had not been born in Lithuania and therefore should be ineligible. Lubin was 6 foot, 6 and 5/8 inches tall – that was a gigantic height in those days. Especially the Estonians argued that players taller than 6-4 should be banned. In January the Latvians succeeded in excluding Lubin from a game that they won, 29-18. The international basketball federation, run by R. William Jones (who later won international note for his role in the Olympic championship game in 1972), nevertheless ruled that players of any height could compete in the Olympic Games. On the question of Lubin’s



1939 European basketball championship opening ceremony. The Latvian team is being presented. The Lithuanian men’s team is lined up on the right. Photo courtesy of “Krepšinio Kelias į Lietuvą” [https://www.knyguklubas.lt/out/1/html/0/dyn\\_images/0/cdb\\_KREPSINIS\\_pavartyti\\_fl.pdf](https://www.knyguklubas.lt/out/1/html/0/dyn_images/0/cdb_KREPSINIS_pavartyti_fl.pdf)





Poster for 1939 European basketball championships.

citizenship, FIBA's own history, published in 1972, spoke of the Lithuanians producing "a creased birth certificate" that FIBA accepted.

When I met Lubin in Los Angeles on the first day of the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984, I asked him about both these issues. On the question of players' heights, he suggested, with some disgust, that fast short players should have to carry metal ingots in their shorts. To my question as to where he was born, he said simply, "In the United States," but he avidly insisted that being of indisputable Lithuanian heritage, he was properly allowed to play. He disclaimed any knowledge of the birth certificate story.

In 1938 and 1939 Lithuania suffered ignominious diplomatic defeats in yielding to ultimatums from Poland and Germany, and the government was struggling to find some sort of positive image. In preparation for hosting the European championship in May 1939, FIBA Eurobasket 1939, it spent some 400,000 lita to build a basketball stadium in Kaunas that would seat 3600 and accommodate up to 7000 standees. It was claimed at the time to be the largest building in the world specifically dedicated to basketball.

Lithuania retained the championship, winning all seven of its games, most by lopsided scores, but the first game, against Latvia, was definitely the most memorable. The spectators were raucous, and the game was close. As an American diplomat described the scene, "pandemonium broke loose, except when Lithuania was having a free throw. When Latvia had a free throw there were whistles, hisses, and so much shouting that the hall seemed to vibrate with it." The Latvians made only two of fifteen free throws.

Lubin himself recounted the game's deciding moment to me: "We played a very close game. Latvia was well instructed. They gave us a hard battle. It came down to the last minute of the game. They had the ball; we intercepted it, however. They were leading, 36-35. We saw our downfall. For one brief moment I forgot all my Lithuanian. I hollered and I cursed our players. 'For goodness sake, pass me the ball!' I was standing under the basket. Finally Arturas Andrusis, who knew English very well, nodded his head, and he threw me the basketball. In the last second I whirled and made the shot that won us the game 37-36. The crowd erupted; they came down on the floor and carried us around on their shoulders."

The Latvian players reacted angrily. As one Lithuanian observer later recounted, they "fell upon the competition clock, wanting to verify the time. Here they met with a crowd of spectators. In the confusion several Latvian players were pushed around." (The Lithuanians used a chess clock to time the game.) A few days later the Latvian government announced it was cancelling all sport competitions with Lithuanian teams for the next two years, but the Soviet invasion of 1939-1940 soon obliterated such thoughts.

After the Latvian game, to the relief of all officials, the Lithuanian

spectators behaved in much more orderly fashion, especially in their team's subsequent game with Poland, which the Lithuanians won, 46-18. (Some foreign diplomats chose not to attend the game with Poland out of fear that there would be trouble.)

In the years of Soviet occupation, Lithuanians had to play for the Soviet team in international competition, but even in these circum-



Frank Lubin (Pranas Lubinas) after the 1939 European championship win.

stances, "gold fever" – the term was coined in 1983 as the title of a film about Lithuanian participation in Soviet basketball championships – raged, testifying to the strength and durability of that bacillus that the Chicago Lithuanians brought in 1935. I later asked Lithuanian president Algirdas Brazauskas what he considered to be the significance of basketball success for the Lithuanians; he responded that a small nation has only a few opportunities to establish international success and basketball gave such an opportunity to Lithuania. Basketball together with the ailment "gold fever" deserves consideration as a major contribution by the emigration to Lithuanian national culture.