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Sport in Russia and the Power of the NBA - Wimbledon

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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There is almost a sense that time stops when you leave the country and go off to a place in which the media presence is minimal, and in a language you can neither speak nor read. You get a very good reality check as the obsessions of the world of sport, the daily patterns of wins and losses, the battles over money and egos, all fade quickly to the background.

At the same time you are reminded of the important role that sport plays worldwide, and the fact that soccer is every bit the obsession in other places that baseball, football and basketball are here. You are also reminded of just how great a job has been done by the marketing gurus of the NBA, as well as how dominant American popular culture has become across the world.

For the fourth time in less than three years I have had the good fortune to travel to Russia, not just the familiar cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, but to go to the east some 700 miles from Moscow, near the Urals, to the city of Izhevsk. This is an industrial city in the heart of the former Soviet military-industrial complex which was off limits to outsiders until glasnost.

In Russia the major sporting interest while I was there was the battle for the European Cup, Euro '96, in which Russia was an unsuccessful competitor. Russian soccer, like all Russian professional sport, is in trouble as the best players are attracted to teams in the West paying the big money.

Russia has become the international equivalent of baseball's small market franchises, able to develop young talent, but not able to pay the price to retain this talent. In addition the future of Russian soccer and hockey, and other local sport is in doubt as the grand subsidies of the era of Soviet Sport have ended. Russian Sport is not as large as Soviet Sport either geographically or financially, and this will no doubt be increasingly apparent in the Olympic games.

What is remarkable is the growth of the marketing presence of the NBA. Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls are omnipresent in Russia. I noted this phenomenon with some surprise three years ago in Moscow and later in St. Petersburg, as well as in Africa. The presence of Michael Jordan is daunting, not just in Moscow but across the landscape and even in Izhevsk where NBA, Bulls, and Jordan paraphernalia appear with some frequency.

I had dinner one night with one of the New Russians in Izhevsk during which we had an extended conversation through a translator concerning the relative merits of Jordan and the Bulls, the problems of trash talking, what he saw as rude behavior, and inflated salaries. There were also the nearly inevitable questions about why African-Americans dominate the NBA.

We were driven to that dinner in a car that had an Orlando Magic logo on the center of steering wheel. I asked through an interpreter if the driver knew what the Magic logo meant. He did not.

While a guest in another home for dinner I saw a Shaq-Fu video game, and asked if the ten-year-old boy who played with the game knew who Shaq was. He did.

Indeed at the level of popular culture the westernization of Russia proceeds at a rapid pace with video games, popular music, film, television, junk food, and sport, all penetrating the market and mass consciousness. Russian radio, even out in Izhevsk, has the sound of American pop/rock radio, and two or three songs per hour are in the English language. "Santa Barbara" remains one of the most popular programs on Russian television. What all this means remains to be seen, but for those in Russia suspicious of the West this cannot be an encouraging development.

Returning home I was able to see the end of this year's version of Wimbledon. On the women's side the story was familiar. Steffi Graf, despite injury and sinus problems, was still too much for her opponents as she won her seventh Wimbledon singles title. Graf is now clearly one of the all-time greats of women's tennis, and Martina Navratilova's whining cannot change that fact.

On the men's side however the story was much different. The top seeded players dropped by the wayside, some quite early, while the semi-finals had only one seeded player and the finals none. In some ways the match of the tournament was the two day five set plus battle between MaliVai Washington and Todd Martin, with Martin up 5-1 in the fifth and final set and unable to close the deal.

In the meantime Richard Krajicek was mowing down his opponents with the big serve. Krajicek's serve never left him, and on grass he was nearly untouchable. It might even be that we will

look back to this tournament as a marker of another changing of the guard in men's tennis when new names moved to center stage at center court.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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