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U.S. chokehold is gone; archaic rules are at fault

By Doug Walker
 Assistant Sports Editor

Tuesday's loss by the United States Olympic basketball team to the Soviet Union made journalists around the world note the end of American dominance in international amateur basketball.

Unlike the 1972 Olympic basketball final, in which the Soviets won after getting a third chance at making a last-second shot, the Soviets defeated the American team fair and square on the court this time.

It was only the second American loss in 52 years of Olympic basketball competition. It left me with the same sick feeling I get when I see film of the loss in the Munich Games of 1972.

In the loss at Munich, the United States was done in by a controversial ruling by international basketball officials which forced two replays of the game's final three seconds and snatched a gold medal from the Americans.

The latest loss brings to mind a question that has been floating around amateur athletics for the past few years: Should the United States send professionals to the Olympics, and should the government finance athletes in sports such as track and field?

A move in the right direction was made a few years ago when the United States began allowing track and field performers to accept money for appearance fees at major track meets around the world.

It seems that if the United States wants to win in these competitions we must learn to play by the same rules as the competition. America should send a basketball team of paid professionals to the Olympics.

This team could be either a team of NBA all-stars or the NBA champion of the Olympic year.

Soviet athletes in all sports compete as paid professionals while most American athletes competing against them in these amateur sports festivals struggle for funding of any kind.

Soviet team members are paid by their government to play the sport and have been together as a team for several years.

Coach John Thompson's team did a fine job in the Olympic tournament and would have won the game if

forward Danny Manning had contributed offensively. Manning, college basketball's player of the year, scored in the game against the Soviets.

Even though a bronze medal is nothing to be ashamed of, the Americans should be expected to win the gold every four years in this sport. America has the greatest basketball league in the world — the NBA.

Historically, the players chosen for U.S. national teams for international play are picked from summer programs. They only play as a team for a few months before competing against, and usually beating, teams from other nations that have been playing together years.

Other countries use American basketball as a model and have only begun to catch up with us because America doesn't show the best it has to offer.

Probably the best route to follow is using the champion to compete as the U.S. team.

Think of the possibilities! Would the Soviet team stand a chance against the Laker fast break? Would Worthy and Magic Johnson would have a field day?

An NBA champion could complete the championship series in June, take a month off, then begin touring against a team of NBA all-stars like the current Olympic team did.

Perhaps the team could also be bolstered by adding a player, or two, from another NBA team to shore up problems with depth. After the long regular season schedule and playoff games the team may have problems with fatigue and injuries. Adding a player like Larry Bird or Michael Jordan would certainly solve the problem.

The only reservation I have about this idea is that, in many cases, the same people may be receiving Olympic gold medals over and over again.

The governing forces for U.S. amateur basketball need to face the fact that America probably has seen the end of its domination of Olympic basketball if the current policy remains in effect.

If the United States keeps this policy, America should get used to losing in international competition — just because we choose to play by archaic rules and other countries refuse to follow.

Glasnost spreads to sports

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Maybe this basketball glasnost is taking things too far.

Look at the facts. When Soviet coach Alexander Gomelski met the media Wednesday after the Soviets' 82-76 humbling of the U.S. basketball squad, did he credit Mother Russia or Marxist-Leninist doctrine for the victory?

No. "United States basketball and NBA basketball helps my country," said the short, gray, grandfatherly Russian. "I am very happy, and thank you, United States basketball." Thank you, United States basketball?

Gomelski was talking about the National Basketball Association, a decidedly capitalist outfit that has given comfort and aid to the Soviet team.

The Soviets have played exhibition games against the Milwaukee Bucks. The Atlanta Hawks toured the USSR and trained with the Soviets in the United States.

The Hawks have even spent draft choices on Alexandre Volkov, Raimondas Marchulionis and Valeri Tikhonenko in hopes the Soviet government will let their stars play in the NBA.

The Portland Trailblazers, with a first-round draft interest in Arvidas Sabonis, took in the 7-foot-3 Russian and supervised the therapy on his ruptured Achilles tendon.

Sabonis was doubtful for the Olympics before he got NBA care. He paid back the kindness with 13 points and 13 rebounds against the United States on Wednesday.

At the post-game interview, U.S. Coach John Thompson noted the Sabonis recovery with some irony.

"He's been working hard all summer, and he's improved ... against America's finest," said Thompson, who has been critical about the chummy relationship between the Soviets and the NBA.

"I don't see it as a form of collaboration," he said. "Several NBA teams helped us, too. We lost. The NBA didn't. We understood the circumstances under which we were playing. Because I agree or disagree, that's totally different from blaming."

Thompson wasn't so subdued a few months ago when he complained that the use of U.S. sports medicine to heal Sabonis was like Benedict Arnold handing the British the keys to the fort.

"I see Sabonis as being a fulfillment of Lenin's prophecy: The capitalists are selling the Communists the rope they can hang us with," he said at the time. "We are in direct competition with them, and to prepare Sabonis to play against us just isn't right."

U.S. loss to U.S.S.R. not isolated incident

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — This is not 1972, and this was no fluke. The 82-76 loss to the Soviet Union in the Olympic basketball semifinals Wednesday was the fourth straight failure in major international tournaments for U.S. men's teams so accustomed to ruling the world.

And, according to the coach who will play the Americans for the Olympic bronze medal Thursday night (Thursday morning EDT), there is good reason: The Americans are behind the times.

"The U.S. is a very young, inexperienced team ... and they paid the penalty for preparing the team within the United States," said Australian coach Adrian Hurley.

The 1987 World University Games and the World Junior Championships both meant silver medals to Yugoslavia's golds. The Pan Am Games were a showcase for Oscar Schmidt, the shooter from Brazil who flew back with a gold medal while the United States again accepted silver.

But the loss to the Soviet Union came in the Olympics. The only blemish on the U.S. basketball record in the Games had been a loss to the Soviets in 1972 that was so tainted the silver medals were never accepted — they remain in a bank vault in Munich.

There was nothing tainted about this Soviet victory. The United States was beaten by a team that was never bothered by the Americans' most potent weapon — pressure defense — and a team which showed there is no substitute for international experience and competition.

Hurley said the U.S. team should "get out of the country and play under international rules and with international referees. That talent isn't enough. You've got to play."

But is Thompson supposed to act like a diplomat or a general? That is the heart of the question facing U.S. sports officials and fans. Are the Olympic games a battle for worldwide basketball hegemony or an exchange of friendship and the furtherance of international sports?

In a world where President Reagan promises to share Star Wars secrets once we figure them out, is John Thompson out of step?

Yes, said Glasnost, whose basketball is much better than his English.

"The United States and the Soviet Union organize good contact in athletic, economic, in sports," he said. "All country, all people, very good for this friendship. People think it's a problem and maybe Thompson understand this."

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