

**The Strengthening of Sport and Nationalism in  
Lithuania Despite Soviet Influence**

by

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Upon the annex of Lithuania as a Soviet state, the Soviet Union imposed an order on Lithuanian athletic figures to represent the Soviet Union. Lithuanian athletes would now be obligated to represent the Soviet Union in all international sporting events in which they competed. The international success of Soviet Athletes, which did not exclude Lithuanians, was immense. This strength shown through athletes was meant to bolster the image of Soviet citizens as a unit, but by strengthening athletes in Lithuania, pride and nationalism grew in the small Baltic republic as Lithuanians became proud of their flag despite the Soviet Occupation.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the collection of Oregon State University. My signature below authorizes of my thesis to any reader upon request. I also affirm that the work represented in this Thesis is my own work.

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## **Introduction**

‘Sport’ has been defined as “a social phenomenon, inseparable from society’s culture, a system of preparation for competitions and participation in them; and in a broader sense – all forms of physical activity which improve physical fitness and spiritual state” (Stonkus, 1996, p. 502). The power of sport as a social phenomenon and a core part of the fabric of society can be seen through Lithuania’s transformation: from an independent country, to part of the Soviet Union, and back to an independent country again. As a nation, Lithuania survived the Soviet’s attempt at eliminating all things Lithuanian, and sport was part of this small Baltic nation’s survival kit.

This paper will consider the power of sport in forming and retaining national identity for the country, its people, and the athletes themselves. Personal experiences living and studying in Lithuania and Russia, an interview with an Olympic Athlete (Munich Games, 1972), and reading both English and Russian texts (e.g., books, journal articles, newspaper accounts), serve as the primary sources for this paper.

## **The Cold War Years—A Transformation of Athletic Traditions**

The hammer and sickle that ascended flagpoles across Lithuania marked the end of the Second World War and the beginning of a new struggle in Lithuania that would last nearly a half-century. Although the Soviets had occupied Lithuania in 1940, the Nazi regime had authority from 1941-1944; however, the Soviet grip was re-established in 1944. Lithuanian nationalism remained suppressed as the Soviet identity was imposed.

The Stalin-led government sought to homogenize all Soviet nations, creating a new culture that embodied the Soviet way of thinking. Only partisan voices of the Soviet government were allowed. Consequently, loyalists to the Lithuanian motherland—which included athletes and physical educators—were condemned through imprisonment, being exiled to the far reaches of the Soviet empire, or even being killed. Cleansing Lithuania

of its traditions occurred in every facet of life, including sport. Through government programs, the Stalinist goal was to create world-class athletes for whom all Soviet citizens could cheer, thereby bringing unity among the nations of the Soviet Union. The acceptance of the Soviet way of life began through the Soviet's assistance in the defeat of the Nazi rule in Lithuania, but there came a time not long after their annexation, when Lithuanians in general had no real desire to label themselves as "Soviets," and the idea of just going along with the Soviet system wore on Lithuania as a nation.

The Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic was not exempt from the poor economic conditions and lack of basic freedoms that the rest of the Soviet Union was experiencing, and since the Soviet philosophy of sport was not aligned with friendly competition with the rest of the world, Lithuania had no power in bolstering their own relations with other nations. Though national pride and representation may not be an athlete's first concern when training or competing, it was an important dynamic that was missing for Lithuanian athletes as they competed under the Soviet flag. Regardless of the root of an athlete's motivation, the Soviets failed to recognize that their new tradition of developing top notch athletes would evolve into a seed of national pride that was beginning to be nourished in their newly annexed territory. Ultimately sport would develop into one of the only ways that Lithuania could retain a national identity, and there was one new Soviet passion that endeared the Lithuanians to the Soviet government: their strength in sports.

### **What Sport Meant to Lithuanians During the Soviet Occupation**

Upon the defeat of the Nazi regime and now sharing a common experience, the entire Soviet Union, including Lithuania, had something to unite them. This was used to coerce Lithuania into a brotherhood with all Soviet republics. In order to strengthen this

brotherhood and forge a unity, the Soviets capitalized on Lithuania's athletic traditions and sought to create even higher caliber athletes.

Athletic performance skyrocketed under Stalin's orders to pull out all stops in order to win, for there was a strong desire to display the might of the Soviet Union to its citizens and to the on looking West. This form of athletic celebration of "freedom, comradery and strength" was merely a façade used to market the Soviet Union not only to its own people, but also to non-Soviet nations. The superiority of Soviet athletes was used to represent an overall healthy and vital society.

With Joseph Stalin as leader of the Soviet Union, the objective of athletics shifted from the Marxist model, which emphasized the development of a strong worker, to targeting individuals who had the most potential to become successful elite athletes. The Soviets began to search for talented and promising athletes in Lithuania and her Baltic sisters. With the annex of Lithuania, the new Soviet government began to rearrange all sport participation according to the new Stalinist model, and they halted the activities of the Lithuanian National Olympic Committee and other athletic organizations that existed at that time. During this cleansing process, many of the heads of these organizations were exiled. Through this transition, elite athletes who cooperated were offered coaching from the best coaches, training with the best available equipment, and use of the best available facilities.

As part of Lithuania's athletic transformation into elite sport, sports clubs for the common person were eliminated. That is, only the elite athletes were supported in their athletic pursuits; the average citizen could not participate in some athletic pastimes since most of the funding for sports and related facilities was reserved for the athletes chosen by the government. Soon after the Second World War, Soviet-sponsored sport festivals

were organized and Lithuanian athletes began to see some positive results. Nevertheless, Lithuanians were not allowed to represent their native country in athletic venues held outside the Soviet Union, and, when they did compete, it was in a Soviet uniform.

### **The Olympic Experience as a Soviet Nation**

After the Second World War, leaders were instructed to begin preparing athletes for the Olympic games of 1952, and Soviet officials were ordered by Stalin to “Raise the level of skill, so that Soviet sportsmen might win world supremacy in the major sports in the immediate future” (as cited in Rosellini, 1992, p. 2). The eight nations liberated by the Red Army in the mid 20th century were expected to follow Stalin’s orders.

Stalin saw the Olympic opportunity as the Soviet’s only way to rise above the rest of the world, and in order to rise above the rest of the world, he needed to cut all “frivolous” athletic participation in order to reach his goal. Despite the 1952 Helsinki games being a first for the unified Soviet Union, their success was immense with contributions from all Soviet republics resulting in a total of 71 medals (finishing just 5 behind the USA in the overall medal count). Three of the medals earned were by Lithuanian athletes. They were all silver medals.

Though these were Lithuania’s first three medals, it was not their first Olympic experience. Lithuanian athletes represented their independent nation for the first time at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, and the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam (summer) and St. Moritz (winter). Though no medals were won by Lithuanians at these Olympic Games, the experiences helped the small Baltic nation begin to establish its own athletic traditions. For example, in the late 1930s, both the Lithuanian men’s and women’s basketball teams were successful at the European Championships winning two gold medals and a silver medal, respectively.

These athletic traditions were halted with Lithuania's annexation into the Soviet's new Stalinist model. Stalin saw the Olympic Games in particular as a way to promote the Soviet cause.

Certainly athletics was one of the only areas that the Soviet Union could compete in and be successful at against the West, since economic conditions in the communist regime were no match for the capitalistic system. Furthermore, the borders of the Soviet Union were so tightly maintained that one of the only opportunities people had to cross the iron curtain into the Western world was through elite sport competitions. When the Soviet Union won gold medals in the Olympic Games, internally it reaffirmed the strength of the union to the people because the capitalist West could not overcome the might and comradery of their Soviet competitors. Externally, the goal was to showcase to the world that within the Soviet Union resided a strong, dynamic people and system of government.

Since Lithuanian athletes were not competing for their motherland, but rather the Soviet Union, it is important to consider the driving force behind their success in the Olympic Games. For instance, during Olympic Games (or any international sporting event), athletes and fans wave the flags of their homelands while wearing national colors and cheering for their representative athletes. For nearly half a century, however, Lithuanians could not compete for their homeland. What drove them to excel in light of these circumstances?

As shown in Table 1, when Lithuania represented itself as an independent nation at the Olympic Games (1924-1928 and 1992-2004), the number of Lithuanian athletes chosen to compete was high because the athletes were only competing with other Lithuanian athletes to earn a spot on their country's independent Olympic team. In

contrast, during the Soviet occupation (shown as 1952-1988) the Lithuanian athletes had a lower chance of earning a spot on the Olympic team because they had to compete with athletes from the other Soviet nations. However, despite their low representation on the 1952-1988 Olympic teams, the Lithuanian athlete's probability of winning a medal was much higher while competing for the Soviet Union rather than independent Lithuania (Figure 1).

Table 1. Number of Lithuanian Athletes Competing in the Olympic Games 1924-2004.

	Year	Number of Athletes	Number of Sports	Gold	Silver	Bronze	% of Medal winning athletes
Pre-Soviet Independent Lithuania	1924	13	2	0	0	0	0%
	1928	12	4	0	0	0	0%
Soviet Occupation	1952	5	3	0	3	0	60%
	1956	7	4	0	4	1	71%
	1960	4	3	0	2	1	75%
	1964	16	3	0	1	0	6.25%
	1968	10	5	2	2	5	90%
	1972	8	4	2	1	0	37.50%
	1976	8	4	2	2	3	87.50%
	1980	16	7	7	1	3	68.75%
	1988	25	9	10	3	2	60%
Post Soviet Independent Lithuania	1992	46	11	1	0	1	4.35%
	1996	60	14	0	0	1	1.67%
	2000	61	15	2	0	3	8.20%
	2004	59	13	1	2	0	5.10%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>20</b>	

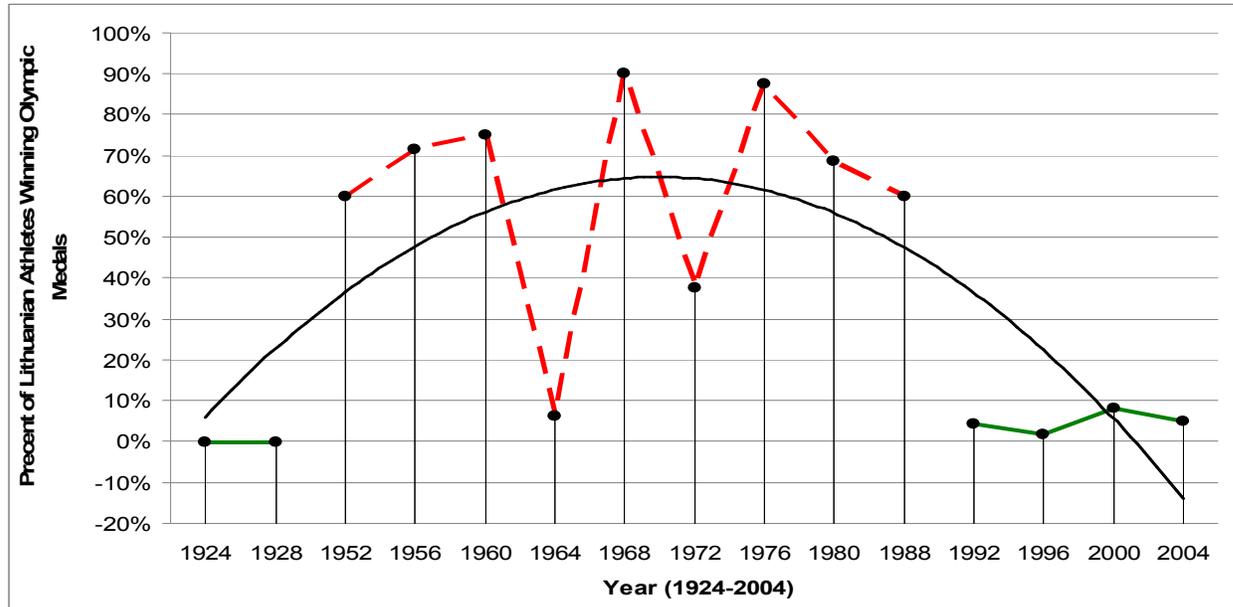


Figure 1. Percentage of Lithuanian Athletes Winning Medals at the Summer Olympic Games 1924-2004

### Sports as a Reflection of Political Unity and Unrest

It is through sport that the internal conflict between Lithuania and the Soviet Union can be observed. For example, from 1987 until the end of the Soviet occupation, various sports teams withdrew from Soviet competitions until Lithuania later gained political independence. And, in 1988, with the formal re-establishment of the Lithuanian National Olympic Committee just after the Seoul Olympic Games, all sports teams finally refused to compete under the Soviet flag. In the Barcelona Olympic games of 1992, the former Soviet Union competed as the Unified Team, except for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, who all competed as independent nations.

Prior to the dissolve of the Soviet Union, however, Lithuania demonstrated both unity as Lithuanians and unrest with the Soviet system. To illustrate this dichotomy, consider two examples of athletic competition: one which the Lithuanians were not tied to as a nation, and another which reflected a strong national identity. The first real sporting event between Lithuania as a Soviet Republic and another sport team was a

futball (soccer) match between the newly formed Dinamo of Kaunas (Lithuania) and Dinamo of Minsk (Belarus) in September of 1940. The match was in Kaunas in front of 15,000 fans. The Lithuanians won 4-1 and the relationship between the two sides was said to be very friendly with the Lithuanians cheering “Welcome,” and Belorussians shouting “Physical Culture!” (Senn, 1992, p. 76-77). Senn also reported, “They blamed no one for their loss, and no player accused another of having played badly, of having allowed goals, etc.” (p. 77). This display of comradery was a spectacle of sportsmanlike conduct, one that any athletic venue would be proud to model. Of course this is a Soviet account of how the teams and fans treated one another, and therefore it should be taken with a grain of salt. However, this opening game does model the type of behavior and comradery that was expected from teams within the Soviet Union.

Yet from the mid-1980's on, as Lithuania's Žalgiris basketball club of Kaunas won a great deal of victories over other teams in the Soviet Union, a sense of national pride began to flourish, alongside an increasing display of anti-Soviet behavior. With high Lithuanian morale and a feeling that they could prove their uniqueness to the rest of the world, the country felt tied to basketball as part of their national identity. Just as the Soviets had used the momentum from the defeat of the Nazis to bring Lithuania into their political grip, now more than ever basketball had become a source of national pride for the Lithuanians. Valdas Adamkas, President of Lithuania, said,

... ‘during the 50 years of the occupation, basketball was an expression of freedom. The entire country was trying to beat the Russians and to show that we were superior in that respect. The game reflected our will to win against our oppressors and sustained our hope and resolve.’ Successful basketball performances by both men and women earned Lithuania the name of a ‘sport republic’ (as cited in Cingiene, 2004, p. 772).

According to Professor S. Stonkus, “Lithuanian basketball formed the image of the Republic of Lithuania as a state, and competitions with the strongest teams from the

USSR, such as CSKA (Central Sport Club of Army) and others in the Kaunas Sport Hall, symbolized Lithuania's fight for freedom" (as cited in Cingiene, 2004, p. 777).

### **A Personal Recount of the Soviet Hand in Lithuanian Sport**

Birutė (Užkuraitytė) Statkevičiene, a swimmer from Kaunas, Lithuania, who competed for the Soviet Union during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich (Personal Communication, January 2008), said, "The Soviet Union was not a rich country. If you wanted to travel, sport was the best way. Because I was Lithuanian and many years ago some of my ancestors had moved to the USA, authorities would sometimes 'accidentally' lose my documents. On one such instance, I could not compete in some games that were held in Czechoslovakia."

Statkevičiene went on to say that when she wanted to leave her room at the Olympic village, she had to report where she was going and why she was going there. In some cases, Soviet authorities had to go with her. Because she wanted to leave so often, a cloud of suspicion surrounded her when she returned home from the Olympic Games. Once she was no longer a medal contender, she was immediately sent home, where she was told to go to the KGB (Soviet Secret Police) headquarters in her hometown of Kaunas. Her family was worried, but she went. She was told to write down everything that she had done while she was in Munich. They wanted to know where she went, with whom she met, and what they talked about. In short, they wanted her to write about the who, what, when, where, and why of every situation. Recalling the experience, she said "it was terrible." She was told never to talk about anything she did in Munich again, or that she met with KGB afterward.

As Statkevičiene reflected about sport in Lithuania during the Soviet era, she felt that the training conditions were ideal for creating high caliber athletes. She believed the

facilities were wonderful, even better than those in Lithuania today. Still today Lithuania does not have enough swimming pools and they only have a few good stadiums for basketball. Though funds are limited, Lithuania has tried to maintain some of the positive athletic traditions brought to them by the Soviet Union. For example, the Soviet system had sport schools, and Lithuania has carried on that tradition. Lithuania also has a sport university. Many good coaches have graduated from the Lithuanian Sport Academy. One such example is Vladas Garastas, who was a coach for the Žalgiris basketball club, the Lithuanian Men's national basketball team, and president of the Lithuanian Basketball Federation. While funds may not be sufficient for all of Lithuania's sporting traditions, they make the best of what they have.

Statkevičiene continued reflecting about how Lithuanians adapted to competing under the Soviet flag: "Sport was the first way we were able to be independent from the Soviet Union. This was the first way we were able to show the rest of the world that we were Lithuania, not Russia. Before we boycotted competition within the Soviet Union in 1988, we as Lithuanians were all thinking, 'The world thinks we are just part of Russia, but we are not Russian!' It even disappointed and caused some confusion amongst Lithuanians when they would see me wearing the CCCP (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) logo on my clothing."

She went on to say, "When we were in Munich, we would wear the Soviet issued clothing, which would say CCCP on it. Since our athletes in the Soviet Union were so powerful, we were almost like celebrities to the rest of the world. People would come up to me and ask me to sign a book of photography with Soviet athletes in it. Instead of signing my name and my country as the Soviet Union, I would write my name, and then in huge letters underneath write my home country as LIETUVA."

Though Statkevičiene considered Lithuania as her home country, she did appreciate much that the Soviet Union offered her in terms of her swimming career. She confided that conditions were excellent there for athletes (e.g., best facilities, coaches, etc.). When asked about the stigma that the Soviet Union has concerning performance enhancing drugs, and the overtraining of athletes, her face filled with concern: “There were no drugs [performance enhancing] administered in my experience. Kiril Inesevsky, the head coach of swimming once said to us, ‘You are my children, I would never harm you.’ When I was in competition, athletes were only eating, studying, training, and sleeping. In my opinion, there is no better way to develop world-class athletes. It is similar to what you see elite athletes doing in the states, even at the collegiate level. It is strange that our methods [in the Soviet Union] for becoming great baffled the rest of the world. This is how anyone becomes a world class athlete, by dedication and practice.”

### **Lithuanian Athletes Today Have a Choice**

Since the dissipation of the Soviet Union, a policy was created to allow athletes who were born in the Soviet Union to choose to compete for their home country, or for Russia. Two contrasting examples are Darius Kasparaitis and Dainius Zubrus. They are both Lithuanian ice hockey players that have chosen two different career paths.

Darius Kasparaitis left for Russia when he was 14-years-old to play ice hockey at a higher level than Lithuania could have provided him with. He now plays for the Russian national team. Kasparaitis was drafted into the National Hockey League (NHL) in 1992 and he has played for several NHL teams since then.

Another case is Dainius Zubrus, also a Lithuanian national. He played for the Russian national team during the 2004 World Cup of Hockey. Though Lithuania has never competed in the Olympics in ice hockey, he continues to compete with the

Lithuanian national team and plans to do so in the future because he feels that Lithuania needs him more than does Russia. Zubrus also plays in the NHL.

Regarding Kasparaitis' decision, Statkevičiene explained the disappointment from Lithuanians toward athletes who decided to represent Russia rather than Lithuania. However she says, "In the case of ice hockey, these athletes ended up champions because they loved the game of ice hockey, and Lithuania did not have an ice hockey team at the time."

Lithuanians are sometimes frustrated by athletes who choose to compete at the collegiate or professional level in countries other than Lithuania. Nevertheless Statkevičiene, who's daughter swam for the University of Utah said, "Many athletes move to the states on scholarship to compete for a university. When a Lithuanian athlete moves to the states to compete, I appreciate it a lot. When you see athletes competing all over the world, this supports Lithuania and spreads the name of our country to the rest of the world. This is how the world can see we are important. Our athletes can go to the United States and train in the best facilities, under the best coaches, and in the best conditions. It means a lot to us when other countries will recognize us for our talents."

## **Conclusion**

As the Soviet Union imposed their system of training on the Lithuanians—the system that was supposed to unify all Soviet citizens—the people instead used their training, their competition, and their successes to nourish the seeds of hope and grow an identity that would flourish as they worked to attain their independence. Sport—earlier defined as "inseparable from society's culture"—was meant to prepare Lithuania for participation in competition, but it additionally prepared Lithuania for their participation in building a nation not dependent on or tied to the Soviet's political agenda. Although it

may seem counterintuitive for a nation to boldly compete under a flag not their own, Lithuanians proved that they were willing to undergo the transformation of their athletic traditions while still holding to their sense of commitment to national pride.

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