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Cold War on the Court: **The 1973 American-Soviet Basketball Series**

In the spring of 1973 the national basketball team from the Soviet Union came to the United States and played a series of six games against a select group of American collegiate all-stars. The American-Russian matchup attracted a huge following nationwide and drew capacity crowds. Marketed as the “Revenge Tour”, the popular series was a chance to avenge the controversial loss to the Soviets at the 1972 Munich Olympics, and United States fans responded to Russians’ visit with patriotic fever. One sports columnist remarked on the eve of the series that “the way some people carry on”, one would think that the Munich upset “will live in perfidy with the sinking of the Maine, the killing of Alexander Hamilton and the British burning the White House”. So important was the tour for national prestige that months before the first game Americans demanded lawmakers intervene in the sacred realm of amateur athletics to settle an eighty-year old dispute between the AAU and the NCAA which threatened to keep the country’s best players from competing. Such displays of nationalism were at odds with a divisiveness over issues of race, war, and authority that were polarizing the country.

Emotions too ran high on the court. At times the action resembled football, players pushing, elbowing, fouling brandishing fists. On more than one occasion noses were bloodied and eyes blackened. One Russian player had his shorts torn completely from his body. By the end of the six-game tour, an amazing 417 fouls had been whistled (almost seventy per game), and a total of thirty-nine players had fouled out. Newspapers called the tour “manslaughter in the pivot”, “basketbrawl”, a “slugfest”, “karate”, a “brutal cross-country duel”, “pure mayhem”, “bruising”, a “traveling tag-team wrestling match,” “rugged,” and a “free-wheeling (and swinging) contest” in which “players crashed to the floor repeatedly”. Adding to the bellicose nature of the two-week series, the Russian coach charged American cagers with unsportsmanlike behavior. The American coach returned the favor, accusing the Russians of dirty and unfair play. The print media wasted no opportunity in characterizing the so-called friendly competition as an extension of cold war hostilities and tensions. According to one reporter, the tour was a “microcosmic war.”

The series took place precisely at the moment when relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were at their warmest since the end of World War II. Detente ushered in numerous agreements on arms limitations, trade, civil aviation, and cultural exchanges. Joint ventures in science, space, medicine, and health research helped bolster the “era of good feeling.” The press communicated that the nation need no longer view the Russians with fear and suspicion. After a 1972 visit to Moscow, President Nixon told the American public of the Soviet’s “genuine desires for friendship with the American people”. That the cold war appeared to be thawing was made evident by popular opinion: Gallup Polls taken in the early 1970s revealed the lowest levels of hostility toward the Soviet Union up to date. Such developments have left historians to conclude that the early 1970s witnessed a great ebb in East-West enmity, popular attitudes included.

This paper examines the ways in which the 1973 Soviet tour belied the spirit of detente. In doing so, it addresses the question of why Americans embraced a seemingly insignificant event with such hyperpatriotism. One explanation is that Americans craved revenge for the shocking 1972 loss. Another is that the cold war raised the level of significance of the series. Still even one more is that the public was stimulated to acts of patriotism by the spectacle of the event. The major conclusion is that the tour fulfilled a need for the nation to be seen as a winner. By 1973, internal divisions, government skullduggery, and the tragedy of Vietnam had generated a loss of faith in the greatness of the country. A victory over the Soviets in basketball offered Americans a chance to restore national pride — however briefly. Beating the Russians at America’s game diverted attention away from anxieties over social and political decline and served to compensate for the loss of national power. Exploring how the American-Russian basketball series not only brought the country together during a time when it seemed to be coming apart but also reflected popular attitudes toward the Soviet Union inconsistent with an atmosphere of detente permits us to see a side of the 1970s that has escaped historical analysis.