

ATHLETES JOIN REAL WORLD AS SUPPORT SYSTEM FADES

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MOSCOW – "Babushka! Babushka!" Ksenya Bazarevich is calling.

She is running from room to room in her parents' three-room apartment in southeastern Moscow, excitedly gathering the toys and clothes she will take to Grandmother's house for the night.

It's Daddy's day to watch 4-year-old Ksenya, and Sergei Bazarevich, 26, a member of the national basketball team of the former Soviet Union, is like any other father. He has his hands full trying to talk, dress and get his daughter ready for the drive across the city.

Irina Bazarevich left earlier from the apartment, which is 18 floors up in one of the city's newest, finest and most depressing buildings, a co-op partly owned and occupied by KGB employees. She teaches aerobics two days a week and will be back at 6 p.m. to enjoy an evening alone with her husband.

"Her job is more or less symbolic," Bazarevich says. "Its purpose is to get her out of the home, not profiteering."

Profiteering is his role. He gets 500 rubles a month as a member of the Dynamo sports club, another business begun partly with KGB help, and 900 rubles more as a national team member who will play in the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain.

Bzarevich is typical of new Russia's athletes, who once were cared for by the Soviet Union's sports ministry but now face the everyday chores of survival as much as U.S. Olympic athletes.

By Russian standards, his salary is good. But when he travels internationally for competition, such as when he spent several months in the Houston Rockets' NBA summer league, it can't be converted to hard currency.

If you were to visit Russia and exchange some U.S. currency for rubles, about \$110 would cover Bazarevich's annual salary at the legal tourist exchange rate. You could buy the same amount of rubles for half that on the risky black market.

Bazarevich's economic advantage over other Russians is that by being allowed to compete internationally, he can earn the hard currency that buys Nescafe, Kellogg's cereal and Ksenya's coloring books from Greece.

Irina Bazarevich still must wait in lines to shop for bread and other staples, but that frees her husband to go to twice-daily basketball practices.

"The degree of problems here depends on the financial situation of the person," he says. "For some it could be crucial, for some inconvenient.

"In my financial position, I can afford it. But I cannot concentrate only on basketball. What annoys me is I have to think about money all the time.

"The fact is that time spent buying food is not determining everything. The quality of food Soviet athletes get tells on them greatly. Even if God gives you excellent health, a lot depends on the quality of food you eat.

"In this country, because of the poor food, players can't play to 35 or 40 as players do in the NBA."

The drive to Babushka's apartment takes about half an hour. She has meat and peas for Bazarevich's lunch.

Bazarevich's hope is that an NBA team, or even one of the western European professional clubs, will sign him to a contract after Barcelona. As it is, his security is bound too tightly to a country whose future is uncertain.

"Yeltsin is a former volleyball player," he said of Russia's president. "Maybe because he's facing a lot of problems running the country, sport is not of interest to him.

"Maybe we should organize a system similar to the West and not depend on a Yeltsin. I think George Bush or the state legislatures don't invest money in the NBA."

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