

DIVIDED, THEY FALL: INDEPENDENCE COULD HURT MEDAL EFFORTS AT OLYMPICS

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MOSCOW – The Olympic Games are a kind of national intoxication, and a lot of countries just coming of age are bellying up to the bar.

Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, which competed as separate teams as late as the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games before being swallowed by the Soviet Union in World War II, will reappear Saturday at the opening of the Albertville Winter Games under their old flags.

Slovenia and Croatia will send teams to Albertville independent of Yugoslavia.

The Commonwealth of Independent States – what's left of the old Soviet Union – will send a unified team to compete under the five-ringed Olympic flag in France. By this summer's Barcelona Games, the united commonwealth team may have multiplied into a dozen separate teams representing individual republics or groups of republics.

“There is a very, very strong movement in Ukraine to get recognized (by the International Olympic Committee) before Barcelona,” said Alexander Kozlovsky, vice president of the USSR Olympic Committee, the only internationally recognized Olympic committee in the commonwealth.

Not only Ukraine, but also Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova among former Soviet republics are at some stage of preparing independent efforts for Barcelona.

The issue of whether republics will compete independently at Barcelona is to be decided in a meeting with IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch on March 9.

Yet while the politicians in these republics see Barcelona as the place their long-ignored nationalities will finally be recognized, there are strong forces at work for maintaining a united commonwealth Olympic team.

Ukraine is the home republic of several athletes on the commonwealth's rowing, relay and cycling teams, which would be favored to win medals. Competing only for Ukraine without their teammates from other republics, those athletes' medal chances are slim.

"As for the athletes, the coaches and the administrative body of sports, they are for a unified team," said basketball player Sergei Bazarevich, who lost his best teammates when Lithuania – which was to Russian basketball what Indiana is to U.S. basketball – gained its athletic independence.

"In the past, we played together. If we play separately, nobody has a chance to win."

Officials of the USSR's national sports federations, which are still functioning for the time being in the new commonwealth, believe breaking up the Olympic team will end the competitive national system that made the Soviet Union the world's most successful international sports power.

There are also more practical reasons for remaining united at least through this Olympic year.

"We will not give anybody a bed that we reserved for our athletes (in Barcelona)," Kozlovsky said. "Why should we? We (the USSR) qualified."

In some cases, such as women's basketball, in which the Soviet team qualified for the Olympics by its finish in the 1991 European Cup, splitting the team would disqualify all former Soviet athletes in that sport.

"Those players got this opportunity by their own efforts," said Valentin Sytch, president of the Soviet basketball federation. "This is their right. It is more important than the rights of the state. The human right is of top priority."

There are also factors favoring a united commonwealth team even beyond this year's Olympics.

The network of Soviet athletic training centers and sports research institutes that has contributed to past successes is spread throughout the commonwealth and is expensive to operate. The poorer republics probably couldn't afford to develop their own, and they would suffer competitively.

Still, the bickering among republics is heating up.

Sytch, a native of Ukraine who is also director of the Moscow Research Institute for Sport, says nationalism would prevent him from freely sharing information with the Kiev Institute of Physical Culture, from which he graduated, if Ukraine breaks away from the commonwealth Olympic team.

“We have quite a lot of such idiocy,” Sytch said.

The former Soviet sports establishment has been infuriated at the intrusion of previously ignored political factors in sports.

“People want to be independent. Bravo,” said Igor Ter-Ovanesyan, president of the track and field federation. “People want to be free. We are normal people.

“But let us organize something that will unite us. Each day I must make hard decisions. But politicians, they learn how to sit at a table and not decide.”

To Sytch, tearing up the current system before a new one is developed would be “reacting as the Bolsheviks in 1917.

“Our system of sport was not perfect, but it should not be ruined. It should be made right. A peasant never destroys his old house until he builds a new one.”

The solution, say sports officials, might be to let republics send separate teams to some competitions such as Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland do now. But at the Olympics, there would be a united team such as Great Britain’s.

That would require slaking the republics’ thirst for Olympic glory just when they’ve gotten old enough to drink.

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