1972 U.S. Olympic Basketball Team Loses to the Soviets – III

Lead: In September 1972 the U.S. lost the basketball final to the Soviets in one of the most disputed games in the modern Olympiad.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts

Content: In the closing minutes of the game the U.S. was ahead because of a shot made by Doug Collins who then tackled probably on purpose by a Soviet player.
During the free throws, apparently, the Soviet coach had tried to call a time-out, but that was against the rules. Despite this, the refs, in one of the sport’s most controversial calls, gave the Soviets the time out and a second chance. They were unable to score even with the added time. The American contingent was apoplectic with joyful celebration.

At that point, William Jones, the British head of the FIBA, the international basketball association and no friend of U.S. basketball, came out of the stands and intervened despite the fact that he had no standing to do such a thing. He ordered another three seconds to be added to the clock. The Soviets then had a third chance. At first the Americans tried to boycott the return to the game but were told they would forfeit if they did so. When the ball was put back into play, the refs incorrectly ordered
Tom McMillen off the baseline and Ivan Edeshko without interference was able to make a hail-Mary pass to the other end where Alexander Belov muscled his way past two American defenders and dropped in the winning shot. The Soviets had won on the third try.

The world and the Americans were stunned. The U.S. coach refused to sign the score-card. The Americans appealed but the judges turned them down. The presence of a majority of judges from the Soviet orbit, Cuba, Poland and Hungary, who, allegedly, true to form, voted as a bloc against the U.S., raised serious questions as to the fairness of the process. The American team refused to take the stand and its Silver Medals, all of which remain unclaimed in a Swiss vault.

The 1972 Summer Olympic Games, particularly the basketball final, have caused
many sports fans to do a slow burn, with anger aroused by what many consider to be unjust rulings by judges deemed to have an anti-American bias. Yet, in end, these were just games, surely capable of arousing emotional passions and nationalistic fervor, but just games. The horrific story to emerge from the 1972 Olympics was the death of 11 Israeli sportsmen whose lives were snuffed out at the height of their competitive careers, in act of terror unequaled in the history of athletic competition.

Research assistance by Garret Lanigan, at the University of Richmond’s School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I’m Dan Roberts.
Resources


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