

Opportunity Abroad: Jack Ramsay

Shortly after leaving the Pacers in 1988, I received a phone call from Michael Goldberg, legal counsel for the NBA Coaches Association, with whom I had a long association as its president. Leon Wandel, the organizer of the Belgium national basketball team, had contacted Michael about my availability to help that team prepare for an upcoming qualifying tournament in Portugal in April 1989. Belgium had never had much success in international basketball competition and it appeared to be an interesting challenge. And, since my wife was interested in spending some time shopping in Brussels, we agreed to go.

The beginning workouts were held in a college gymnasium in Brussels. We had about two weeks to get ready for the tournament. My job was to assist the young head coach, Tony Van Den Bosch, in any way I could. Our first task was to select a 12-player squad from a group of 20 candidates, all national citizens, who made their living playing in the Belgian professional league. They ranged in age from early 20s to mid-30s and compared favorably in ability with players at a good Division II college in the United States. French is the national language of Belgium (although those from the northern sector speak mostly Flemish), but all except one of the players spoke English, so there was no major communications barrier. (I did, however, finally get to make use of the French I'd learned in high school and college in the hotel, restaurants, and local shops.)

There weren't any NBA prospects among the Belgians, but there were enough players who understood the game and knew how to play to convince me we could have a good team. I liked Coach Van Den Bosch very much. He ran the practices, but allowed me to stop the action at any time to make corrections and suggestions. Together, we became an effective team. We made our squad selections after several sessions, and the team made solid progress over the next week. The players were attentive and receptive, and Coach Tony gave me plenty of opportunity to teach. I especially liked the team's center, Rik Samaey, and the point guard, Ronny Bayer. Rik was an experienced European player with a solid inside game, although he

was only about 6–8. Ronny was a quick, aggressive point guard who was a fierce competitor.

Wandel had scheduled two pretournament games with France, both to be played in Belgium. France was reputed to have a superior team and didn't have to go through the qualifying procedure that Belgium did. There was high interest in the games—in part due to the historic animosity between the two countries. Unexpectedly, Belgium ended up decisively beating the French in both games.

Suddenly, there was a stirring of interest in the national team, although no one gave us much of a chance in the upcoming tournament. Our first opponent was top-seeded Israel, which had gone to the Final Four in the last competition (the other teams included Iceland, Hungary, and Portugal). One of the journalists who had been covering the team in Brussels told me that he wasn't going to the tournament because it made him feel too sad to watch Belgium lose all the time in international competition.

The team made the trip to Lisbon, Portugal, by air, then bussed to Anadia, a small town in the mountains where the tournament was to be played. We had one day of practice and looked sharp. I didn't know anything about the Israelis, but I sensed that our team was playing well and should be able to at least hang in the game with them.

To the surprise of everyone there, we beat Israel. When the tournament began, there were no spectators from Belgium at the games. But after the victory over Israel, the fans started to appear. They made the drive over the mountains into Portugal, then up to Anadia. By the time the tournament ended, about 100 Belgian fans had traveled to the mountain town to see the final game. We made their trip worthwhile, because we beat Israel, Iceland, and Hungary in succession and, finally, Portugal in the Finals. We won four straight games in four days. Samaey was marvelous—playing through the pain of aching knees—and Bayer was not to be denied.

Helping the Belgian team was one of the most enjoyable experiences that I ever had in the game of basketball. Leon Wandel, a wonderful patriot who personally financed most of the expenses,

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was ecstatic. The players were equally thrilled, and Coach Tony and I were flat-out elated.

At the conclusion of the dinner following the championship game, the players and their fans began singing their victory song, and when quiet had been restored, they began a chant of “**Ramsay, Ramsay, Ramsay.**” It was an emotional moment that I still feel deeply. I rose from my seat at the table and simply told them how happy I was to have been a part of their great success. It was an experience that I’ll never forget.

I returned four more years for brief periods with Wandel, Van Den Bosch, and the team, and while each time was enjoyable, we never duplicated the magic of that first year.