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Hoop Dreams

By The Moscow Times

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Lyuba slumped over, and her face fell into her plate of sushi. I gently adjusted her head so that she wouldn't accidentally inhale the cube of wasabi.

"Is she okay?" another dinner companion asked.

"Oh sure," I answered. "She does this all the time. Too many mojitos just after her Botox injection. Don't pay any attention; she'll come to after a while."

"Okay then, shall we get back to the business at hand?"

We were meeting about a special sports project in Russia for which I was lobbying in the United States. Lyuba and I were having dinner with Russian officials responsible for developing and promoting high-level international sports events in Russia. After securing the Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 World Cup, the Russian government was now anxious that it was lagging in basketball and cricket. My British counterpart had been charged with lobbying to bring the Cricket World Cup to Russia, while I was hired to promote having

the National Basketball Association's championships in Russia.

"Did you have much success on your recent visit to the U.S.?" one official asked.

"Well, I had mixed results ..."

"That's a pity. Your British counterpart had great success. The 2015 Cricket World Cup scheduled for Australia and New Zealand has been scrapped. It will now take place in Ivanovo."

"The Ivanovo region has great infrastructure!" cried an Ivanovo official. "And what's more, the Ivanovo region has great infrastructure for *cricket!* We are passionate about cricket, and we have already designed the mascot for our Cricket World Cup!"

"Tell him what it is," the Russian sports official directed proudly.

"A cricket! Ivan the Cricketer!"

"That's good, *very* good" I said, impressed. "But listen ... the NBA is still kind of on the fence. You know, the NBA is really a *North American* league, so they haven't figured out just how to spin having its championship in Russia yet. They're working on it though. But in the meantime, I *did* manage to have officials agree to have the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship in Russia next year."

"That's great news! But what is this NCAA championship?"

"Well, it's a huge event in America," I answered, "but it's played among American colleges. But you see, the good thing is that because it's with American college students, the players and fans don't really know where the hell anything — or any place — actually *is.* We're not big on geography over there, you understand. So if we have a championship game in, say, Penza, we can say, like, that it's Penza, *Nebraska* ... or something like that. They'll never know the difference."

"I see," the Russian official said, thinking of the possibilities. "I like it! Do you have a mascot yet, like Ivan the Cricketer?"

Just I was about to answer, Lyuba jolted up, the wasabi cube firmly lodged in her right nostril and giving her just the creative adrenaline rush she needed.

"Penza the Basket!" she shouted at the top of her lungs just before passing back out in her plate of sushi.

"Penza has great infrastructure, and great infrastructure for American college basketball!" someone else shouted.

"Excellent!" the Russian official said excitedly. "Oh how I love progress! I'll notify the prime minister immediately!"

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