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Pain, Glory for Mozgov in NBA

By Alec Luhn

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Mozgov visiting Moscow in May. **Alec Luhn**

Timofei Mozgov, at 7 foot 1 and 250 pounds, is a man hard to ignore, but until a night in New York earlier this year he was a virtual no-name in the National Basketball Association, a rookie center from Russia who had fallen out of the Knicks starting lineup early in the season.

Then he got his chance, and 23 points and 14 rebounds during the Knicks' 124-106 victory over the Detroit Pistons had the crowd chanting "Moz-GOV! Moz-GOV!"

Director and legendary Knicks fan Spike Lee was later spotted wearing Mozgov's jersey.

"Ten games in a row I just sat and didn't get one minute of playing time, and then out of the blue, 40 minutes of playing time," Mozgov, 24, said about the game in an interview with The Moscow Times. "I was just rehabilitating myself for the 10 games all at once."

In person, Mozgov, whose deep voice seems to rumble up from within his huge frame, is

a giant to anyone outside the basketball world. His humongous hands grab a large table knife and bend it as if it is a baby sapling as he talks.

Mozgov returned to Russia in May to visit family and to compete with the Russian national team in September's FIBA European Basketball Championship, or EuroBasket, training for which begins in July.

He will be playing under David Blatt, who coached him in 2009's EuroBasket championship and the 2010 FIBA World Championship, where the Russian team placed seventh. Blatt welcomed Mozgov back to the team, calling him a "natural" with good shooting and shot-blocking skills, as well as agility and speed unusual for his size. But he also said Mozgov is "a work in progress" who needs to improve on position defense and playing in the low post.

"In the past, he has not shown great back-to-the-basket playing," Blatt said. "It's something he needs to work on."

As a player, Mozgov is "still not there, but he has the ability to get there if he focuses on the work," he added.

The other Russian NBA player, veteran Utah Jazz forward Andrei Kirilenko, will also be playing with the national team for the first time since the 2008 Summer Olympics. Kirilenko told The Moscow Times that Mozgov will be the key player on the Russian team this year, partly due to the experience he gained in the NBA. He and Mozgov befriended each other this season after Kirilenko called up the younger player offering to help with any questions, he said.

"He's definitely going to be the main force for the Russian team, as well as [center Alexander] Kaun from CSKA," Kirilenko said, suggesting that Kaun might play power forward. "They can be twin towers for the Russian team."

Mozgov's journey to the NBA began in St. Petersburg, where he was discovered in the fourth grade by girls basketball coach Kira Trzheskal. During a search for prospective girl players, Trzheskal said she accidentally went into a classroom of all boys where Mozgov's classmates singled him out. She took him into the hallway and did a cursory test of his athletic ability.

"He ran and jumped with pleasure," Trzheskal said, adding that in any sport "he would have been a leader."

Trzheskal invited Mozgov to train at a local Olympic training school, but he forgot about the coach's offer. A few weeks later, Trzheskal called Mozgov's parents to ask why he hadn't showed up.

"Then my dad cussed me out ... and took me to train," Mozgov said. "And that's how the journey ... to the league started."

Mozgov worked his way up through youth teams to the country's top league, joining Khimki in 2006. His performance for Russia at EuroBasket 2009, where he averaged 11 points and 4.6 rebounds, helped raise his profile, and in 2010, Mozgov was signed by the New York Knicks on a $9.7 million, three-year contract. His first season, however, was marred by frustrating time on the bench, a trade to the Denver Nuggets in February and a season-ending injury —

knee and ankle sprains — on April 5.

"The injury really hindered me," Mozgov said. "In my last games the coach was starting to trust me."

Mozgov may have fewer chances for growth in Denver as the Nuggets already have two premier big men, although the team coach has said he has a chance of playing 25 minutes a game next season.

Kirilenko said his countryman could play NBA ball for a long time thanks to his size and mobility. But he added that Mozgov must prove his worth in his first three seasons, while he's still considered a young player.

"He did a good job in his first season," Kirilenko said. "In his second season he's got to work even harder."

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