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Local Lithuanians bask in **basketball** glory; Community wild about Cavs' picks from tiny nation

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Algis Penkauskas led the way from a noisy barroom to a back office and slipped a ring of keys from his pocket. Glancing once, twice, over his shoulder, he fitted a key into the door of a steel cabinet and revealed the club's prized trophy: a pair of **basketball** shoes as big as bread loaves.

Zydrunas Ilgauskas signed each shoe that night he came in for cepelinai (potato dumplings), soon after arriving in Cleveland in 1996 to play center for the Cavaliers.

"He was mobbed. I don't think he liked that much," said Penkauskas, a longtime member of the Lithuanian Club on East 185th Street.

Z doesn't come around anymore, Penkauskas said and sighed, as he walked back into the bar carrying the shoes on outstretched palms, like a crown. Ah, but there's the new boy from Kaunas, he said, brightening.

And maybe a third Lithuanian on the way! another man added.

Conversation flared in a room sprinkled with trim, angular-looking men and women, several of them quite tall. They talked about **basketball** - the second religion of **Lithuania** - and the recent good fortune of Cleveland's Lithuanian community.

Having secured the rights to 19-year-old Martynas Andriuskevicius, who stands 7 feet 2, the Cavs may soon field twin Baltic towers - Z and "Martyn" (Mahr-TEEN) - making Cleveland the most Lithuanian team in the National **Basketball** Association.

Further stoking the frenzy, local Lithuanian-Americans are keenly aware of the Cavs' reported interest in European sensation Sarunas Jasikevicius, the guard who helped **Lithuania** upset Team USA at the Athens Olympics, and the best man at Z's wedding last summer.

Three Lithuanians on a 14-man NBA roster? All from the same city, Kaunas, from one of the smallest nations in the world? The possibilities leave an ethnic community breathless.

"It's painful listening to people say our names," said Vidas Tatarunas, president of the Lithuanian Athletic Club. But he smiles at the youths pouring into the club's **basketball** program.

"They always heard about how good Lithuanians are," he said. "This is, like, reality. We feel like the mouse that roared."

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A portrait of Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus hangs prominently in Ingrida Bublys' office, a tiny diplomatic post behind Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Collinwood. But visitors also see a picture of Ilgauskas and newspaper stories headlined, "Z the star of the show" and "Cavaliers Zeelight."

Bublys is the honorary Lithuanian consul general for Ohio. The clippings are her way of telling Lithuanian immigrants, "Welcome to Cleveland."

The immigrant families still come, in a trickle if not in a stream, and they are hearing reassuring words.

"We all love listening to the sports commentators these days," Bublys said. "All the time they mention, '**Lithuania, Lithuania, Lithuania,**' and it is so great."

Tiny **Lithuania** entered America's **basketball** lexicon after 1990, when it broke from the grip of the former Soviet Union and players like Sarunas Marciulionis and Arvydas Sabonis, Z's idol, blazed a path from Baltic Sea towns to the National **Basketball** Association.

But the Lithuanian passion for the game long predates SportsCenter.

You can hear much of the history in the Lithuanian Club, where immigrants from 40 years ago and from last year debate sports in the glow of TV screens and beer lights.

They will tell you about a game in 1939 when a team from Cleveland's oldest Lithuanian parish, St. George's, played a European all-star team in Cleveland and beat them.

They will recount the great Collinwood High School teams stocked with Lithuanians in the 1950s.

They will remind you that four of the five starting players on the Soviet **basketball** team that won gold at the 1988 Olympics were Lithuanian.

"We're the Indiana of Europe," said Raymond Butkus, a retired banker who came to Cleveland in **Lithuania**'s post World War II immigration wave.

He says Lithuanians play a world-class brand of **basketball** because they play all the time, year-round, especially in **basketball**-crazed towns like Kaunas.

But he also stands 6 feet 3. And growing up in a Lithuanian neighborhood of Cleveland, no one called him tall.

As they ponder their success on the court, Lithuanians often come around to observing that they are well built for the game.

"We're long-legged," Bublys said.

"There's a lot of tall ones," agreed Al Gudenas, president of the Lithuanian-American Community of Cleveland. "But it's very uneven. There's a group that is very tall and a group my size [5 feet 10]. Growing up, I had many friends 6-4, 6-6, 6-10."

If it's fun to play **basketball**, it's inspiring to see your cultural kin play the game at its highest level.

So Lithuanian parents wince only slightly to hear out-of-town sportscasters pronounce Zydrunas. (It's ZHEE-drew-nus.) They beam to see their children wearing T-shirts tie-dyed in the Lithuanian national colors of green, yellow and red, recalling the distinctive warm-up outfits of the Lithuanian national team at its 1992 Olympic debut.

And they look hopefully toward the next tall star in town.

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The shy Ilgauskas donated his shoes, hundreds of game tickets, and his time for **basketball** camps.

But once a familiar face at Lithuanian gatherings, he's now seen mostly on television.

"Once he signed that big contract"- for \$70 million in 1999 - "he seemed to disappear," Gudenas said.

Welcome Martynas. He's 19. Just a boy. And a long way from home.

Ruta DeGutis, president of the Lithuanian Club, thinks Martynas will be missing cepelinai. Once he gets to Cleveland, she plans to whip up a Lithuanian dinner and invite him down to the club - and into the community. While he's still theirs.

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For your information

Population: 3.5 million

Area: 65,200 square miles, slightly larger than West Virginia

Declared independence: 1990

Lithuanians in Greater Cleveland: About 10,000.

Other Cleveland connections: Forced to flee the invading Soviet army in 1940, Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona settled in Cleveland.

Telshe Yeshiva College, **Lithuania**'s world-renowned center for traditional Jewish studies, relocated to Cleveland in 1941.

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