



# A History of Volleyball Relations Between the Russian and American People

USA Volleyball

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During the two decades immediately following World War II, while the governments of the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics escalated the Cold War the American and Russian people were escalating a warm sport relationship that was promoted by mutual respect for the other's sportsmen and sportswomen who were competing against each other in major sporting events and sharing in the pursuit of the Olympic ideal of "Citius, Altius, Fortius."

It can be stated, without room for serious contradiction, that this sporting relationship between the peoples of the two superpowers was the initiator of and eventually one of the most important factors contributing to the termination of the Cold War, Sport exchanges set a tone for friendship and cooperation that carried over into other areas of mutuality between the two peoples and allowed the governments to enter into those other cooperative ventures that helped to end the cold war.

## I. The Early Years

### A) Savvine, Wilson and the International Federation

It was through the Federation Internationale de VolleyBall (FIVB) that initial contacts between Russian and American volleyball sportsmen first occurred, and through which the first friendships were formed. Principals in the development of this relationship were Vladimir Savinne, president of the Volleyball Federation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and Harry Wilson, vice president of the United States Volleyball Association, who were both officers of the FIVB. Although the governments of both were in conflict, Savvine and Wilson recognized a commonality of purpose in their relationship through the sport of volleyball, and an open dialogue was initiated looking for the right moment at which to have a formal exchange of athletes and teams. It took over fifteen years to reach that important moment of the first bilateral exchange of volleyball teams, and neither live to participate in the initial visit to the other's country. However, they did participate in and take great satisfaction from other meetings between their teams, principally at Olympic Games and World Championships.

### B) The Olympic Games

The first encounters between the Russian and American volleyball athletes occurred during volleyball's first appearance on the Olympic court, at Tokyo in 1964, where both the men's teams and the women's teams met. The Russians showed a dominance that would continue for the next fifteen years, excepting the meeting between the men at the Mexico Olympics in 1968. It was at Mexico City that the Americans shocked the world with a victory over the

Soviets in the first match for both teams in the competition. But, the glory was short lived for the USA and only a temporary setback for the USSR, as the Russians went on to win the gold medal while the Americans finished seventh in the standings. But it was an indication of competitions to come when both teams would compete on nearly even terms to the general thrill of the sporting world and the specific thawing of Cold War barriers.

### C) The 1965 Canadian Competition

The first bilateral meeting between Russian and American volleyball teams occurred in Canada, in 1965, through the organizational and promotional skills of the Canadian Volleyball Association and with the cooperation of the Canadian government. The multi competition series was filmed and distributed widely throughout the North American volleyball community, and set a standard for creative volleyball cinematography. This Canadian bilateral meeting, resulting also from the friendship of Savvine and Wilson, opened a crack in the previously closed door for bilateral American-Russian volleyball exchanges.

### D) Savvine and Monaco Plan the First Bilateral- Exchanges

In 1972, on the occasion of the 1972 FIVB Congress in Munich during the Olympic Games, Savvine and Wilson agreed that the time was now ripe to pursue aggressively bilateral exchanges of teams. This agreement in principal was followed by a meeting in the autumn of 1973 between new United States Volleyball Association (USVBA) Secretary General Albert Monaco and Savvine during the FIVB meetings at the Women's World Cup in Montevideo, Uruguay. It was agreed that the USA Men would visit Moscow in 1974 with the USSR Men visiting the USA in 1975. During the time of this meeting, Wilson, who had remained in the USA died unexpectedly, throwing a cloud of sadness over those who were planning this historic exchange.

### E) The 1974 Visit to Moscow

Savvine welcomed the Americans to Moscow in the summer of 1974, and the visit was exciting both as a sporting program and as a cultural opportunity. History has not recorded the exact results of the competition, but it has concluded that a level of friendship was initiated that has continued without interruption ever since. The Americans returned home with stories of wonderful encounters with the Russian people, of seeing historical monuments, events and places previously only encountered in movies, and of the sincere and lasting friendships among the sportsmen. Savvine and his sportsmen were perfect hosts, and highlights included a visit to a Young Pioneers camp, a boat ride on the Moscow River, and a special night at the Circus where the joint USA-USSR Soyuz space venture was highlighted. The Americans returned home intent to make the 1975 return visit of the USSR team to the United States an event to remember for all involved.

## F) The 1975 Visit to America

Early in 1975 the members of the USSR and USA volleyball federations once again were saddened by the death of a major party to this historic bilateral exchange, this time that of Vladimir Savvine. How ironic that both of the leaders most responsible for initiating this sportive relationship during the height of the Cold War did not live to make the historic first visit, to the other's country.

In the autumn of 1975 the Russian delegation arrived in the United States tired from a stay in Canada and a long air controllers strike delayed trip to Los Angeles. The seven match fortnight started tentatively with both delegations unsure of just how friendly to be, but a stop at Disneyland melted all artificial concerns and established a bond between all members of the delegation that in some instances continues today. The seven city and match tour commenced with two stops in Southern California (one near Los Angeles in the venue that would in 1944 be the location of the 1984 Olympic Games), and concluded in New York City, attracting along the way the largest crowds ever to watch volleyball in the U.S. Although the Russian athletes won all of the matches, the Americans won some games and the game scores were close more often than not. Real tears were shed by all participants from both delegations when the visitors headed home from JFK Airport.

## G) Women's Team Exchanges

The development of bilateral contacts between the women's teams of the USSR and USA commenced a few years after the men. The teams had met at the 1964 and 1968 Olympic Games, and at the 1973 World Cup, and those first meetings indicated that the Russian women were considerably better than their American counterparts. Both Savvine and Wilson agreed that it was premature for bilateral activity for the women until they were more evenly matched.

## H) The First American Victory

In 1977 the American women posted their first ever victory over the Soviets, at the Varna, Bulgaria summer tournament, and this one victory opened the door for the serious discussion of bilateral competitions among the women. Following a surprising sixth place finish for the American women in the 24 team field at the 1978 World Championship in St. Petersburg (then named Leningrad), exchanges of women's teams became a reality.

## I) The First Women's Team Exchanges

A visit to the USSR became a regular annual event for the American women commencing with the Sportakiade of 1979 in Moscow. In that same year the Soviet women's entry headed to the World University Games in Mexico stopped in the USA for a tournament organized by the USVBA at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs.

## J) Tchesnokov and Monaco

A major factor in the development of the bilateral exchanges between the volleyball team from Russia and the United States was the friendship between Colonel Yuri Tchesnokov and Doctor Albert Monaco. Tchesnokov, a sports hero of the Russian people after having captained the USSR Olympic volleyball team to a gold medal at Tokyo in 1964, and Monaco, who assumed leadership of the USVBA in 1973, first met during the 1974 World Volleyball Championship in Mexico shortly after the American men had been at Moscow (a trip Monaco did not make). From 1974 through 1988, Tchesnokov who became a vice president of the FIVB, and Monaco, who was a member of the FIVB Sports Organizing Committee of which Tchesnokov was chairman, met regularly throughout the world at various competitions and meetings, and used, the contacts to plan bilateral exchanges between the Russian and American men's and women's volleyball teams, as well as to organize and conduct the major competitions of the world, including the 1978, 1982 and 1986 World Championships, the 1980, 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games, the 1986 and 1990 Goodwill Games, plus numerous World Cups, Junior World Championships, and Continental Championships. Their personal friendship, solidified during those years fostered the continuation of regular meetings between the national team of the two great friends and forecast the eventual friendship between their nations.

## II. The Men's Dynasty Teams

### A) The 1977 - 1982 Russian Teams

There have been two great men's volleyball team dynasties in FIVB history, the USSR men of 1977 through 1982, and the USA team of 1984 through 1988. Although the Russian men had won world and Olympic titles in the 1960's it was the unbroken string of successes at world events between 1977 and 1982 that was most remarkable, including the 1977 World Cup in Japan, the 1978 World Championship in Italy, the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, the 1981 World Cup in Japan, and the 1982 World Championship in Argentina. It was a streak of dominance unparalleled before or since, and a run of continuous success that may never be equaled.

### B) The 1984 - 1988 American Team

During the years of the Russian dynasty the American team did little more than participate in the events the Russians won and in fact did not even qualify for the 1980 Olympic Games. By 1982 at the World Championships in Argentina the Americans were competitive with their Russian counterparts and in 1984 during the American's annual participation in the USSR at the Savvine Memorial Tournament, the USA posted its first ever victory over the USSR. Later that summer the Americans captured the 1984 Olympic title in Los Angeles, (in which the USSR did not participate), followed by championships at the 1985 World Cup in Japan, the 1986 World Championship in France, and the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. In the latter two events the Americans and Russians met in the championship match.

### III. The Goodwill Games

#### A) The Concept and Planning

In 1985, with the Cold War seemingly never to end and official relationships between the USSR and the USA having been accented by mutual refusals to participate in Olympic Games hosted by the other, the concept of the Goodwill Games emphasizing the friendly relationships between Russian and American sportsmen and sportswoman, was conceived by American Ted Turner, and immediately adopted by the USSR Olympic Committee. The volleyball federations of both countries eagerly endorsed the event, and shared a mutual enthusiasm during the planning stages. Tchesnokov, operating behind the scenes for the USSR and taking a leading role with FIVB, and Monaco, as leader of the USVBA and also active with FIVB, worked together to develop the volleyball competition concept and to get international acceptance of and participation in the event, which was not enthusiastically received at first by national Olympic committees or the International Olympic Committee, who feared that the event would hurt the Olympic Games. Eventually, the benefit to mankind of this event, bringing together the best athletes of the superpowers as well as selected top sportsmen and sportswomen of other nations, was endorsed fully by the world's sport leaders.

#### B) Boris Yeltsin and the First Goodwill Games

The first Goodwill Games were organized in Moscow in 1986 and were a rousing success. Boris Yeltsin was mayor of Moscow at that time and his unlimited enthusiastic support for the games played a major role in that success. During the 1986 Goodwill Games Yeltsin hosted a luncheon at a major hotel in Moscow, which Monaco attended. During that gathering Yeltsin discussed with Monaco his youthful experiences as a sportsman, including volleyball, and his commitment to bettering the relationships between the USSR and USA. Gorbachev was premier at that time and "glasnost" and "perystrokia" were becoming well known concepts in the west. It was apparent to Monaco that some Russian leaders offered great hope for the future and Yeltsin was one of them.

The great competitive matches between the Russian and American volleyball athletes continued in the Goodwill Games, and through exposure on American television sent to the United States the message of friendship for which the organizers had hoped and prayed. Soon thereafter the official stance between the governments of the USSR and USA softened and the spirit of goodwill that was so obvious at the 1986 Games began to surface at the official level. One can only guess at the reason, but the 1986 Goodwill Games must have had some positive impact.

#### C) The Seattle Goodwill Games

The Second Goodwill Games, in 1990 at Seattle, placed an exclamation point on the changing official stance between the Americans and Russians. Although the competitions, including volleyball, were fierce, off of the competition field there was an opportunity for the American hosts to continue the "Goodwill" that started four years earlier in Moscow and to

generate sincere friendships with the foreign athletes especially the Russians. For Tchesnokov and Monaco it was the first opportunity since the 1984 Olympic Games, at which Tchesnokov participated only as an FIVB leader, to be together on American soil to continue their unique and special friendship. They were both proud of what had grown from their initial efforts to have the Goodwill Games become a reality and they were truly proud of the official friendship between their countries that had grown parallel to their personal friendship. They watched again as in St. Petersburg in 1994, the Goodwill Games added Beach Volleyball to the friendly rivalry as well as yet more Gold medal match showdowns between what now was called Russia, and the USA occurred.

#### IV. The Atlanta Olympic Games

When Tchesnokov and Monaco attended the Closing Ceremonies of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles they believed that they would not in their lifetimes share another Olympic Games on American soil. How wrong they were! At Atlanta in 1996 Russians will compete for the first time in an Olympic Games on American soil, and the great rivalry between the volleyball teams of the two peoples will be a highlight. The greatest crowds in US volleyball history are expected in 1996 in Atlanta and television will broadcast the competition, to record numbers of viewers in both nations. A double Russian-American finals would be a fitting conclusion to sport in the twentieth century, a century that during its second half saw sport lead superpower politics from the depths of mistrust, fear and nuclear confrontation, that threatened the future of mankind to cooperation, friendship, and goodwill that offers mankind hope for the future.