



3x3's Rise from
the Streets to
the Olympics

BASKETBALL 2.0

TOKYO 2020

Tristan Lavalette

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Chapter 1

FIBA shows interest in three-on-three

IN EARLY July 2007, Patrick Baumann should have been jaded as he traversed different continents scurrying between his high-profile roles with FIBA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Amid a gruelling schedule, the FIBA secretary general had spent several hectic days at the IOC's 119th session in Guatemala City where the Russian seaside resort of Sochi was named host city of the 2014 Winter Games.

Baumann, one month shy of his 40th birthday, was a newcomer on the coveted IOC but tipped for big things within the Olympic fraternity, underlined by having a strong rapport with president Jacques Rogge.

Always sporting a jam-packed schedule, this was no exception as Baumann headed to Novi Sad, Serbia, for a FIBA Youth Commission meeting during the U19 Basketball World Cup, which featured a 19-year-old Steph Curry along with future NBA players DeAndre Jordan, Patrick Beverley, Nic Batum and Boban Marjanović.

But, as he left the Central American country, Baumann showed no signs of weariness, which wasn't particularly unusual for the indefatigable Swiss who had an unrelenting

work ethic. 'He wasn't able to switch off. He would be on 24/7,' said former FIBA communications coordinator Simon Wilkinson.

'He expected everyone to be working at the same pace as he could. No one else could. He was passionate. You couldn't fault his commitment.'

Baumann, however, was more enthusiastic than usual. In Guatemala City, the IOC endorsed a proposal to establish the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) aimed at 14–18-year-olds in a 'new sporting event to educate, engage and influence young athletes'.

The IOC's mission, among others, was to 'raise awareness and participation among young people' and the first YOG was to be held in 2010.

The upcoming meeting in Serbia proved fortuitous timing with Baumann having much to share about the robust discussion on the IOC's roundtable.

But he couldn't wait. Proactive, in his trademark style, a giddy Baumann called Lubomir Kotleba, FIBA's sport director, who had a long career in basketball marked by a distinguished 14-year stint as an international referee.

'I was just with the IOC and they've decided something must be done,' Baumann told Kotleba.

'People are losing interest in the Olympic Games. It is losing relevance, especially for the young generation who don't care about some of the traditional Olympic sports. It has scared the IOC who believe the Olympics will be forgotten. They need to modernise it.'

Baumann detailed how an IOC-commissioned study on urban sport found non-traditional sports were growing rapidly, particularly for youth.

The findings created urgency within the IOC to embrace urban sports and include them in the Olympic program.

The IOC, Baumann said, was spooked by the X Games, an annual extreme sports event organised and broadcast by ESPN in the mid-1990s, which gained popularity in the 2000s highlighted by its largest single-day attendance of 79,380 in 2004 in Los Angeles.

The action sports event expanded from North America and into Europe, South America and Asia with its popular core sports including skateboarding, BMX, snowboarding and, eventually, e-gaming.

'X Games has more impact on the core audience than the Olympics,' *Snowboarder Magazine* editor Tom Monterosso told *Vice* in 2015.

Baumann then went on to detail the IOC's implantation of the YOG to Kotleba, a pragmatic Slovak who had, since 1989, been part of FIBA, which had only a full-time staff of seven at the time rendering him to being something of a jack of all trades, including cleaning the office on occasion.

It was a far cry from the hundreds of staff members FIBA employed decades later at its inimitable 'House of Basketball' headquarters in Mies near Geneva in south-western Switzerland.

'They have to bring in sports that are for young people. Something new,' Baumann said. 'Lubo, we have to do something similar.'

'What do you think about us starting a new sport? What do you think of three-on-three basketball? We won't be starting something new but what will be new is that it will be played at the national level. But do you think it can become an Olympic sport? Can we get two sports into the Olympics?'

It was a verbal overload for Kotleba, who had never paid attention to the various three-on-three competitions around the world that were removed from FIBA's orbit.

He didn't quite know how to respond because he was oblivious of three-on-three but didn't want to dampen his boss's obvious excitement.

After a brief contemplation, he offered encouragement, 'Patrick, I think it might work at the Olympic level. I can imagine a sunny day in the future at the Olympics, where we have two sets of medals.

'You know why I think that? Governments are asking their national Olympic committees to bring back more medals. It's great prestige for governments when their countries win more medals and doing well provides goodwill. There will always be influential support for more sports being included.'

'Lubo, you will look into three-on-three,' an emboldened Baumann replied with gusto.

'Patrick, I do not have time. I'm already doing a million things. I don't even have time to go to the toilet!' said Kotleba, who attempted to try to wriggle himself out of the situation.

'Lubo, you know I love you,' Baumann chuckled. 'We need you for this. Do it... for me.'

* * *

Well before the IOC's directive, Baumann and senior officials had been intrigued by three-on-three for some time.

The basketball governing body had monitored the heyday of American private promoters in the 1990s riding off the back of the NBA's global explosion as they attempted to expand into Europe, which was at the heart of FIBA's operations.

There were some informal discussions between senior officials about potentially FIBA getting involved, but they never amounted to anything serious.

However, the power brokers became edgy after FIBA Europe, the European branch of the governing body, and the Union of European Leagues of Basketball (ULEB), consisting

of the continent's richest and most powerful clubs, engaged in a nasty dispute in 2000 that has remained bitter ever since.

In a power struggle for European authority, ULEB parted ways with FIBA and created its own EuroLeague, which has remained the biggest competition in Europe although the bloody war has continued to rage intermittently throughout the years.

Amid such a damaging, long-winded saga, FIBA administrators were keen to avoid a similar fate from three-on-three.

'We were silently observing three-on-three from 2001 onwards,' Kotleba said.

'People were saying, "Shit if we do not step in now there will be an organisation outside of FIBA organising three-on-three." It was not a serious threat because no promoter expressed a wish to create an independent organisation that was going to structure this whole game and take control of it.

'But if Patrick hadn't come up with this idea to push three-on-three then someone else probably would have come along. Maybe a Big3 type of league would have grabbed it and stated, "We are the owners of three-on-three in the world."'

Baumann was determined to rejuvenate FIBA, which formed in 1932, two years after basketball was officially recognised by the IOC.

It oversees international competitions while establishing official basketball rules, and by 2022 brought together 212 national basketball federations.

But FIBA was widely perceived as stringent and archaic by the time Baumann stepped into the hot seat in 2002 at just 35 years of age, after a rapid rise to the top.

After finishing his law degree from the University of Lausanne in 1990, Baumann joined FIBA four years later as a general counsel and quickly rose the ladder impressing

everyone with his shrewdness, ingenuity and unwavering devotion to the job.

In 1995, he was appointed deputy secretary-general before taking the reins from the legendary Boris Stanković, who was an instigator in allowing NBA players to participate in the Olympics and FIBA competitions ushering the way for the iconic 1992 Dream Team to dominate at the Barcelona Games and spark a basketball boon worldwide.

Seeing basketball spread like wildfire through the 1990s was a formative experience for Baumann, who spoke five languages fluently and had an innate ability to push past cultural barriers.

His worldly outlook fuelled a belief that basketball could one day legitimately challenge football's global supremacy.

It led to FIBA, later in Baumann's tenure, poaching Markus Studer from UEFA, where he was the deputy chief executive, and he initiated the development of FIBA's Basketball Champions League in 2016 with obvious parallels to football's highly prestigious UEFA Champions League.

Bespectacled and doughy, looking boyish despite his receding hairline, Baumann had a gentler edge than the crusty Serb, Stanković, who ruled with an iron fist.

It wasn't just appearance; Baumann sought a more inclusive leadership approach.

'I had access to him quite easily. Was able to go up to him directly and talk to him instead of having to go through bureaucratic levels. That is not usually the case in a big organisation,' said Wilkinson, who felt more appreciation for Baumann's managerial style after leaving FIBA in 2019.

He might not have known yet exactly if three-on-three was a viable business idea, but Baumann had an instinct that this shortened game could unlock FIBA and shake it from its staid foundations, while making basketball more popular globally,

particularly in traditional barren areas like the subcontinent and parts of Asia.

Smaller basketball nations essentially had no hope of ever making World Cups or Olympics, but maybe they could in three-on-three, which required a smaller pool of players.

Baumann envisioned global top-class events, World Cups and continental competitions for men's and women's, adding to FIBA coffers, but that at the opposite end of the spectrum three-on-three could be a friendlier introduction to the sport.

Three-on-three would be a complement to basketball not a substitute or competitor, he foreshadowed.

Having noted three-on-three's rapid popularity in the 1990s in the United States, Baumann was confident the game could be revived and tweaked to adapt to a modern audience, increasingly glued to their devices and with less attention span.

There were a lot of unknowns, but it came down to the three-on-three format never having been formally established with worldwide uniform rules.

FIBA estimated that unregistered three-on-three players outnumber licensed basketball players by a ratio of five to one.

This pickup game, already widely played informally worldwide, was sitting there for FIBA to take ownership of. Baumann intended to do exactly that.

Shortly after it was floated around the boardrooms in Novi Sad – which was quite symbolic given the Serbian city would become a breeding ground of top 3x3 talent – FIBA approved three-on-three and determined it was the format to represent basketball at the 2010 Youth Olympic Games.

After it had been officially ratified, there was the mere matter of creating rules and a structure.

Quickly becoming his pet project, Baumann wanted the ball rolling and thus three-on-three basketball was accepted

as a demonstration sport at the Asian Indoor Games in Macau in October 2007.

‘We didn’t know what to do. The basketball federations had no clue what we wanted from them. There was nothing,’ said Kotleba. ‘But we needed to organise rules as we needed to educate players and send teams to Macau.’

It left a stressed Kotleba with just one month to scramble to develop official rules from scratch. Working around the clock, he studied the rules from three-on-three and streetball tournaments from the USA and around Europe, including Sweden and major leagues in Hamburg and Moscow, which attracted hundreds of thousands of participants.

With help desperately needed, 25-year-old intern Kevin Bovet sensed an opportunity to impress.

The 6ft 6in former Swiss basketball player cut his teeth on the new project with exhaustive research, as Bovet studied footage of Hoop It Up and other three-on-three/streetball tournaments wildly popular in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s.

‘Hoop It Up was a true TV product and emerging brands, like Gatorade, were leveraging to get involved and push their products,’ Bovet said.

‘What made three-on-three popular was sponsorship, television and connecting grassroots with the NBA. Patrick’s goal was to really bring this back and use it as an initiative to make basketball even more accessible globally.

‘That bode well with what the IOC wanted to do and aligned with the IOC’s aspirations for the Youth Olympic Games.’

To properly grasp the rise and fall of three-on-three in the United States, the FIBA staffers needed to firstly learn its humble origins from decades earlier.