
2006

Bert went to a basketball game in August 2006: CEP Fleurus (Div. II, Belgium) vs. NCAA Northeastern Selection (USA).

CEP Fleurus hosted a USA College Selection coached by Lafayette's assistant **Drew Dawson** a few weeks ago. CEPF played without local stars **Zaki Ayyoub** (180cm, guard, born in 1979), **David Mukeba** (199cm, center, born in 1972) and **Dieter Billet** (204cm, center, born in 1978), all three recovering from minor injuries. **Fabien Muylaert** (196cm, forward, 1975) and **Emma Mampuya** (198cm, forward, 1979) started strongly and CEPF quickly took the lead. But the American college players with an impressive Villanova's **Bilal Benn** (196cm, guard/forward) came back into the game (26-27 at the end of the first quarter). Mainly thanks to a very good defense as well as great moves by their centers (impressive **Jason Mgebroff** of Lehigh University who had spectacular moves in the paint), the US team made up of 9 young players (out of top NCAA colleges from Northeastern States -- mainly from Pennsylvania and New York --) finished the first half with a 9-point advantage at the half (43-52).

Despite a nice come-back and spectacular actions by CEPF's **Sam Semijebero** (196cm, forward, 1978) and **Georges Bokanga** (198cm, forward, 1981) from long range, the local team fell short in the final seconds. CEP Fleurus' coach **Pat Verdun** took a last time-out but could not avoid a 88-92 final loss. Excellent game by both teams

Bert went to a basketball event in June 2006: the XXth U18 World Basketball Tournament of Douai in Northern France.

With its annual inland water fleet fair, the yearly Gayant giants festival, carillon concerts and other events, Douai, Northern France, has always been a city of folklore and traditions. As far as tradition is concerned, the 20th edition of the World U18 Men's Basketball Tournament organized by **Richard Ciesielski**, his sons and staff has now become a classic. It was very hot on Sunday afternoon when the finals were played at the gym of the *Lycée Corot* in Douai. That is maybe why attendance remained so sparse. Moreover, big TV broadcasts like the *Roland Garros French Tennis Open* final, the *Formula One Grand Prix* of Silverstone and the *2006 Football World Cup* going on in Germany could already fulfil many local sport fans' envy of great competition. Nevertheless, the *Douai World Tournament* was of great quality again and keeps on being a major preparatory competition (together with the *Albert Schweitzer Tournament* in Mannheim, Germany) for the U18 national teams to prepare major FIBA championships to be held in a few weeks. The same teams as last year faced each other in the final for 3rd and 4th place as well as for the 2006 title game. In front of several famous basketball analysts and connoisseurs, France played Lithuania in the "petite finale". Some basketball personalities enjoyed the high-quality level of the afternoon games: **Laurent Buffard**, coach of FIBA Women's Euroleague team US Valenciennes and Belgian Cats (the Belgian women's NT); **Niksa Bavcevic**, the Croatian head coach of 2006 Belgian Cup winner, vice-champion and FIBA Europe Cup quarter-finalist Dexia Mons-Hainaut; **Veselin Matic** of Serbia, former Polish NT coach, Rhein Energie Köln assistant coach and 1997 Cadets European Champion with the team of Yugoslavia; **Tahirou Sani**, former player of French 'Ligue Nationale' club Gravelines-Dunkerque, etc.

France played the final game without their best players **Alexis Ajinca** (214 cm, INSEP), **Antoine Diot** (190 cm, JL Bourg Basket) and **Nicolas Batum** (201 cm, Le Mans SC) but quickly seemed to take an easy 12-point lead in the first quarter. French coach **Richard Billant** could rely on an excellent team spirit from all his other players preparing for the U18 European Championship to be held in Greece next summer. A very good example of this great team spirit is when **Abdou M'Baye** (189 cm, in Dijon next season) got hit by a Lithuanian defender and laid on the floor for a few minutes. The other French players, including the substitutes, stood and walked towards their teammate to help him rejoin the bench. After a few turnovers, 'Les Bleus' could not avoid a nice comeback by the Lithuanians with a fantastic **Marius Valukonis** (196 cm, Marijampole SS) in offense. Half-time was reached with a small advantage for Lithuania: 43-44. At 61-50 in the second half, every observer thought the game was over when the Lithuanian coach **Rutenis Paulauskas** was sent out of the game by the referees. Despite nice efforts from **Olivier Romain** (182 cm, Paris Basket Racing), **Adrien Moerman** (204 cm, Roanne Chorale), **Ludovic Vaty** (a nice baby of 206 cm, EB Pau Orthez), **Jessie Begarin** (190 cm, New Star) and **Edwin Jackson** (190 cm, ASVEL), the French squad kept losing balls and missed easy shots. Impressive performances by one of the tournament's All-Star member **Martynas Gecevicius** (193 cm, S. Marciulonis BA, see picture -- Source: FIBA) as well as his teammates **Paulius Kleiza** (194 cm, A. Sabonis BS) and **Marius**

Valukonis allowed the Lithuanian team to come back again in this game and even take the advantage with just 13 seconds left in the game. Contrary to the situation of last year, the Lithuanian boys managed to remain in front until the buzzer: 81-85 final score.

After very spectacular three-point shooting and dunk contests, won respectively by US guard **Nick Calathes** (198 cm, verbally committed to the 2006 NCAA champions of Florida) and **Chase Budinger** (207 cm, committed to University of Arizona), everyone was waiting to discover the impressive USA Elite Team of coach **Linzy Davis**. Coach **Davis** had the excellent idea to come to Douai with a real U18 '*Dream Team*' indeed: 5 players were ranked among the Top 12 of the famous Hoop Scoop's ranking of High School Seniors published in the April 2006 edition of the well-known magazine '*Basketball Times*'. Most of the guys picked by **Davis** this year were also involved in the *McDonald's All-American* game (the All-Star game for high school players in the USA): **Thaddeus Young** (207 cm, Georgia Tech), the twin brothers **Brook and Robin Lopez** (both 213 cm and both committed to Stanford), **Chase Budinger**, **Javaris Crittenton** (198 cm, Georgia Tech), etc. Earlier in the Douai competition, the US team defeated the Netherlands 103-53, beat Turkey a first time 104-72 and got rid of Slovenia 105-51. In the semi-finals, while France got beaten in the last seconds by their Turkish rivals 83-81 after having led by almost 20 points, the Americans easily won against Lithuania 120-97 with a huge offensive performance by the tournament's MVP **Chase Budinger** (40 points in the semi). Needless to say that despite a courageous first half for the Turks (without their talented player **Dogus Balbay**), the US squad had no difficulty at all to win the title. The final game ended under the following score for the USA: 107-78 (55-48 at half-time). Special mentions to the Turkish players **Sahin Ekmen** (200 cm, Efes Pilsen) with 16 points, **Mehmet Arif Sahan** (204 cm, Tilton High School) with 12 points and 8 rebounds as well as **Altay Özuganci** (195 cm, Ülker) with 11 points in the final game.

MVP of the 20th Douai World U18 Men's Basketball Tournament: **Chase Budinger** (USA Elite Team).

Tournament All-Star: **Nick Calathes** (USA Elite Team); **Chase Budinger** (USA Elite Team); **Thaddeus Young** (USA Elite Team); **Robin Lopez** (USA Elite Team) and **Martynas Gecevcicius** (Lithuania).

Bert went to a basketball game on 26 April 2006: Liège Basket vs Royal Atomia Brussels in regular Belgian Division I season.

Thanks to the *Sud Presse* group, Bert attended the Liège Basket vs Atomia Brussels game on 26th April at the Sart Tilman Country Hall in Liège. Liège Basket was still in the run for a spot in Division I Play-Off (which they reached but where they were eliminated by BC Ostend in the semi-finals later on) and had to win the game against a Brussels' squad which had nothing to lose as the end of the season approached.

Despite some tensions between ex-Belgian MVP **Eric Struelens** (ex-Racing Mechelen, Spirou Charleroi, PSG, Real Madrid, Girona, etc.) and his very nervous Atomia team mate **Lionel Bosco** during a time-out in the first half, the Brussels' team remained close through 3/4 of the game mainly thanks to a brilliant **Elijah Palmer** (see picture), the Atomia center coming from the USA. **Palmer** (born in 1981, 201 cm, ex-Duquesne), a Chicagoan who played in Traiskirchen, Austria last season, scored 38 points and grabbed 9 rebounds through this game. Atomia's experienced players **Vilius Gabsys** (198 cm, born in 1979) of Lithuania and **Eric Struelens** (207 cm, born in 1969) played very well in defense and grabbed respectively 7 and 10 rebounds. But Coach **Gio Bozzi's** men of Liège had an excellent last quarter and, helped by their clutch player **Ebi Ere**, guards **Mo Finley** (US player who played for Larissa in Greece last season) as well as Belgian international **Guy Muya** were stronger than **Bosco** and **Tjoe De Paula**, the duo of guards for Atomia Brussels, in the last minutes. Final score: 84-75.

Here are the scorers of this pleasant game:

Liège Basket: **Scott Brakebill** 2; **Ron Ellis** 7; **Ebi Ere** 16; **Mo Finley** 17; **Ryan Moss** 12; **Guy Muya** 12; **Stéphane Pelle** 11; **Karim Souchu** 7.

Atomia Brussels: **Lio Bosco** 9; **Tjoe De Paula** 7; **Vilius Gabsys** 8; **Cédric Hoornaert** -; **Elijah Palmer** 38; **Julien Pirlot** 2; **Eric Struelens** 9; **Duke Tshomba** -; **Séba Vermeulen** 2; **Dennis Willegems** -.

Bert went to a basketball game in February 2006: Dexia Namur (BEL) vs VBM-SGAU Samara (RUS) in FIBA Euroleague Women's 1/8 Finals.

When **Ann Wauters** came on the floor for stretching before the game, many of her hometown fans and relatives went to greet her. Each time **Wauters** comes back to her homeland, she is welcomed as a hero. The 2005 Euroscar winner

Wauters and her (dream) teammates **Stepanova** (FIBA Europe Player of the Year 2005), **Arteshina**, **Abrosimova** and **Lawson** were the starting five for visiting team VBM-SGAU Samara on February 3rd. After a fantastic first quarter, hometeam Dexia Namur was just one point behind: 25-26. **Elzbieta Miedzik**, **Krystyna Lara Szymanska** and **Nicole Ohlde** had a good start. Dexia was playing its best basketball, the 1500 attendance probably saw the best plays of the season by the local squad in the first half. Freshly selected FIBA Europe All Star **Becky Brunson** had a tough time in offense but was very present in all other sectors of the game for Dexia. Dexia led by Polish trio **Wielebnowska**, **Miedzik** and **Lara-Szymanska** was ahead at half-time: 44-41.

The funny thing about Dexia Namur is that the club has great ambitions and talents but the atmosphere around it is still very "bon enfant", even sometimes quite amateur: the club's magazine mentioned that Samara's guard **Ilona Korstin** was 2.82 m tall, the local speaker announced a basket by **Korstin** during the game although it was **Stepanova** (the tallest player on the court indeed) who just scored, Russian center of Namur **Natalia Kalthurina** was laughing with fans sitting just near the bench a few seconds before being on the floor for playing, the speaker mixed up names of his favourite team players again (**Agabalova** whom he mentioned as a scorer was not even close to the paint when **Szymanska** made the basket indeed), etc.

No matter what happened around the court, **Marc Silvert's** players did start very well the second half and took a large lead of more than 10 points against last season's Euroleague champion Volgaburmash Samara. Suddenly, **Maria Stepanova**, **Amaya Valdemoro**, **Svet Abrosimova**, **Edwige Lawson** and **Ann Wauters** raised the level of the game and Dexia finished the third quarter ahead with only a 57-53 score. The hometeam still had a 6-point lead in the last quarter but it was not enough to maintain the advantage until the end of the game. Turnovers and a missed lay-up in the final seconds allowed VBM-SGAU to qualify for the quarter-finals indeed. Dexia players, staff and fans had the feeling that they had been very close of a fantastic success. **Lara-Szymanska** had scored 17 points for the Belgian team. **Ann Wauters** was the best scorer for Samara: 17 points. Russian player **Maria Stepanova** grabbed a total of 8 rebounds and scored 12 points. Special mention to **Svet Abrosimova**, the best player on the floor according to most observers. A great evening for all basketball lovers and a great way to start the Year of Woman's Basketball in Europe.

Final score was 74-77.

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