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ESPIONAGE IN THE GEOGRAPHY OF WORLD SPORT

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Abstract

This paper on the Espionage in the Geography of World Sport is to recount real stories whereas sport and espionage converge under the aegis of geography. The objective is to demonstrate espionage, intelligence, and surveillance exists in the global theater of sports geography. The nature of this paper is not necessarily academic but actual and authentic by observation.

Keywords: Sports Geography, Human Geography, Espionage, Military Intelligence, and Motorsport

I. Introduction

The discipline, or sub-discipline, of the Geography of World Sport has now been established for about fifty years. The foundation of sports geography is largely based on the principles of Professor John Rooney, considered the ‘father’ of the subject, who was the Chairman of the Geography Department at Oklahoma State University. Rooney is credited with writing the first book on sports geography titled ‘A Geography of American Sport’ (1974). Later, John Bales book ‘Sport Geography’ (1989) added credence and definition to the topic. Unfortunately, although the existence of sports geography remained strong, the academic study remained stagnant. Except in some incidence, there was a constant need to catch up with a modern definition and further study. The objective of my previous article, ‘Defining the Geography of World Sport’ (2020) was designed to accomplish that goal with a learned, universally accepted explanation.

Espionage and intelligence are also an integral sub-component of geography. It is best found buried in geo-politics. However, based on both corporate and government demand, there is a formable employment marketplace for cultural geographers and geographic information system (GIS) specialists in the espionage and intelligence sectors. This confirms proof of the connection between espionage and geography.

Surprisingly, or not, there are instances in the global theater, particularly during the ‘Cold War’ and the fight on drugs, where sport and espionage converge under the aegis of geography. The overall aim of this paper is to share genuine occurrences as proof of its phenomena. These are personal accounts whereas I was an observer and/or directly connected as a sports management/marketing professional. It is noted that nothing stated in this paper ever was or and longer is considered as classified information by any governmental agency of the United States. There are other written accounts of some of the following versions that can offer some verification based on instances of crime and sporting results. The goal of this paper is not to accommodate those points nor complicate the names of people involved. The further intent of this particular paper is strictly geographical by observation; but not necessarily academic. As the popular saying goes, ‘you are not going to believe this s###’.

II. Auto Racing and the War on Drugs

During the late seventies and early eighties, sports car racing in America was inundated with vast wealth. It was a well-known secret where much of this money was initiated: drugs. Multiple drivers/teams were in this business on a very large scale. Over time, it was impossible to hide the source of the money and the government was positioning itself to take action and take the drug trade out of motorsport.

At that time there were two competing sanctioning bodies of sports car racing in the United States and the big budget teams were more attracted to one organization over the other because it was perceived to be a better organization and superior racing. A plan was instituted to install a new Executive Director/President of the competing club. Let us call him 'Tom'. Tom was a former Lieutenant Commander of the United States Navy and an intelligence and counter intelligence specialist who kept tabs on Soviet shipping and naval during his military career. Tom made immediate inroads to have the two competing clubs become 'friendly' and the clubs began to cooperate with each other; sort of a collaboration. A race schedule that traveled throughout North America allowed the collection of valuable information to the feds.

At the same time, another government agency got financially involved with a struggling yacht manufacturer. Coincidentally it was the same south Florida yacht maker trusted by the drug smugglers involved in racing. As new ships were made and others being serviced, each went to sea fitted, unknowingly, with tracking devices. Those involved were totally now infiltrated from two angles.

Over time, every racer involved in the drug trade was compromised. There were multiple accusations. Ultimately, each was incarcerated and served time. And, without their substantial income, each disappeared from the sport upon their return to society. During this period, somewhat fresh out of college, I was employed by a major corporation that utilized auto racing sponsorship to promote their products (referred to as a 'commercial' component in 'Defining the Geography of World Sport'). This allowed me to work closely with Tom and another person from the racing body, who we will name 'George'. Both Tom and George, both whom have passed, took a trust in me and made me aware of the situation as I was already embedded into motorsport. It's a storyline worthy of a Hollywood movie.

III. Auto Racing and Soviet Surveillance

In the later eighties, the Soviet Union had only two forms of motorsport: karts and road rally. Both were controlled by its military. Sporting between the United States and the Soviet Union was limited to the Olympics and some mainstream sports like hockey. So, I came up with this breakthrough idea: the USA versus USSR SuperSeries for karting. It is noted I operated under the auspices of my company name OMNI-Communique Inc. First, I established connections with the two national sporting authorities and then the appropriate governmental channels (referred to as a 'political' component in 'Defining the Geography of World Sport'). My contact was with the United States Department of State and specifically the 'Russian Desk'. On the Soviet side, I dealt with a character named Vladimir. Vladimir was on the board of directors with the Russian automobile club and, more relevant, a journalist with PRAVDA, TASS, or both. In other words, some sort of propaganda specialist. Although his specialty was rally racing, he packaged a professional team of kart racers; all members of the Soviet Army with the rank of 'Master of Sport'. This was the beginning of a decade plus association of several parties.

a. Soviets Invade the Midwest

Indoor auto racing is kind of a winter 'thing' in the Midwest. The American team was comprised of mostly young Indy-car drivers; whom were mostly personal friends. This was necessary to attract interest and publicity opposed to kart specialists. Venues were contracted (referred to as 'economic' component in 'Defining the Geography of World Sport') and an array of sponsorships for the programs was arranged ('commercial' again). The first two events were planned for December, 1988, in Peoria, Illinois, and Chicago, Illinois. Two friends were hired to assist me with logistics.

Tom was a childhood friend who played on two national championship hockey teams at the University of Wisconsin and was a member of the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team. He was available and his job was to pick up the Soviets at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and transport them to Peoria. In the early afternoon, Tom called me and advised the Russians never arrived. From Peoria, I learned, by the State Department, the Russians did board their flights from Moscow to London and London to Chicago. Later that evening, several hours later, I received a call from the Chicago Police Department. They were holding a group of Russians they found in the restricted baggage area at the United terminal. You can't make this stuff up. I asked the officer to hold them, summoned Tom to pick them up and get them to Peoria.

They arrived at about 3 a.m. and participated in the race events the following day. The following week would be spent in Chicago with various parties and events planned.

Mike Ditka, the legendary coach of the Chicago Bears, owned two restaurants and invited the Russians, I mean Soviets, to a party/dinner at each restaurant. The Soviet contingent was large: 5 drivers and 10 coaches; none of the so-called coaches looked like they ever sat in a race car but perhaps drove a taxi. Quickly, I learned Vladimir was not the leader of the team. On the first night there was a party, in their honor, at Ditka's popular nightclub. Tom went to the hotel to retrieve the Russians and was promptly told the Russian team would not attend but the Russian agents, I mean coaches, would attend. I denied them the opportunity to drink free vodka which was not a popular decision with them. Two nights later, the entire Soviet team did attend a dinner hosted by Ditka.

Both events, which were actually support events to another race, went off without a hitch. The U.S. dominated the Peoria and Chicago races. The Soviets went home wearing souvenirs from their visit including baseball caps from the various Chicago television stations. The possibility of defections was discussed prior with the 'Russian Desk' but the Soviets ran a tight ship. Nobody was running off. I reported back that everything went smoothly. The State Department seemed relieved.

b. Soviets Return the Favor

Less than one year later, in September, 1989, our Soviet friends invited us to the Soviet Union for a return match. I advised the State Department and sought permission to bring a friend. Julie was an attractive model from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who just moved to Los Angeles to become an aspiring actress. Years earlier we met in Esbjerg, Denmark, where her step father was Head of Exploration for an oil company in the North Sea and I was driving through during one of my racing excursions. The State Department actually thought it was a good idea and encouraged me to take others. So, I called the 'dean' of racing journalists: a colorful guy named Chris who was also the voice of auto racing on ABC's 'Wide World of Sports'. Chris arranged to bring an ESPN crew to cover the event. This was a big coup. Suddenly, mothers, fathers, wives, and girlfriends all wanted to go. The Vice President of a safety equipment company (Bell), Roger, requested to join as well. And, the powerful head of the American racing authority ACCUS (Automobile Competition Committee of the United States) nicknamed 'Burdie', a former Marine captain, inquired if there was room. In all we had a group of thirty and asked our Soviet counterparts to arrange visas.

The program was to start with a news conference in Moscow and then travel to Riga, Latvia (which was still part of the Soviet Union at that time), where there was a beautiful, new racing facility roughly called the Bikernieki Sports Complex. The manager of Bikernieki was a local motorcycle legend who had family in Chicago; thus we met previously. Our group met at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport for a SAS flight to Stockholm connecting to Moscow. Only half of our visas arrived the day prior our departure. Vladimir assured us the additional visas would be ready when we arrived in Stockholm but he was wrong. Fifteen of us arrived at Sheremetyevo International Airport. Immigration was intimidating. Each visitor entered a box outlined in mirrors with cameras everywhere. Fourteen of us were immediately jettisoned to the Moscow Circus with Vladimir. Sleep deprivation was clearly part of the Soviet plan. I was left behind at the airport with a somewhat shady character to wait for the other guests. Somehow the balance of our group was allowed to board the flight to Moscow without visas. Amazingly, I was allowed to walk freely throughout the airport until my group arrived several hours later. I was told to collect US\$50 from each person with their passport and was escorted to a dark, smoky room. Handwritten visas were issued (more on that later). The majority of our group was dropped off at the Kosmos Hotel. Chris, Burdie, Julie and I were taken to the upscale Ukraine Hotel. Don't let the word upscale fool you. It was terrible. It now is a five-star hotel.

What was clear was they wanted to separate us and we were constantly being watched. The second evening the four of us enjoyed a nice dinner at the press club while the others went to a place that resembled an all-night Greek restaurant with 400 different items on the menu except they ran out of every item on the menu. Breakfast was a roll and oil-slicked coffee that is unless you had a pack of Marlboro for the waiter. That would earn you a single egg with a piece of bacon. I came equipped with cartons of Marlboro.

Three types of identification were needed to get into our hotel yet ‘people’ were constantly knocking on our room’s door knowing my name asking if we wanted to sell our jeans or t-shirts. Three days later we boarded our Aeroflot flight to Riga. The Soviet-era Ilyushin was several seats short of its capacity; meaning it was missing seats. Pear juice was served but in shared paper cups.

No official Russian representative accompanied us to Riga; just our two Russian interpreters. Accommodations were far better in Riga and the tone of the trip turned Balkan. The first night we were bused to a kibbutz in Lithuania (another former Soviet republic at the time). The town featured a malnourished mascot tiger in a very small cage that was hardly threatening. Prior dinner we were entertained by a ‘typical’ four member family band that sung anti-Soviet songs. Afterward the group returned to Riga for the two-day race events. The Soviet team won the points battle but an American driver won the main race. Roger gifted the Soviet drivers with state-of-art helmets. The Soviets were intrigued with the head protection offered by Bell and asked if any technology can be transferred to fighter aircraft pilot application (referred to as ‘technological’ component in ‘Defining the Geography of World Sport’). There was also a ‘friendly’ race between Canada, Latvia, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. The Soviets shared their ultra-fast, soft Italian tires with the American team which made Canada and Latvia not competitive. The later were stuck with hard, uncompetitive Czech tires. This incensed both Canada and Latvia and a small international incident was boiling. A gala dinner was held that evening to celebrate the first-of-its-kind event. The dinner was family-style and the Latvians refused to feed the Russian table so we passed on food to the Soviets. The Latvians complained to the Canadians to object to the Americans sharing of food. The program ended on a sour note. Back at the circuit, I became reacquainted with Estonian cyclist named Aavo Pikkuus. Aavo won a gold medal in 1976 Olympics (more on him later). The group was to bus from Riga to Tallinn, Estonia, and then ferry to Helsinki, Finland, for our flight back home. I was to race at Watkins Glen, New York the following weekend, so I left Julie at Helsinki.

In Riga, the family of a U.S. driver threw a birthday party for their son. It was a big affair; maybe 50 people. A new Soviet face showed up: Yuri. If Yuri wore a sweater, it would say KGB on it. Surprisingly, Yuri and Burdie knew each other. Also in Riga, I continued to get unannounced calls to our room. One afternoon, in the hotel lobby, I was ambushed by an Aeroflot pilot. Someone gave him a ‘heads up’ on me. He wanted to be a race car driver and brought me a resume of sorts. The State Department advised me to avoid and ignore these types of situations.

Aavo offered to drive us to Tallinn. In Riga, I was paid in Soviet Rubles (I was to be paid in US\$); which was not on the World Currency Exchange. It was big money for a Soviet but worthless to me. I gave the money to Aavo but he refused. At immigration, a Soviet official whom I previously met in Chicago sent us off. I gave him the box of rubles to give to Vladimir. The money disappeared. As we went through immigration at the port in Tallinn we learned those hand-written visas were not, in fact, visas. It was b####s####. It was a total con-job. Ultimately, all of us were allowed to proceed onto the ferry. Mission accomplished. A report was prepared and delivered to the State Department.

c. CIA and DIA Involvement

Sometime after the trip to Russia, I was contacted by an individual claiming to be packaging an international road rally through both the People’s Republic of China and the U.S.S.R. The whole concept sounded far-fetched by I agreed to meet this individual.

There was another individual located in Palmdale, California, that was also attempting to put together racing programs between the United States and the Soviet Union about the same time as I was. If I recall correctly, his name was Bob. And, I don’t recall Bob having any success at his project. However, being located in Palmdale was interesting because it was in close proximity to the Edwards Air Force Base and other military installations. Maybe that was a coincidence and maybe not.

Bob called me the day prior my meeting with the individual trying to put together the ‘unlikely’ road rally through China and the Soviet Union. Bob informed me that two government officials, one CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and one DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) visited him that day and had a big file on me.

The following day I picked up the same two officials at the old Terminal One at Phoenix International Airport. They were obvious G-Men. We went to an outdoor café in nearby Tempe to discuss. Although they made a very professional marketing presentation they also made a unusual demand that I sign an outrageous 'no-conflict' agreement with a million dollar penalty.

Ultimately, they were more interested in what contacts I had in these two Communistic countries that would approve their road rally concept. It was made clear to them I was in business to make money and nothing more. I was anxious to call my contact at the State Department to voice my concern, but the time difference precluded I needed to wait until the next morning. I more or less said, 'why I am being investigated by the CIA and DIA' and 'does not the CIA and DIA know what I'm doing'. I was told they'd look into it and essentially not to worry. I never heard from those two guys again.

IV: Bicycles, Boxing and other Communista

Summer, 1989, was a busy time for Omni-Communique because it promoted two events with global implications: a late June Olympic-style boxing program between the United States and Poland and followed by street bicycle race called a criterium or crit. Both events were to be held in the Chicago suburb of Rosemont.

In consideration of Chicago's large Polish population, the boxing program was a good idea. USA Boxing is the authority for the national boxing team and the Olympic boxing team. The organization was easy to work with and offered the opportunity to promote matches with Poland and the Soviet Union. USA Boxing was well experienced with working with sporting authorities from Communist nations and an agreement was reached to put on a show on June 30, 1989. The State Department was also comfortable with working with USA Boxing as they already had an established history. Furthermore, the State Department did not think of Poland being any kind of obstacle. The crowd of about 5,000 was predominantly Polish and there were diplomatic no tensions.

Two weeks later, on Bastille Day (June 14), Omni contracted with a French hotel company to produce an international bicycle race as a promotional vehicle. We were able to secure a field with bicycle racers from Belgium, Canada, France, and the United States. I reached out to Vladimir about attracting a Soviet entry. Vladimir delivered Aavo Pikkuus; a multiple world champion and Olympic Gold Medal winner. Aavo, from Tallinn, preferred to represent Estonia and not the Soviet Union. The price was a promise to have a race bike ready and a Chicago-cut steak every night. Immediately I sensed a comfort working with Vladimir. Furthermore, he did not bring his entourage. The State Department referred me to the Justice Department to arrange visas. It was becoming clear the State Department was becoming disinterested or taking a looser attitude with me.

V. Perestroika and Glasnost: Russia, Russia, Russia

Perestroika was a political movement inside Russia's Communist party and Glasnost was a term used to promote openness and transparency. Although the movement started sometime in the mid-eighties it did not reach fruition until the revolutions in Soviet republics occurring in 1989, and ended the Soviet Union in 1991. Essentially the 'restructuring' ended Soviet nationalism (nationalism is a sub-component of the 'cultural' component in 'Defining the Geography of World Sport') and concluded the Cold War.

Sosnovy Bor is a town on the Gulf of Finland some 80 kilometers west of St. Petersburg in the Leningrad Oblast of Russia. It's a restricted area because it is home to a nuclear power plant that happens to share the same design as Chernobyl. On the grounds of the power plant is a sports complex that annually held kart racing on ice. In the last year of the Soviet Empire, Omni sent a team to compete in its big race. Detailed waivers were necessary to enter the clean but spartan complex as the Soviets were protective of what may be filmed. The event was held for the next decade, into the Russian Federation era, until weather conditions precluded ice from forming and the event discontinued. During this period, there was a noticeable change on how we were allowed movement; particularly in St. Petersburg. State became increasing disinterested as well.

VI. Nyet Soviet: Mexico City and Toronto

Also on February 26, 1989, Omni supplied teams from seven nations including Russia to compete in a race called The Nation's Challenge in Mexico City. Interestingly, Vladimir had to make a visit the Soviet Embassy on this trip. That Embassy was considered the central point of Soviet gathering of information in North America.

Although the Soviet Union had not yet collapsed, the cars clearly identified as Russian and not the Soviet Union. As the old adage went, 'the writing was on the wall'. The whole process was now trouble-free and complete trust was established going forward.

Another world kart event was held on January 16, 1993, at the Skydome in Toronto. Canada, Mexico, Russia, and the United States competed in front of 25,000 race fans and national television. Dealings with the Russians became simplified under the Russian Federation. After arranging Canadian visas through its Ministry, Vladimir was allowed to freely travel with the team he assembled. Now, Vladimir wanted to tackle a new project with my help: The World Formula One Championship.

VII: Russia: Formula One

Formula One is the pinnacle of all motorsport and there was no Russian footprint in the World Formula One Championship. Vladimir desperately wanted to change that perception. He advised that the Russian military was working on a suspension system made of rubber bands. He wanted to introduce this idea to Formula One teams but, of course, it was rejected by those to whom I presented. In fact, the concept was laughed at. There's little doubt that 'spying' existed in Formula One. First, teams spied on other teams to learn what worked better to make their car faster. Second, it was a place where real spies from the CIA and KGB had a real presence in the seventies and eighties.

Vladimir had another idea: get a Russian driver into Formula One. And, he had the answer in a young fellow named Viktor. Vladimir thought Viktor was immediately ready to jump into Formula One not understanding the training system to build up to that point. One of my clients was a wealthy whiskey heir from Kentucky and ran a team in one of the lower formulas that feed into a Formula One program. He had an extra car for a race held at the picturesque Road America circuit in Chicago. Vladimir was excited and sent Viktor unaccompanied. Viktor performed well and the next day I put him on a BA flight to London connecting to Moscow. About thirty days later Vladimir called me asking what I did with Viktor. I told him I saw Viktor board his flight in Chicago and knew nothing more. Vladimir was concerned because he was under pressure from someone. About sixty days later it was learned Viktor stayed in London and was working as a bus boy at a restaurant. Viktor's racing career was over and Russia did not get its first Formula One driver until 2010.

VIII. Conclusion

Nations project culture and there are fifteen (15) nations complicated in this paper that represent their respective cultures (referred to as 'cultural' component in 'Defining the Geography of World Sport'). Somewhere along the way, Belgium; Canada; China; Cuba; Estonia; France; Great Britain; Italy; Latvia; Lithuania; Mexico; Poland; Russia; the Soviet Union; and the United States are all considered in this paper. All five (5) components of world sport, as defined in my article 'Defining the Geography of World Sport', can be found in the aegis connecting these places and their respective role in surveillance activities. So, in conclusion, each have a history in sport and each are complicit in espionage through sport geography in some way or another. If observation is fact then this paper can be accepted as partially academic.

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Additional Storyline

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