

Inside Sports: Basketball big man goes from Lithuania to Goretti to Notre Dame

See Martin Geben and the St. Maria Goretti boys' basketball team by playing the video above.

By Paul McMullen

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Martin Geben knew little about Hagerstown, let alone Maryland, when he arrived at St. Maria Goretti in 2011.

The educational process has been a two-way street, however, as the only Catholic high school in Hagerstown – and, by extension, its competition in the Baltimore Catholic League – learned as much about basketball and education in Lithuania through Geben as he has about life in the United States.

While a broken hand in late January ended any hope Geben had at repeating as BCL Player of the Year, it did not diminish the impact he's made or the potential that has earned him a scholarship to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind.

The senior is headed to one of the nation's great universities, but the learning curve in the Atlantic Coast Conference might be more daunting than the one Geben will face in the classroom, where he has solid math and science credentials.

"In the locker room, Martin is the one correcting the other guys' grammar," said Amrit Rayfield, the boys' basketball coach and dean of students at Goretti. "He had already taken formal English classes in Lithuania, but it's not just his second language. He speaks Russian, a little Spanish."



En route from Vilnius, Lithuania, to the University of Notre dame, big man prospect Martin Geben spent three seasons at St. Maria Goretti in Hagerstown. (TOM McCARTHY

JR. | CR STAFF)

Geben stood 6-feet-7-inches, weighed 210 pounds and was more comfortable on the perimeter than in the paint when Rayfield, who spent a decade coaching at the

college level in West Virginia, first got wind of his desire to play in the U.S. and brought him to Goretti.

Now 6-9, 230, Geben has developed an inside presence, growth that helped him earn a spot on his national under-19 team last summer.

While Geben's peers aren't as well-versed in the hoops history of his homeland, veteran BCL coaches understood that he came from a Northern European nation that stocked the Soviet Union's Olympic gold medal team in 1988 and took Olympic bronze on its own in 1992, in the interim winning a bloody fight for independence during the collapse of the Soviet Union.

That intertwined story was told in the 2012 documentary, "The Other Dream Team." "It's hard to explain how big basketball is in Lithuania, it's the No. 1 sport by far," Geben said. "When I tell my friends here that Lithuania beat the U.S. in the 2004 Olympics, they doubt it. I have to show them videos to prove it."

Geben enjoys learning and worshiping on a Catholic campus, freedoms the 19-year-old does not take for granted despite being part of the Catholic population in Lithuania that is estimated at 77 percent..

"I've heard many family stories about (religious) persecution," he said. "My grandparents are glad those times are over."

Geben misses his mother's cooking, but has found comfort with his host family. It helps that the Zinaich household includes Connor, a junior on the Goretti varsity, and Ryan, a member of the J.V.

Rayfield said that Geben's being a student at Goretti also included his family paying a portion of the tuition, and the need-based aid that is available to any student.

He is not the only the only international student on the boys' basketball team, which also includes Tobias Christensen, a 6-6 junior from Denmark.

"I like the opportunity, for everyone," said Geben, when asked what he most likes about in the U.S. "Meeting new people, making new friends, the opportunities for education, a better life."

Goretti had a 17-7 overall record and Geben was averaging 14 points, 14 rebounds and 2.4 blocks per game when he suffered his season-ending injury.

If he were still suiting up, the Gaels figured to have been a much bigger factor in the 43rd annual BCL tournament, which begins Feb. 21 with quarterfinals, continues Feb. 23 with semifinals and concludes Feb. 24 with the championship game, all at UMBC.



Maria Goretti's Donovan Walker and Donte Doleman drive to the hoop against Calvert Hall Feb. 5. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

43rd annual Baltimore Catholic Tournament at UMBC

Feb. 21 Quarterfinals

Seeds in parentheses

Mount St. Joseph (2) vs. St. Maria Goretti (7), 3:30 p.m.

St. Frances Academy (3) vs. Mount Carmel (6), 5:15 p.m.

Calvert Hall (1) vs. Loyola Blakefield (8), 7 p.m.

John Carroll (4) vs. Archbishop Spalding (5), 8:45 p.m.

Feb. 23 Semifinals

1-8 winner vs. 4-5 winner, 1 p.m.

2-7 winner vs. 3-6 winner, 3 p.m.

Feb. 24 Championship

7 p.m.

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