

Hoops provides hope, opportunity for Delta State player

The math teacher was trying to get his kin to safety, but a bottleneck had formed at the Kosovo border. The war had displaced over a million people, and as the 1999 NATO bombings wound down, the Maliqi family had made the decision to move back home.

The war was not going well for the Serbians, who still controlled the borders. The border guards, bristling with Kalishnikovs, pulled the refugee math teacher aside and threatened to kill his family of Albanian ethnic undesirables. Luckily, there were too many witnesses, so the laughing guards roughly shoved the shaken man back into the throng. Arian Maliqi '10, the teacher's son, was 13 years old at the time.

Maliqi is now 24 and will finish an MBA at Delta State University in 2011. He is a senior forward for the DSU Statesmen. While the nation salivates over college stars who play a year in the NCAA before joining the NBA, Maliqi instead decided to find a college athletic program that would be willing to pay for his MBA. He found that opportunity in the heart of the Mississippi Delta.

Yet, the road to Cleveland was a winding one. As a child, because of Serbian segregation edicts, Maliqi had no access to public schools for a decade. "Serbia didn't want us to succeed at anything. We were denied public school access, so we educated ourselves in private homes. We were not allowed to play organized sports, so we played illegal, secret games in the middle of the night." These stringent laws were only lifted once NATO intervened. Schools and colleges opened for Albanian Kosovars, and organized sporting leagues began to form.

Maliqi explains, "In my younger years, Kosovars were more concerned about survival than sports, so I did not play basketball competitively until I was almost sixteen years old. It did help that I was quite tall for my age and took the sport very seriously."

It was in the Sigal Prishtina basketball club that an American scout noticed Maliqi's work ethic, teamwork, and intelligence. Soon Maliqi was filling out visa forms to play basketball at a community college in Panama City, Florida. After playing there for two years, Division I programs recruited Maliqi, but the coaches and players talked about parties and women, not education, so he looked at NCAA Division II athletics instead. DSU coach Jason Conner visited, drawing excitably about courses and majors. Soon Arian was trying to figure out where Cleveland, Mississippi was, and how exactly Okra fights. He has been in Cleveland for almost three years, and he has enjoyed both his academic and athletic experiences.

Regarding American hoops, Maliqi point out, "The athleticism of American players is unmatched in any place in the world, although Kosovar basketball is very disciplined and makes for tough competition. Unfortunately, Kosovo will have to wait to play on the international stage."

What Arian refers to is that Kosovo is in international limbo. Kosovo is not yet an independent country, because Serbia and its allies oppose full international recognition. While the U.S. supports Kosovo, only 72 of the 192 United Nations countries acknowledge Kosovar independence. This means that Kosovar athletes cannot participate in the Olympics or other international competitions and, like the math teacher, are roughly pushed back into the throng.

Yet amazingly, Maliqi holds no ill will towards Serbians in the former Yugoslavia, stating, "I don't hate anybody. No one can forget the past, but we must progress to the future." Indeed. The world would be a better place if it were run by people like Arian Maliqi.

By: Don Allan Mitchell, Assistant Professor of English

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