

Gonzaga bigs busy globe-trotting over summer

Jim Meehan/SR

Here are a few possible entries if Przemek Karnowski, Domantas Sabonis and Kyle Wiltjer were asked to write a paper titled: "What I did this summer."

Karnowski briefly guarded NBA great Pau Gasol, tangled daily in practice with Washington Wizards center Marcin Gortat. Traveled to Latvia, Spain, Germany, France and his native Poland. Did homework.

Sabonis played all over the globe, including a Nike camp in Los Angeles where he roomed with Wiltjer. Key member of Lithuania's U-20 team and later a role player for national team at the prestigious European championships. Had interesting tiff with Matthew Dellavedova. Did homework.

Wiltjer attended two camps with the best players in the country. Saw limited minutes for Canada in the Pan Am Games but learned from teammates such as Anthony Bennett (Toronto Raptors) and Andrew Nicholson (Orlando Magic). Exchanged friendly pre-Pan Am game barbs with U.S. coach Mark Few. Did homework.

It's no secret Gonzaga's rise to national prominence has been assisted by world-wide recruiting, effectively launched by Ronny Turiaf's arrival in 2001. Players like Turiaf, J.P. Batista, Germany's Elias Harris, Canada's Rob Sacre, Kelly Olynyk and Kevin Pangos rank among the program's all-time greats. Karnowski, Wiltjer and Sabonis will be in similar company after their GU careers conclude.

At some point, those Zags played for their respective national teams. Karnowski since 2008, the 19-year-old Sabonis since he was 15 and Wiltjer since age 15 have suited up internationally.

"It's a real achievement to be selected," said assistant coach Tommy Lloyd, who leads GU's international recruiting efforts. "Sometimes they're so enclosed by us at Gonzaga, it's good for them to get outside of that womb and experience some success with different teammates and coaches. I remember with Ronny, he was a role player on his national team, he spent time at Gonzaga and improved but he was too close to it and didn't see his improvement. He went back and played with his national team and saw how he'd made a jump. At that point he was hooked and sold on Gonzaga even more."

"It gives me a different angle to see European basketball and American basketball," Karnowski said, "and it gives me a positive impact for this Gonzaga season."

Sabonis' Hall of Fame father, Arvydas, runs Lithuania's basketball federation.

“Lithuania means everything to me and my family,” said Domantas, the youngest member of the national team, “so I want to give everything I can.”

Wiltjer has had dual U.S.-Canadian citizenship since his pre-teen years.

“My grandparents live in Canada. My dad and (older) sister played on Canadian national teams,” he said. “Once I played in a FIBA-sanctioned event when I was 15 or 16 ... basically I’m considered Canadian for international basketball.”

Karnowski focused on conditioning, rebounding, defending and using his right hand around the basket.

“I haven’t gotten on a scale but I feel way better and feel like I’m moving better on the floor,” he said.

He averaged nearly 13 minutes per game. He scored 33 points and grabbed 14 rebounds in 77 minutes, hitting 56 percent from the field and 62.5 percent at the free-throw line. Poland went 3-3 and finished 11th.

Basketball has no rival in Lithuania’s sports pecking order. Asked what comes after basketball, Sabonis shrugged, “basketball and basketball.”

Wiltjer has always wondered why Sabonis had such animated reactions after scoring baskets last season. Not anymore. Wiltjer was watching on TV when Lithuania played in the European championships last month.

“Fans around the world are so passionate, they kind of make NBA games look silly because they go crazy the whole game,” Wiltjer observed. “The Lithuanian crowd was going nuts. Then you start to realize why Domas is such an animal on the court with his reactions and stuff. We used to make fun of him, he’d flex at a guy even if he just made a layup, but that’s just what he’s grown up around.”

Sabonis erupted for 18 points and 28 rebounds in one U-20 game. With the national team, he saw action in four games and finished with 12 points and eight rebounds.

“It’s very aggressive and dirty,” Sabonis said of the style of play. “I didn’t notice it that much ’til I got back.”

Case in point, Lithuania and Australia played a “friendly” that became rather “spirited.” Sabonis set a perimeter screen and found himself defended by the smaller Dellavedova, who was called for a foul trying to move the 6-10 forward away from the hoop. The former Saint Mary’s standout didn’t stop and swatted at the ball a second later, bringing a crowd of players into the lane before tempers cooled.

“You can imagine how it gets in a real game,” Sabonis said.

Sabonis and Karnowski, who has been under the weather for the past few days, have been held out of practice to help their bodies recover.

“You’re always worried about injury,” Lloyd said, “but if they weren’t playing for their national teams they’d be playing pickup here.”

Sabonis said the practice ban has been challenging.

“I sneaked in at night but I got caught and I have to go back to my room,” he said. “I just love basketball, even just working out with the coaches.”

Wiltjer was coached by Jay Triano, father of Gonzaga walk-on Dustin Triano. Former NBA MVP Steve Nash is Canada basketball’s general manager. Prior to the Canada-Brazil title game, the teams were at the dining hall and Batista made time to visit with Wiltjer.

“Classy guy,” Wiltjer said.

The Zag trio juggled school work with basketball. Karnowski, who attended one summer school session, missed the first two weeks of fall semester, Sabonis roughly three. At one point during the Nike camp, Wiltjer nearly forgot about an assignment that was due. He stayed up until 2:30 a.m. to complete the paper but was a tad sleepy for a 7 a.m. yoga session. He took an extra class each summer session to put him on track for his master’s degree at the end of the school year.

Karnowski and Sabonis completed assignments via computer. Sabonis took care of academics in the evenings because national team duties kept him occupied throughout the day.

“I was in touch with my teachers and made sure my work was done,” Karnowski said. “Our teachers know we care about school.”

Sabonis took 2½ weeks off after spring semester to visit family and friends in Spain. He returned to Spokane, then on to L.A. for the Nike camp, back to Lithuania for practice and eventually the U-20 championships in Italy. He returned to Lithuania and had one day off before beginning practices with the national team. Lithuania lost to Spain in the title game Sept. 20.

“Busy summer,” he said. “Wouldn’t change nothing.”