

It is with great pleasure and pride that I speak to you today, through my friend and former “Ausra” team-mate Ed Punkris. I regret that I am unable to be here in person, since I’m working with the Toronto “Raptors” in Detroit this evening. First of all – congratulations to the “Ausra” sports club on its 50th anniversary at the Church of the Resurrection. “Ausra” has been a cornerstone of our Lithuanian community in Toronto. Countless young people like myself were able to compete athletically, socialize, maintain their cultural heritage and share in their spirituality through the church and “Ausra”. Now with your beautiful new church and facility, the tradition established at the old “Prisikėlimo Parapija” will undoubtedly continue.

I owe a great deal to “Ausra” and my Lithuanian heritage. Basketball was our sport in a country where hockey was the only sport you were supposed to play. “Ausra” and the church gave us Lithuanian kids something different and something special. We had teams, coaches, games and battles with “Vytis”, “Kovas”, “Tauras” as well as the rest of the SALFASS teams in the United States.

Those were the days. I loved going down to the church and seeing the older guys play as well as trying to play with them and getting their advice and guidance. It was the start that I had in my career that gave me the desire and confidence to push harder – further than many thought possible. As I got better I was able to play on the men’s team while still a junior. To have the likes of Ron Underys, Steve Ignatavicius, and Sam Kaknevičius help me out or straighten me out after an ill-advised shot or pass (usually a shot) was so important to my development as a player.

No matter how many games I have played or where my career has taken me, my fondest memories revolve around those Sunday games after Mass at the church. I can still see my Dad playing table tennis in the hall next to the basketball court, waiting for me to finish playing. Although sometimes it was me waiting for my Dad while watching him play against national and international players such as Birutė Nesukaitis, Birutė Plučaitė and Paulius Klevinas.

I’ll never forget my vision of Father Paul, having all of us boys in a lay-up line, teaching us proper lay-ups. I’ll also never forget my surprise when I was at the hall for some event on a Saturday evening, an elderly gentleman standing next to me asked me if I was going to play on Sunday. I informed him that I could not play as I hurt my leg. He then looked up at me and said simply “Then I guess I won’t be going to church tomorrow”.

Now with the new church, new memories will be forged for the many youngsters that will now have their opportunity to take part in the “Ausra” sports club. I can’t wait to see who will be the next Lithuanian “baller” that will look back and realize how important this club and these days were to his or her career. But for me right now, a sincere thank-you to “Ausra” and the Church of the Resurrection for all of the wonderful memories and opportunities you provided me with. Thank you.

Leo Rautinš