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# Could this man control college basketball?

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15-19 minutes

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Levan Mikeladze floored his Audi A5 on a straight stretch of road in Tbilisi. He is 23, smokes two packs a day and has the beginning of a paunch. He boasts that he was 19 when he negotiated a 2 million euro contract and that he is the Democratic Republic of Georgia's first basketball agent certified by FIBA, the world governing body for basketball.

"I stopped playing at 16," he said, "when I realized others can run and I can make money."

In the status- and wealth-obsessed post-Soviet world, being a billionaire businessman holds far more cachet than being an athlete. Which is why Mikeladze joined forces with Jamlet Khukhashvili, a man he half-jokingly refers to as "the godfather." They are an odd pair, the jaded boy genius and the smooth-talking Jewish salesman. But then, Georgia and basketball is a strange combo.

Georgia is known for producing many things -- conflicts, wine, Joseph Stalin -- but not professional basketball players. Yet inside this little nation in the turbulent Caucasus, sports fans can rattle off

the names of all five native Georgians who have played in the NBA: Zaza Pachulia, Tornike Shengelia, Vladimir Stepania, Viktor Sanikidze and Nikoloz Tskitishvili. They tend to leave out that Sanikidze never actually signed a contract. It is easier to skip to Giorgi Shermadini, Manuchar Markoishvili and Viktor Sanikidze, all of whom play in the prestigious Euroleague.

In the U.S. there are whole industries devoted to discovering, developing and promoting college and professional basketball players. In Georgia, there is Khukhashvili.

“No one is developing players here,” said Mikeladze. “He is the only guy made the money in basketball, me and him.”

Khukhashvili’s first big success was Shermadini, a player he discovered and developed and whose name he still mentions at least once a day. Now he is promoting five brothers. All are, or are going to be, over 6-foot-8. It seems insane, and yet he has caught the attention of at least one American agent. In a sliver of land in a region where county-size territories can declare themselves separate nations, Khukhashvili has made himself a semi-serious legend.

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He wore a black suit the first day we met, and each day afterward. On his lapel was a pin with a Georgian and an Israeli flag. Lined up in a row in front of him were four cellphones, three land lines and three remote controls. When he wanted to use one of his four DVD players he barked at his assistant, Badri, who came running. Khukhashvili’s raspy voice is recognized around the country, in part because of his radio station, JA-KO. Sports fans almost all say they listen to Khukhashvili. Then they point out that JA-KO is

the country's only all-sports radio station. Mikeladze credits Khukhashvili's fame to his distinctive voice.

"He has such a specific voice, nobody has a voice like him," said Mikeladze, offering weird animal-like grumbles in demonstration.

The voice I heard in the office was impatient.

"You like basket?" Khukhashvili demanded.

There was only one way I could answer. I nodded and started with my own questions. In response he called Badri and a television documentary of Khukhashvili's life appeared on a huge screen at the other end of the office. There was Khukhashvili exiting a limousine while talking on a cellphone, the soundtrack of "It's a Wonderful Life" playing in the background. In the next scene a Russian-speaking anchor chronicled Khukhashvili's early years playing handball in the former Soviet Union.

Khukhashvili added his own commentary: "I was champion in balls, I was champion in wrestling, I was champion in handballs." When a photo of one of his "friends" appeared on-screen Mikeladze provided a darker interpretation. "Billionaire. Died in 2007 because he got involved in politics. He was one of richest men in the world." Then he stubbed out his cigarette in the cup of a trophy.

It is hard to picture Mikeladze running the court, and even harder to picture Khukhashvili. He is 69 and 5-foot-7. He has a double chin, fingers like cigars and droopy eyelids. If his biography is to be believed he was some sort of an athlete in his youth, but never a basketball player. Basketball came later, after he switched to sportscasting and coaching and his son, Mikheil, now 44, took up the sport. In 1981 the youth team he managed, Dinamo, won a

USSR championship.

After independence he helped establish basketball in Georgia and was appointed chief of the country's junior team. He has been credited with bringing some of the first foreign players to the country and starting the first free basketball academy, for which he was awarded a "badge of honor" by the president of Georgia in 1998. He is still a commentator at professional games and remains an honorable chief of the Georgian national team.

At a Sunday afternoon game between Dynamo Tbilisi and Kutaisi, a team from the Georgian city of the same name, he broadcast from the media section. The stands were sparsely populated and the Dynamo cheering section waved blue and white flags and launched blue streamers onto the court. The Dynamo players, sporting orange uniforms, stopped playing to kick the streamers away. In this area of the world teams named Dynamo are almost always blue and white. And that is what the Tbilisi team wore until a sponsor offered them money to change to orange. The fans had yet to adjust.

Stability is not a common theme in Georgia. Since breaking from the Soviet Union in 1991 it has had two regions declare their independence, fought a war with Russia and undergone a revolution. The president and prime minister are currently engaged in a public power play that includes the cutting off of outdoor lighting to the presidential palace.

Not surprisingly, most of Georgia's top basketball prospects play abroad. As a teenager, Mikeladze played in Europe and the U.S. In Europe he ended up playing for 19 teams in Greece in nine months without proper residency papers; in the U.S. his basketball

scholarship to a school in Virginia included an unwanted religious component. He is determined to improve the training system in Georgia so other children don't have to do the same. Here basketball is played in private clubs, in gyms that often lack heating and proper equipment. Khukhashvili's academy boasts 150 children between the ages of 6 and 16. They pay \$22 a month to practice in a basement gym at the Palace of Sports, one of the largest arenas built for basketball in the former Soviet Union.

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On the afternoon I visited, half a dozen 6-year-old boys were practicing ball-handling skills under the tutelage of a former pro. Instead of dribbling behind his back, one little guy picked up the ball and spun around. The instructor caught my eye and smiled. Khukhashvili was upstairs in his office, possibly watching the scene on the television by his desk, which streams live footage from the gym.

Even if Khukhashvili's weren't one of the only offices in the Palace of Sports, it would be difficult to miss. A massive photo tapestry of his mentor, the late Georgian sports commentator Kote Makharadze, hangs above the stairs that lead to the arena's upper level. The hallway outside Khukhashvili's door is plastered with photos of him and a number of famous, and not so famous, athletes, dignitaries and friends. The photo homage continues inside, with black-and-white shots of athletes from Soviet times and a large color banner of Euroleague center Giorgi Shermadini.

Sports officials regularly stop by to pay their respects, bending down to kiss Khukhashvili's cheek before taking a seat at his table. Khukhashvili does not get up to greet them, and seldom lets them

add more than a comment or two to the conversation. In his self-published 2004 book, "Attention, Attention, Jamlet Khukhashvili Is 60 Years Old," ambassadors, Olympians, newscasters and even actors and musicians comment on Khukhashvili's career. The late Badri Patarkatsishvili, one-time president of the Georgian National Olympic Committee and fugitive of the law, credited Khukhashvili with being one of the first three honored coaches in the history of independent Georgia. This feat is made only slightly less impressive when one remembers that Georgia has only been independent for a little over two decades and that Patarkatsishvili was a controversial oligarch accused of plotting a coup in 2007.

A few pages later, Georgian State Television and Radio sports commentator Nugzar Jugeli recounted how he once heard Khukhashvili's voice on two television channels and a radio station simultaneously. Stepania, the country's first NBA player, credits Khukhashvili with converting him from swimming to basketball. Both Stepania and Shermadini are featured in a photo on the back of Khukhashvili's business cards, two pillars of Georgian basketball sandwiching a fat little balding man in a black suit.

Now the little man is focused on the five Revazashvili brothers. It is hard to tell if he is interested in them because he thinks he can make them stars or because he simply thinks it's neat to have five extremely tall brothers who play basketball. It may not matter. He needs an audience more than he needs money.

"After one year they will be in book of Guinness," he said.

Maizer is the third, and favorite brother. He plays forward and center on Khukhashvili's under-18 amateur team, Maccabi. He is 16 years old, 6-foot-8 and averages 33 points and 17 rebounds a

game according to Khukhashvili. He averaged 3 points and 1.8 rebounds in the under-16 European Championship B Division.

Maccabi has a less than stellar record, and the day before a February game only three players were at practice. Khukhashvili's son, Mikheil, is the official coach, but it was Khukhashvili who had Maizer taking quick shots from around the key while another player rebounded. Other drills included having Maizer run the baseline and take shots and practice jump shots from the top of the key, all performed quickly and with a set of free throws in between. Maizer is fast and agile for his size, and most of his shots made it in with a gratifying swish. His teammates rebounded while he shot.

"We are developing a single player, not a team," said Khukhashvili.

He doesn't bother with the pretense of sportsmanship. The communist legacy combined with a too-quick transformation to capitalism means greed and selfishness are valued.

Mikheil echoed his father. He was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket and stepped into the hallway to smoke.

"They are like sons to him," he said of his father's relationship with the Revazashvili brothers.

The oldest, Giorgi, is 22 and also 6-8. He averages 34 points and 16 rebounds a game according to Khukhashvili and 14 points and 8 rebounds if you go by official statistics. He plays power forward at Tbilisi State Medical University, a professional team. His 20-year-old brother, Levani, is 6-foot-9 and averages 34 points and 14 rebounds according to Khukhashvili or closer to 7 points and 4 rebounds going by the stats.

When I met them in Khukhashvili's office, Giorgi had an injured knee and was dressed in sweats and a jacket. Maizer was weighing himself on an ancient scale in the corner and Levani was sprawled in a chair by the wall. They are huge and looked cramped in the busy office, fighting for space among trophies, balls and televisions. When asked who was best, Levani smiled and pointed to Giorgi. His brothers remained silent. Maizer seldom spoke, except to echo a brother or Khukhashvili. Giorgi remained guarded, offering monosyllabic answers and questioning whether I was an agriculture reporter when I inquired about the family farm. Their parents are farmers who live in a small village several hours outside the capital. Before Khukhashvili brought them to Tbilisi their lives were "a little bit misery," said Levani. He wouldn't elaborate. He started playing basketball as a teenager, around the same time Giorgi did, and since coming to Tbilisi five years ago that is about all he has done. He practices six hours a day and admits to no other interests than improving his game. When I asked how often he gets back to his village he replied, "Never." "We haven't been there in over a year," he said; Mikeladze translated his words from Georgian.

Mikeladze only half-listened to the conversation, while smoking and playing the game "Temple Run" on his phone. He had told me that Khukhashvili kept chickens for his players in a locked refrigerator in his office complex. There is incredible wealth and incredible poverty in Georgia, Tbilisi is filled with both, the villages almost entirely the latter. Homes constructed during communist times are now crumbling, heated by a single wood stove. Factories that once functioned have been shuttered, and families survive on the meager vegetables they grow in their fields and milk they get



from their cows. Refugees from the fighting in Abkhazia and South Ossetia live in slums while the president spent “a trifle” — around \$8 million — on a new presidential palace in 2009. But, back to the chickens. We went in search of the refrigerator in a back room but couldn’t find it. As we left the dark room the door handle fell off in my hand.

I had heard about the chickens from others. They said Khukhashvili had talked a sponsor into donating chickens for his players but advised me not to ask Khukhashvili about the poultry. Khukhashvili readily admitted to paying for the brothers’ apartment and food through his Maccabi Club, which includes the team and academy, and otherwise supporting their training. Next year, he plans to bring the two younger brothers, Nika, 10, and Jaba, 6, to Tbilisi. They tower a head above their classmates and doctors have assured him they will be at least as tall as their older brothers.

“All of this family are the shooters,” said Khukhashvili. “Dad is not shooting the ball, but he's a good hunter.”

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There are no games being played in the Palace of Sports the last day I visit and it is plunged in darkness. To reach Khukhashvili one must climb the unlit stadium steps. His office is a beacon of life and light in an ocean of empty silence, rather like Khukhashvili himself, fighting for attention in a universally overlooked part of the world when it comes to professional basketball. His latest scheme is to get all five of the brothers in the NBA, or the Euroleague.

“Bidro, Bidro, Bidro,” he yelled from his desk.

Bidro appeared and a DVD of the brothers began to play on the

television screen at Khukhashvili's side. They are shown in a line dribbling, the smallest struggling to keep his ball moving. They are shown exiting a limo, performing lay-ups, and again in a line dribbling. The three oldest have separate cameos. They are shown repeatedly dunking the ball while the English words "slam dunk" appear on the screen. It is a glorified highlight reel that makes it impossible to tell how well they perform in game situations. Scouts want full game videos and Khukhashvili knows it. They asked for as much when he was promoting Shermadini, but Khukhashvili cagily told them highlights were all he had.

"It was great marketing from him, because nobody could really understand who Shermadini is and how he fills the game and everything," said Mikeladze.

So the scouts came to Georgia, to find out if Shermadini could really play. And that is how he eventually made his way into the Euroleague, earning both Khukhashvili, who developed him, and Mikeladze, who represented him, a tidy sum.

Mikeladze doesn't represent any of the Revazashvili brothers. The oldest two began playing the game too late, he believes, but Maizer may still have a chance. If not, there are still two more. And if they don't pan out, Khukhashvili has a backup plan.

"If necessary there will be a six brother even."