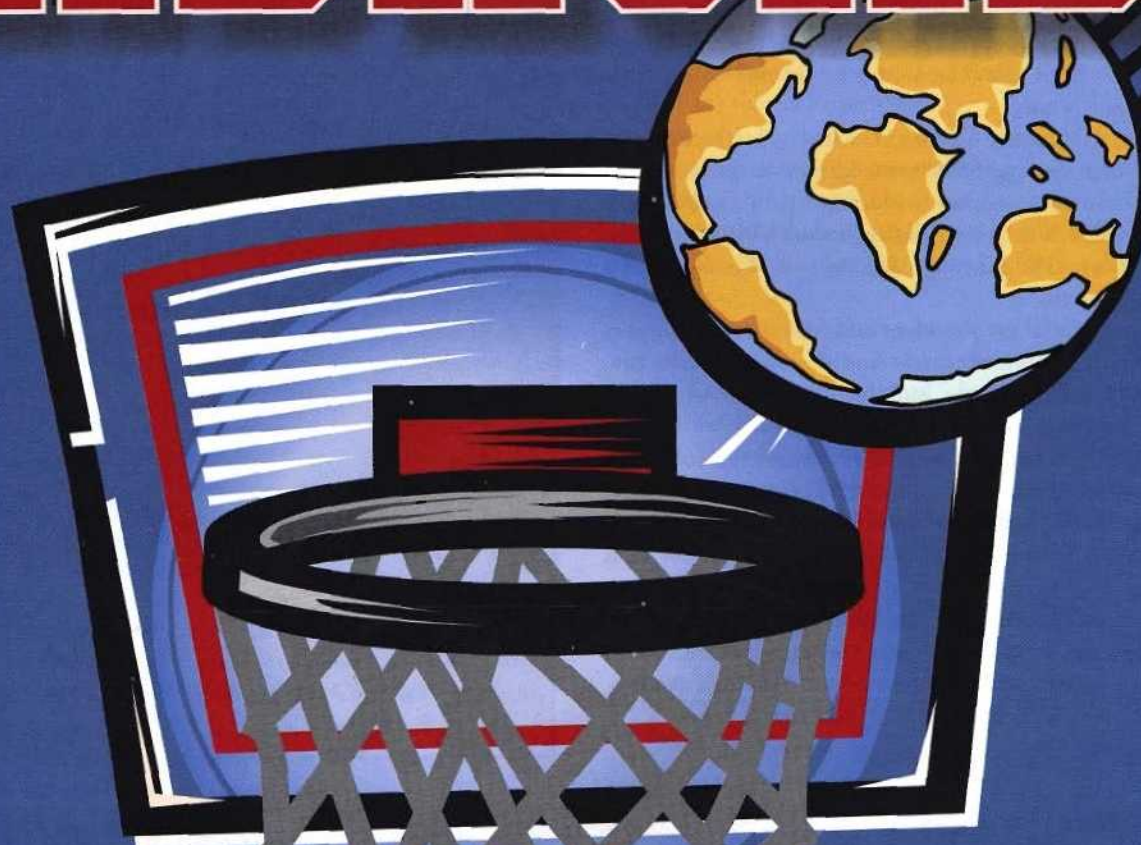


HOOPS ABROAD



They would rather be in the NBA, but a number of former Sooners are successfully plying their trade in Europe and beyond.

By DAVID DRIVER

After playing basketball in the United States since 1996, Jozsef Szendrei returned home to Europe last season as a first-year professional. It did not take him long to see why and how the overall state of hoops in Europe had improved.

"The why is simple: They want to beat the USA. You want to beat the best," says the outspoken Szendrei, 25, a former Sooner who graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 2003 with a degree in international business and marketing.

And just how has hoops improved in Europe?

“With more aggressive defense,” notes the 6-foot-9 Hungarian. “College basketball is still much more organized; the roles are more basic (in Division I). Everyone has their role.”

Szendrei played for BC Boncourt in Switzerland during the 2003-04 season, averaging 8.2 points and 8.4 rebounds in 12 Swiss league contests, and his team won the league title.

“It (was) not the highest level for me,” says Szendrei, who is playing this season in his native Hungary. “But it was important for me to get back on the floor and play 30 to 35 minutes per game” after injuries limited his playing time while in Norman.

Szendrei is a native of Szolnok, Hungary. This season he plays for the northeastern city Debrecen, called “Calvinist Rome” since it is home to the Reformed Protestant church. He capped an 8-point, 8-rebound regular season for 20-6 Debrecen with a 20-point game in a first-round playoff victory among Hungary’s top eight teams. His head coach is American Robert Reid, who was part of an NBA title-winning team as a player with the Houston Rockets.

Szendrei is one of several former Sooner players now playing for pay in Europe and other foreign lands. Most of them are Americans who are a long way from home.

New Orleans native Hollis Price, a standout on the 2002 Final Four team now in his second season in the top league in France, plays for Le Mans. The team’s hometown in northwestern France is about one hour from Paris by train and is noted for its 24-hour automobile race.

“I considered (Europe) once I didn’t get drafted (by the NBA). It came to my mind that I could be going overseas,” says Price, in a telephone interview from France. “That is what happened. I really didn’t give (the CBA) much thought.

“You want to make money,” adds Price, who says salaries are better in Europe than the CBA. “I got a nice contract, and I didn’t want to pass up on it.”

The Washington Post reported in January 2005 that players in the National Basketball Developmental League, a minor league in the USA, make about \$15,000 per season for 48 games.

Price averaged 13.4 points per game last season in France and 12.9 through early May 2005. The 6-1 guard averaged 18 points per game for the Sooners in 2002-03.

Jason Detrick, meanwhile, is in his first season in Europe after he scored 11.4 points per game as a captain for the 2003-04 Sooners. He plays for the small-town Oberwart Gunners, a team in eastern Austria, and was the MVP as the Gunners won the 2005 Austrian Cup.

“Hopefully one day I will be able to play in the NBA,” says Detrick, who played high school ball in Virginia. “If not, hopefully I can have a long career in Europe.”

That may be the most common mantra of American players who head overseas.

Jackie Jones, who averaged 15 points per game for the Sooners in 1989-90, has since played as a pro in Spain, Turkey, Israel, Korea, and last season was in Mexico. He also has played for minor league teams in North America, and as 2005 began he was with the Bellevue (Washington) Blackhawks in the ABA.

During college, “I didn’t even know they had leagues overseas,” says Jones, who turns 38 in August. “Coming out of college, I thought I was a sure (NBA) pick.”

Living in a foreign land

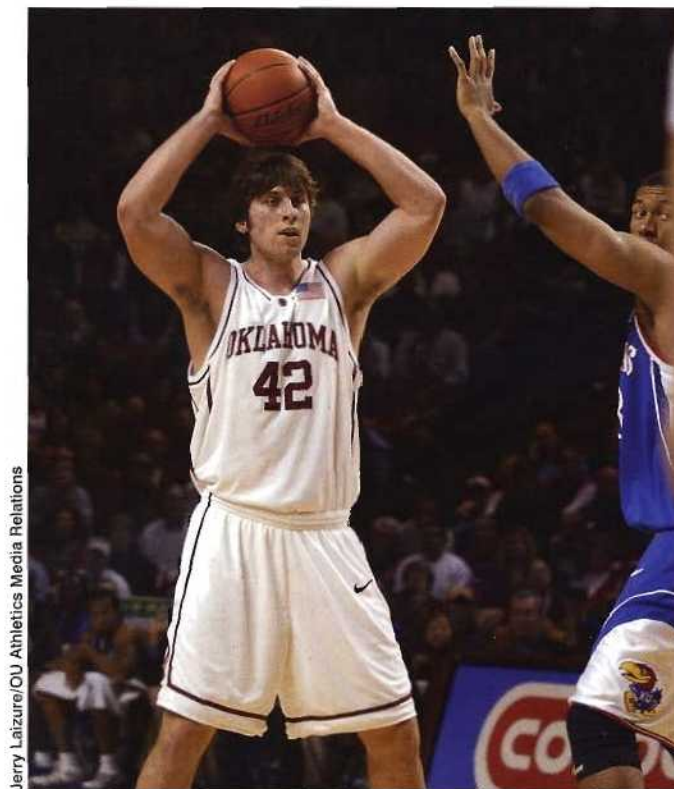
The Sooners living and playing overseas have had to adjust more than just their professional aspirations.

Price, for instance, is provided a tax-free salary, the free use of a new car and a three-bedroom house—and a different lifestyle.

“I have a pretty simple life,” he says. “I wake up in the morning, go to practice, come home and surf the net . . . then go to practice in the evening. I don’t go out much. I cook. I don’t want to go to McDonald’s all the time.”

Detrick graduated in 2004 with a degree in African-American studies. He is used to moving. He was born in Germany while his father was in the military and lived in California, Montana and Pennsylvania before his family settled in Newport News, Virginia. He says that Americans who play in Austria can make about \$30,000 to \$60,000 per season, based on their pro experience, and that is tax-free.

“It is kind of quiet here, I will tell you that. You have a whole bunch of time on your hands,” says Detrick, who sleeps a lot in the afternoon since he stays up late to make phone calls to Virginia and Oklahoma. “It is a little town. The people are really friendly; that is a great thing about being here.” *continued*



Playing in Europe is going home for Jozsef Szendrei, a 2003 OU graduate now playing in his native Hungary.

Jerry Laizure/OU Athletics Media Relations



Photo Provided

OU fan favorite Hollis Price, a New Orleans native, traded Sooner crimson for Le Mans orange after averaging 18 points a game for the 2002-03 Sooners.

New York native Jameel Heywood has played in Korea, Uruguay, Chile, Puerto Rico, Argentina and Poland since his college days. He averaged 19.1 points per game last season in Puerto Rico and was with a team in Argentina as 2005 began, then played in Poland. He averaged 4.6 rebounds per game for OU in 2000-01.

"The hardest adjustment I have had to make playing in different countries is being away from my family for extended periods of time," he wrote in January. "I have a seven-month old, and leaving him for the first time was the hardest thing I've done since I began my overseas career.

"I can't think of any pleasant surprises besides being paid on time and in full," he added. "Playing overseas is a job; yes, you do get to play the sport you love, meet new people, see a lot of beautiful places and learn about different cultures, but your main reason for being out there is to get paid. Some teams can make that more difficult than others."

Norman helped pave the way

So how did playing for the Sooners prepare these young men for living overseas?

"Although you may only play two or three games a week, the (foreign) team can practice up to two times a day at (an intense level) that reminds me of my college days," Heywood wrote. "Also, the way in which we have to conduct ourselves off the court (is important as pros), because the fans are always watching (and that) also reminds me of OU. Word always gets back to the coach about your off-court behavior, good or bad."

Price and other former Sooners are quick to credit head coach Kelvin Sampson for his guidance, both on and off the court. Szendrei says he misses his college days at OU. He feels that the Sooners were one of the hardest-working teams in the country, and that results were more important than style.

"I don't think the unity atmosphere exists (in the pros), I am sorry to say. I really don't have (any) bad memories (of OU). I made a lot of friends that are going to last a long time, including Coach Sampson," he says.

"I made relationships; I made friends. I don't think there was a tighter-knit group. That is why it is harder to play as a pro," he adds.

Szendrei also met his future wife at OU. Natasha Marie Hall is from Norman and graduated in 2004 with a degree in health/sports medicine.

An unplanned detour

Certainly all of the former Sooners would rather be playing in the NBA. And many would play in a minor league in the United States if the pay were better. But playing in a foreign land has brought many surprises, professionally and personally.

Jones hoped to be drafted out of college, but that did not happen. He was injured in a car accident when he played in Spain. After two seasons in Turkey, he averaged 21.4 points per game for Elitzur Rishon Le Zion in Israel during the 1997-98 season.

He met his wife, Nava, from Israel, that season, and the couple has been married for about seven years. They had their first child, a boy, on July 21, 2004.

What are some of the famous places he has visited?

"Wow! I saw the (Wailing) Wall in Israel and spent time in Jerusalem. That was nice. There was a lot of nice beaches" along the way, he says of his long pro career.

Price is the starting point guard for Le Mans, after he played shooting guard for the Sooners as a junior and senior. He was averaging 16 points per game in mid-January in France.

"That is my ultimate goal, get back to the States (in the NBA). I did start a good career here in Europe, and it can only get better," says Price, a sociology major who admits to being a few credits shy of his degree.

"You are always looking for a better situation," he says of playing in Europe. "There was a team in Spain that was real

“I made a lot of friends that are going to last a long time, including Coach Sampson.”

interested in me (earlier this season). My name came up. But I had already signed a contract, and I couldn't break it.”

The pressure to win in Europe is just as intense as the Big 12 or NBA.

Any stories that are memorable?

“There are several, but one fresh in my memory is that story of a team owner losing it in the locker room in Argentina,” Heywood wrote. “The team had just suffered another loss, and the owner got frustrated and threw things and broke down in

tears.” A hoop version of “Don't Cry For Me Argentina,” perhaps.

Here is a look at other former Sooners who began this season overseas:

- **Corey Brewer** (Italy) ended his OU career in 1998 with 1,211 points in just two seasons. The 6-2 guard, now 30, averaged 10 points per game last season in Spain, and his team made the league finals. He was first-team all-Big 12 in 1998 and began this season with Bologna, Italy.

- **Nate Erdmann** (Spain) averaged 20.5 points per game for OU in 1996-97 and was drafted by Utah of the NBA in 1997. He has played several years in Italy, and last season he played in France. Erdmann, 31, a 6-5 guard, averaged 10 points per game for the Lobos in Spain this season.

- **Ricky Grace** (Australia) has announced his retirement after a long, productive career Down Under. He first played there in 1991 and had been with the Perth Wildcats since 1994. Grace, 38, a 6-1 guard, played three games for the Atlanta Hawks in 1993-94 and was drafted by Utah in 1988.

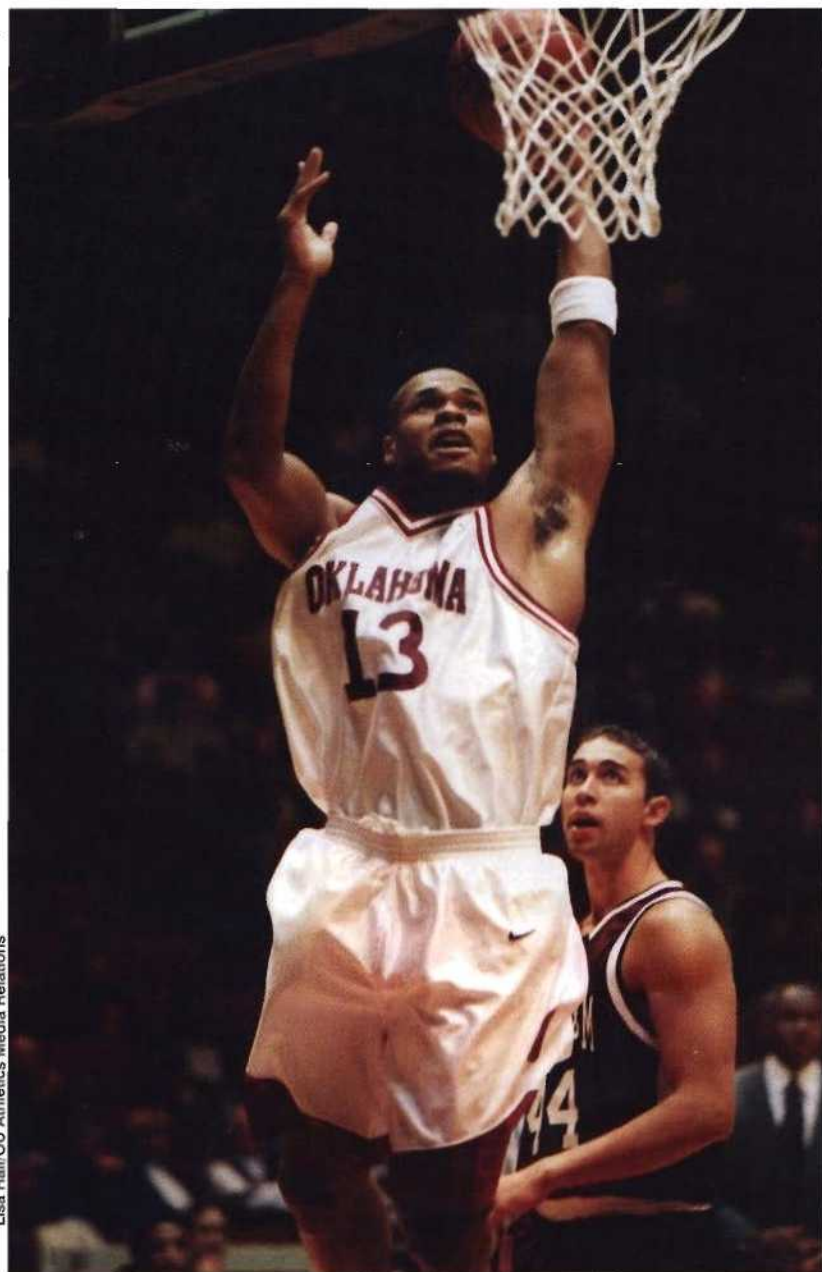
- **Aaron McGhee** (South Korea), who turns 26 in June, is a 6-8 forward who averaged 15.4 points per game last season in Spain. He played in Italy and Spain the previous season and averaged 15.2 points per game for the Sooners' Final Four team in 2001-02. He began this season with the Magic Wings in South Korea.

- **Damon Patterson** (Israel) averaged 20.8 points per game for the Sooners in 1991-92, and since then has played in Belgium and Israel. His team made the final in Israel last season. The 6-7 forward is 36.

- **Bryan Sallier** (Spain) is a 6-9 forward who finished his OU career in 1993. He has played several years in Spain, and his team won the league title last season. Sallier, 35, was injured and released by his team in Spain in December.

Also on foreign team rosters this season are former Sooners Michael Johnson (Israel), Erik Martin (Argentina), Daryn Selvy (South Korea) and Victor Avila (Mexico).

David Driver, a freelance writer and Virginia native, now lives in Szeged, Hungary, and covers pro basketball for American magazines and newspapers. He has contributed to Basketball Times, The Washington Post, Associated Press and several alumni magazines. He can be reached at davidsdriver@aol.com. Information from www.usbasket.com was used for this story.



Aaron McGhee, star forward on OU's 2002 Final Four team, began 2005 in South Korea after stints in Italy and Spain.