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NBA REFEREE MARAT KOGUT, 31,
TALKS WITH HIS DAD,
LEON KOGUT, 63.

Marat Kogut: Growing up, I played basketball at the rec center by us, and when I was about fifteen I sprained my ankle. I couldn't really run, so I asked my coach if I could referee the practice instead. I was terrible—had no idea what I was doing—but it was a lot of fun. And so I started volunteering at games on Saturdays and Sundays.

Most kids grow up dreaming that they could hit the game-winning shot of a championship. I was the one that said, "I want to be the referee that blows the whistle and says the basket was successful." Being a player, sometimes you may have to sit on the bench. But I always wanted to be right in the middle of the action—and when you're a referee, you're the one controlling the game.

Leon Kogut: When you told me someday you're going to be

a referee, I said, "Yeah, sure." But it was your goal, and so it became our family goal. Then one day you came from school and said, "Dad, can you give me two hundred dollars to get a course for referee?" Remember? It was the first investment in your future.

Marat: When I took the written exam to become a licensed referee that November, about 115 people took the test. Thirteen passed, and I was one of them. Most of the people were in their thirties, forties, and fifties, but I was sixteen.

In high school, refereeing at all these rec centers on weekends was a great way to earn some extra income, but I wasn't doing it for the money. I was doing it because I really loved it.

Leon: I used to drive you to every game, because you didn't have a driver's license at that time.

Marat: Right, I only had a referee license. But you have always been supportive, no matter what I said. If I told you I wanted to be a ballet dancer, you would say, "Oh, good!" Mom, on the other hand, was totally against it. Her main concern was to marry me off. "Who's going to take a guy who's going to be a referee?"

Leon: Yeah, she wants to see you as a doctor, as a lawyer, you know. But I always remember when you asked me, "How many lawyers do you have in this country, Dad?" I said, "Maybe three, four million?" "How many doctors do we have in this country?" I said, "About six, seven million doctors?" And then you asked, "And how many NBA referees are there

in this country?" I said, "I don't know." You told me, "It's about sixty. And I'm going to be one of them."

I'm never going to forget that. You knew you were going to be there. Since that, I said to your mom, "That's it, don't bother him anymore. He's going to be an NBA referee."

Marat: My first official NBA game, my partner gave me the ball, and I'm the one that got to throw it up to start the game. I was so nervous up until I finally released the ball in the air; then all my training just clicked in. I was like, *This is just another game between two teams. I'm here, I earned my spot. Let's go to work.*

Leon: I remember your first game in the tri-state area, everybody came to the game—the whole family went to support you. I'm a barber, and a lot of customers from my shop went to that game also.

Marat: It was a hell of a turnout! And they filled up a whole section. During the last time-out, I saw a whole bunch of them start screaming, "Marat! Yeah!" My partners were looking at them like, "Wow, all those people are here for you? You have more fans than the players do!" *[Laughs.]*

I just finished my second season, and I'm exactly where I want to be right now. I got hired at thirty, and I'm planning on doing this for another thirty years.

Leon: Everybody told me, "Your son is in the NBA? No, it's impossible." I say, "Yes. He is." Now all the customers in my shop, everybody ask me about you. And everybody's looking

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for your games to watch, then the next day they call me up, say, "Oh, Leon, I saw your son!"

Marat: I still go to your barbershop to get haircuts, and every time there's a customer, you say, "Hey, this is my son," and the first thing that comes out of their mouth is, "Oh, your father always talks about you."

Leon: Of course! I'm proud of you, that's why. I watch all the games on TV—I never miss even one game yet. If you work in the west and the game start ten o'clock at night and finish one o'clock in the morning, doesn't matter. I still watch to the last minute.

We came to the United States from Kiev when you were seven days old. And I choose your name, Marat, because I just have a feeling, *This name going to bring you lots of success.* So when I see my son is in the arena, and you blow the whistle there . . . it's incredible—the dream's come true.



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