

EVER since the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the U.S. has seen a growing influx of foreign gymnastics coaches. But talented coaches or gymnasts from abroad need more than just a one-way plane ticket to move to America. They also need a visa, and sometimes they get rejected.

Just ask Stacy Maloney, who coaches Paul and Morgan Hamm at the Swiss Turners in West Allis, Wis. When he tried to hire 1996 Belarusian Olympian Alexander Belanovsky, the visa application got rejected by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

So Maloney turned to the Internet in search of plan B, and he found immigration specialists Velie & Velie. The law firm from Norman, Okla., re-packaged Belanovsky's application and got it approved on Sept. 28, 2001. "They hired us to save their case," says Jon Velie, who, with brother Will, has been in practice since 1993.

Ironically, the Velies know little about gymnastics. Their father started the rugby club at the University of Oklahoma in 1974, and both Jon and Will

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attended Cal-Berkeley, where they also played rugby. (They were 1988 national champions.) Then they returned home and went to law school at Oklahoma. "We were able to obtain the very first Green Card for a professional rugby player in the United States," Jon says. "We became the go-to guys in the country for rugby immigration, and that evolved into other things."

Since 1996, the Velies have worked within various sports, including tennis, skating, golf, mountain biking and now gymnastics. After Belanovsky, the Velies worked with gymnasts Christian Ivanov of Bulgaria and Ivan Ivankov of Belarus.

Immigration Men

Brothers Jon and Will Velie specialize in immigration visas for gymnasts, coaches and other individuals

BY DWIGHT NORMILE

The Velies love what they do because they take pride in their country. Their grandfather emigrated from Ukraine to America, where he sent both his children to Harvard. "I just think that's what makes America strong," Jon says. "We're a nation of immigrants."

Unfortunately, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have made it more difficult for foreigners to obtain visas. Muhammad Atta, one of the suicidal terrorists from Sept. 11, actually received an extension on his student visa after he was dead. Velie says it slipped through the cracks because the name was so common.

Now individuals from the Middle East are looked at very carefully. "No examiner [at the INS] wants to be the guy that rubber stamps the next terrorist, and that's totally understandable," Jon says. "A very large net is being thrown out, and they're taking out a lot of good people, too. That's what's frustrating from our point, trying to help the good people of the world to come into this country to live and work."

The Velies are confident they still can, however. They are extremely thorough and remarkably accessible via the Internet. In 2002 they received the Louis M. Brown Award for Legal Access from the American Bar Association.

Through their website, www.onlinevisas.com, the Velies have streamlined the entire process of immigration visas.

The recognition came largely because of the Velies' Internet presence. Through their website they have been able to streamline the entire process of securing a visa. In fact, they often never have to meet face-to-face with their clients.

What most people don't realize is the variety of visas available (visit www.onlinevisas.com). Most are temporary, while the permanent ones (Green Cards) take longer to secure. "Obtaining your Green Card is not an easy process, whatsoever," Jon says. "And then you have to have that for five years before you can get the naturalization, or citizenship, as it is."

Olympic-caliber gymnasts such as Ivankov and Ivanov have an "O-1" visa, which is for athletes or coaches with extraordinary ability. The easiest method to secure a visa is to marry an American, but it's also the most fraudulent, according to Jon. The INS requires the couple to remain married for two years, and they must be able to prove it.

The Velies are proving their value to prospective clients through their experience, energy and vision. They also enjoy working in a field largely ignored by their local colleagues. "It's an interesting way to practice law," begins Jon, a former litigator, "because we really don't have an adversary on the other side."

With a playing field like that, how can the Velies lose? **IG**



Jon (second from left) and Will Velie (second from right) have secured visas for Ivan Ivankov (center) and his brother, Sasha (left), and Christian Ivanov.