

TWO GUYS FROM SOMBOR

by Milos Rastovic

TWO GUYS FROM SOMBOR, SERBIA, MEETING IN CLEVELAND, OHIO

Currently, Nikola Jokic (23) has become a top basketball player for the Denver Nuggets and one of the best Serbian Players in the National Basketball Association. His teammates, coach, and the public who follow his games in the United States and on television in Serbia admire his unique basketball skills and bravura. Michael Malone, the coach of the Nuggets, claimed, "I do not think he realizes how good he is and how great of a player he is." Tim Connelly, President of Basketball Operations for the Nuggets, said, "He's embracing the role of not just being our best player, but embracing the role of being the face of the franchise, it's so impressive."

Will Barton, Jokic's teammate, was his supporter from the first day. "He is a special person and a special player, and I am just happy to be a part of his rise and be one of the guys who can go to war with him and count on him."

Jokic was born in Sombor located in the northwest of Serbia, famous not only for its cozy atmosphere for prolific writers, poets, and artists but also for famous athletes. One of them is Nikola Jokic. He made Sombor, its citizens, his home, and family proud of his athletic achievements. As the youngest child in his family, Nikola grew up watching his elder brothers Strahinja and Nemanja's basketball success. His passion for the game eventually became his profession and took him to the NBA. His destiny was to come to the United States and become one of the best players in the league.

Growing up and living in Sombor in a house by Nikola's grandparents, I watched him and his brothers play ball. I would never have guessed that our lives would intersect in the United States. While I was thinking



SNF group hails fans with Serbian flags on the court

about philosophical ideas, Nikola was playing ball. When I heard that the Denver Nuggets would play the Cavaliers in Cleveland, Ohio on November 1st, I decided to go to the game and meet him there. The Serb National Federation, the oldest Serbian Fraternal Society in North America since 1901, organized a group of 90 Serbs who came to Cleveland to support him.

Before the game, Serbian flags were waving in the stands and on the court. As the SNF was announced in the Quicken Loans Arena, President John Martich led a group of SNF members and hailed fans on the court. Serbian flags were waving everywhere in the arena and the Serbian language could be heard all around. Serbian fans came from all over Pennsylvania and Ohio to cheer Nikola and support his team.

After the Nuggets won, I waited in the locker room to meet up with him. When I presented myself, Nikola tried to remember some of the times at his grandparents' house while he was growing up. He also wanted to know more about the Serb National Federation and the *American Srbobran*. During our conversation, I asked him a couple of questions for the *American Srbobran*, the oldest continuously published Serbian newspaper in the world since 1906.

When you watched your brothers Strahinja and Nemanja play basketball, could you have predicted that you would play professionally in the United States?

I followed how my brothers played basketball from a very early age. My mother told me when I was a baby

and had a pacifier in my mouth that I watched my brothers, who were age 15 or 16, play basketball. When they began to play seriously, we followed them to Vrsac, Belgrade, and Kovin. The whole of my childhood passed on the basketball court but I never thought I would make it to this level of the game. This is a great success for me.

When you came to the United States, how difficult was it to accept a new lifestyle compared to life in Serbia?

It was difficult to accustom myself to everything: from culture, language, food, and customs to the different kind of basketball they play here. The whole world and society are absolutely different here compared to Serbia where I grew up. I changed my way of life and some habits I had. Everything is absolutely different than in Serbia.

How do you see your professional basketball future in the NBA?

I would like to stay with the Denver Nuggets as long as I can. I like the organization of the club. Although this is the only club I have played for in the NBA, they showed me acceptance and readiness to help in anyway. When I had an injury, they immediately reacted. The Nuggets' main doctor and the hospital in Denver have always given me help in every situation. They are always ready to help. I cannot complain at all. I would like to stay here as long as I can.

How important is the support of your family, relatives, and friends in Sombor?

I just received a couple of messages from my family after the game. This kind of support from my family,

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relatives, and friends is very important. After every game, I have always gotten messages of support from my family, brothers, girlfriend, uncle, aunt, all relatives, friends, and Kums. For me, it is important when somebody follows my work, success, and career.

As an NBA player, what is the best part of life off the court?

During basketball season, the life of a player is boring. In this context, life is not very interesting. During the season, I have to practice all the time, to prepare for games, get proper sleep, to eat, and I am always traveling. When I have a break from the season, I go home to Sombor to enjoy life and try to make up for everything that I miss during the basketball season.

How important is it to support young people in sports?

Young people should play some sport. Whether it is basketball or some other sport is not important. The sport will pull them out from some bad things which they do not need in life. If they go to practice, they can make some friends. I am friends now with people with whom I practiced in Sombor. Success is not the only thing basketball gives you. Or rather, basketball gives you at least success, but it also gives you

something more valuable, and these are friendship, companionship, and amiability.

At the end of the interview, on behalf of the Serb National Federation, I gifted him the book *Serb National Federation – First 100 Years*, a Serb National Federation- t-shirt and a copy of the *American Srbobran* with his picture in Sombor. He was delighted with the presents. He signed his jersey, SNF t-shirts, and basketballs. After that, he had to leave the locker room because the bus was waiting for him.

When I was driving home to Pittsburgh, I felt a great enjoyment and happiness that I met someone in the distant world with this kind of success and approach to life which makes Serbs proud wherever they live.

Tim Connelly, President of Basketball Operations for the Denver Nuggets may have described Jokic's approach to life in the best way with the following words: "I have never seen a guy less enthused about a contract this big, and I say that in a positive sense. Everything is secondary for him to basketball and family...Beyond that, he doesn't care... He just wants to play ball and help us win games and hang out with his girlfriend and his family."



Nikola Jokic and Milos Rastovic with Nikola's autographs on the jersey and basketball



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