

Story about my father Slobodan Janićijević and his relation to the game of Football

Written originally on Serbian by me translated to English and then rewritten by Bill Humber as part of his book Soccer Triumphant. It was finally approved and book was published in 2022.

One of Aleksandar Janićijević's first memories as a child is accompanying his father by train to a football match in the now former country of Yugoslavia. "It was around 1955. I was six and my sister Svetlana who was three years older also came with us. My dad was in the early stages of becoming a referee and it must have been a second or third division game.

"During the ride he told us he would put us in a safe place in the stands, but on no condition should we tell anyone we were his kids, because if trouble happens, he said, I'll run one way and you'll have to go the other. I don't want anyone following you. We took it very seriously and I think it really bothered my sister because she stopped going soon after, but I went along for quite awhile."

Aleksandar's father Slobodan was born the same year as my father, 1918, and Aleksandar and myself were born a week apart in September 1949, but for me it was in the quiet and reserved space of Canada, while Aleksandar's family lived in the turbulent, though at the time relatively peaceful, eastern European region.

One thing Yugoslavia, made up of its now constituent countries of Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, as well as the disputed Kosovo, had and continues to have is lots of history. Parts were occupied by Turkey for hundreds of years and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Epare was blamed for the events leading up to the Great War, now better known as World War One, when a Serb assassinated the heir to the Empire's throne. Between the wars a Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, emerged, marked by a monarchy, upheaval, amalgamation of other territories and eventually a Serb dominated government. The country fought Nazi invaders during World War Two, and may have done just enough to stall the German advance into Russia so that eventually the Wehrmacht succumbed to winter conditions on the edge of Moscow, and may for this reason have lost the war. After the war and under Marshall Tito, Yugoslavia settled into an anxious balancing act amidst the Cold War rivals in the East and West, during which it maintained a high degree of independence from its erstwhile Communist comrades in the USSR.

Throughout this period the Janićijević family survived and like their fellow citizens struggled to give their children better options than they had.

"Before the Second World War," Aleksandar says, "My father had been a top soccer player with BSK or the Belgrade Sports Club, now known as SD Partizan Belgrade, then he went to Obilić in 1937, before joining SK Jugoslavia in 1940, a team now known as Red Star and which won the European Championship many years later in 1991.

"Sometime after the war started in Europe, probably 1940 my father broke both legs in a match and he was never the same. It didn't stop him however from joining the Resistance, or as we called them the Partisans, fighting against the German occupation. He never spoke of the things he saw or did. Like my mother however he joined the Communist Party. And afterwards he had a successful career as director of an insurance company.

"But it was soccer that made our lives better than most in Yugoslavia. My dad eventually became a FIFA referee and that not only meant he got to travel outside the country, but got paid in foreign currency far exceeding the value of what he made in his full-time job.

"Yugoslavia also maintained a high degree of independence. We all had passports and could leave the country when we desired. The world always looks different when you travel."

For Aleksandar growing up as the son of a respected internationally accredited referee also made for many special moments and perks unavailable to others. Some were simple things like the two different outfits his father maintained for different levels of competition, and on which different crests could be temporarily sewn depending on whether he was officiating a local or an international game. They were in the wash constantly, Aleksandar remembers. Others however made for the special accord paid to the young son of a famed soccer man like Slobodan.

"We lived in a suburb of Belgrade. Once my dad gave me a leather soccer ball as a birthday gift. Before, we had played with anything we could get our hands on, now I was the most popular kid in the neighbourhood. Other times the children of soccer officials got to play in the big stadiums while the refs were working out. All those years I only remember one bad incident. It was around 1961 and I went to see my father at an international match in Belgrade. He was a linesman for the game. Someone threw a coin and it hit him on the neck. The game was stopped for quite awhile but eventually he carried on even though he was still bleeding."

Slobodan's refereeing career ended at the age of 50 as prescribed by international rules and he died in 1981, a year after Tito. Yugoslavia began to break up afterwards and violence, bloodshed, and even massacres haunted the former country's gradual evolution into the separate countries of today.

Before then however Aleksandar had played soccer during Yugoslavia's glory years, always wanting to be a goalkeeper but told he was too small. He did play as a youth through his teenage years with Radnički, a labour team, between 1966 to 1969. Before entering into a university education in architecture and graphic design, followed by marriage and a child.

Love for football was transferred to the next generation. His daughter Una, that was very unusual for girls back then, in 1991 joined the football team formed among boys in her elementary school third grade class. Aleks, graphic designer and illustrator was working on a logo for International Athletic Meeting and when told about Una's football interest created over night a sketch for the logo for their team Three-Three (third grade, third class) Emperors.

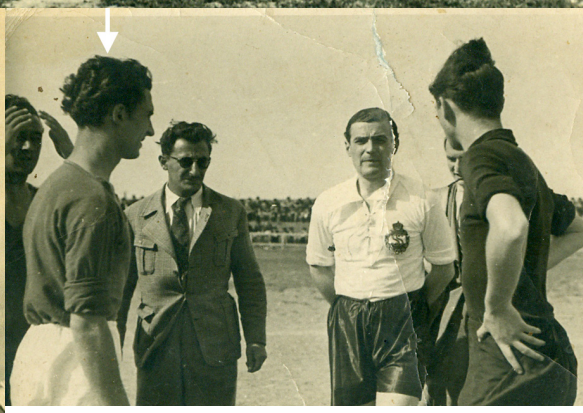


Eventually whole family in 1993 emigrated to Canada.

Ironically the Canada he entered already was a hotbed of rivalry between clubs descended from the famous outfits in Croatia and Serbia. Their games often had to be played in attendance with fans of only the home team in attendance. In 1976 Toronto Metros Croatia, a decidedly ethnic based sounding club in a North American Soccer League that wanted nothing to do with such identities, won that year's Soccer Bowl led by the world renowned Portuguese star Eusebio. It was long before Aleks made it to Canada but the rivalries have continued and for Aleks it must seem at times he has never left his original home, a country tragically rocked by calamities beyond his family's control.



Slobodan's first first division team BSK, around 1934 before and during the game.



Slobodan in a role of the captain of his team BSK around 1935.



Another group photo of Belgrade Sport Club {BSK}, around 1935.



Slobodan's in a new team FS Obilic, around 1938.



Around 1940 Slobodan switched to SK Jugoslaviya.



Referees entering the field for the important mach. ~ 1960.



Important part of the life of a FIFA referee was to keep exelent phisical shape ~ 1962.



Famous national team goalkeeper Vladimir Beara, from FC Red Star, in heated discussion with Slobodan about the situation in the 22nd minute of the derby game with main city rival, FC Partizan. Player behind is also famous one Bora Kostić.



All 3 referees ariving with the complete families on some important game, with their newly purchased famous Fiat 600 machines ~ 1962.