



SPORTS BYU BASKETBALL BRIGHAM YOUNG

Kresimir Cosic honored in Croatia, teammate on hand for celebration

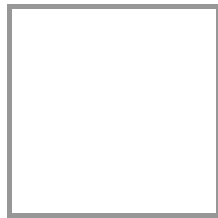
By Dick Harmon, Columnist | @Harmonwrites | Jun 8, 2015, 4:50pm MDT

 GRID VIEW



Miso and Ankica Ostarcevic, left, and Doug and Kerry Richards pose for a photo in Venice, Italy. | Photo courtesy Doug Richards

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Kresimir Cosic's legend remains as strong as ever 20 years after his untimely death.

It took me about five holes into the second round of the 2015 Mesquite Amateur a few weeks ago to ask playing

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partner Danny Stefanovic where he was from. He said Las Vegas. He asked where I was from and I told him Utah.

there and is highly respected still. – Doug Richards

“I went to Utah one time,” he said. “The people there are so nice, so kind, I couldn’t believe how great the people are there.” It took another hole or for me to asked him about his accent: He was a native of Croatia.

“Do you know of Kresimir Cosic?” I asked.

“Oh, he is a hero, a legend in my country, famous in all of the former Yugoslavia and Europe,” said Stefanovic.

About that same time Danny and I were whacking the ball around in the desert, across the globe in Cosic’s hometowns of Zagreb (where he was born) and Zadar (where he was raised) Croatia, Cosic’s teammate at BYU, Doug Richards, found himself part of a national week of recognition for Cosic, the legend and BYU All-American who played in four Olympic games and led Yugoslavia to the 1980 gold medal in Moscow.

Cosic is Europe’s version of Michael Jordan, said Richards. “He not only helped end the war as an ambassador for his country, but he helped establish the LDS Church there and is highly respected still.”

In Croatia, Richards found himself treated like a king, an American forever attached to Cosic. Everywhere he went, he learned not only old-timers remember Cosic but also the youth knew of Cosic, the smiling, joking, lanky, gazelle-like 6-11 basketball phenom who could play all five positions on the court.

Cosic died May 25, 1995, at 46 from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

During Richards' stay, he was singled out and honored at a game for the Zagreb team that made the semifinals of the national championships in Croatia. He was given a replica warm-up jersey of the Zagreb team, given an ovation, a team banner and statue of the city. "To tell you the truth," said Richards, "I was treated better there than I was at BYU when I went back.

"I never had to pay for anything wherever I went. Cosic is so loved and revered there, even after all this time after his death. And by association, I couldn't believe the reception I got."

He reunited with Cosic's wife and children, two daughters and a son named Kresimir Petar whom Richards said looked and acted just like his father in so many ways it was uncanny.

A banner stretched across one of the main streets in Zagreb, recognizing Cosic's death 20 years ago. Outside the Kresimir Cosic Arena in his hometown of Zadar, there's a statue of the star. "It is an arena fashioned a little after the Spectrum at Utah State and holds about 9,500," said Richards.

The celebration for Cosic included a basketball tournament, which drew teams comprised primarily of LDS youth from Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, that was organized in part by another former BYU player and Croatian Misha Ostarcevic, who has worked as an NBA scout in America. The LDS Church's North Adriatic Mission was key in organizing the tournament and festivities to honor Cosic.

"The missionaries have used his name to get a foot in the door in their work," said Richards. Cosic translated the Book of Mormon and Doctrine & Covenants into the Croatian language.

Richards, who not only played with Cosic in Provo, but also followed him to the

former Yugoslavia and played with him there, is now a senior attorney in the Utah Attorney General's office with a focus on education. His brother Golden Richards was a BYU and NFL receiver.

That early foundation of Croatian basketball has elevated that corner of the world into the cradle of the sport in Europe, with Olympic dominance. Cosic, despite never establishing much of a career in the NBA, has been enshrined in the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts.

On a recent Saturday night, the North Adriatic Mission of the LDS Church honored Cosic with a fireside/tribute which drew Croatia's minister of education, minister of sport and minister of justice, Croatia's current ambassador to the U.S., plus TV and print media members who interviewed Cosic's friends and family.

Richards, at the invitation of host church officials, was one of the speakers. Introduced by former BYU guard Ostarcevic and with the help of an interpreter, Richards paid tribute to his departed friend.

Knowing his audience wasn't just missionaries and Mormons, but atheists and current and former communists, Richards tried not to get too preachy. He directed his remarks on how Cosic loved his country and lived a life based on gospel traits of integrity, faith, courage in facing his cancer and death, as well as his tenacity and love of God and life.

A reporter from Al Jazeera media outlet owned by the ruling family of Qatar, gave Richards' remarks a positive review. Part of the program included a video presentation that featured LDS Church apostle Dallin H. Oaks, Utah Senator Orrin Hatch and U.S. diplomat Beverly Campbell, the author of a book on Cosic which was handed out to attendees.

BYU basketball coach Dave Rose sent 48 T-shirts with Cosic's name silkscreened on

one side, which were given to tournament participants. “They can’t get enough of the Utah Jazz and BYU stuff over there,” said Richards. “They know all about basketball and its history; it's a big deal.”

Richards donated his Nike basketball shoes to a restaurant, which had him autograph them so they could be placed on a wall to help remember the Cosic era.

“He is so loved there even now,” Richards said. “It is remarkable the impact he’s had and how he is remembered.”

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