

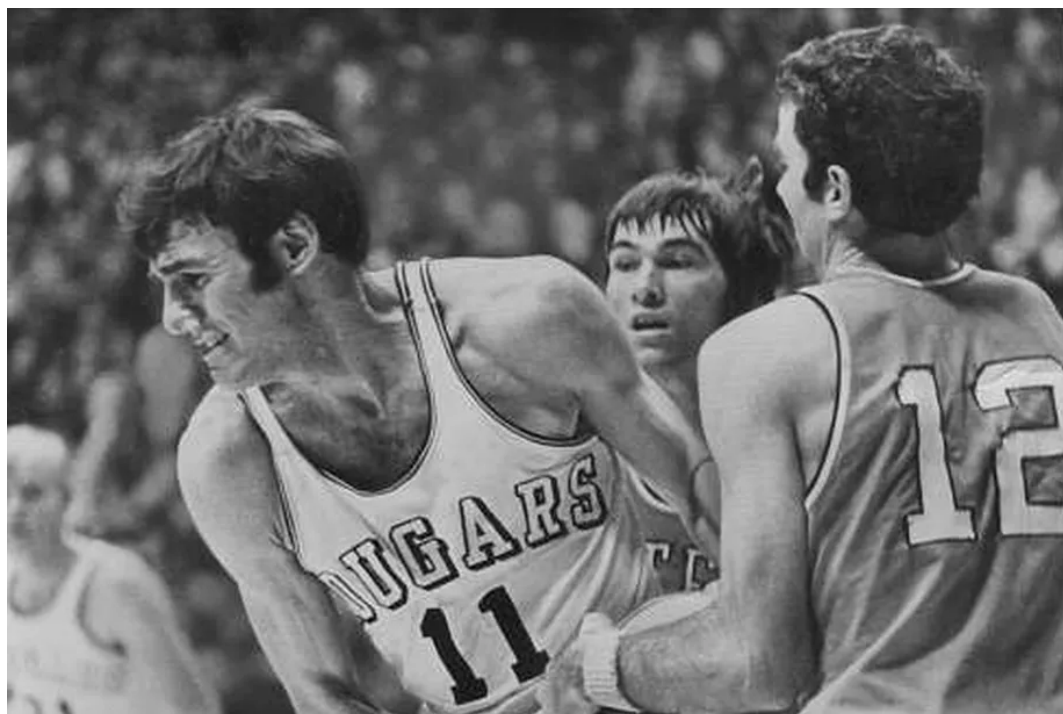


SPORTS UTAH BYU BASKETBALL

Kresimir Cosic's adventure to get to BYU was as complex as it was destined

Kresimir Cosic arrived on BYU's campus without knowing the language, the school's affiliation to a church, the honor code or its unique culture. Yet, he survived and starred.

By Dick Harmon, Columnist | @Harmonwrites | Apr 19, 2020, 5:21pm MDT



Kresimir Cosic during his time at BYU. | Dave Conley

Editor's Note: Second article in a series remembering Kresimir Cosic.

PROVO — The first time Doug Richards met Kresimir Cosic, he saw a lanky smiling character with hair down to his shoulders, a length prohibited by BYU's honor code, but school had not yet started for the 1970 season. Haircuts could come later.

Cosic was a year older in college eligibility than Richards. When Richards came in from Granite High to BYU as a freshman, Cosic was a sophomore. At that time, the freshmen practiced and played separate from the upperclassmen and had different coaches.

Like Cosic, Richards came to BYU because of Stan Watts' style of run-and-gun basketball. Growing up in Salt Lake City and an all-state basketball and football star at Granite High, his interest in the Cougars piqued when the Cougars won the 1966 National Invitational Tournament title.

RELATED**Remembering legendary Kresimir Cosic, BYU and international superstar**

A 6-foot-3 athlete with 9.6 speed in the 100-yard dash, he grew up with brothers Sterling and Golden in a family where their father, Jack, regularly took his sons out to hit baseballs and throw the football around. They even made a basketball court by hand-mixing cement for the pad, making a homemade basketball banker and painted a square above the rim.

The Richards lived in a pioneer-era house built in the 1890s and located on the corner of 1300 East and 4500 South in Salt Lake City where 13 in the neighborhood would gather to play. On Sundays between church meetings, the local bishop who was a caretaker of a local park, said the teens could go play games in the park if they promised to make it to Sunday school.

Doug Richards' older brother Golden, a 9.4 sprinter, later became a BYU and University of Hawaii star before beating out his idol Bob Hayes and earning a Super Bowl ring as a receiver with the Dallas Cowboys.

Doug Richards signed with BYU because of Watts' reputation and a pitch by his assistant, Pete Witbeck, whom Richards described as a great recruiter. Watts stepped down as BYU's coach due to prostate cancer treatments shortly after Richards arrived, taking a job as athletic director. Richards went on to help BYU win WAC championships playing alongside Bernie Fryer, Brian Ambrozich, Jay Bunker, Phil Tollestrup and Cosic.

Richards had offers to play at Utah and other schools, including Stanford, but at the time, Stanford was at the bottom of the Pac-8. When a Stanford recruiter asked Richards if he took the ACT, a requirement at Stanford, Richards said he hadn't and wasn't going to. He chose BYU.

Richards' best season at BYU came as a senior when he averaged just over 20 points a game.

Cosic's interest in BYU began while 18 and playing on Yugoslavia's national team in a Federation International Basketball Association tournament in Helsinki, where he met Finnish star Veikko Vainio in the summer of 1968. After many discussions about life in the United States and at BYU with Vainio, a BYU student, Cosic expressed interest and made contact. BYU's Witbeck was the point person at BYU trying to get Cosic to Provo.



FILE: Doug Richards, a Salt Lake City native, played at BYU from 1970-74. His first reaction upon meeting Kresimir Cosic: "He was just a big-time goofball. He was just a big happy-go-lucky Croat. He was very demonstrative and very gregarious and outgoing with a big smile on his face." | BYU Photo

Cosic helped Yugoslavia win the silver medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. His primary news of U.S. college ball was of UCLA and John Wooden's NCAA championships with the Bruins. UCLA and BYU became his primary targets for his plans to come to America. What he didn't fully know was the red tape that would be required to leave Eastern Europe, which at the time was ruled by communist regimes that had strict travel control not only over citizens but star athletes.

Yugoslavia's national team was to play FIBA games in Naples, Italy, in the fall of 1969, and Cosic planned to participate and then kind of slip out of Europe for either UCLA or BYU when it was over. He had tickets to both schools and papers to get him enrolled.

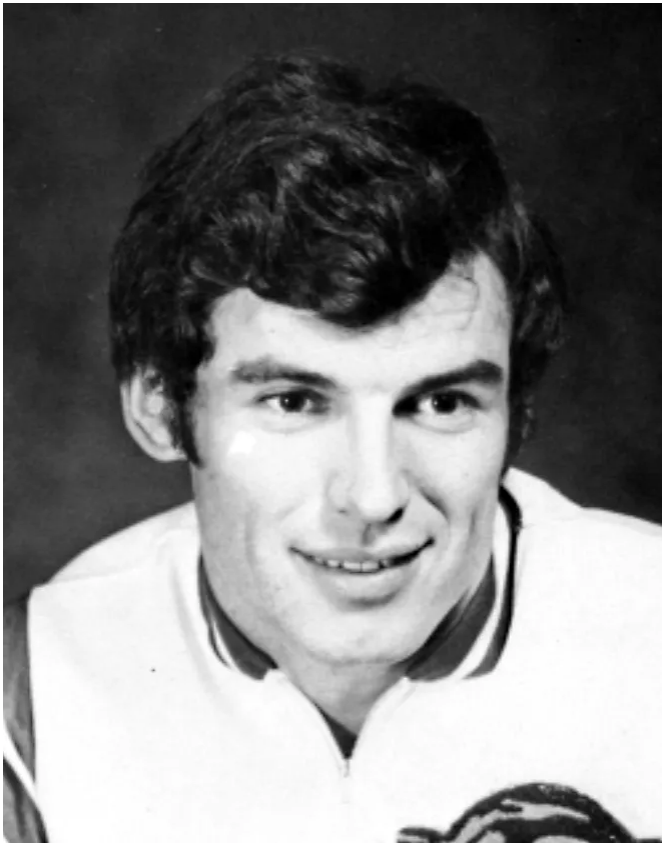
Yugoslavia lost to Russia in the championship game and amid the celebration, Cosic decided the distraction was a good time to leave for America. He took a side door, grabbed a cab to the airport and once there, looked at the tickets to Los Angeles and Salt Lake City.

He had a feeling come over him at that moment that he should go to BYU. It hit him hard, a kind of spiritual thing, something he was not acquainted with. When the flight left for an eventual transfer to Salt Lake City, he was bound to be a Cougar.

At a stopover in New York City, Cosic got to a phone with contact information for BYU athletic folks and called. Nobody answered so he left a message with his name and said in broken English, "In New York. Be there soon. Collect me please."

Witbeck was in for the shock of his life when he met Cosic. He'd corresponded with him in letters that apparently were written by a friend who was very well versed in English. When the two met, Cosic barely spoke any English and barely met the deadline to enroll in school.

In ensuing months, Cosic was in shock. In all his correspondence, the idea BYU was



FILE: Kresimir Cosic joined the BYU basketball program in 1969. | BYU photo

a church school with an honor code that prohibited smoking, drinking and sexual relations outside of marriage had flown completely over his head in the translation.

He didn't know what he'd gotten himself in to and was looking for a way to leave.

Through numerous challenges and battles, both inward and outward, he settled down as a student and athlete in the structured atmosphere that was just about as foreign as could be for a European superstar athlete.

He had choices to make. He chose to

change his attitude, and it changed his life.

In 1970, Richards met Cosic for the first time.

Richards recalls his first reaction. "He was just a big-time goofball. He was just a big happy-go-lucky Croat. He was very demonstrative and very gregarious and outgoing with a big smile on his face," he said.

"I could tell he was very, very unique, very special, not only on the basketball court, but he had one of those personalities that was just engaging, just enveloping. That was my first reaction."

More than a year later, after his freshman

could tell he was very, very unique, very special, not only on the basketball court, but he had one of those personalities that

season at BYU, Richards had been working with the construction company that built the Marriott Center in the summer and it was getting ready to open in December 1971 for BYU's first game.

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Richards, a sophomore, went with Cosic, a junior, to look at the Marriott Center that fall. At that time, it was the largest on-campus basketball arena in the nation, seating nearly 23,000, surpassing the University of Minnesota's Williams Arena. It was larger than any NBA arena at the time.

“When we walked in, we came in from where the locker room was, on the floor, and walked in and looked around. He was on my left side, shoulder to shoulder. I do not exaggerate this, he grabbed my arm like he was going to fall down and said, ‘Doug, Doug, this is the arena I saw in my dream.’”

Richards said that moment with Cosic was really startling and very dramatic. “It was very genuine and real and he said, ‘This is the exact — I’ve seen this in my dreams.’”

In a book written by Beverly Campbell on Cosic's spiritual awakening, she shares a quote from Cosic.

“I was drawn somehow — in a way I did not fully understand — to this college in the mountains of America. I had been raised in my education to be an atheist. I did not know what a Mormon was or what Joseph Smith had done.

“I could not speak English. My heart was not quite right. And culturally I was not prepared at all for what was to come.”

Next: Cosic was a coachable star ... kinda.

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