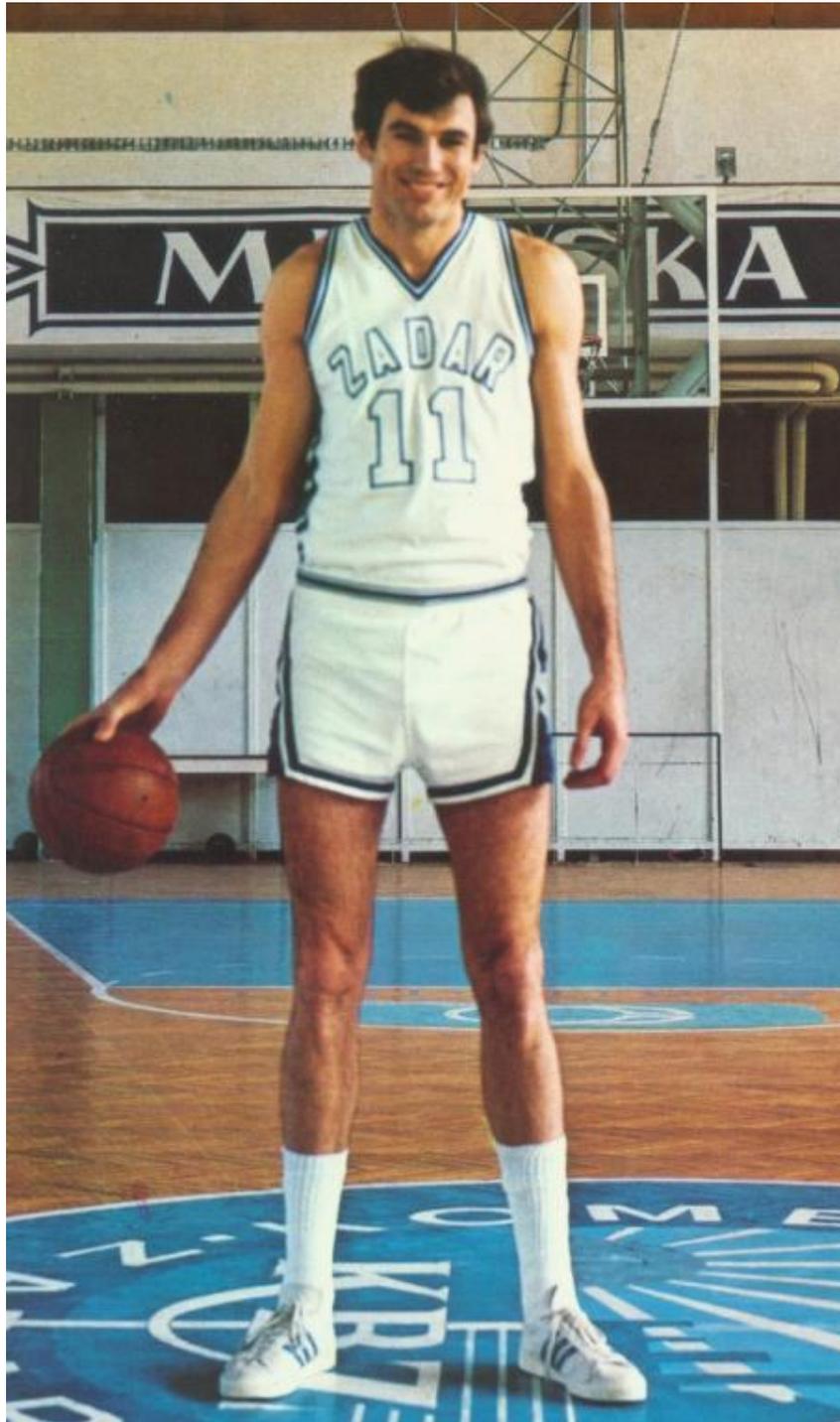


# Missionary

## Missionary Moment: Legendary Kresimir Cosic of BYU Still Opens Doors for Gospel

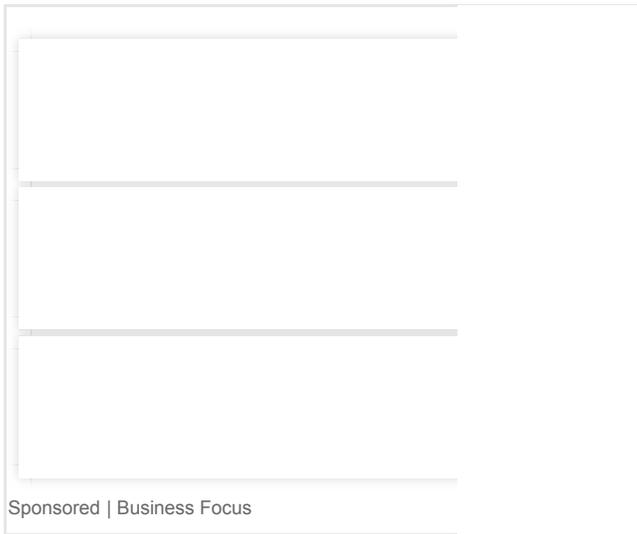
By [Mark Albright](#) · January 29, 2013



Kresimir Cosic, son of Ante and Darinka Cosic, was born Nov. 26, 1948, in Zagreb and raised in Zadar, Yugoslavia, now Croatia, a coastal town along the Adriatic Sea. He began playing basketball at the age of 9, and soon became a sports celebrity by playing on the national team at age 16. Kresimir then led his hometown team to the Yugoslavian national championship and represented his nation at the Mexico City and Munich Olympic Games. The team won a silver medal at Mexico

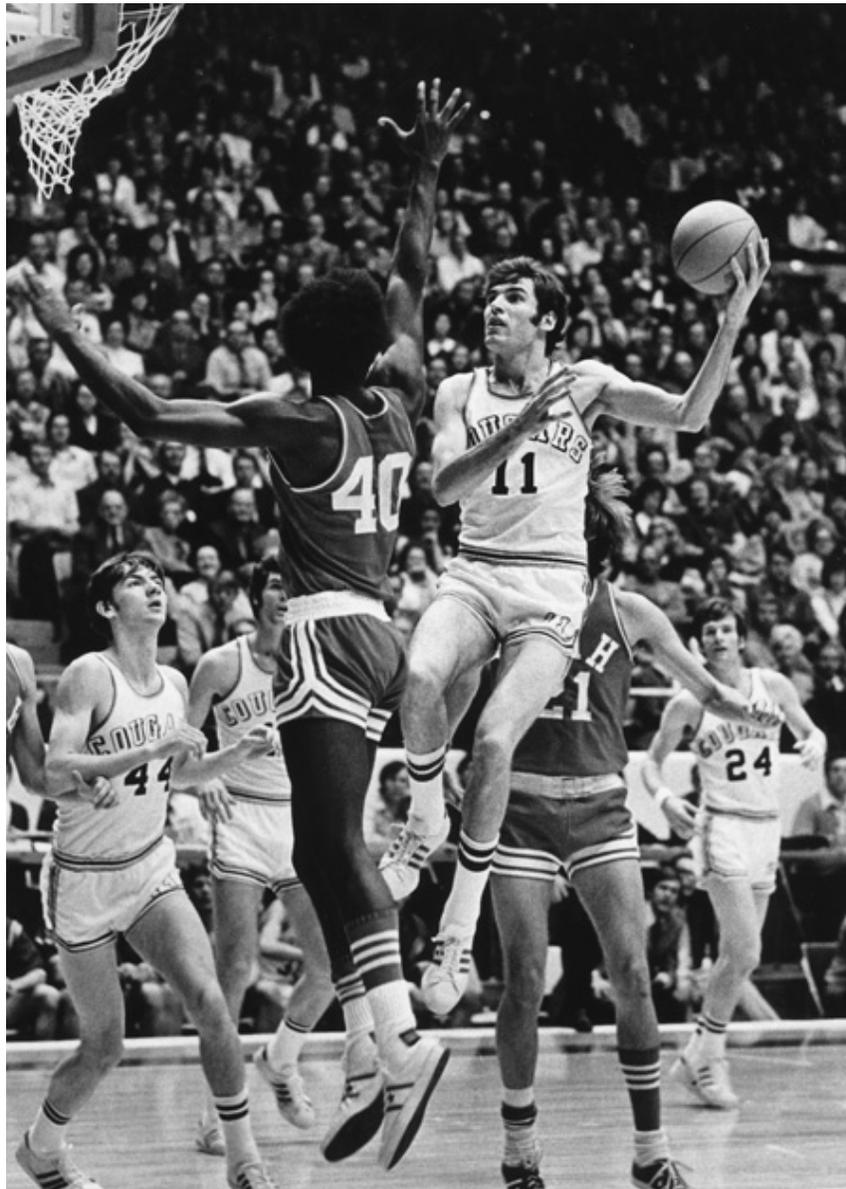
## City in the 1968 Olympics.

He loved playing basketball for his nation's teams. He later described what happened in his hometown when the national team won major basketball games: "The whole town celebrates. Everyone dances; there is no work; everything closes. You can go outside, and you can see it's a completely different place for a week. Those are maybe the most impressive things. In the United States there is not so much celebration. In Zadar we have happiness. We have a good time winning the game." (*New Era*, Feb. 1974)

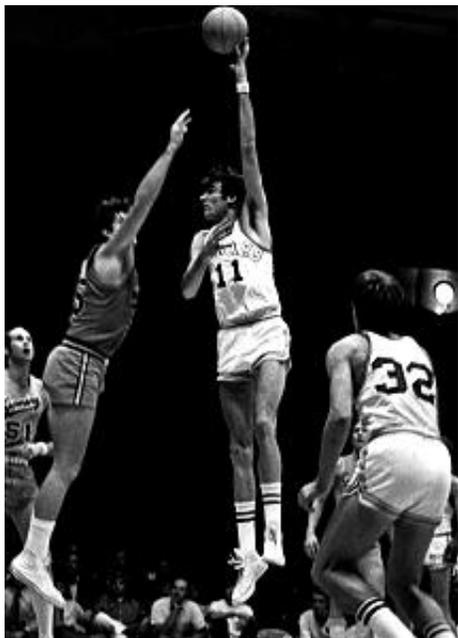


The following year, Brigham Young University Head Coach Stan Watts somehow persuaded the 6-11 player (with a shoe size of 17) to leave communist Yugoslavia and come play at BYU in Provo, Utah. He soon became the star of his BYU team where he played from 1971 to 1973, averaging more than 20 points per game. For a time, he was the school's all-time leading scorer with 1,512 points. His style was notably unorthodox but crowd-pleasing. One writer described him as a giraffe in sneakers. *Sports Illustrated* is quoted as saying his "zest for the game" was "something to behold," describing how he was "forever clapping his hands, raising fists high, laughing, shouting 'Opa! Opa! (I'm open, I'm open),' jackknifing for layups, dribbling through his legs, passing behind his back, and joyfully firing all manner of shots from improbable positions and angles." Few players in BYU history have been able to capture the hearts of Cougar fans like Kresimir Cosic. The 6-11 center

from Zadar, Yugoslavia entertained fans with his guard-like play. Many mourned his departure following the 1973 season.



During the 2005 NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament, CBS Television analyst Billy Packer highlighted Cosic during a discussion of the quality of international players. He said, “Kresimir Cosic, who played at BYU, was really the first great international player to play college basketball in the United States.” After his junior season, Kresimir became the first non-American player ever named to the All-American basketball team.



## Spiritual Growth Off the Court

When he first arrived in Provo, Kresimir remembered a dream from years earlier in which he envisioned the mountains east of Provo, and he felt that the dream meant he was destined to play for BYU. He was intrigued to learn from his new friends at BYU that dreams can sometimes provide spiritual guidance, and he wanted to learn more about this new Christian faith. He showed up one day at the office door of Hugh Nibley, a BYU professor who, he had been told, understood some of the spiritual purposes of dreams. The two men soon became close friends, creating quite

a stir on campus as they walked together—Brother Nibley standing at 5-feet 7-inches dwarfed by Kresimir’s 6-feet 11-inch height. One day Kresimir said, “There are a hundred reasons why I should not join the Church, and only one reason why I should—because it is true.” So it was in November of 1971, Kresimir decided to be baptized a member of the LDS Church.

To deflect public attention from his fans, the star player was baptized by Brother Hugh Nibley in a private service in the basement of the Tabernacle on Temple Square in November 1971 (the font has since been removed). The sisters who worked at the Tabernacle baptistry were shocked when they saw this very tall man stoop through the front door. Only days earlier, they had felt inspired to stitch together an extra-long baptismal outfit, wondering the entire time at the remote prospect of anyone ever wearing such long-legged clothing. But the white clothing fit Kresimir perfectly. From his baptism until he completed his athletic career in the spring of 1973, Kresimir joined the Nibley family for home evenings each week. He also became a close friend of the Truman and Ann Madsen family. “Boss,” as Brother Cosic often referred to Brother Madsen, was both his friend and mentor.

Kresimir lived his new religion with the same determination and gusto with which he played

basketball. His BYU teammates and coaches reported that after his baptism he could usually be seen reading a church book of some type—on planes and buses, in hotel rooms, even just before the start of games. It was as if he knew that soon he would be the only member of the Church when he returned home, and he needed to have a firm grasp and understanding of the restored gospel.

After graduating from BYU in 1973, Kresimir was drafted to play in the NBA, first for the Portland Trailblazers in 1973 and the following year for the Los Angeles Lakers. This would be a dream come true for almost any player in the world, but Kresimir wanted to return home to play for his relatively obscure Olympic team in Yugoslavia. Kresimir was also drafted by the American Basketball Association's (ABA) Carolina Cougars in 1973 and the Boston Celtics in 1976, to name a few. But Kresimir stayed with his home team, playing with Yugoslavia in a total of four Olympics: 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 in Moscow, when he led his country's team to the gold medal at the age of 32. He previously led Yugoslavia to a pair of FIBA World Championships gold medals in 1970 and 1978. An Italian team was so impressed by his performance in the European championships that it offered him a \$200,000, three-year contract, but he turned it down, preferring instead to remain in Zadar.

He ended his playing career as the all-time Croatian scoring leader. After leading his Yugoslavian team for years, winning medals in three Olympic Games, Kresimir Cosic was hired to coach the national team. He coached the Yugoslavian national team for the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games. As a coach, he led the former Yugoslav team to a silver medal in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea, and two bronze medals at the 1986 FIBA World Championship and the 1987 Euro Basket. In 1991, FIBA (French: Fédération Internationale de Basket-ball) named Kresimir Cosic as one of FIBA's 50 Greatest Players.

During this same period of time, he was actively spreading the gospel in his native land as the LDS presiding *priesthood* holder in post-communist *Croatia*. In his spare time, the national sports star

translated the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants into Croatian.



“He was a man of God for his country,” said Elder Wondra, former mission president of Yugoslavia.

---

“Brother Cosic laid the whole foundation for the kingdom of God in his country. Everything we have there, we have because of him. And this under communistic dictatorship. It was publicly known that he was a Mormon, but the love and admiration of his people made him untouchable-beyond any criticism.”

Kresimir laid the foundation of the Church in Yugoslavia at a time when foreign priesthood leaders were not allowed to even minister in the country. As a young priesthood leader, Kresimir organized church branches in Zadar, Zagreb and Belgrade. He assisted in the translation of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price and the temple ceremony. He translated for President Thomas S. Monson, then of the Quorum of the Twelve, during the dedication of the first meetinghouse in Zagreb and the dedication of the land for the preaching of the gospel in 1985.

### Statesman

Brother Cosic also proved himself savvy on the political field when he left coaching in the early 1990s to help Croatia seek an end to the Balkan war by becoming one of the Croatia’s top diplomats. The star coach was just 42, when he was named deputy ambassador to the United States in 1992 for the newly independent Croatia. “The president (of Croatia) thought Washington was the most important city to us after our capital of Zagreb,” Brother Cosic is quoted as saying. “He sent me here because I know America.”

He was beloved in his native Croatia, a country in former Yugoslavia, as a national hero. He died in Baltimore, Maryland in 1995 of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a form of cancer, after a year-long battle. He was just 47 (November 26, 1948 – May 25, 1995). For his contributions as sportsman and statesman, Brother Cosic was honored May 25, 2005—the 10 year anniversary of his death from cancer—by the city of Zagreb, his birthplace. A major public square, “Kresimir Cosic Square,” is located adjacent to the country's main sports complex. It was named in his honor during a ceremony that included members of the Croatian sports community, as well as family and friends of Brother Cosic, and Church leaders, including Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the Seventy.



In a tribute speech to the U.S. Senate at the death of Brother Cosic in 1995, Senator Orrin Hatch said, “Since 1991, Kresimir was one of my wisest counsels on the crisis in the Balkans. Always with optimism, he would outline the regional complexities with a shrewd notion of strategy that effortlessly combined historical sense with the ability to see three moves down the court.” On March 4, 2006, Kresimir became just the second men's basketball player to have his jersey retired by BYU (the other was Danny Ainge).

Brother Cosic is still highly respected in the former Yugoslavian countries of Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Slovenia. He is recognized as the best player the country has ever produced, who then sacrificed the prospects of a lucrative life in the NBA to return home to play for a then obscure local team. He is also recognized as a devoted father, husband, humanitarian and Christian of the highest moral character. He and Ljerka raised three children:

Iva, Ana, who graduated from BYU, and Kresimir.

In June of 2012, in Zadar, Croatia, more than 375 people gathered for three days of events to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the first baptisms performed in the former Yugoslavia by the late Kresimir Cosic. These events, over which Elder Erich Kopischke of the Seventy, president of the Europe Area, presided, also celebrated the first time as of this year that all countries of the former Yugoslavia-and Europe-have proselyting missionaries and Church units. This was the first time that members of the Church from each of the four countries of the Adriatic North Mission (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia) had gathered together since the Balkan War in the 1990s. (*Church News*, July 21, 2012.)

Elder Ronald A. Rasband Visits the Balkans

But even after his death, Kresimir Cosic continues to have an influence on the gospel in his homeland.

Elder Ronald A. Rasband has been a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy since April 1, 2000. He has been the senior member of the Presidency of the Seventy for four years. On Church assignments September 7-17, 2012, Elder Rasband divided the Milan Italy Stake to create the new Milan Italy East Stake on September 16; the Milan Italy Stake was renamed the Milan Italy West Stake. ([LDS News Release](#))

Before traveling to Italy (where they rented a special hall large enough to accommodate the thousands of members who attended), Elder Rasband called and asked the Europe Area Presidency if there were any branches or districts they should visit after the stake conference in Italy, perhaps where church leaders had not been able to visit in some time. They responded that Elder Rasband should consider visiting some of the Balkan States. (The breakup of Yugoslavia as a result of a series of political upheavals and conflicts during the early 1990s resulted in the creation of six new

Balkan states: Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Slovenia.)

Elder Rasband agreed with their suggestion and the Area Presidency (Elders Teixeira, Kearon and Richards) started efforts to arrange for meetings with missionaries, members, and heads of state in the region. They soon received presidential invitations for Elder Rasband to meet with the heads of state in both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

## Croatia

On September 10, Elder Rasband and Elder Richards met with Croatia's president, Ivo Josipovic, in Zagreb. They were accompanied by President Edward B. Rowe of the Adriatic North Mission; Miljenko Babic, Croatia District president; and Fatima Hamsic, Croatia District Relief Society president. In this historic meeting, Elder Rasband noted that this year marks the 40th anniversary since the late BYU basketball legend Kresimir Cosic introduced the Church to his beloved country.

[\(LDS News Release\)](#)

During this meeting with the country's president, Ivo Josipovic, Elder Rasband thanked him for the government's support of religious freedom. Elder Rasband pledged the Church's ongoing commitment to strengthen the family, to offer humanitarian service, to encourage education and self-improvement, and to foster high moral standards, all centered in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

(Ensign, Dec. 2012)

President Josipovic spoke of his government's commitment to religious freedom and its desire to promote tolerance among all faiths and peoples. President Josipovic also expressed his appreciation for the humanitarian aid the Church has provided his country, including the aid sent to address the devastation caused by the Balkan war during the 1990s.

## Bosnia

Traveling from Croatia, Elder Rasband then arrived in Bosnia on September 11, 2012, where he presided at a meeting for new members of the Church and delivered messages about faith, the reality of the Restoration of the gospel, the sanctity of the family, and the worldwide scope of the Church. (Ensign, Dec. 2012). This was the first meeting in Bosnia presided over by a General Authority since the Church was officially recognized there earlier in 2012.

The next morning, on September 12, Elder Rasband met with missionaries from Bosnia, Serbia, and the eastern part of Croatia. He then met with eljko Komic, one of the three-person presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This was the first time Church leaders had met with a head of state from Bosnia. (The Bosnian Serb Army constantly bombarded the civilian population in the city during the Balkan conflict. It is estimated that on an average day more than 300 shell rounds were fired into the city during the battle. Signs of the shelling are abundantly evident on the walls of buildings throughout the city).



Elder Ronald A.

Rasband, right, presents a gift to eljko Komic of the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

President Komsic described the diverse religious community that exists in Bosnia and welcomed the Church as a member of that community. He described the challenges families face and his concern for the success and well-being of families in his country. Elder Rasband then explained that the family is a high priority in the Church and that its members look forward to supporting this

shared objective and contributing in other positive ways to Bosnia's society. Elder Rasband also explained the LDS belief of eternal families, and how the priesthood sealing power spoken of by Jesus is once again on the earth, and families can be sealed together forever in sacred temples.

### The Kresimir Connection to the Presidential Meetings

Toward the end of each formal discussion, Elder Rasband then inquired what had led these heads of state to invite him to such a meeting. Both presidents answered in similar fashion by explaining that the only LDS member they were familiar with was Kresimir Cosic, the beloved and legendary Croatian basketball player who had played at BYU and on the various Yugoslavian national and Olympic teams, before becoming Croatia's deputy ambassador to the United States. Secondly, they had heard that one of the candidates then running for president of the United States was also a member of the LDS church, and they wanted to learn more about the Mormon faith. This of course gave Elder Rasband the wonderful and rather unique missionary opportunity to present a summary of the beliefs of the Latter-Day Saints to the presidents of both countries, who already loved and respected Kresimir. Elder Rasband recently explained that during these presidential visits the spirit was present in rich abundance, questions were answered, and friendships were forged.

(Interview with Elder Ronald A. Rasband).

These two special missionary opportunities with two presidents last September (just before the national elections in the United States), were made possible, in large part, due to the magnificent example of a 6 foot 11 inch missionary and basketball player with size 17 shoes. This beloved player, who turned down many lucrative contracts to play in the NBA and elsewhere, returned home to his beloved country of Yugoslavia not just for sport but also to introduce the restored gospel to his countrymen. There he established a firm foundation for the Mormon Church to begin to flourish in an area where Christianity had long been suppressed. Kresimir has left behind a rich heritage in his beloved country that even now, almost 20 years after his passing, continues to help the church grow. As one mission president said of Kresimir: "He was incomparable, because I don't know any

other man in Europe who had such an influence in establishing the Church in his country.” (Elder Johann Wondra, now an Area Seventy.)

*Authors Note: We thank Elder Ronald A. Rasband and his staff for their assistance in writing this article.*

## INSPIRATION FOR LIVING A LATTER-DAY SAINT LIFE

Daily news, articles, videos and podcasts sent straight to your inbox.

### Name

First Name

Last Name

### Email \*

\*

I agree and consent to Meridian Magazine's privacy policy.

### CAPTCHA

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA  
[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)

Submit