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Maro Jokovic (CRO): “I’m still nervous before every match”

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In water polo superpower Croatia, one man has outdistanced all others. Croatia has produced some of the

world’s greatest players. They include Hall of Fame members Perica Bukic and Milivoj Bebic and the likes of Ozren

Bonacic, Goran Sukno, Veselin Djuho, Deni Lusi?, Dubravko Simenc, Zoran Roje, Josip Pavic, Sandro Sukno. It’s a

long and impressive list but there is one man who has amassed more trophies, medals and titles than any other. He is

Maro is still active at 32, still playing, and he certainly will not stop adding to his medal tally. We are convinced he will manage a further two per year for two or three years. Of those 54 medals, he has won 20 with the Croatian national team and 34 with three different clubs. There is only one player who has won more with the national team: Andro Buslje has 23 medals for his country but fewer in his club career.

Besides, Maro Jokovic holds another record. He is 2.03 metres (6ft 8ins) in height, which means that he is the tallest member of the 'Barakuda', as Croats call their national water polo team. Jokovic quickly grew to that height, so it's no wonder that at an early stage basketball also interested him.

"Honestly, it lasted a very short time. True, I was training basketball for a while, but it's not worth mentioning, though I

still like to watch some basketball matches. After water polo, it's my favourite sport."

At least there were not too many doubts about which sport you would take on.

I grew up at Mlini, it's a small town, or rather a village, near Dubrovnik. Immediately in front of our house we had a bay with a water polo pitch set up in it. It looked as if you had a home with your own pool, it was so close. Only this 'pool' was actually the sea.

When did you play for a national team for the first time?

In 2006, and indeed if I look at it, it's been 15 years. Only Buslje and I have been playing for Croatia for so long. We have won a lot. Looks like we're a productive generation (laughs). The most interesting thing is that I can recall a lot of moments. In fact, everything.

Even your first matches for Croatia?

That was in Novi Sad, Serbia. We played a World League tournament, against Spain. Only a few minutes, but it was just a beginning.

Then came the 2007 World Championships where you, barely 20 years of age, scored the equaliser in the last

moments, forcing the extra-time in which Croatia managed to claim the title.

I didn't play a lot of minutes even then, but it was the first time I felt what athletes often said: we gave the last atom of our power. Well, that's how it was for me, but also for every team-mate on that day. In every second, in every contact, in every shot, every block ... I pulled out everything, the maximum. After that match, I sank, completely. But yes, that was a match, the competition when I was noticed for the first time. What followed later was a need to improve. You know, once you get 'captured' in sports, when you come out of anonymity, then your rivals start analysing you, following you. So then there is a need to push some boundaries. What you did yesterday, everyone knows today, so you have to do something new, something different.



Is it possible to upgrade yourself continuously for 14 to 15 years? Is that even possible when you are at age 32?

We all have to do it, no matter how old you are. I still do that today. Now, as the years go by, the upgrade is a little different. How to make the best, bigger deal possible with less expenditure. It used to be different. When you are younger, you can work harder at speed, power, shot strength... Each career period carries something of its own. Now I handle some things with experience. It's just important to think about this upgrade because if you don't work on yourself after the initial burst, you will remain only a potential big player. You will remain average.

You joined the famous club Jug quite late, at 14. But there was someone who played a key role in shaping your

career.

Yes. He was Ognjen Krzic. He is the sport director of Jug today. Even though he is twice as old as me, he was my first roommate when we were in training camp, or when we travelled for away games, which was strange to many people. He guided my first steps in the senior team, although I was barely 16 at that time. To make it easier for a young athlete, you must have an older, more experienced person who is willing to give you advice and who does that selflessly. Well, Ognjen was just like that. He used to push us, the younger ones, all the time. Constantly, all day long, for months and months. What he said made a lot of sense, but you had to listen to him in the hotel room, during training and matches, even when you sat down for a coffee... I was in constant mental training. Since I am a left-handed player, just like him, Ognjen took on the task of 'introducing' me to the senior world of water polo. I really learned a lot from him. Some of the things he was saying to me at that time are still applicable even today, and I am now forwarding them to the younger ones.

Your sporting achievements are known to the public but there are some that are unknown. For instance, you were an

excellent student and even as a top athlete you graduated at the Faculty of Economics in four years, flawlessly. Does

I'm already thinking about my kids, who are little now, but I need to foresee how I will raise them when they start attending school. Yes, my parents were responsible for my school progress. In my opinion, the high school period is crucial. This is the period of first dates, enjoying the company of friends, going for drinks... I had a great work ethic, but it was my parents who positively insisted on having school as the primary goal. I will try to pass this on to my children as well. First of all, it requires a good organisation of time. It's not easy today, all the time and commitments take time, from school, sports, friends, but if the time is well managed... everything can be done.

What did water polo give you?

I'm not going to talk about what everyone says, like I got to know the world, a lot of cultures, different customs... It is true, OK, but the basic thing that water polo gave me was that I could cope with the defeats in life more easily. Matches lost, but never battles. These are all things that happen. You fall, but you rise again. Then the next big thing that sport gave me is relying on team work. We can all be great individuals, but the whole world is based on team efforts. These are again some values that I will strive to convey to my children. Sport generally teaches you to cope with stress more easily, because I've been through stressful situations a million times. It is easier to navigate through life when you have been in sport for a long time, where there is first of all discipline, organisation, people you depend on, but also people who depend on you.



Is there anything that can make you upset all of a sudden?

I've never been impulsive. I am a Libra in horoscope, so I always value something, I estimate. Maybe sometimes I miss things because of weighing them up too much. The only thing that can anger me is human stupidity. Sometimes big things go wrong just because someone is lazy, nonchalant, doesn't want to engage anymore to make it good or better for everyone. It can make me angry when I see someone acting outrageously while myself and the people around me give everything they have. One who also makes a living from it but behaves carelessly. Uh, those things can upset me pretty much. But in a water polo game... now, almost nothing.

For every Olympic winner, the most magnificent moment in life is probably winning gold at the Olympics, but what

was the hardest for you? Was it in 2009. when you had a thrombosis in your hand, when you had to stay in the

hospital for a long time, when many things were questioned?

The worst feeling was not because of that thrombosis, but the possible consequences. You watch your team on TV, at the World Championships, you watch them play, even play well, and you're gone. That's the worst. So you're wondering if this might be the end of your career... Questions and questions pop in your head.

One of those players who suddenly had to end their career early is your team-mate Sandro Sukno. A close friend,

colleague, and now he is the assistant coach of the national team of Croatia. In one way, he is one of your bosses. How

did you approach this situation?

That's exactly what I was wondering, how to handle this, when I came to the first training where Sandro acted as the assistant coach. Sukno and I were room-mates, both with the club and in the national team. We were playing together. He hasn't changed much. At the pool, of course, everybody knows exactly who is in charge. If I do something wrong, I expect him to tell me that I was wrong. And that's what happens. No matter that he's a little younger than me. He is now a coach, he is there to lead 13 players, along with the head coach, and I fully respect all his decisions. On the contrary, I am glad that he is here again, among us, since he was forced to end his career so abruptly.

How do you fill your free time during the preparation period, travelling, tournaments?

I've been reading a lot more in the last few years. All the things I didn't do before, because 'I didn't have time'. People are constantly talking about living faster today. I would say that today we are living more stupidly. How much time we spend daily, looking at our cell phones, searching for some bizarre news, looking for photos, videos... We have even stopped communicating with each other, just stare at the cell phones. It's actually a waste of time. I follow two or three websites, no more. I read books a lot. The last I read was 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' by (Gabriel Garcia) Marquez. It struck me terribly. Like his 'No One Writes to the Colonel'. I read six or seven Hemingway books when we were in Australia in December 2019. Then even 'Don Quixote'. Now I'm reading Sun Tzu's 'Art of War.'

Since you are already among the ‘senators’ on the team, do you notice any differences in behaviour, interests of the

young players and your generations?

Yes, but not only in sports. This is the case throughout the society. My generation really had more fun, we hung out, whereas now everything has moved on to some stage of a fictitious social platform that is all between influencers and everything is in the cloud. Of course, I have to follow it a bit too, because if you don't follow it you stay outside and get left behind.

Does this scare you, through the prism of being a father of three little daughters who'll be growing up in such a

world?

Yes, it scares me. Only because of the kids. I'm scared by the alienation of people. There are fewer and fewer people who are ready to help and then I look at it through the prism of my three little girls who have yet to tackle this world. I worry about the digital age as the modern monster of humanity.

The best answer is still... sport?

Recently, when we were in Australia, we visited one school and there a poster read: 'Why it is good for children to play multiple sports?'. From not getting tired too early to learning other sports, developing motor skills. So yes, that is the answer to your question as well. Everything can be fixed.

You have won all the competitions, all the championships, leagues and cups that exist. What more can you do?

Win the next match! As long as I'm in the sport, I want to win. You know the famous words of Baron Coubertin: 'It is not important to win, it is important to participate' (Ed: quote usually runs: 'The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part' but Jokovic was close enough and those were his words), those words are noble and beautiful, but of worth only for those who are fourth! For those who have to leave empty-handed. Despite all the titles I have won, I am glad that I still have the will and desire to win again. It still happens to me, even before matches I know we will win by 10 goals, with no chance of losing, and I still feel a slight nervousness, some cramps in my stomach. While I am having them, it makes me feel good. So when I seem to reach the maximum age... I'll endure longer... Maybe for 10 more years (laughs).

