

SONJA VASIC

– Interview by Lana Krzman





The best Serbian women's basketball player Sonja Vasic, who is also a newly crowned Women's EuroBasket champion of 2021, is a flag bearer of her country in the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympic Games. After 17 years of successful professional basketball in the USA and Europe, multiple medals, champions league and national titles, she decided to finish her outstanding sports career after the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

How did she get to the top? A combination of dedication, hard work, pain, and tremendous family support.

Here the 32-year-old athlete shares with our colleague Dr Lana Krzman her love for basketball, experience from her long career, and advice for children who are just starting to play sports.



You have announced that after the Olympic Games in Tokyo you will end your playing career. How difficult was it for you to be an elite athlete?

Very complex question that would be difficult to answer in one sentence. A professional sports career evolves through phases and at the beginning the athlete can't be aware of the temptations and adversities that he/she must face. We, professional athletes, have to change our priorities with time, but the difficulties stay the same: injuries, absence from home, separation from family and friends, not being there to support them when in need... Life of elite athletes seems to be extravagant and interesting, but the truth is far from that. I was one of the lucky ones, thanks to basketball, that lived some extraordinary moments, travelled the world, made lifelong

friendships, learned a different language, played some good games, and won many trophies.

You have played in USA and several European countries: Serbia, Russia, France, Spain. What are the main differences in their approach to women basketball?

USA has the best organised women basketball in the world. They have a well-developed system and high ethical standards; all players are respected and there is always someone who is taking care of an individual athlete and her needs. The situation with European clubs is much different. Financially, we can sometimes reach better contracts, but this is not a result of a developed system, and it is common to depend on someone's good will. European women



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CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

SERBIA WOMEN'S NATIONAL TEAM
FIBA WOMEN'S EUROBASKET:

- 2021** Gold medal
 - 2019** Bronze medal
 - 2015** Gold medal
- OLYMPIC GAMES:**
- 2016** Bronze medal, Olympic Games Rio 2016
- MEDITERRANEAN GAMES:**
- 2009** Silver medal, Italy

CLUBS
EUROLEAGUE CHAMPION:

- 2014-15** USK Praha
- 2009-10** Spartak Moscow Region
- 2008-09** Spartak Moscow Region

FIBA EUROPE SUPERCUP WOMEN WINNER:

- 2015** USK Praha
- 2009** Spartak Moscow Region

INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENTS

- 2021** EuroBasket Most Valuable Player
- 3x** EuroBasket All-Tournament Team: 2015, 2019, 2021
- 2x** Serbian Player of the Year: 2016, 2019
- 2007** Europe Young Player of the Year Award
- 2016-18** Played for Phoenix Mercury in WNBA
- 2012** Played for Chicago Sky in WNBA

basketball clubs are usually owned and managed by individuals and often serve as toys for them.

How does the medical treatment differ between countries where you played.

Again, USA has the best organised health cover of injured players. The medical care we were receiving was always of the highest standards, professional and with guaranteed competence. In Europe, although the officials were willing to invest in the players' contracts, they never reached adequate medical care. It is strange that a player's health seemed like a luxury. In the end, even with great financial motivation, a player who is often off the court due to injuries cannot really contribute to the team. Last year, with a lot of

pressure from the players, the medical care started to change for the better, but unfortunately the medical care is still far from optimal.

What are, in your opinion, the most important qualities of a team doctor?

A good team doctor must be competent, to know and understand athletes, and to always be present, not only during the games but during the training as well.

Throughout your basketball career you had numerous injuries, two times your left knee was operated for ACL rupture.

That is true. Basketball is a contact sport with well-known high rates of injury. By the way I play the game, I exposed myself to an



Image left: Sonja Vasic with the MVP best player trophy at the Women's EuroBasket 2021. Spain, June 2021.

Image below: Vasic playing for ZVZ USK Prague at the FIBA EuroLeague Women. Russia, April 2017.

What is your experience with sports injuries prevention program, especially prevention of knee injuries?

After revision surgery of ACL, preventive exercise become part of my daily activities. Each day for a half an hour before training I would do different exercises to strengthen the active stabilisers of the knee. Many times, doctors openly advised me to end my professional basketball career because of my left knee. I am sure that these 30 minutes of daily exercise extended my sport's career to the present day.

You have had contact with many doctors; what is your impression, how well did they understand the requirements and mentality of the top athletes?

In my experience they are all very different. Some of them understand that tolerance for effort and pain is very high because we are a category of people that is highly motivated to go back to competing. The majority have difficulty to understand our extreme limits and frequently they see us as the general, not sports population. Fanaticism in training and effort is always present among top athletes when they are working towards the "ultimate goals".



even higher risk of injuries. For that reason, some people advised me to change the way I play the game. I chose not to accept their advice because I didn't want to lose my "player's identity".

After my second operation/revision/ of ACL most of my friends believed that was the end of my professional basketball career. The chances to return to play on the pre-injury level were only about 30%.

That reality motivated me to work even harder. Today I believe that this experience made me a much stronger person mentally.

Was that early experience a reason to hire and consult other experts in the discipline of sports medicine/sports science?

Sure, I concluded that if I wanted to continue to pursue a professional basketball career, I had to reinforce my medical team with other experts. I engaged with a personal fitness coach, I started to consult on a regular basis with a sports psychologist and a sports nutritionist. They all helped me significantly to return to the same level as I was before my injuries.

I have the impression that they helped me to prolong my career until today.

It is interesting to mention one small detail from working with a sport psychologist. He has helped me to understand that basketball is a dynamic sport and small mistakes are part of the game. Before, as a perfectionist by nature, I would spend hours on the additional training to punish myself for making mistakes.

Image right: Sonja Vasic playing for Uni Girona in the Catalan Basketball League. Spain, September 2020.

Image below: Vasic during the WNBA match between the Phoenix Mercury and the Washington Mystics. USA, June 2016.

There is often no logic in our behaviour, so for an inexperienced doctor it's very difficult to fully understand some of the things we do.

What advice would you give to young girls who started to play sports, especially to those who dream of becoming a champion?

I always advise young kids, girls, and boys, to play sports because sport is good for their health and development. By participating in sports, you will strengthen your personality, you will be open to new views and become more mature, independent person, which is very important to young female population.

For top female athletes, a successful career gives an opportunity to be able to protect, encourage and advise the female population.

For young females who dream of becoming the next champions, they have to understand that the road is long and rocky, and percentage of full success is extremely low in practice. In sport, it is very important to know when to stop with your project.

It is not just about top athletes to choose the right moment to end their professional careers. It is also about children and their parents to know when to stop with a dream about a professional sport's career. These are not easy decisions to make.



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Image: Serbia's National Team players celebrate after winning the Women's Eurobasket final match against France on June 27, 2021 in Valencia, Spain.



Do you think that enough attention is given to mental health of young female athletes?

For a long time, it was a taboo topic in sports, skilfully concealed from the public's eyes. Fortunately, in recent years this has been talked about and it has been accepted that only in stable, transparent, and harmonious environment a sport success can occur. Mutual respect between players and coach is essential.

At the beginning of my career, the coaches were very nervous, angry, and always very loud. Players had no say. It was considered at that time that this type of behaviour was necessary to motivate the female team. When I signed to play for one French club I was surprised by my new coach's approach. He was always cool, never raised his voice, he was modest, but he was equally a very successful coach. In that moment, I realised the importance of sports psychology in a coach's education and I am glad that today it lived in practice.

Is it an advantage in women basketball if you have a female coach?

In my opinion it doesn't matter if the coach is male or female, it is much more important that he or she is professional, honourable, and sports educated person. We are lucky in Serbia to have Marina Maljkovic as the national team coach. She understands us very well and has all qualities of a top coach. She created a fantastic atmosphere in the National Team and the end results are many medals in international competition. So, I am very grateful to my coach. Maybe as a woman it helped her to understand better our mental states.

Now as you are approaching the end of your very successful basketball career, to whom are you the most grateful for it?

First, I am grateful to my family, especially to my father who was involved in sport all his life, for being by my side when it was necessary for me to make the most important decisions. I am also grateful to my mother and my sister who have dedicated a large part of their lives to me and my basketball dream. I knew through all these years that I had the full support of my family, which was very important for me. This "team" was later joined by my husband Milos, who is also an Olympian.

Both of us represented Serbia at the Olympic Games in Rio – he in rowing and I in basketball. In a few days we are once again going to participate in Tokyo, seeing that finally both of us are Covid-19 negative.

Good luck in Tokyo and thank you very much for you time!

Lana Krzman M.D.



Image: Flag bearers Sonja Vasic and Filip Filipovic of Team Serbia during the Opening Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. July 23, 2021 in Tokyo, Japan.