

A LETTER FROM

BANJA LUKA, BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA

Everlasting Pride: The Story of KKI Vrbas

– *Written by Nebojsa Popovic, Doha
and Biljana Nedic, Banja Luka*



Image: A View of the River Vrbas in Banja Luka.

This year, after a long absence, I visited Banja Luka, my hometown, to celebrate with friends from Munich 1972, 50 years since winning the Olympic gold medal in handball. Banja Luka is now a modern European university city with a population of 200,000. The city is renowned for its rich sports tradition and many successful athletes—18 Olympic gold medals in the past 60 years! In discussion with local sports experts, I learned that there is a club in Banja Luka today that everyone supports and loves, regardless of their favourite sport or team. This club is the Basketball Club for Disabled Individuals, KKI Vrbas.

For over 20 years, KKI Vrbas has been thriving in Banja Luka as a club with a unique mission. In conversation with Biljana Nedic, the Club's captain, we uncover why everyone loves this exceptionally humane sports initiative and share this with you in what follows.

The Club was founded in 2002 by Marinko Umicevic, Goran Krsmanovic, Luka Jelacic, and Slavko Simic. Their objective was to provide individuals with disabilities, especially paraplegics, amputees, and those affected by childhood paralysis, with an opportunity to engage in sports. Recognizing that wheelchair basketball is one of the sports accessible to individuals with paraplegia, they decided to establish the Basketball Club for Disabled Individuals Vrbas. Their primary goal was to help these individuals to break free from hospital rooms and become active participants in everyday life.

Ten percent of the world's population has one or more disabilities, and sports play a crucial role in enhancing their quality of life. In the UK and several other western countries, clubs for individuals with disabilities have been active since 1946. KKI Vrbas was a pioneer in the region, initially recruiting prospective players at the prestigious Dr. Miroslav Zotovic Rehabilitation Institute. Considering the club's limited resources, this was a challenging and financially demanding journey. Their inaugural match

against Maribor was played without suitable wheelchairs and uniforms, marking the beginning of an amazing club history.

KKI Vrbas embarked on a mission, not only on the sports field but also in everyday life, advocating for the rights of people with disabilities in Banja Luka. They successfully campaigned for the removal of architectural barriers at street crossings, the adaptation of traffic lights with audible signals, and the adjustment of entrances to public buildings. Furthermore, the Club was instrumental in establishing the first kindergarten for children with special needs.

The club's first president, Mr. Marinko Umicevic, is still in office today! Thanks to his outstanding leadership, unwavering belief in the Club, and unflagging enthusiasm, KKI Vrbas continues to attract more-and-more athlete members. The club now owns approximately 20 sports wheelchairs with a total value of more than 150,000 euros.

Sports activities are hugely beneficial to athletes with disabilities. Through increased self-confidence, adaptability, and



Image above: Ademir Demirovic (left) and Marinko Umicevic, president of KKI Vrbas.

Image left: Front cover of the 2019 monography book.

Image below: Vrbas playing against FlinkStones from Austria in finals of NLB League 2016. Vrbas won 73:55.



self-reliance in various situations, sports profoundly impact the socialization of people with disabilities.

The rules of wheelchair basketball closely resemble “standard basketball”, with only minor adjustments for seated players. The hoop height, foul rules, traveling violations, and the potential for up to 100 points per game are the same. Moreover, both men

and women can play on the same team. The Club successfully competes in the wheelchair basketball leagues of Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and has achieved notable results in the Southeastern European region by participating in the regional NLB league. The Club’s rise to success began in the 2013/14 season with its first NLB league championship title. Since then, they’ve captured the same trophy

seven times! This season promises to be another good one!

The club takes pride in its 60 male and two female players to date. One of our interviewees and guides in this story, Biljana Nedic, has been with the club for eight years, while her teammate Andrea Stanisic, who played for the club, returned to her hometown of Gradiska due to family commitments. Biljana remains highly active in the club while successfully pursuing painting and music.

The Club continues to deliver impressive results, playing in the Bosnia and Herzegovina league for nine consecutive years, and winning the cup five times. Several players from the Club have represented their respective countries—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia—on the international stage.

According to Biljana, a dedicated club hall is crucial. It serves as a gathering place where members could socialize, watch games, strengthen friendships; many also participate in other sports, pursue education, plan trips, and partake in various cultural events.



Image: Biljana Nedic and Igor Ignjatovic.



Image: Players of KKI Vrbas celebrating winning their fifth title in NLB League.

Celebrating the Club's significant contributions, an impressive monography was published in 2019 to document its history, members, contributors, and sport achievements.

Many well-known athletes prioritise a visit to KKI Vrbas when they're in Banja Luka, engaging in conversations with the Club's members, and exchanging sporting experiences. KKI Vrbas's members were particularly proud when the legendary NBA player and current director of the Sacramento Kings basketball club, Vlade Divac, visited.

I have always enjoyed reading stories about sports volunteers, including what motivates them, and what drives them to make huge sacrifices for the benefit of others and how, for example, individuals like those at KKI Vrbas and their president, Mr. Umicevic, launched such a remarkable and altruistic sports project with just a few friends and managed to sustain it for years without a secure source of funding. Where does Mr. Umicevic, CEO of a shoe manufacturing company with 1500 employees and a long-time handball enthusiast, and currently serving as the president of the Handball Federation of Republika Srpska, find the enthusiasm, time, and dedication for his work?

Without people like Mr. Umicevic, sports in general will suffer, and many clubs around the world would likely not exist. Most of these individuals remain unknown to the wider sports community. Therefore, as

Editor of the *Aspetar Journal*, I am thrilled to share this brief story with you, our readers. I am sure you will join me, on behalf of the world of sports, in expressing our immense gratitude to these giants.

I conclude this wonderful story about KKI Vrbas, with the words of one of their experienced basketball players: "I firmly believe that this is the best-organized sports collective when it comes to disabled sports. KKI Vrbas has dedicated fans; there is always a positive energy present within the club." Not only a wonderful testimony, but also a call to action: we all have work to do!

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