

BOJANA POPOVIC

Bojana Popovic, born in Nis former Yugoslavia stands as one of the most respected handball players in the history of the sport. Renowned for her exceptional skills, leadership, and strategic acumen.

Bojana has left an indelible mark on women handball, both as player and a coach. Bojana began her professional career with ZRK Buducnost Podgorica quickly rising to prominence with remarkable playmaking abilities and scoring prowess.

In 2002, Bojana joined the Danish Slagelse DT, where she continues to excel. Her tenure in Denmark solidified her status as one of top player in the world. She played pivotal role in leading Slagelse DT to several Danish championships and European titles including the EHF Champions league.

Bojana international career with Yugoslav and later the Montenegrin national

teams, further highlighted her extraordinary abilities. She was instrumental in Montenegro's historic silver medal win at the 2012 London Olympics, showcasing her leadership and competitive spirit on the global stage.

Beyond her playing career, Bojana transitioned into coaching, bringing her extensive experience and tactical knowledge to new generation of player.

Her insights and strategic understanding of the game have made her respected coach continuing to influence the sport positively.

Her journey from a young talent to a global handball icon is a testament to her hard work, passion, and unwavering commitment to the game. Bojana is an inspirational role model for young athlete around the world.



What handball means for you?

Handball has allowed me to do what I love with all my heart throughout my life. It enabled me to realize and fulfil my dreams and experience many beautiful moments. Even today, as a coach, I enter the hall with the same emotion; I learn something new and try to pass all my knowledge onto the youth. Thus, next to my family, which always comes first, handball is a constant in my thoughts.

How do you think sports science and sports medicine has influenced your coaching career?

For me, sport is closely related to sports medicine, and a very important aspect when we assemble the support team of professional staff. These days, more and more players are injured. Recovery and treatment after training and matches is something

that is very important because of the further work and training that I, as a coach, want to carry out with the players.

Have you seen attitudes to sport science and sports medicine change over your coaching career?

Everything changed, including these aspects of course. Due to frequent injuries, all teams now have 20 players in the roster because they don't want to take risks when injuries occur. And because of that, coaching work has also changed a little. There must be more players' rotations for all players to play at high intensity and to reduce the burden on the same players because the seasons are long and tiring. This is of particular importance when you have a lot of national team players in the team who also play in major competitions for the national team.

What were the major contributions of sports science and sports medicine you have implemented in your coaching activities?

I will never force players to do something that the injury does not allow them to do at that specific moment; this is something I always prioritize when it comes to sports medicine. We will therefore find an alternative way of working to stay in shape as much as possible. I always work in partnership with the medical team, and I believe that with the good work of such a team (e.g. through the therapies we apply) we will achieve faster and better player recovery. Also, as we want to protect the players from injuries, we do a lot of activities related to injury prevention in the introductory part of the training.

How has handball changed over the years and what have you changed in the way you prepare your players?

Handball has mostly changed in the physical demands part and running activities. I feel that handball technique has been neglected. I am saddened by this. The way athletes train, alternating gym work and handball training has also changed. There is more emphasis on strength because the modern game is faster and a lot more strength and power are needed to perform at this speed and to avoid injuries. Players are also under a lot of pressure; this is why psychological preparation has become a very important aspect. Compared to the older generations, new generation handball players are nowhere near ready for that kind of pressure and responsibility. We grew up in different times and it was kind of natural for us to fight for everything.

What are the biggest impacting changes you have seen in sports science that have benefited your players in recent years?

Regarding the influence of sports science on my players, there are some details and novelties that I introduced in my training method and diet that positively affected their performance. Some of the changes have been the introduction of a lot more handball situational training (e.g. running in water which is very useful for both physical fitness and muscle recovery). I also introduced a much more varied diet, which, combined with the training interventions, gave us an edge. Interventions like these and attention to detail ultimately separate you from the average. Motivation and passion are big parts of success.

Nutrition, physical preparation, recovery are all important to succeed at international level. How have players' attitudes changed towards these aspects? Are players taking more responsibility about lifestyle choices to improve performance?

I think that all players who sign a professional contract become aware that without these things there is no success. Performance is a puzzle made of many pieces. If everything does not come together properly, it is difficult for the player to get what he/she wants in the end. Of course, sometimes there are issues and/or lack of attention to these aspects, especially among young players, but our task is to constantly direct them and educate them to the importance of lifestyle choices. I think that the new generation players do not take a lot of responsibility on themselves like we did. They are not self-critical and independent, and this is often a problem because they expect to be constantly guided and also expect someone to be always responsible for them.



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Image left: Bojana Popovic in action during the Women's Preliminary Round match between Montenegro and Russia at the 2012 London Olympics.

Image bottom left: Popovic shooting at the goal against Denmark during their main round match at the European Women's Handball Championship, December 2010.

Image right: Bojana Popovic waves to supporters after the women's handball finals between Norway and Montenegro at the 2012 London Olympic Games.

Image bottom right: Bojana Popovic celebrates winning the Women's Handball Preliminary Round match against Angola on Day 5 of the London 2012 Olympic Games.



For the next generation of coaches, what simple advice would you give to help them get the most out of sports science and sports medicine?

I would tell them to be themselves and have an attitude. They should never expect any gratitude from players (this helped me a lot because I heard it from a top expert who developed a lot of top players - Duska Vujosevic) because they will be disappointed many times. Coaches should constantly work on themselves and accept constructive criticism, but only from those they know are experts and wish them well. Coaches should discard criticism from irrelevant individuals or people trying to negatively affect them. They should identify and appoint loyal and highly qualified people in their coaching staff. Coaches should take care of their players and should be available not only as coaches on the field but also in life, in particular when working with young players. Coaches should be patient with players who are coming back after an injury, because that's when they need the most support and help.

What do you think is the future of handball and how do you see sports science and medicine helping coaches and athletes?

The future of handball is speed and attractiveness. I think that some new rules should be introduced, maybe to emphasize attractive moves and goals from long distances providing more points and facilitating more aggressive defense approaches. As far as science is concerned, it is very important to continue developing better approaches to training to improve player performance. Also, there should be more emphasis on quality nutrition combined with a





Image: Bojana Popovic, coach of Team Montenegro, during the Olympic Qualification Women's match against Germany, April 2024.

way of training that would be specific and directed exclusively for better performance in handball.

Science and medicine are extremely useful to get the maximum performance out of an athlete. Technology and science can help coaches to create better ways to analyze performance and develop individualized programs.

Is there something that you want to add that I did not ask you?

I want to add that all children should engage in sports (regardless of the type of sport) from an early age. In my opinion, it is more important than school because a healthy body harbors a healthy spirit, and it is through sports that children are strengthened for everything that awaits them through their education.

What advice can you give to girls who dream to become high-level players as you were?

The younger ones should be responsible and dedicated; they should have a goal and freely dream big dreams. They will learn more from defeat than victory and should not fear it; it is the only path to success. Finally, they should never doubt themselves and should always have a strong stance.

You have children, are you going to push them to become high-level athletes as you were?

Both my children definitely have good athletic genes, and through both me and my husband (who was a basketball player) they have been living sports from an early age. Lea and Krsto are involved in sports but what's most important to us is that they enjoy it. They should go to each practice—not for our sake—but with love. After games or training, we have discussions where we suggest what they can do better, and we are fully supportive of them. Since we all have strong personalities, these discussions are always interesting.

Interview by Nebojsa Popovic MD, PhD, and Marco Cardinale PhD