

Gabe Logan (L) oral interview with Sasa Kostic (K), Director of Coaching at Marquette United Soccer Club. The interview covers Sasa's upbringing in Serbia, his move to the United States, and relocation to Marquette, MI. He details his soccer training, coaching expertise and what he hopes to do for Marquette soccer. Sasa and his wife also run a local coffee house which he details.

L: This is Dr. Gabe Logan for the Center of Upper Peninsula Studies oral interview with Sasa Kostic.

K: Thank you for your time.

L: So Sasa to begin if you could give us the spelling of your name Sasa Kostic, and your birthdate please.

K: My name is Sasa Kostic, S.A.S.A. K.O.S.T.I.C. I was born June 29, 1971 in Serbia.

L: Ok and how did you say was the name of your town, Vladicin Han?

K: Vladicin Han is my hometown city. I was born in Zajecar because my mom and my dad were visiting relatives in a different city.

L: [Laughter] There you go, so what's that town, what is the main employment of the town, what are the people like?

K: **Vladičin Han** ([Serbian Cyrillic](#): Владичин Хан, pronounced [\[vlăditiĉin xâ:m\]](#))^[3] is a town and municipality located in the [Pčinja District](#) of southern Serbia. The population of the town is about 9000 while the population of the municipality is 20,871.

L: Kind of like Marquette?

K: Something similar. Vladicin Han is located very close to the Bulgarian border a couple of driving hours from Macedonia and Greece.

L: Do you have brothers, sisters?

K: No, I don't. I am an only child. My family still lives in Vladicin Han. Both of my parents are school teachers.

L: What subjects did they teach?

K: My mom is the professor of the Russian language while my dad is an elementary school teacher. I grew up pretty much in a teacher's family.

L: She taught Russian?

K: Yes. She does. I speak Russian too and also a couple of other languages.

L: Russian, English...

K: Technically, I can speak 6 different languages.

L: I can order beer and insult people.

K: I can order beer in a couple of different languages but I am not a big beer fan. I am more for an order of coffee. [Laughter].

L: The focus of this interview is soccer/football, so what was the role of soccer in Vladicin Han?

K: Generally speaking, the role of soccer in my town is significant.. Soccer is very popular in Serbia. Soccer/Football is the national sport. Serbia has pretty successful team sports history in general. A couple weeks ago, the women's volleyball national team won a world championship. Serbia also won some European Championships in basketball, water polo, e.t.c . There are a lot of good and famous athletes from Serbia, such as Novak Djokovic. Serbia is a small country but very successful by team sports. The Serbian U 21 soccer team also won the world cup a few years ago. In the present day, many Serbian basketball players play for the NBA.

L: How would you describe the difference in sport environments between the U.S. and Serbia?

K: Serbia does have a very different sports environment. This environment hasn't changed much to present day. The educational system is different, we have multiple sports participation through the school system. Physical education plays a big role in the country. Physical education teachers really help the athletes in terms of future sport orientation. The programs are designed to inform about different sports within a school (soccer, basketball, volley ball, martial arts, hand ball). Teachers are able to build a perception to the abilities of the students. Students are able to learn how to compete before they commit to organized clubs. Soccer is the number one sport for sure but we also have different sport clubs in the city: basketball, handball, volleyball, martial arts....

L: Let's say you excelled at football/soccer.

K: Yes I did.

L: So when you were in gym class did the teacher say "okay this guy has a good strike he would probably be better in football than basketball"?

K: Teachers don't force any decisions upon kids. They are helping the students become able to make their own decisions about possible sport commitments. During my childhood, the majority of my time was dedicated to soccer. I also played other sports for fun but was never involved in a club environment for any other sport. Soccer was the most important thing in my life. Almost all my time was dedicated to soccer. We didn't wait to be organized by somebody, we organized ourselves to play. A very important fact is that schools have their own fields, and they are free for public use. Some of my friends played basketball, some of them played handball but the majority of my friends played soccer. One of the nicest sports complexes in the country is located in my city.

I learned about competition before I became a member of the competitive soccer club. Those phenomena represent a big difference between United States and Serbia. Parents here have to bring their children to the field and wait for someone else to organize them. Players experience the pressure of winning the games before they learn how to compete. I learned how to compete before I opened the door to an organized competitive club. The objective of winning the game is not the primary goal. After you learn how to compete, it is easier to play a game. I don't know how to explain it, it's just different.

L: No, no that's a good explanation let me just kind of build on this because it fascinates me. So you are getting together with your mates after school, is there a coach running around or do you just throw the ball out?

K: I actually had a lot of friends that really love soccer. I also had friends which really liked to play basketball or some other sports. Majority of my friends at that time played soccer. If we didn't have enough teammates it was always easy to find someone who wanted to play. Sometimes I also wanted to play basketball for fun, but it wasn't organized and we also never had a coach. We usually formed a couple of teams, and played. I can say 85- 90% of my spare time was soccer. if you don't count the school time and the other things of that nature, soccer was my main thing. I was a good student as well. I had to be because I'm from a teacher's family....[Laughter]

L: **That's great. That's a big difference from the United States.**

K: It is different. I don't know if that is because of the difference in the values or the lifestyle. I am not saying that its better there or here, I am just saying that it is different. My first obligation was to finish homework. Once I finished the homework, I was good to go out and play. Saturdays and Sundays were big days for all of the kids in my neighborhood. Environment there is different than here. As a coach and player I had the opportunity to travel and work in many different countries. I have seen kids playing soccer on the streets as well. Brazil is probably one of the famous countries by street soccer. Before one training season a couple of months ago I pointed out the importance of "street soccer" and how "street soccer" can be a different way to enjoy the game. A moment after my statement I got a question. "Coach do kids play on the street because they are poor?" Marquette is very specific community. I am so happy to see players using their bikes to come to the fields I didn't see this at the big cities in the United States.."

L: Would you have been in the transition between the Soviet Union and the Independence?

K: We have never been under the Soviet Union. The former Yugoslavia was a very strong and respectful country during its time. Tito was one of the most popular leaders in the world at that time. Before the transition we had six constituent republics that made up the SFRY. The [SR Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [SR Croatia](#), [SR Macedonia](#), [SR Montenegro](#), [SR Serbia](#), and [SR Slovenia](#). Serbia contained two Socialist Autonomous Provinces, [Vojvodina](#) and [Kosovo](#), which after 1974 were largely equal to the other members of the federation

L: So it was like a Serbian sports system throughout it wasn't something,

K : It was maybe a similar as a Soviet system , but Yugoslavia wasn't under direct Soviet Union influence. I was too young to understand these relationships and the politics. Russian federation is traditionally always in a good relationship with Serbia but we have never been under the Russians, or under their leadership. Before the transition Tito was one of the most popular leaders in the world. My parents were able to build a house for a couple of years and never got a loan for the house, it was a pretty good time, I also had a really good childhood and we never struggled with finances. Maybe other people in the country did, but not in my family.

L: Yeah I was just kind of thinking that the Soviet system of play was in a lot of Eastern Europe.

K: I agree. Yugoslavia was an independent country. We are talking about Yugoslavia before 1990. After the second war Stalin tried to influence a lot of countries and Tito didn't allow that. At that time Russia and Yugoslavia weren't in a great relationship. Russian leadership made an attempt to put Yugoslavia

under the umbrella of the total influence of the Soviet Union. Tito was a leader who said the historical “no”. It was Tito –**Stalin Split**, or **Yugoslav–Soviet Split**, was a conflict between the leaders of [SFR Yugoslavia](#) and the [Soviet Union](#), which resulted in Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Communist Information Bureau ([Cominform](#)) in 1948. This was the beginning of the [Informbiro period](#), marked by poor relations with the USSR, that came to an end in 1955.

L: Yeah and the soccer that came out of it, now that I am thinking about it hearing you talk about how soccer came out, especially the Hungarians, but Yugoslavians as well that was a very strong team.

K: Correct. There is a long history of football developments in Yugoslavia and Serbia. Coach Milutinovic was a national team coach in the United States and you probably remember that time as well.

L: Right, thank you for the lesson and reminding me. So what brought you to the United States?

K: Soccer primarily but also opportunities in this beautiful country. In 2001 I got hired by Eurotech soccer. Most of the coaching staff was from European countries as well. My coaching experience and playing career was probably the most important thing which attracted their attention. My first senior team appearance was 1987. I was only sixteen years old. The competition system at that time was very strong and very well organized. Level of play was really impressive as well. I also played for many semi and professional teams during my career (Fk Morava, Vladicin Han, Radnik Surdulica, Fk Sloga Nis, FK Jastrebac Nis, FK Car Konstantin Nis, FK Orljane) I graduated at a University of physical education and played at the same time. The hardest part was managing studies and the playing career. Serbia doesn't have university football system. Playing for a club and studying at the same time is very hard task to accomplish. I always had a full support from my family. I was able to earn an income playing football as well. I had a lot of difficulties to manage both. I finished my playing career and started coaching in 1997. I graduated and earned a coaching license and coaching qualifications from the highest level of coaching school in the country in 1997. My first experience working in the states was 2001.

L: And that was in Florida?

K: No. Eurotech soccer is located in Virginia.

L: So that brought you to the United States?

K: Correct. I started coaching at 1997 in Serbia. Soccer was my way of thinking and way of living. After I graduated a college for professional soccer coaching, I was hired to work in the United States in 2001. In 2003 I got employed by Dutch Soccer Academy.

L: Like the Holland academy?

K: Correct. They are also located in the United States. The period between 2004 and 2007 was very important for my coaching career. I was the head coach of several teams in Serbia.(Fk Morava, Radnik Punkt, Fk Mineralac Vranjska Banja , Fk Soko Vranje). In 2007 and I came back but to the States. This time here to Marquette. At that time I had pretty good coaching experience and coaching development education including one at AC Milan Italy.

L: Out of A. C. Milan?

K: Correct. I was recommended by a professional team in Macedonia, Football Association of Yugoslavia and Macedonian Football Federation for coaching development in AC Milan Italy. I possess all official

documents for this matter. I worked for the Dutch Soccer Academy in 2003. I worked for Power Soccer Academy here in Marquette in 2007 and then I left to Serbia. At 2008 I relocated with my family to the states. We came to Marquette in May of 2008. In September 2008 we relocated to Florida. There I was the founder and Director of Euro Soccer Training Academy. I was able to make a U 17 Boys team from scratch and from 127 ranked teams found the place in the top 15. I earned a Brazilian A pro coaching license in 2012. I was also a staff instructor for the Brazilian pro course, I earned my FA International coaching license in 2013, Premier Diploma and Director of coaching diploma from NSCAA in 2014. In 2015 I started working as a Director of Coaching for PSA and I am currently DOC at Marquette United SC. I also finished a master's degree in soccer coaching education from Ohio University.

L: Yeah that's a hell of a resume. When you were in Florida, what was the name of the academy you founded?

K: The name of Academy was Euro Soccer Training Academy.

L: What was your role at Holland Academy?

I was an International developmental coach during their training season in 2003. I also worked as a head coach of an advance group at the Dutch soccer training camp of Presquise university in Maine.

L: Alright I am just going to throw out a name here,

K: No problem.

L: A buddy I played with, I think he is in Florida, Brendon Moran, did you know him? He is working with the United States Coaching staff, no? So when you got to the United States what were your impressions?

K: The United States is a beautiful country with many opportunities for everyone who wants to follow their dreams. I just want to say that the USA is a great country to live in. We are blessed to be USA citizens. We have our own values, we have our own culture, but we don't try to enforce those upon other people or even say this is the best or it is better. We respect diversity and cultural values of the country. At the same time, we are cultivating our own culture as well. There is a lot of diversity in the United States and that's great, because sometimes diversity gives you a pathway for the success. Soccer coaching gives me the opportunity to meet different countries and cultures.

L: I like what you said there, not that what I say matters, respect your culture against other cultures, you have this really globalized interpretation of soccer now. What is your coaching philosophy? Like are you adopting Brazilian style, some Dutch?

S: Firstly, there is a difference between coaching and teaching. Working as a youth coach as well as professional coach carries a tremendous dose of responsibility. Developing players is hard work. As a youth coach you have to balance many different aspects and be well educated to understand a player's needs in order to be able to make a difference. You have to be able to select quality, but at the same time to give opportunities to everyone. There is a very thin line between coaching and teaching in the youth environment. As a coach in senior team you have to manage the complexity of winning games. I think the biggest problem here is an existence of the gap between youth development and professional soccer in the organizational structure. A parent's perception of abilities regarding soccer is very specific here in the states. The fact is that USA has over 350 million in population, excellent working conditions

but still can't compete at the same level of soccer with the rest of the world. The entire system of competition, coaching, and philosophy is different in this country. Population in Croatia is about 4 million, Serbia about 7 million, Iceland 340 thousand. All of these countries have very impressive results. Pressuring young players to win before they learn how to compete negatively influences their development. During my coaching career I was working on the coaching education courses as an instructor as well. I always advise coaches to focus on a player's development instead of on winning games. Another issue is "Pay to play system". In Europe, the clubs have a youth program, even the clubs at semi-pro or pro level have organized youth systems by age group, and the selection process takes a very important place. If players are able to reach a certain level of play they usually don't have high expenses. I am afraid that youth soccer in USA is becoming a business instead of being focused on development.

L: That's how it was in St. Louis when I played. You had fields, you had coaches, anyway I don't want to talk about me but yeah that's gone away.

K: My attention is not to criticize anyone or anything about soccer in the country. You are asking me for my opinion. I am trying to be respectful and honest. I am always striving to express my honest opinion, conclusion and beliefs. It is evident that many things need a change and require a different approach.

L: Yeah it is a fact. It's a sad fact.

K: I don't know if it is a sad fact or not but there are a lot of players that play this sport. This country has more registered players than many other countries have population.

L: Yeah it's a fact. Let's switch gears here to the Upper Peninsula, so when you first arrived at the UP what did you think? What were your first initial impressions of the Upper Peninsula, soccer aside?

K: Generally speaking the UP represents very specific environment. It is a different community compared to many parts of USA where I lived and worked before. There are a lot of positive values. My impression of what I have learned in the past couple of years is that people believe only what they see based on their experience, and they don't accept new and different things immediately. They just don't "buy advertising". To build trust you need to invest a lot of effort, dedication and time. I am really not happy with the 6 month winter because I never lived in these conditions before. I respect the community values, style of living, routine. As you know, everything has its pros and cons.

L: Marquette United, yeah?

K: Correct. My responsibility is to develop the players and provide them with the best opportunities based on modern and proactive methodologies of players development. My job is to create a new level.

L: Are you training girls and boys?

K: Yes we have girls and boys teams. My role as director of coaching is to design the program, new standards, the club philosophy and coaching education. At this moment we have about 1000 recreational players and 250 competitive players.

L: Take me through a day, say a 14 year old girls' team.

K: U 14 girls' team?

L: Yeah what would a training session be?

K: The new club is actually not a fully competitive club. We are working to create an environment based on the future possibilities to become a highly competitive club. Our first goal focuses on soccer promotion in the community. We need more players to become engaged. At this moment we are able to balance different team levels of quality, to increase the quality of play but at the same time we have an obligation to provide opportunities for more players no matter of their skill level. This year we were able to select one team, and immediately we reached the highest level of competition. Under the current circumstances we have a pool of players with a wide range of skill levels. The most difficult task is to create a training season for such a wide spectrum of skill levels of players and make it beneficial for all of them.. After a couple months of hard work we were able to establish standards of the selection process for some age groups and it was very successful. I designed all curriculums and standards based on different players skills and capabilities. The implementation of coaching philosophy plays a big role.

L: What would that be?

K: My coaching philosophy is something that identifies me as a coach. My strengths as a coach are high levels of self-confidence to build trust and respect on the field and off the field. My responsibility is to show I have the big picture of club development in mind, while following modern training and competitive coaching philosophies. I always follow my principles in creating a system of play according to players' capabilities instead of conforming the capabilities of players towards my favorite systems of play. My realistic understanding of the differences between success and failure also has a similar approach. The only way to learn from our mistakes and progress is to apply the new ideas into the present. In present days we have modern methods to evaluate and to monitor the players at the field and we have to use this opportunity to learn from every single training session and game. I am always asking my players to be creative, disciplined and responsible with no fear of mistakes because their "PROGRESS" will be measured by their ABILITY TO SIMPLIFY COMPLEXITY ON THE SOCCER FIELD.

The possession of this ability or lack thereof places coaches at different levels as well.

Depending on the level of competition where I work as a coach, I have an ability to understand the real environment. I am always prepared to change my approach depending on the circumstances. Like I said before, understanding of reality is crucial. The training curriculum is designed to provide players with real game situations and develop players' capabilities to play under the real game circumstances. .

L: Right, it's a good philosophy. A workable philosophy.

K: I think so. The coaching approach is very important. As a coach you really have to be able to make a difference and establish the realistic approach depending on environment and players' qualities.

L: So what is going on in the United States with the concussions?

K: Players safety is our primary goal. Concussions can happen during practices or games. USA Youth soccer program includes mandatory courses for coaches as an important part of their education. Inappropriate equipment can cause a lot of injuries . The goal's always to be secured in order to avoid fatal injuries. There are a lot of examples including fatal injury of players because of a lack of safety precautions.

L: You had a goal post blow over?

K: I didn't have that situation but if goals are not protected with sand bags or anchors the wind can blow them down and cause fatal injuries. During my playing career, I never got a concussion, so I was really lucky. Headers are not allowed during games in the USA in the age group of 11 or younger.

L: So you allow students to head here in your Academy?

K: We don't organize headers topics for U 11 and below. We have to follow the regulations and rules because we always try to protect the players. Sometimes we try to find a different solutions using extra light balls.

L: Yeah , yeah that's a good idea.

K: We try to come up with a solution to develop the practice curriculums but we strongly follow the safety precautions.

K: Safety of the players is the most important thing .

L: So I guess, what do you want to do with Marquette soccer? What would it take to take Marquette soccer the next level? You talked about getting more people involved, more competition.

K: In order to reach our goals ,] to implement our ideas and complete our big picture for soccer we will need community support, better infrastructure and also better relationship and cooperation with NMU. Developing a soccer culture is not an easy task. Lack of infrastructure, lack of competition and appropriate coaching, lack of having big picture of soccer in the Upper Penninsula are some of the reasons we don't have successful individuals playing at the highest level. Can we change it? I believe we can but we have to build strong relationships. I am not sure for how long I will stay in the UP but I am sure this process will not stop.

L: It's not hockey.

K: I agree. This is not a hockey. I think hockey is UP's number one sport. In the next couple of years we can build the quality program and have players from UP to be able to play in the highest levels of competition. I really don't know if we currently or in the past had any player from the Upper Peninsula play pro or even Division 1 . We need to build and develop the opportunities to help the players if they want to do exceed. We also need to provide environments and opportunities for all of the rec players. We need to be realistic and to find a solution to bring more kids on the field. My idea is to start semi pro team in Marquette. We had a sponsor but not much interest in the community. On a different note, we will have my family friend Vlatko Andonovski and 2 national team players during the camp in December.

L: Who is this?

K: His name is Vlatko Andonovski. Head coach at WNSL Seattle Reign. This is one of the ways to promote soccer in the community.

L: Speaking of community, for your business here you run a coffee shop, you and your wife, why? Why coffee, you love coffee?

K: Actually my wife runs the business and I am trying to help as best as I can. It is hobby to me. This is our family business and we have a lot of experience and passion for coffee. This coffee shop represents the different coffee culture. This is a typical European style “old house café.”

L: What type of coffee do you have?

K: Mostly Italian brands of coffees and drinks based on European standards and sizes.

L: Well that pretty much answers all of my questions so is there anything you would like to add to this Sasa?

I want use this opportunity to say thank you to my wife Milena and my son Despot for their support all of these years especially during my coaching journey. I know it wasn't easy for them but this is the reality of a coaching job. I am very proud of them. I am also so happy because my son had the opportunity to play in Italy as a 16 years old. I believe I helped him to reach that level and I will try to help all my players in the future to achieve their goals no matter what level they play.

K: L: Mutual man, mutual.

K: I don't see this interview as a promotion. My different accent is maybe a voice of difference. I strongly believe in my values and I respect the values of others. As a coach I had the opportunity to work in Brazil, England, Serbia, Italy. Through all of achievements, I am trying to use different methods that I have learned from different world football coaching schools and implement them towards the highest standards.

L: Those are achievements, important achievements.

K: I recommend to everyone “Go for it and always to follow your dreams.”

L: It sounds like it.

K: I am trying to do my best .

L: You will find out in decades when they finally grow.

K: I hope so...

L: There you go. Okay well thank you for your time Sasa, and this is Gabe and Sasa signing off and thank you for the interview.

K: Thank you for your time too.