

How Serbia Produces Great Basketball Players Like Nikola Jokić



Nikola Jokić of Serbia during the FIBA EuroBasket 2022 group D match between Serbia and the Netherlands in Prague on Sept. 2, 2022.

Miloslav Ćuk hasn't slept properly in six weeks. Ever since the NBA playoffs started, he's been watching every Denver Nuggets game he can, most of which start at 2:30 a.m. in Serbia. For Serbians, this year's playoffs are especially exciting since one of their own, the two-time MVP **Nikola Jokić**, has led the Nuggets to the NBA finals for the first time in his career.

"Because it's so early I have to put my headphones on, and I'm biting my face quietly when I'm too excited so that I don't scream and wake everybody up," says Ćuk, who also hosts a podcast called **Serbian Corner** on the American Denver sports media network, DNVR.

Ćuk is one of the most vocal Serbian fans of the Denver Nuggets, but he's far from the only one. Passion for basketball has been ingrained in Serbian culture for decades. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the President of Serbia himself enrolled in a sports college to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming a basketball coach.

Jokić is easily the most accomplished NBA player to ever come out of Serbia, but his success has not happened in isolation. He comes from a long line of great basketball players from former Yugoslavian countries. That includes Krešimir Ćosić, the 6 ft. 11 in. Croatian player in the 1970s who famously turned down the NBA to play for the Yugoslavian national team; the 7 ft. 1 in. center Vlade Divac in the 1990s, who was inducted into the Basketball hall of Fame in 2019; and Peja Stojaković, the 6 ft. 10 in. small forward who played in the 1990s and 2000s.

“When I speak with Americans, I try to make them understand that Jokić didn’t just happen,” says Miloš Jovanović, a Serbian basketball journalist. “If you trace it back, you’re going to see that we had players like Jokić all the way back in the ‘60s and ‘70s.”

Early Years

Basketball was officially introduced to what was then known as Yugoslavia by an American Red Cross worker in 1923. But the country—which encompassed present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia—really began to invest in the sport after World War II, when the Yugoslavian government began promoting team activities as part of its political agenda.

“Socialist countries such as Yugoslavia would empower team sports as a way of promoting community,” Jovanović says. “There was no better way to make people equal than by putting them into team sports.”

Jovanović believes that the socialist mindset helped cultivate a playing style that would ultimately become known as **positionless basketball** (see below to read the article).

In the United States, basketball players usually trained to specialize in specific positions. Taller players focused on staying close to the rim, dunking, and using their physicality to defend. Shorter players were encouraged to focus more on passing, dribbling, and taking jump shots further away from the basket.

In Yugoslavia, however, things were different. All young players trained using the same drills regardless of height or individual strengths.

“That was a hallmark of the Yugoslav school of basketball. They were not going to profile you based on your size,” Jovanović says. “They were not going to say you’re a point guard so you focus on point guard things, you’re a center so you focus on center things. Everyone learns how to dribble, how to pass, and how to shoot.”

That style of training seemed to make Yugoslavian players highly competitive. Between 1961 and 1988, the men’s national team won five Olympic medals, six FIBA World Cup medals, and 13 FIBA EuroBasket medals. Jovanović, who grew up watching the national team, says that the success was incredible to watch.

“In ’88 we won the Olympic silver, in ’89 we won the Eurobasket, and in ’90 we won the World Cup so we were back to back European and world champions and Olympic silver medalists,” Jovanović says. “It felt good because in the scope of things we were still a small country but we could stick it to these much larger countries like Germany, Spain, and the Soviet Union. We felt that it was our own personal David and Goliath story.”

The Breakup of Yugoslavia

But just as Yugoslavia’s basketball team seemed to be on top of the world, war broke out in the country. The fighting—which involved ethnic conflict, insurgencies, and wars of independence—began in 1991 and would continue on and off for an entire decade. More than 140,000 people were killed and nearly four million were displaced.

The war also resulted in sanctions against Yugoslavia, which meant that its basketball team was suddenly cut off from all international competition. This was particularly frustrating for many Yugoslavian basketball fans since the 1992 Olympics would have offered Yugoslavia the opportunity to compete against the United States’ “Dream Team” that included legendary players like Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird.

“Speak to anyone who grew up in Serbia during that time and you will hear that same sentiment,” says host Adam Mares in a documentary about Serbian basketball culture for DNVR called **100 Invisible Threads**. “Not a declaration of supremacy but a sadness for an opportunity that was lost.”

YouTube Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeTmrsVW8qE>

Still, many sports fans like Jovanović needed something to look forward to during those difficult years. So they would focus their attention on Yugoslavian players abroad, playing in leagues like the NBA.

“With all this horrible news of war and people dying, we would try and find a ray of sunshine by seeing what happened with Vlade Divac on the LA Lakers,” Jovanović says. “We would wake up every morning and just hope that sports news would pick up what happened with the Lakers.”

The Aftermath

The breakup of Yugoslavia was a blow to basketball in the Balkans. Yugoslavia was already a relatively small country with a population that hovered around 24 million. Now divided into six countries, each republic had a much smaller population to recruit talent from, and the era of Yugoslavian dominance in international competitions seemed to be waning.

However, the desire to continue the Yugoslav style of basketball lived on. A new organization in Serbia called [Mega Basket](#)—a youth-oriented club that prioritized developing players’ abilities in the long run over winning games—was set up in 1998. The club is based in the country, but trains players from all over the Balkans and Europe. Graduates include current NBA players Ivica Zubac, Goga Bitadze, and, of course, most famous of all, Jokić.

Jokić’s success has ignited a tremendous amount of pride throughout the country and has even united some basketball fans across many once-rival former Yugoslavian countries. But for some fans like Ćuk, there still remains a sense of longing for what could have been.

“I firmly believe that the majority of people in all of the former Yugoslavian republics look at it the same way I do. We all dream of rebuilding that Yugoslavian team, even if it’s just for one game to showcase our strength for the last time.”

Positionless Basketball

How (and why) Position-less Lineups have taken over the NBA Playoffs (2023)

The revolution is being televised. The bedrock of NBA strategy, and basketball in general, has long been its positions on the court. Those positions – point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward and center – have traditionally been prescribed according to height, with shorter guards and taller centers.

In a round peg, round hole game, everyone has a role, tall players were guided to go stand under the basket while shorter guards told to dribble and pass the ball.

But athleticism, mixed with a little math, has revolutionized the NBA. “Defensive rule changes – primarily those that decreased physicality – and analytics have allowed for increases in the speed of the game,” says Bill Burgos, former head strength and conditioning coach for the Orlando Magic. A cheat code for NBA basketball, those

analytics revealed the importance of three-pointers and pick-and-roll matchups, allowing a more offensive game to flourish.

This need to be able to dribble, shoot and defend in the open court has spawned an NBA hybrid player, one that frequently fits squarely in the mid-range of the NBA height spectrum. “Basketball is becoming more position-less and more about team basketball,” says Drew Hanlen, NBA skills coach and consultant, “Called isolations are less used and ball movement is valued.”

The Swiss Army knife-like versatility of the NBA was exemplified in the first-round of the NBA playoffs. Notably a San Antonio-Golden State matchup during which Warriors coach Steve Kerr started forward Andre Iguodala at point guard, a move that ignited a sluggish Warriors team. The first round of the playoffs also featured the Philadelphia 76ers 6ft 10in rookie point guard Ben Simmons and Milwaukee Bucks position busting unicorn, 6ft 10in Giannis Antetokounmpo, with both players tasked as playmakers.

While the NBA has seen its share of tall guards over the years – Magic Johnson and Anfernee ‘Penny’ Hardaway to name two of the best – the league has increasingly hybridized its lineups, trying to force mismatches. The true center, the big man who never strayed far from the basket – is a thing of the past. Today’s centers are either yesterday’s forwards or seven-footers that can shoot and run the floor.

Players floating from guard to forward and even sometimes to center, and back, all within the same game. “Players that can guard multiple positions on defense and stretch the floor and play within a free-flowing system on offense are highly valuable in today’s game,” says Hanlen.

The reason for the change, other than the harnessing of a global talent base, has a lot to do with defense. The pick and roll – during which one player, usually a taller player, sets a screen on the ball handler’s defender and the spins to the basket – was once an offensive strategy used by only a few teams. Now most, if not all, teams can run the pick and roll with all five players on the court, and any one of the five can set or use the screen. To effectively defend the pick and roll, players need to be able to both defend quick shifty guards and tall springy big men.

But the position-less revolution hasn’t resulted in the NBA getting taller or shorter. In fact, the average height in the NBA, 6ft 7in, hasn’t budged in nearly 40 years. It’s more that classifications have become blurred, with positions much less defined as they once were.

“Because of the style of play common in today’s NBA – one that puts a premium on speed, spacing the floor and the ability to guard the pick and roll – many NBA players have common characteristics – 6ft 7in to 6ft 9in with a

long wingspan,” says Burgos. Now tall point guards aren’t really the exception, rather the rule, as three players in the top-10 of assists per game were 6ft 7in or taller.

“It’s not how big you are, it’s how big you play,” said John Wooden, coach of 10 NCAA championship teams at UCLA. According to David Epstein’s *The Sports Gene* the average ratio of arms to height in the NBA is 1.06, compared to the average man, which has a wingspan equal to his height. That added reach allows players to play ‘bigger’, enabling them to block shots and rebound like a taller player but move like a shorter one.

A recent analysis of the NBA combined found, not surprisingly, that height, standing reach, and wingspan, in addition to other physical qualities, was predictive of NBA performance.

Hanlen agrees, emphasizing that the best players in the league often fit that body type. “NBA teams love length and versatility. Also, if you look at the NBA All-Star teams, along with the Rookie teams, you see a lot of guys in that category.”

But it isn’t just the hybrid guard-forwards that are changing their game, centers are straying into areas of the court once only reserved for six-footers, contributing in ways not seen in past eras of basketball.

According to basketball-reference.com, in the 1999-00 season, players 7ft or taller combined for just 133 total three-point attempts (Dirk Nowitzki had 116 of those attempts). This season, 15 seven-footers attempted over 100 three-pointers with Lauri Markkanen of the Bulls tossing up over 400 threes (making 145), perhaps perfectly illustrating today’s new age ‘center’.

Of course, this has all trickled down to the high school and college level, changing the way young players play and prepare for the NBA. “The new NBA values the three-point line so heavily that we spend more time shooting threes than ever before,” says Hanlen. In recent drafts, Burgos sees players drafted into more hybrid roles, able to slide into multiple positions, not just the one they played in college.

But when every team starts following the same formula, the next great team might just be the one that goes back to the old formula, a classic half-court offense with a dominant big man.

Changing a lifetime of hoops tradition is hard, but a young generation of stars is up to the task. The result is a fast, team-oriented brand of basketball that has the NBA hitting sky-high popularity ratings.