

It's a Guided Path Toward Professionalism

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By Michael Lee

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BELGRADE

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On a Friday night in a spacious, dimly lit cafe, Perica Bobic hurried over to a table, dumped his gray-and-red duffle bag to the ground and grabbed a seat in a crowded leather booth. Bobic's soft blue eyes darted toward the others around the table, then he quickly snatched the 50 Cent cap from his head and rubbed his closely cropped blond hair back into place. He didn't want to be disrespectful, especially since he was here on business.

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Bobic is 14. This evening, his coach, his mother, her boyfriend and a prominent agent were gathered to discuss his future.

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In a year-long series of stories, The Washington Post has documented numerous problems in the U.S. approach to developing young basketball players. Foreign countries use vastly different training systems and have successfully challenged the United States' former dominance in international play. But in foreign countries, the systems also introduce young players to both opportunities and pitfalls.

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During a weekend visit with one youth team in Belgrade, that contrast could be found in a dedicated coach, Marko Radovanovic, who seeks the professional and personal development of his players; in a tall playful forward, Alexander Gardovic, who must use his basketball talents to help his family make ends meet; in a pint-sized and spunky point guard, Luka Fustic, whose desire to be a better basketball player prompts him to take 30-minute bus rides back and forth each day from his suburban home to practice; and in Bobic, a fun-loving but temperamental player whose talents could take him to the NBA -- or make him vulnerable to exploitation.

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It's not unusual for the most talented players in Serbia to be approached by agents at age 16 -- and even younger -- in hopes of selling them to the highest bidder at age 18, when players are free to sign with the club of their choice in Europe. Jovan Djordjevic-Marinkovic, a 13-year-old player in Red Star's youth program, already has an agent.

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Bobic also is highly sought after, as a member of a 14-and-under cadet team for Red Star, one of the top professional basketball clubs in Serbia, which has produced more NBA players than any country outside of the United States. New Orleans Hornets swingman Peja Stojakovic, the biggest Serbian star currently in the NBA, developed in Red Star's youth programs and serves as an inspiration for many of the participants.

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Bobic's coach, Radovanovic, is a 29-year-old Belgrade native who spent two years in the United States -- his senior year in high school and freshman year in college -- and speaks five languages. His job involves more than just X's and O's. He often has to serve as mentor and friend to his players. Out of concern for his star player Bobic, Radovanovic arranged the Friday night meeting with European basketball agent Alexander Raskovic, who helped Stojakovic, Vladimir Radmanovic and Nenad Krstic get to the NBA.

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The coach's aims are to keep the talented 6-foot-5 Bobic away from agents with questionable intentions and to provide another positive influence to keep him on the correct path.

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Bobic, nicknamed "Peca" [pronounced pe-tsa], hasn't had any brushes with the law but he has a reputation for a short fuse and fighting and could easily be lost to the streets, Radovanovic said. Bobic is rebellious at times and tunes out his mother, Jelena, an attractive infomercial pitchperson who has raised him alone since his father died.

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"He could be the next [Dirk] Nowitzki," Raskovic said of Bobic, "or he could be a gangster. It's half-and-half."

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During the meeting, Jelena Bobic seemed anxious, barely touching the bottled water on the table. She pulled out a cigarette from her purse and took a long drag as Raskovic informed her that he has no interest in signing her son -- at least, until he turns 18. Instead, he was here to provide a warning, to protect her and Peca from the "slimy" agents, Raskovic said, who have taken advantage of the dire economic situation -- and overly ambitious parents -- in this war-torn nation in recent years and began signing kids to "bogus" deals. "It's a crime. They give them nice clothes, fancy chain, a little money, let them party with pretty girls," he said to a visitor before shaking his head. "It's sick, I tell you."

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Raskovic then gave Jelena Bobic a list of seven names to avoid and tells her he is willing to advise them in any way. She receives no money, but accepts the agreement. The 45-minute discussion was mostly in Serbian, but afterward Raskovic explained that she had hoped to sign a contract with him. "The parents have a dream, an American dream, to be rich overnight," he said. "They have dream to wake up tomorrow with contract of Peja Stojakovic," who signed a five-year, \$64 million contract with New Orleans last summer.

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Coach Radovanovic, who had been listening from the opposite end of the table, interrupted to ask for the time. It's 9 p.m. He and Peca have to leave for practice.

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Stronger Than Most

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Unlike in some other countries, such as CSKA's junior program in Moscow, Red Star cannot afford its own top-flight gymnasium with weight rooms for its young players -- who range in age from 10 to 18. It has to rent gyms throughout Belgrade, forcing Bobic and his teammates to sacrifice their social lives to endure intense, physically draining practices late at night, well after their high school classes. Their motivations for playing basketball are similar to many youths in America -- fun, popularity and escapism. But the circumstances are very different. Friday nights at the movies? Try practice until close to midnight. Saturday afternoons at the mall? More practice. This is their life 50 weeks out of the year.

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Why does Bobic do it? "I play basketball for love," he said. "I don't play for money and fame. Money will come."

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Practicing for two hours in a chilly cavernous gym until 11:30 p.m. isn't an inconvenience for a group of players accustomed to obstacles. They were born and raised during a time of hardship and economic transition in Serbia following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. And in the capital city of Belgrade, which has a vibrant night life but an overall grimy feel, there are constant reminders of 78-day NATO bombing during the Kosovo Conflict in 1999, as some of the buildings that were destroyed have been left untouched. Marin Sedlacek, director of youth development programs for Red Star in Belgrade and

camp director of the NBA's Basketball Without Borders Europe since 2001, said the adversity has made Serbian players, especially those of the younger generations, stronger than most.

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"Our kids are very tough, because they grow up in the tough conditions," Sedlacek said from his office at Red Star. "To stay in sanctions for five years and to be bombed for 78 days, you discover all the different parts of your life. How to take a shower with two bottles of water, how to work without electricity, how you will spend your day under the horns and signals of air strikes."

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Radovanovic's team plays only one or two games each month because the goal of youth programs at Red Star, Sedlacek said, is to produce professional basketball players, not necessarily winning championships. "What shall we do with all those trophies? If you saw one player on the wall that's in the NBA, that's more for me than we won some cups," Sedlacek said, with a picture of a 15-year-old Stojakovic hanging on the wall behind him.

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In addition to their late night practices on weekdays, players can choose to have individual training for two hours, three times a week. Gardovic and Fustic left their respective high schools and rushed to another gym, a shoe-box-sized building in a rundown part of the city, working on their jump shots and free throws until 5 p.m. The old gym looked like a relic.

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The rims were attached to brick walls with no padding and the hardwood court is full of dead spots.

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Radovanovic said: "These kids today are going to commit five hours to basketball. To me, that's professionalism. Nothing else."

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Gardovic, 6 feet 7 with dark hair and a slender build, is one of three players on the cadet team who are paid; he receives a salary of about \$350 per month. Radovanovic said Gardovic's salary amounts to one-third of his household's income, almost the same money earned by his father, a factory worker, and his mother, a cleaning woman. Most of the players receive a stipend for clothes, shoes and equipment, while about five others pay to be a part of Red Star.

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Asked about handling the responsibility of helping his family financially at such a young age, Gardovic shrugged his broad shoulders.

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"The real money will come years later," he said, with Radovanovic providing the translation. Gardovic's motivations for playing basketball were a bit different from Bobic's -- "women, wealth and making new friends."

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After the individual workout, Radovanovic gave Gardovic a ride home to an area of New Belgrade he referred to as the "ghetto," a seemingly endless stream of plain, concrete, high-rise apartment buildings. Radovanovic is familiar with the surroundings since he grew up nearby. At the center of the neighborhood is an outdoor court where dozens of children played basketball as the sun was setting.

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Radovanovic dropped off Fustic at a bus stop near downtown for his ride to Kotez, an affluent suburb north of Belgrade. Fustic's father runs a construction company and drives a Bentley and his mother owns a hair salon.

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But in an effort to not set himself apart from the pack, Fustic avoids flaunting his wealth in any way, sporting the same team-issued And 1 apparel as his teammates and repeatedly refusing his father's requests to drive him back and forth from practice, relying exclusively on the bus.

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Fustic went home to eat dinner and then journeyed back to practice with his teammates. During the half-hour ride, Fustic doesn't pass the time with an iPod or a Game Boy. "I like to watch people and imagine what their life is like," he said. Asked to explain his commitment, he replied: "I love this game."

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After practice the next day, Bobic envisioned what his own life could be like. "See you in the NBA," he told a visitor.

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