



ALEKSANDAR DURIC

BY RICHARD LENTON



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Age: 42

Nationality: Bosnian/Singaporean

Position: Footballer for Tampines Rovers and Singapore national team

EX meets the former Olympian who fled war-torn Yugoslavia and became one of Singapore's greatest footballers

Alex Duric is wiping sweat from his brow as he walks back to the changing room at the end of Singapore's final pre-match

training session at the National Stadium in Kallang. It's 8 November 2007, the day before the Lion City's crunch World Cup qualifier against Tajikistan, and the 37-year-old

veteran is hoping to make his belated debut for Singapore after being granted citizenship a few weeks earlier. He's already been told that he's on the substitutes' bench, but he's just delighted to be there, to be on the verge of becoming an international footballer at an age when most players have already hung up their boots. What a swansong to an amazing career and an amazing life up to this point.

Suddenly, a tap on the shoulder; it's head coach Radojko Avramović. His first-choice striker has broken down in training; he needs Alex to start the match up front. As a kid, Alex had dreamt of becoming an international footballer; he was on the verge of making it a reality.

"I was overwhelmed just to be involved with the national team," says Alex, when I meet him in a coffee shop in bustling Holland Village, five years on from his dream international debut. "So to be told I was playing from the start was amazing. I was so proud. At the team meeting before the game I was so nervous, even though I'd seen most things by the age of 37. I have goosebumps thinking about it even now. I was emotional during the national anthems, but then I switched into gear, and I ended up playing my best game ever. I scored both goals in a 2-0 win, but I could have scored ten that night. I was flying, nobody could catch me. It had taken me so long to get to play international football that I just enjoyed the moment."

Today, Alex looks tanned, healthy and athletic, but the greying sideburns give the game away; at the age of 42 he's older than many managers, yet he continues to plug away as a player. In fact, "plug away" is a disrespectful turn of phrase for a man who's just won his second successive domestic title with Tampines Rovers, and who secured his 50th international cap during the Suzuki Cup semi-final tie with the Philippines in December. This is football's answer to the Duracell Bunny.

Born in 1970 in the industrial city of Dobož in the former Yugoslavia, Alex's early life revolved around sport and competition. He had good hand-eye coordination and an aptitude for most sports, but it was his determination to win that set him apart from his peers.

"Many of my friends said that I would go far. As a kid, I always wanted to win,

“ Two days later the war started. The conflict meant that my passport became void because Yugoslavia, as it was, no longer existed, so I became a stateless person. I was now stuck in Hungary ”

even when I competed against much older boys," he recalls. "I was very good at running, handball – which was a big sport in Eastern Europe – and I was a promising basketball player. I also won championships in kayaking, but it was football that was the big dream."

Alex may have harboured aspirations to make it as a professional footballer but, in order to succeed, his father recognised that he would have to leave a country that, by the late 1980s, was on the verge of self-destruction. An undercurrent of tension between Croats, Bosnians and Serbs had been simmering since the post-War formation of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, but when the country's economy was devastated by the recession in the West, which hit Yugoslav exports particularly hard, the blue touchpaper was lit.

"My father realised that the war was coming; there was huge tension. I have an older brother, and my dad said that one of us had to be sacrificed. If both of us stayed then there was a possibility that both of us would die in the war, so one had to leave and carry on the Duric name. I was younger and a sportsman so I was told to leave the country, while my brother stayed to fight in the army for five years. Thankfully he was lucky and survived."

Alex made his way to Ystad in Sweden, where he played football for a minor league side. However, on a trip home to visit his family, his life changed forever.

"On the way, I stopped in Hungary. I'd lost contact with my family for a period of

time, but I got a message from my father to say that the war was about to start and not to come back, so I stayed in Hungary wondering what to do," he says.

"Two days later the war started. The conflict meant that my passport became void because Yugoslavia as it was no longer existed, so I became a stateless person. I was now stuck in Hungary.

"I had a friend who helped me, and he arranged a trial for me at a football club called Szeged. Thankfully my friend was able to translate, and I earned myself a contract, which meant a wage and my own apartment."

As Alex settled into life as a professional footballer in Hungary, his war-torn hometown of Dobož had become part of the newly formed independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a show of pride in their fledgling nation, they vowed to send a team to the forthcoming Olympic Games in Barcelona. And Alex, who had won national junior and senior titles in kayaking, was mentioned as a possible competitor during a meeting of the hastily formed Bosnia and Herzegovina Olympic Committee.

"They tried to find me via the Olympic Committee of Hungary, who told them that I was playing football somewhere. Eventually they got a message to me asking if I wanted to compete at the Olympics. I thought it was a joke!" he adds.

The decision to represent Bosnia and Herzegovina involved some soul-searching for the ethnic Serb, whose brother and

friends had enrolled in the Yugoslav and Serbian armies that laid siege to Bosnia.

"You can imagine how difficult it was," he says. "People called me a traitor. But at the end of the day, I'm a sportsman. My family brought me up to treat people exactly the same no matter what their religion or colour. I always played football with and against Muslims, Croats, whoever. I said yes."

Individual qualifying criteria hadn't been introduced as of 1992, so Alex was free

ALEX'S TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Follow your dreams and don't ever give up. We all suffer hardships, but it's at these points where you find your true character.
- Stay positive. As Thomas Jefferson said: "Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude."
- Work hard. The harder you work, the luckier you get.
- Believe in yourself. Confidence and self-belief are paramount to success.
- Look after your body. Training hard and eating the right foods definitely extended my career.

to compete, even though his best kayaking days were behind him. His biggest hurdle now was a logistical one. With no passport, no transport and very little money, the prospect of travelling from the Hungarian/Bosnian border town of Zseged to Barcelona was daunting.

“I decided to hitchhike with just a small bag. I got halfway across Hungary and then managed to get a ride in a truck going to Austria, but at the Austrian border I was stopped because of course my passport was invalid. I explained that I was going to the Olympics to represent Bosnia but they just laughed at me,” he adds.

“I gave them the number for the Olympic Committee, and 20 minutes later they came back, congratulated me, and then tried to help me get a lift! The border control guards were flagging cars down and managed to persuade a guy to take me halfway to Slovenia, and from there I managed to get another ride to Slovenia airport and flew to Barcelona.”

Understandably, the story of the hitchhiking Serbian kayaker representing Bosnia at the Olympics became a media sensation in Spain.

“Lots of people wanted to meet me and talk to me; it was an amazing experience. I had the best time; lived the dream. Carl Lewis chatted to me, I was with Boris Becker for one hour, the USA Dream Team basketball

players were there – amazing. I had an access-all-areas pass and I just watched as many events as possible.

“Unfortunately, from a competitive point of view, I wasn’t ready. People trained for four years for the Olympics, but I’d done

nothing. I went out in the first heat, but my brother and my father saw me on TV competing and they were so proud.”

Following his experience in Barcelona, and the devastation of losing his mother during the war, Alex resolved to realise



every last ounce of potential he had as a footballer.

Despite knowing very little English, he took the opportunity to move to Australia to play professionally for South Melbourne.

“I’d picked up the English I knew from watching movies as a kid because we learnt German in school,” he adds. “I learnt the most from John Wayne! We saw a lot of Western movies and we were lucky because the films weren’t dubbed, so they spoke in English and they had subtitles at the bottom in my language. ‘Get off your horse and drink your milk’. I was like a sponge trying to take it in.

“Some Australians teased me about my English, but they always said that they’d never seen a guy who couldn’t speak English but who tried as hard as I did. I always try at everything I do and find a way. One of my teammates said that if I was dropped from an aeroplane in the middle of Africa I would still find a way to survive, get work and learn whatever language I needed to know. I like that.”

In 1999, Alex joined Singapore side Tanjong Pagar United on a short-term deal, and the following year he moved to Singapore permanently when he signed for S.League giants, Home United. It proved to be a watershed moment in his career; since then, the man with the most lethal left foot in Singaporean football has scored nearly 400 goals in a 12-year spell that has yielded no less than seven S.League titles and three Singapore Cups, plus a handful of individual honours. He has also been capped 50 times at international level for Singapore. But, at the advanced age of 42, surely he’ll be hanging his boots up soon?

“I actually wanted to retire at the end of last season, but the boss at Tampines persuaded me to carry on,” he says.

“Physically it’s hard. After the final game of the S.League season in October, I had to join up with the national team. It’s a 12-month-a-year occupation now.

“The weather here makes it very tough to play football, and of course I’m in my 40s now. I need a lot more rest these days, but mentally I’m still strong. I hate losing, I love to train and I enjoy hard work, but it does get harder. I have had to adjust my playing style.

I’m not quick any more, but I use my brain now.

“We’ve just won the S.League for the second year in a row – you play all year for the league title, so that was a great feeling. I was Player of the Year for the third time as well, which at my age is amazing.

“I’ve signed a contract for next season, but I will wind it down and try not to play as many games. It’s time for the young players to prove themselves. If I still train hard and sit on the bench it will hopefully provide enough pressure for them to do well.”

As well as signing a new playing contract, Alex has also agreed to become Tampines Rovers’ fulltime fitness coach as he plans for his post-playing days.

“It’s important to have new challenges when you retire,” he adds. “We have seen so many ex-players from all over the world whose lives seem to slip out of control when they finish; they have problems with their families, money, lifestyle, whatever.

“One day you are somebody, everybody is talking about you and you are part of a group, but the day you wake up as a retired player that’s it; it’s easy to become lost. You need motivation, a plan. Retirement from professional sport can be a scary proposition.

“I really want to be a good fitness coach, then maybe assistant coach, and then coach, who knows. As long as I am close to football, I don’t mind.”

Many ex-players struggle to find roles in football after they retire as there are a finite number of positions within the game, even for the biggest names in football. So what happens if the dream of becoming a coach doesn’t materialise?

“I’ve had a hard life. What I have achieved is down to hard work, and I’m so grateful for the way my life is now. I have a beautiful wife, three beautiful kids and a great career in football. I’m so happy.

“But I’ve always had to fight; from the day I left my country at 18 with no money in my pocket. I am not scared of any job. You have to stay positive. I lost my mother in the first year of the war. It was a very, very hard time, but you have to keep going or what’s the point? I was on my own, it was very tough but it made me much stronger as a man. I can handle anything.” **ex**

Alex’s Career History

- 1992 Competes for Bosnia and Herzegovina at the Barcelona Olympics in the C-1 500m kayaking event, but is eliminated in the repêchages.
- 1994 Moves from Hungarian club Szeged LC to Australia, and scores 11 goals in 12 games in his first season for South Melbourne.
- 2000 After scoring 89 goals in 142 games in Australia for the likes of South Melbourne, Port Melbourne, West Adelaide and Adelaide Sharks, he moves permanently to Singapore to join S.League giants Home United. Wins Singapore Cup in his first season.
- 2001 Moves to Geylang. Wins the S.League title in his first season.
- 2004 After scoring 148 goals in 126 games, he moves to Singapore Armed Forces FC. Wins four successive S.League titles from 2006 to 2009, and captures two Singapore Cups in 2007 and 2008.
- 2007 Granted Singapore citizenship, and makes his debut for the national team against Tajikistan, scoring twice in a 2-0 victory.
- 2007 Wins S.League People’s Choice Award, NTUC-Income Player of the Year and RHB Top Scorer Award.
- 2008 Wins NTUC-Income Player of the Year and RHB Top Scorer Award.
- 2010 Signs for Tampines Rovers and wins 2011 and 2012 S.League titles.
- 2012 Wins 50th international cap in the Suzuki Cup semi-final against the Philippines.

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