



## **Mission Possible**

**By Roland Lazenby**

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From his earliest days in the NBA, the frustration has shadowed Vlade Divac. For each night when he played basketball for the Los Angeles Lakers, the bad feelings would slip away, only to reappear at game's end.



"My country's a war zone," he said miserably while chatting with a cameraman on the Lakers team bus in December 1992. Their cameraman responded by pointing out that strife ridden South Central Los Angeles and Divac's home, the former Yugoslavia, had different circumstances but similar problems: ethnic misunderstanding and hatred that only seemed to breed more hatred, more misunderstanding.

"So many crazy people," Divac said sadly.

In the seven seasons since that conversation, the craziness had only increased, with war and ethnic violence spreading like an ugly malignancy through Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania.

During that time, Divac's NBA career has shifted first from Los Angeles, to Charlotte, and now to Sacramento, where he starts at center for an exciting Kings team. Now, just as it did in Los Angeles, his time on the court helps him set aside his worries for a few hours. In fact, the Kings, with their running, gunning, ball-sharing style, provide a perfect escape. Divac himself can whip up a snazzy full-court underhand outlet for an easy bucket at the other end. Or the big center can execute a fundamentally pure drop step, then pause right in the middle of it to zip a no-look assist to a cutting teammate. But when the game ends, the same old sick feelings return as they have everyday for the past seven years.

Divac decided back in his later days that he needed to do more about the problems than merely use basketball to escape them, so he began using basketball, specifically the money and public exposure he gained from the game, to battle the forces of hatred.

Like many other players Divac formed a foundation to channel money to worthy causes. For the first six years, his foundation aimed to do whatever it could in the face of so much hatred and violence in his homeland. He told the story of a girl who returned with her family to the home they had abandoned during the last year's conflict. Sadly, the family discovered that the fighting may have passed, but the land mines remained.



Divac knows what can happen if racial prejudices are allowed to fester. His goal is to teach children to be "citizens of the world, not just one place."

"After the war they came in the house and opened a door and it exploded," he said. The little girl lost a leg, and her brother was injured, too. Divac's foundation helped them get medical treatment.





“It’s scary,” he said. “I’m blessed to have a chance to help. I feel like that’s my mission, because I have more than I need. When you play basketball it keeps your mind here, until you finish and go back into real life.”

“This is not real life,” he continued, nodding at the Kings' locker room around him. “I don’t know how many people here know what’s real life. I know what’s real life. Like my dad always said, ‘Son, don’t fly too far. Always stay on the ground. Because you know what’s real life.’ And that’s what I’ve tried to do.”

His motives begin with his own family in Yugoslavia. “My friends, my brother, my parents, they live in a crazy environment; for the last seven years it’s been war,” he explained. His other motivation is that he has seen the devastation wrought by hatred.

“I see what’s happening in the world,” he said. “I came from a country where, right after I left, the country was turned upside down. When I grew up there, it was probably the most beautiful country in the world. Wonderful people. Then in one year everything collapsed. You can’t tell me it was the people who did that. They lived there for 60, 70 years in peace. It was the bad decisions of politicians that did it. People were naive. And now they need help. And I am glad to do it.”

His efforts had always been low-key, purposely avoiding photo opportunities and staged public relations efforts to focus on what he could do quietly by diverting funds into his foundation. While Divac was only one man fighting against the inhumanity of war, his efforts touched lives dramatically.



A 10-year veteran of the NBA, Divac has many fans, but he has a special affinity for the younger ones.

“I had an experience with a guy,” Divac said. “His son had an eye problem. He was raising money on his own. Then when he heard about our foundation, he contacted me so I stepped in. He had found a surgeon in Russia. He just needed some money. So I gave him money for the surgery. But the father figured he got more money than he needed, so he called back the foundation and returned what he didn’t use. Because he knew somebody else was gonna need it.”

Time taught Divac that he could help here and there but that a bigger influence would require him to find help. That process began last year when he was joined by six of his national teammates- Sasha Danilovic, Aleksandar Djordjevic, Zeljko Rebraca, Zarkan Paspalj, Dejan Bodiroga and Zoran Savic- many of whom have had some NBA experience.



“My teammates decided to get involved to do the same thing,” Divac explained. “So they have joined me now. We raise money here and in Europe. What I’ve tried to do, I’ve tried to help the kids that live in that bad environment. They were in the war and they lost parents. Or even here in America, I try to help the kids that live in the same kind of environment.”

Last June, Divac decided to expand his work in the United States by announcing Group 7’s efforts at the Serbian National Federation’s 60th annual basketball tournament in Chicago, a gathering of American Serb teams from across the country.

“We received an excellent response, a lot of encouragement,” said Alex Dimitrijevic, an Indianapolis-based financial planner who runs the foundation for Divac.

At the same time, Dimitrijevic acknowledges the tremendous challenge the largely Serbian group faces in attempting to offer help to people of all ethnic backgrounds.

“Serbs were looked at as the aggressors and now we want to help,” said Dimitrijevic, who is half Serbian and half Croatian and a former basketball player. “People need confidence to accept the help from us.”

“Reaching out is clearly difficult in an atmosphere where people have been murdered by their neighbors”, Dimitrijevic said. “But somebody’s got to start it.”

Divac joined forces with the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow/Push Coalition to transport supplies for people in need around the world.



Vlade Divac, it seems, is that person.

“I still have a lot of good Albanian friends, Macedonian, Croatian,” Divac said. “At the same time, you have people who don’t like you because, you know... But I really don’t care about that. I always look at people as if they are good people or bad people. Not black, white, Serb or Croats, European or African. All over the world, you have good people and bad people.”