

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTINA GRKOVIC

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

OCTOBER 10, 2022

TRANSCRIPT BY

REV

Paul Clemens: First, I just want to repeat to you the ground rules, which are any question I were to ask you that you don't want to answer, just say, "Let's go on to something else." That's fine. If I have such a question, that it has that potential, I usually try to ask that in a context where you'll understand that I'm particularly concerned that you answer it only if you feel comfortable doing it. If for some reason after we're done, you want to just pull out of this process, that would be fine. You just tell us. I really hope it doesn't happen. [laughter] This will be used as part of the work we're doing. It won't be anonymous. I can't say that this interview will be used, but it will be part of a process where we work on our book or our articles or whatever it turns out to be. Finally, at the end of this interview, after I've turned off the recording, I do want to ask you one follow-up question about the process. So, it's okay to go ahead?

Kristina Grkovic: Yeah.

PC: Why don't you tell me just first and very generally--we last talked with each other September of 2021.

KG: Wow.

PC: Yeah. What's happened sort of in your student-athlete life, just in a very general sense, since that time?

KG: A lot of things. I changed where I live. The whole team changed, the environment. A lot of my friends left. A lot of new friends came, and we started playing normally again.

PC: Yeah.

KG: That's a big one, too.

PC: Big, big change. Have you made progress on--you were supply chain, I think was what you were studying?

KG: Yes.

PC: So, you're still focused on that?

KG: Yeah, I'm doing the major right now. This is the first year that I'm in the Business School.

PC: And that's going okay?

KG: [Yes]. Thanks for asking.

PC: All right. It's got some challenging introductory courses or at least prerequisites. I know that much about it. So, you've got to take the math and all that stuff.

KG: I'm taking one right now. [laughter]

PC: Yeah. If I talked to you in September of 2021, what was last year like for you as an athlete?

KG: Last year was pretty tough actually. We got a 0-20 record, so not any wins. Of course, it was very mentally draining, and ...

PC: Go ahead.

KG: Just the whole atmosphere on the team, nobody really wanted to be there by the end. So, it's much better this year, I'd say.

PC: Yeah.

KG: But that's just in the fall. In the spring, it was way better, because we were out of season. We were just living life as student-athletes.

PC: Do you continue to practice in the spring after your regular season more or less comes to an end?

KG: Yeah. I'd say it's even harder in the spring, because that's where the tough conditionings are.

PC: Over the course of last year, did you have things that happened with somebody getting COVID? Even when everybody got vaccinated, we all found out it was very easy to get COVID, even when you were vaccinated. You just didn't get really sick. Were there people who were getting COVID on the team or on other teams you were playing?

KG: I think it happened a couple times on other teams after we played them, and some teams had to cancel flights and stay in other countries. But, on our team specifically, we didn't have a case, thankfully.

PC: Wow. That's pretty good.

KG: Yeah.

PC: And nobody's gotten a case this year either? I mean, again, I don't want to know anything specific.

KG: Nobody got COVID. Everyone got it before. Some new people had it in the past, but when they were here, when we were practicing, we didn't have this issue.

PC: Does your team this year have as many foreign players on it, yourself included, as it did last year, or has that sort of changed?

KG: It's changed. We just have, I think, three foreign people now, an Australian and someone from Canada.

PC: Do you think that has anything to do with COVID?

KG: It could be. It could be, but I don't know. That could be a reason, but I think it's more that they wanted to make the team easier to coach. It's kind of hard when you have a lot of different internationals. There's one more girl from Turkey, though. But just the ratio has changed. It's more like seventy-thirty; last year was kind of fifty-fifty.

PC: Yeah, that was the sense I had last year, that almost half the team was. I just was wondering in a larger sense about things like travel restrictions or ...

KG: Actually, travel is way better now. It changed immediately, like masks, you don't have to wear them anymore.

PC: No. I wanted to go back to something then from the first interview we did and talk a little bit and just make sure I'm clear on the timing of this. You got vaccinated, if I recall from our first [interview], in Serbia. Is that correct?

KG: Yeah.

PC: You got it with your father.

KG: [Yes].

PC: Does that mean that somehow he found a way to get back from Somalia to Serbia or Italy without being vaccinated?

KG: Yeah, because he's a diplomat. He works for the UN [United Nations]. So, he had to fly. He had to; he couldn't continue his job unless he was vaccinated.

PC: But he got vaccinated in Europe, not in Somalia?

KG: Yeah.

PC: So, he had to get on an airplane at a time when vaccines were available, but he hadn't had one, come back to Serbia, and get vaccinated ...

KG: Yeah.

PC: ... Which is essentially what you did, too.

KG: He might have flown with the UN, the new flight service that they made during COVID. I'm not completely sure though. But there was flights specifically for these people that need them in order to work in the areas. We drove to Serbia together from Italy.

PC: In other words, you met in Italy, and then you drove to Serbia.

KG: Yeah.

PC: Okay.

KG: We were there like two days and then came back to Italy. [laughter]

PC: Is your father back out in the field now working?

KG: Oh, yeah. He's in Juba, [South Sudan] now.

PC: Wow. How about your mother? You told me she got a job working for the UN, I guess in Italy, maybe in Serbia. I don't remember which, but she got a job. Is she still doing that job?

KG: She's thriving. She's going to Turkey. Actually, she went yesterday for a week for a business trip or something. Oh, she's doing great. She's doing great.

PC: Do you have any impressions--you were then back in Italy, after they'd gone through the disaster, which you were also there for, the very first part of the pandemic, which hit Italy before anybody else in Europe. What was the difference? What did you see that seemed particularly different to you?

KG: [laughter] People were wearing crazy stuff because nobody could afford--not afford--nobody just had masks because they just weren't that many. [laughter] There was no toilet paper. We stocked up on food the first week, so we didn't go shopping, and it was complete quarantine. Nobody could go outside, and if you went outside, you'd get fined, unless you had a dog, or there's a paper you could've filled out, like, "I need to buy groceries" or whatever. But, even that, nobody really wanted to do that. So, sometimes, if we really were sick of staying inside, me and my mom would go outside without our phones, because that's how they find you, using your phone, and we'd just watch, "Okay, there's cops there, so let's go that way." [laughter] We'd take a quick walk. But, no, it was crazy because we spent a whole half a year locked indoors. But, every night in Italy, like around eight p.m., everybody went to their balcony and started playing loud music, and that was how they were connecting still.

PC: What were the big differences that you noticed this time when you got to go back to Italy?

KG: This time?

PC: Well, yeah, the summer. I guess it's the summer after you're back in Italy because that's when you're going to get vaccinated in Serbia. You were back in Italy for, I guess, the first time at that point. What was it like now that there was no longer just an incredibly dangerous situation?

KG: Yeah, I mean, they still kept the mask policies on buses and indoors most places. But now it's pretty much back to normal, I'd say. People are very much more distant from each other than they were before. In Italy, you greet each other by kissing on the cheek, but now it's kind of like taboo. It's kind of changing the culture a little bit. I think that's going to stay, though, probably.

PC: I grew up in a--one side of my family was French, and my older, at that time older, relatives, I always kissed them on the cheek. That just completely disappeared for the people I knew in France. You had to stop doing it.

KG: Also in France.

PC: Yeah.

KG: In Serbia, you kiss three times, like this. Unless it's family members, they don't really do that anymore.

PC: When you were in Serbia, I remember you saying somewhere that they were giving out, you got a little present or something for going and getting vaccinated.

KG: Oh, yeah, [laughter] twenty dollars.

PC: Well, we did the same thing in the U.S. In any case, the sports world associates the tennis player [Novak] Djokovic, Serbian, [as] sort of being an anti-vax person. Was there a real political controversy about that that you were up to date on?

KG: I mean, I just looked at the Instagram stuff; I didn't really follow it that much. I was like, "Oh, okay, Australia is something with Djokovic." But I think they solved it in the end, right?

PC: Well, he hasn't played. I mean, he's played one place. He was kept out of at least two, including the U.S. Open. He was kept out of the U.S. Tennis Open. He was kept out of Australia. I can't remember whether he played at Wimbledon or not, but he's paid a high price for his principles. [Editor's Note: Novak Djokovic played in two Grand Slam tournaments in 2022, Wimbledon, which he won, and the French Open, which he lost in the quarterfinals. He did not play in the Australian Open and U.S. Open due to his vaccination status.]

KG: Yeah. That's just what comes with being such a huge figure, like everyone has a very big opinion on what you do.

PC: Can you think of any way that perhaps this experience of living through this pandemic may change the way you look at life for the next ten years?

KG: Oh, yeah, for sure. I think the pandemic gave us a chance to kind of slow down our world, which is very fast paced, and just seeing how nature became better during the pandemic and everybody got more close with their families and stuff. A part of me will be grateful for that time, because I got very close with my mother and my brothers. Of course, it was a tragedy worldwide. But I've become much more patient and I'm not scared of uncertainty now because there was just so much of it during those couple years. I think that's the main points, how I've grown. Of course, being cautious and everything, too.

PC: Yeah. Are you still in touch--there was at least one other player on the team who was from Serbia, and as you said, a whole turnover of players. Are you still in touch with the players who were on the team last year, or some of them, and now are off and somewhere else?

KG: Yeah. [laughter] Beka was her name.

PC: Beka, yes.

KG: She's in Serbia. She has a job. She's working for this British firm or something. She's with her boyfriend. She's living the life. [laughter]

PC: The last time I talked with her in an interview situation, she was also planning to play some more volleyball over in Serbia. I don't know whether she ...

KG: She looked at it, she looked into it, but she doesn't want to dedicate her whole schedule to volleyball anymore, because she just has a lot of other things going on. So, she's looking for, I think last time I talked with her, she was looking for a couple clubs. It's been months, so I'm not sure where she's at right now.

PC: What plans do you have now, as much as you can see into the future, for what you're going to do when you get out of college?

KG: I'm for sure playing pro. [laughter] I want to. That's the goal, if I still love it, of course.

PC: Okay. What are you going to do with your major then? Where does the major fit into this?

KG: See, that's a hard question. [laughter] I want to work for, ideally, in a couple years, maybe not immediately, but I also want to work for the UN, like my parents are; I want to help people that are less fortunate. I also want to do a side major that's going to be more of a hobby, I guess, with something art related, because that's a huge part of who I am. But, yeah, definitely something like my parents are doing. But, immediately out of college, I have no idea.

PC: I guess you're among the students who get an extra year because of COVID.

KG: Yeah, yeah.

PC: When do you plan to graduate? Have you figured that out?

KG: I'm a junior now, so I have two more years.

PC: Two more years that you're eligible?

KG: Yeah, it will be '24 or '25.

PC: Okay. Then, at that point, the plan is probably to look for a job back in Europe as opposed to in the United States?

KG: See, I don't know.

PC: Okay.

KG: I'm not sure yet.

PC: All right.

KG: Maybe ...

PC: If you work for the UN, you could certainly work almost anywhere in the world.

KG: Yeah, yeah. Or right now, there's so many options to work anywhere just online. I think that's also part of what happened after COVID. That's what Beka is doing. She's working for a different country, but she's still in Serbia. I really like that. [laughter]

PC: Just one other question, in terms of team dynamics, have you noticed any differences in the way that team, the players, relate to each other in this, not post-COVID, but in a world in which vaccines have been readily available and the fear level has gone way, way down since people got late in 2020--let me get the timing here right--middle of 2021, I guess that's when vaccines became pretty available ...

KG: Yeah.

PC: ... When 1As and 1Bs were taken care of. Have the team dynamics changed any from what they were when people were still at risk?

KG: I don't think COVID really affected a lot of our team dynamic. We just spent way more time with each other than we do now. Now, we spend a lot of time together every day, but during COVID, that was the only people we were seeing, nobody else. So, I think it's kind of better now because you need to have other friends, connections outside of volleyball. It's not good to focus on one thing constantly, because it feels like you're never getting a break from it.

PC: Yeah.

KG: We have some new personalities, so they're cute, the newbies.

PC: Okay, all right. I think that's about it. I wanted to tie up some loose ends, find out how things are going. It sounds like they're going fairly well, and that's really good.

KG: It's tough, the season's tough.

PC: I've talked with your coach ...

KG: You did?

PC: Yeah, I did, yeah.

KG: Recently?

PC: She recommended a number of players I should contact initially, and I asked her not to tell the players that because I didn't want to put any pressure on anybody to say "yes," and a coach, even if she tries not to, could still in some ways influence your decision. She picked up a really, really difficult assignment, because Rutgers is in, as you now know better than when you came over here, in the best league in the country by far. We hadn't been in it before, and so you've got a real uphill fight in the Big Ten to stake a place in it. It's been a tough baptism for her in terms-- I can't say that personally, I don't have any idea about that--but in terms of the type of success that a coach would like to have, it's really tough to come into something like the Big Ten and start playing volleyball against squads that are expected to be in the top five or ten in the whole country.

KG: It's a big challenge. It's a big challenge. We get reminded of it every day.

PC: Well, I'm going to see you play a couple more times this year for sure. It all depends on how my grading goes and things like that, but I hope the next time, I can come and watch from beginning to end the whole thing.

KG: I wanted to ask you, how's the book coming along?

PC: We're still debating whether or not we're going to actually do a book, but we're writing parts of it, which could go into articles and could go into chapters. So, in that sense, it's coming along. These things take a while though. They take as long as your college volleyball career does, so it's going to be a few years, I would guess, before we're at the final point of getting this done.

KG: That's so cool, though. Wow, I wish I had such a project going on.

PC: Well, it's been fascinating for the two of us, Johanna and myself, and I'm still interviewing people on a regular basis who had different parts to play in the early part of the pandemic, which was by far and away the most brutal. I've heard some absolutely remarkable stories about what they went through, many of them students. We've tried to interview as many students as possible to get a range of opinions. I want to thank you officially. I'm going to turn off the recording, but I want to talk to you about one other thing. So, thank you. It's been wonderful talking to you. It's a wonderful getting to know at least a little small cross-section of the volleyball team, and that's been sort of neat to see how different players experienced this, and also the fact that a couple of them were foreign and they had to experience coming to the United States and what that was like in the middle of all this mess.

KG: Travel restrictions were, oh my God, one of the hardest things I've had to go through. It was terrible.

PC: Let me stop this.

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Transcribed by REV

Edited by Paul Clemens

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi

Reviewed by Kristina Grkovic 11/7/2022