RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEKA KOJADINOVIC

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

ZOOM

Paul Clemens: We're recording now. In the process I described to you in the form that I sent you, and we do it orally by your saying yes, but let me make two very specific points about it. One is, and this is probably the more important one for today, if I ask you a question about anything and you don't want to answer it, just say, "Let's skip it and go on to something else." It very rarely happens in the interviews I have experienced, but it could, and that's fine. Secondly, as the process goes forward, if at some point you decide, let's say we want to interview you again at the end of the semester or next spring to just catch up for maybe half an hour, and you don't want to do it anymore, that's fine, too. That's okay. You're not committing yourself to anything beyond the interview today. So, with those in mind, do we have your consent to go forward with this?

Beka Kojadinovic: Yes, absolutely.

PC: Okay, good. Thank you. Let's start off by you telling me a little bit about when you were born, where you grew up, what your early life was like, your parents, things of that sort. I'll ask you questions, too, but give me a narrative to start off with of your own.

BK: Sure, and please let me know if I start talking too much, or I start talking about things that are irrelevant to you. [laughter] I don't know what are you interested in. I can give you a quick overview of my background and everything. Basically, I was born in 1998, in Belgrade, Serbia. I have a younger sister and both of my parents, thank god. I went to a gymnasium. That's how we call it. It's like a high school, but it's not a high school where you can learn something specific, like we have high school for economics, for law, for example. No, gymnasium is just like a general subject high school. I was also playing volleyball at the same time. I've been playing volleyball since I was six years old, so seventeen years now. I was kind of managing both of those things, and closer to the end of my high school, I realized that I had no idea what I was going to study. I really didn't know what I was interested in. I still don't know, if I'm being honest. [laughter] But at least coming here helped me. I have more time to decide.

Basically, I learned that there's an opportunity for me to study in the U.S. and that I had to get involved in a sense I need to take some tests; I need to send my videos, volleyball videos. So, coaches started reaching out to me, and that's how I met the assistant coach, former assistant coach, Phuong [Luong] from Rutgers. He came actually to Serbia to see me play, and we talked there; we had a two-hour conversation about everything. Honestly, I didn't quite know where I was about to come. I didn't quite understand this, because coming from a small country like Serbia, you can't really get the full picture of what American education and this system where you can play and study at the same time is like. So, I kind of agreed, knowing that I will have a full scholarship, that my parents won't have to pay a dollar for my education, and that was the primary reason why I came here, and also because I wanted to play at a high level and get a good

education. I knew that Rutgers is one of the best universities nationwide, so that's how I decided to come.

PC: Okay, so let me take you back. First of all, what do your mother and father do?

BK: So, my mom works for the government, at a citizenship department. She's like the main inspector, let's say. My father, he's an office worker for the main office in a post office in Serbia.

PC: Okay. Your sister is how old?

BK: She is fourteen now, so she's quite younger than me.

PC: Her name is Nina maybe?

BK: Lara.

PC: Okay. I remember seeing that somewhere on the form they put up on the webpage [Rutgers Women's Volleyball website] about you. She's in gymnasium now?

BK: No, actually she's in eighth grade, still in elementary school, yeah.

PC: Have any of the three of these, your mother, father or your sister, come over to the United States to see you play?

BK: No, never. First of all, my father is afraid of flying, so he will probably never come. [laughter] My mom kind of waited for my last semester here, and then coronavirus happened, so it disturbed all of our plans.

PC: That's really tough to deal with. I talked to some of the other players on your team, and their parents are trekking around the country to see them play. Mostly, they do it by car because they don't want to get on an airplane.

BK: Exactly.

PC: It makes a lot of sense. So, if you've been playing since you were about six years old, you've been playing some form of volleyball from the time you were first entering school.

BK: Yes.

PC: How does that happen in Serbia? Is it a sport that girls play in the school system, or are you getting your training outside the school system?

BK: No, actually, there's a big difference between volleyball here and in Serbia, because it happens outside of the school system. So, you have clubs, independent clubs, and you just join. They have smaller groups for kids, let's say, from six to ten, and then all the other groups are separated from twelve to fourteen, from fourteen to sixteen. As you get older, you usually transfer to a better club which plays in a higher league, of course, with older players.

PC: Do any of the regular schools have volleyball as a sport that girls can play, or is it all just outside the school system?

BK: No, it all happens outside of school.

PC: Is that true for all sports?

BK: Yes.

PC: So, if a girl wants to play soccer, she's still going to have to go outside the school system to play?

BK: Yes, yes, to find certain clubs, and these clubs might practice in some of the schools. Schools allow them to use their gyms, but it has nothing to do with the school system and the department.

PC: Do you have to pay to participate in these clubs?

BK: Yes, when you're younger especially. Yes, everybody has to pay.

PC: As you get older, do the clubs begin to recruit you because they recognize you as a good player in one of the top leagues?

BK: Yes, absolutely. From the age of fourteen to eighteen, I moved--I actually didn't move, but I started practicing in a different city. This club played in a "super league," which is like the highest league in Serbia, and so I stopped paying for the club. That's how it usually happens for all the girls; when coaches see the potential in certain kids, they just transfer them to a better club and they just stop paying.

PC: At what point in this process did you realize that there might be a possibility of taking this sport and using it as a way to get entry, let's say, to an American or perhaps some other university but a university outside of Serbia?

BK: Honestly, I realized this maybe six months before I got here.

PC: Wow.

BK: Six to seven months. Then, I learned about this opportunity and everything that I had to do before I came. So, I entered this process quite late compared to all of the other kids who decide to come.

PC: Were you recruited by any other schools in the United States?

BK: Yes, a couple other coaches reached out to me. I would say a coach from Towson University, it's in Maryland, I think.

PC: Yes, Towson is in Maryland.

BK: Right now, I can't--Texas, probably, Texas. A couple other schools reached out, but only the coach from Rutgers came to Serbia to see me play.

PC: You're obviously on a team which has a significant component of foreign players …

BK: Oh, yeah.

PC: … Two at least that have come from Serbia, [one] by way of Italy, if I remember correctly. She's one of the other student-athletes I've interviewed. What did your parents think of you coming all the way over to the United States? Were they happy about that?

BK: Of course, I will say they were [not] ecstatic because it's such a long way from Serbia, but at the same time, they were so proud and so supportive because they knew how much American education is valued overseas.

PC: Despite the fact that your father knew it meant he wouldn't see you except when you came back to Serbia, because he's not getting on that airplane to come over, even if perhaps your mother would have, except for the pandemic. Two things about this transition, did you have any idea that Rutgers as a volleyball team was doing as badly as it was when you got here? Did you know that, that they were just losing sort of continuously in the Big Ten?

BK: Honestly, no. I knew they were playing in the best conference in the States, which was a huge deal to me, but that's about it.

PC: So, you were put in a spot where you were going to be depended on to do a great deal if you were going to start winning ways in the Big Ten, which is, again, a monumental hurdle because the Big Ten is so, so good. How about the academics? Were you surprised by the type of work you were being asked to do in the classroom here?

BK: If I'm being completely honest, not at all, because our education in Serbia is pretty good. The biggest difference is that we take, let's say, half of our exams orally, which means you actually have to memorize every single thing and learn how to talk about every single thing. When I got here, I learned that I should actually take tests, multiple choice or true and false, which was kind of easy for me. So, this transition wasn't hard at all.

PC: One other question I want to go back to, and actually it's from what you have in your personal statement online, but this is the sort of question you're absolutely free to pass on. You talk about your parents because of everything they've been through. Now, what I know is before you were born, and when I was very much alive, Serbia went through some pretty tough times. Were those times in the past tough for them, as much as you're comfortable speaking about it?

BK: Oh, absolutely. Probably you know that Serbia is a country who's been through many wars and many recessions, depressions, whatever, and I think we're still in one. Our government is just very corrupted, and it's just not an ideal situation to live in. A lot of people, I would say eighty percent of the nation is struggling and has been struggling for years. So, of course, my family went through this period of time, and it was very hard. I think that was the moment when I realized that I really wanted to do something so I can become independent, completely independent, even though I knew that my parents would do anything to give me a proper education, because even my grandparents graduated from universities and have master degrees. So, I knew they would do everything to make it happen, but I just wanted to make it easier on them.

PC: When I came to Rutgers, one of the professors here who I became great friends with, he's long since deceased, was Serbian. He was multilingual. He knew at least eight different languages, wrote a book on the Balkans, which is still used a lot today, and being very politically active at the time that there was a lot of arguments going on, at the end of his career, when there were so many arguments going on in the United States about Serbia and Croatia and the president that time, Clinton, everything that was happening. Most of us in the department actually do know something about that history, not because we ourselves do it, but because we had a colleague who was probably that acknowledged master of Serbian history in the United States. His name was Traian Stoianovich.

You get to Rutgers, you find the academic work useful but not terribly challenging in the sense that you still have the time to be a good athlete, too. You're truly a student-athlete. Obviously, you have a group of teammates who've gone through a losing spell, and you become part of it. Tell me what your first season here was like.

BK: Every time I go back to that first season, I have so many negative thoughts in my head, because it was just a bad environment overall. The team energy was bad. The coaching staff didn't really get along. We were constantly losing, of course. Then, you had to juggle homesickness as well with all of these requirements, and I had no idea where I was coming to, because even though the school work was kind of easy--I wouldn't say easy but not that challenging--you still have to constantly work, which is not a case in Serbia. You study for a little bit and then you have a while to relax, and then you have to study and then relax. But here you have to constantly do something, assignments, quizzes. Then, all of that combined just led to me, and all of the other girls on the team, being in a very bad mental state. Some of them, I would say, even got depressed after this first year. I don't know if you know this, but after the first year, eight of our athletes transferred.

PC: I actually do know there was a mass transfer at one point in time.

BK: [Yes].

PC: And you stayed.

BK: Yes. Basically, that tells you all; it wasn't a great season and it wasn't a great year for me in general. After that year, I was seriously thinking about either transferring or going back to Serbia. I didn't know what to do because that's how bad it was.

PC: That first year, you were living in a residence hall, or did you find an off-campus place to live?

BK: Yeah, I was living in a dorm. I was rooming with a girl from the gymnastics team.

PC: Oh, okay.

BK: That part was actually really good because she was going through a lot herself, so we were kind of sharing the struggles. [laughter]

PC: I've also watched the gymnastics team, only because I had a student who was on it, and I got to see her a couple times and then she had some really horrific injury to her leg or something and stopped. That was a few years back, and she's quite a gymnast.

BK: Gymnastics is amazing.

PC: At that time, I think their meets were over in the Livingston gym; I don't know if they still are. Everything is still being upgraded. I hope they, at some point, get a slightly nicer venue than the Livingston gym.

BK: I think they transferred them to the RAC now.

PC: I hope so. I will say that seeing your team play in the RAC was really neat, I mean, for me. There's a coziness to the College Avenue [Gym], but it's not a very nice place.

BK: Exactly,

PC: It strikes me that it can't possibly be the safest place for you people. When you watch a person dive on the floor, as one of the women I interviewed does, constantly to get the [ball], you're hitting your knees against that lousy surface, even if you've got padding on it, and it can't possibly be good for you.

BK: Unfortunately, you kind of get used to it. [laughter]

PC: It's quite something to watch. Did things get better your second year here?

BK: Actually, they did, probably because I thought that it couldn't get worse from the first year. So, even the slightest improvements led to me believing that there is hope. [laughter] The second year, I think everybody realized that we weren't doing something right in the first year, so the practices kind of got a little better. Academics was still pretty well, this aspect. I was doing pretty well. But volleyball, as you know, we were still losing every single game, even though the practices were kind of better and the overall energy was--I wouldn't say that much better, but at least we weren't fighting every practice. We didn't have disagreements about every single thing. The overall energy was kind of calmer, I would say. So, that's why it was better, but also when you think about losing every single game, it's still disaster. [laughter]

PC: Could you, at that time, not you personally, but was the team making full-match videos--obviously, they take shots of it for all sorts of reasons--that you could get ahold of and send back to your parents or a link to them so your parents could see you play?

BK: I think my freshman and sophomore year, BTN [Big Ten Network] was still available for Europe, so I think my parents could watch. Then, junior year, I believe, I don't think--I'm not sure about this, but I think that's when they stopped broadcasting in Europe. So, they were able to watch for the first two years.

PC: I actually did not know that BTN had stopped. I thought they actually continued to broadcast.

BK: Yes, they stopped.

PC: That's too bad.

BK: But we still find alternative ways, and they're still able to watch.

PC: Your old coach leaves after you've been there three years or four years? You're in your fifth year now, right?

BK: Yes.

PC: And you have the extra year, presumably, because of a pandemic?

BK: Yes.

PC: That's what most athletes have now.

BK: Yes.

PC: You would have been four years under your old coach, right--no, three years.

BK: Three years, three years, yes.

PC: Yes, because you played spring of last year, and then now, you're playing fall of this year, and that's with the new coach. Before we get to the pandemic, just in terms of volleyball, how does a new coach change the way your life as an athlete or a student-athlete goes? What's the difference? I really don't want you to say anything disparaging about your old coach. That's not important. I'm just curious about how it impacted you individually, in terms of practice time, being open to being able to talk to the coach, in terms of the way in which you were encouraged or not encouraged to get your classroom work done. How did things change?

BK: I would say that the entire former coaching staff was actually really supportive and they were open to conversations and this was never the issue. It was just the wrong group of people, if I can say like that, the group of people who just didn't know how to work together, all of us. That was the biggest issue. Then, when the new coach came, it was a turning point for all of us, for the girls who were there previously, because the new coach came and some kind of new freshness to the team, and she brought in her associates, one of them being her husband, who's now our assistant coach, and also coaches who she has known from years prior. So, I think their cohesiveness and their energy is what changed this program, because they were all on the same page, and they knew exactly what they wanted. They communicated well with us, and they knew who was in charge of what. That's something we hadn't seen before. Obviously, they started working with us with different skills. They encouraged us to speak out, to say what we wanted, to say what we needed, and they made it all happen for us. I think that was the biggest difference.

PC: Switching over to the pandemic itself, can you remember when you first heard about the pandemic, that is, when you first were aware that there was this thing out there, COVID-19, which was over in China or just recently in Italy or in the United States, that was causing serious problems? When did that first register with you? Can you remember?

BK: I actually remember the entire scenario, which is kind of funny. It was our spring semester. I think it was February when we heard about this virus, and we did not know what to think. We just heard there was a situation going on in China. I can't say we were very concerned because we didn't really know. At that time, nobody knew what was going on. So, we had spring break [in] mid-March. My two teammates, one of them graduated and the other one is Russian, we were supposed to go to a vacation in Dominican Republic. Basically, we were supposed to leave on, let's say, Thursday or Friday, early in the morning. The night before, we were packing our bags, we were packing our summer dresses and everything, so we were really excited. I remember talking to my parents and my dad was really worried, because every time he hears something happening in the world, he gets very paranoid, of course, because he knows he's not close to me, he can't protect me. So, they kept telling me not to go because they had heard that a lot of countries are closing up and can you imagine us being closed up in the Dominican Republic with no money? [laughter] But we still decided that we're going to go, at that point. It was around six p.m.

We had packed, and we were hanging around at the park in front of our building, in front of our dorm, when we got a call from our coach, Scott. He's Caitlin's husband. He said, "Do you girls want to go home?" We were like, "What do you mean, home? We're leaving tomorrow." He's like, "If you want to leave, there's a flight going to Moscow and then to Belgrade. You have to be ready in forty-five minutes." [laughter] So, all of a sudden, we started screaming in the park because that meant we were going home. It's still a pretty good deal for us. [laughter] It didn't

matter that we weren't going to go to the Dominican Republic; we knew we were going home. So, we started packing, we started rushing, we started taking all of those things from the suitcases out, and started packing our winter clothes and everything we had, because obviously in Russia, it was still pretty cold, and in Serbia as well. So, I don't know, twelve hours later, the three of us were in Moscow. [laughter] That's when the two of my teammates said goodbye to each other, because one of them graduated two months later, and the other one was going to come back, but they didn't know what was going to happen after, and they literally said goodbye to each other for who knows how long. They still haven't seen each other. We went to Serbia, and she went to Russia. I came back six months after that.

PC: Did your father's concerns, as he expressed them to you, have anything to do with the fact that the pandemic was--I don't know what was happening in Serbia--but I do know in Italy, it was already a really, really horrible thing? Is that what he was concerned about?

BK: Yes, absolutely. Also because everything was so uncertain, he didn't know what the situation was like in America or in Dominican Republic. In Serbia, it was still pretty good probably because nobody even knew about this virus at the time. But he had no idea what was happening across the world, so that's why he was very concerned and he was telling us not to go. But I'm very stubborn, so I made the call. [laughter]

PC: You wonder what would have happened if you'd gone to the Dominican Republic.

BK: Exactly.

PC: If you'd stayed there a week and then tried to get back into the U.S., you might have made it. I don't know.

BK: Who knows, honestly?

PC: Let me see if I can get the timeframe, you came back six months later. That means you were coming back mid to late summer of 2020, I guess.

BK: Yes. It was the beginning of August, as I recall, or the end of July, something like that.

PC: When you came back, was it specifically because your coach had told you that you can come back because we're now at least going to be able to do some sort of modest training or something in the fall semester?

BK: Yes. That's what she said. Also because we were still hoping at the time that we were going to have a season later. She had said that the situation was getting better. It was getting

better in Serbia as well. So, I was thinking that we waited long enough and that everything was going to get better from that point, so that's why I decided to come.

PC: When you came back, did you already know that the fall season had been canceled?

BK: No, we were still hoping that it was going to happen. I think we were hoping for a good month, maybe even a month and a half, before we heard the decision.

PC: Okay, so you get back and you can start training as if there's going to be a season. Were there any restrictions put on you, initially, in terms of how you went about training for the season?

BK: Yes, I think, first of all, we had to quarantine in the hotel for two weeks or maybe ten days or until we got two negative tests, I apologize. I'm not quite sure, but I think it's something like this. I was actually in the same hotel as my Russian teammate, but we were in separate rooms, so we were completely isolated. We were told not to go out, not to be in contact with anyone. We couldn't even get the food delivered. They had to come to our hotel room doors, so that's how it all started. Then, after that, we learned about protocols, about how we were going to get tested every single day, and that's how it all started basically.

PC: At least when you started your testing, I assume the testing was the Rutgers saliva test, the spit test?

BK: Yes.

PC: I know later, it changes because of the NCAA and they insist on a different sort of test, or at least they standardized the testing. Initially, you're doing what I consider to be the somewhat easier tests and easier on your body.

BK: Yes, yes.

PC: It's a lot easier than sticking the thing up your nose.

BK: Exactly.

PC: I have a visceral sense of difference between them. Practicing, when you practiced together, were there any rules put in place saying, "You can do this, but you can't do this when you were practicing"?

BK: Yes. I believe we all had to wear masks most of the time. Also, the weirdest part for all of us was that we couldn't high five each other. When we were about to high five each other, we were going to do fist bumps instead, things like that, that we didn't even think it was that important, but we had to change our entire way of practicing and what we were doing. Oh, yes, actually, we had to wipe the balls after every single practice. I'm trying to think what else we did. Outside of the court, honestly, we were told to avoid any sort of contact with people. Of course, it wasn't a requirement because our coach couldn't tell us and of course she didn't want to tell us that our social lives should stop, but we were advised to try and stay away from people because it might have influenced our upcoming season, the season that we thought was going to happen.

PC: It's tough. I mean, your college years are somehow the time where you get to meet all these people, and that's not happening to you. On the other hand, you probably know on at least one or more of the teams, the kids didn't obey these rules, people actually got COVID.

BK: Exactly.

PC: So, that's tough stuff. One question that is specific to how you play, I know you play up at the net a lot, you're banging things over and doing kills and aces--well, kills is what really matters in terms of what I'm going to ask you. When you're doing that in a practice, we'll get to a match in a second, there are people on the other side of the net from you, and that's probably as tricky situation as you could come up with in COVID, because you're both energetically breathing in and out in each other's faces. Has anybody ever talked to you about that, any of the coaches, "Here's how we're going to handle that," or did you just accept that as part of what you have to do?

BK: Yeah. Well, for us, we kind of had to accept that, because there was no other way that we could play, honestly. But I know a lot of teams had to wear masks all the time, even when they were playing, which we didn't have to do, because I guess our coaches thought that it would be too much on us, which it probably would, because it's physically very hard to breathe under a mask and to jump and to sweat, do conditioning, lifting. I can't even imagine it. We were doing it actually; lifting and conditioning, we had to wear masks. But, on the court, it was the only time we could take them off, and only the people who were actually playing. All of the people who are on the sideline, they had to wear masks all the time. Also, we never switched sides. You know that we usually switch sides, but the teams had to stay on the same side. We didn't have this, how would I put it, greetings at the beginning of the matches, where you [are] handshaking everybody. We were just kind of waving to the other team; that's what we still do. Also, we didn't have the people handing us balls. We needed to go run after every point to get the ball and to serve, which was another way for them to kind of isolate us from other people.

PC: What we're talking about now is what actually happens when the season does start up in the spring semester [of 2021]?

BK: Yes, yes.

PC: To play that spring semester, and I sort of know some of the answer to this because of the two other women I've talked with, but you're going to have to fly at least one place. You're going to fly somewhere. Do you remember where you were flying to?

BK: You mean the first game?

PC: I don't know. You're in the Big Ten there. It's a long way away if you play even partially a Big Ten schedule; you're going to have to get on an airplane to get to some of those games.

BK: Oh, yeah, for sure. We had to fly a lot, actually. I think that's where being in a school like Rutgers comes into play, because Rutgers is such a good school, and we were actually able to charter everywhere. To have the funds and for the department to allow us this was kind of unbelievable if you think about it; it's a lot of money to pay for one team to charter there and back every single game. So, we were kind of lucky, because we were completely isolated from the rest of the population and we could just be alone on the plane, the sixteen of us, and that's how we made it.

PC: When you say sixteen, that means what you did, you took your student-athletes, the coach, maybe the assistant coach or maybe not, and maybe a trainer or something like that?

BK: Yes, yes.

PC: Assuming you did things like working with a trainer, did they change the protocol in any way of that? Could people literally touch you? Was that allowed?

BK: Well, they couldn't …

PC: When I've worked with a trainer, I've had them stretch my leg and do all sorts of things when you've got muscle spasms. I've thought about it and if I had to go to a fitness program right now for some running injury I've got, I don't know what they're allowed to do. So, that's the context in which I'm asking.

BK: Yes, yes. I understand. That's kind of why we were getting tested every single day. We were going to this center where we would get tested, and after we got negative results, we could go to treatment to our athletic trainers and that's the only time they could actually work with us.

But, of course, they had to kind of be close to us, to be able to touch us, because there was no other way for us to get recovered after a tough game or a practice. That kind of stayed the same, but I think we were restricting the number of people in the room, in the training room, and also, of course, I don't even have to mention the masks were mandatory all the time. We also used the hand sanitizers a lot, of course, these wipes. After every person gets treated, we would wipe the entire table, all the equipment that we used, and things like this.

PC: Thinking back, of course the pandemic's continuing, but thinking back over this experience with the pandemic, was there a time, at any point in this, where at least briefly you felt unsafe?

BK: Honestly, no. First of all, because our entire department did such a good job, and I'm not saying this just because it's on the record, but it actually was. It happened like this. Also, because I believe I have a strong immune system as an athlete, I didn't really think that COVID was going to impact me that much. I felt scared in a sense that I could stop playing for two weeks if I got COVID and my entire team would suffer probably, but in a sense of being worried that something was going to happen to me, something more serious, no, I don't think I was scared at all.

PC: Now that you're back in the classroom, not the athletic part of your life, back in the classroom, are you taking any courses that are in person even?

BK: Yes, actually, all of my classes are in person.

PC: Okay. Do you feel safe in those?

BK: Yes.

PC: You're not worried you're going to pick up COVID and bring it back into the team?

BK: I mean, I do feel safe because I know that everybody had to get vaccinated in order to come back to campus, so that's one reason, and also because we keep social distancing and teachers are very strict about masks and everything. They're doing the best they can. So, I would say I feel safe and also because I am vaccinated.

PC: How about thinking about your parents back in Serbia? Do you have this sense that they're safe in Serbia from COVID?

BK: Yeah, I was actually very scared and I still am, because my father had a serious disease, back in 2020 actually. That was the year that it happened. He had surgery. So, after this, we were so careful. Every time we would get out of the house, we would sterilized every single

thing we would wear, we brought back from the store, whatever, so I was actually very scared, and not just for them but for my grandparents because I have a pretty big family and we're always together. So, I tried to stay away from everybody as much as possible. To be completely honest, people in Serbia don't really believe in this vaccine, because the government is basically pushing it above its limits. They're actually making people get vaccinated, and because people are so skeptical about the government, that's why they don't believe in vaccines. But I wanted my parents to get vaccinated for the same reason. I was worried about leaving the house because my father especially lived in this constant fear that he was going to get infected, and I thought that getting vaccinated would at least free him from this constant fear he was living in.

PC: When they did get vaccinated, was it Pfizer or AstraZeneca, or do you know which one it was?

BK: I think one of them got Pfizer and the other one got the Chinese one.

PC: The Chinese one, okay. The Chinese one wouldn't suffice for you coming back to the United States, but certainly Pfizer would.

BK: Yes.

PC: If I can ask, and you don't have to give me any medical information if you don't want to, but you got vaccinated, I assume?

BK: Yes, yes.

PC: Which one did you get? Did everybody on the team get the same one that wanted to get one? I mean, there may have been an athlete …

BK: Yeah. I can't say for everyone because I really don't know, but I got Pfizer.

PC: Okay. Right now, are you still, despite the fact that you've been vaccinated, are you still going for testing [on] an ongoing basis?

BK: No, no, the people who are vaccinated don't have to get tested anymore, which is a huge relief.

PC: I know that for the university population. I didn't know that for the student-athletes. There's no NCAA requirement that you be tested?

BK: No, no, there's not, no.

PC: When you go out and play a match at Michigan, let's say, you get on an airplane, fly out there, you're playing at Michigan, will you have to be tested when you get out to Michigan?

BK: No, I don't think so. Actually, I don't know how it's going to happen this season, but so far, everything we did and all the games we played, we didn't have to get [tested]. So, I think this will continue during the season, but I'm not quite sure.

PC: Okay. How can you see yourself continuing in any way in the volleyball world after you graduate, or do you see yourself doing that?

BK: [laughter] Well, this was the toughest question so far, because I really don't know. I wish I knew what I was going to do and what my plans are, but I really have no idea. One, I could go professionally somewhere, but then I feel like it's also time for me to start looking for a job because I have no work experience. So, it can go either way at this point.

PC: I guess I was asking a question of sort of your own personal not identity but what makes you tick right now in your life. Can you see yourself over the next, let's say, seven or eight years going through life without the opportunity occasionally, let's say, to play volleyball? Has it become part of a routine by which you sort of make yourself feel good, cut down on the stress and all the other things that go along with it? I'm not so much interested in the competitive part of it; I'm interested in just and how it fits into your life. I mean, I'm a jogger. I'd go nuts if I couldn't jog. Because I've been doing it for so long, I won't say it's an obsession, but it's certainly compulsive in a certain sense.

BK: Of course.

PC: So, I was wondering if, and I don't know anything about the opportunity, I do know you can play professionally in Europe, but other than that, I don't know anything about the opportunities. My daughter-in-law played, pitched, for Harvard on their softball team.

BK: Oh, wow.

PC: She got through her concerns by just moving into the softball leagues that play in Central Park in New York City, where most of the position players are male and most the pitchers are female. She pitched on an otherwise essentially all-male team and did that, you know, for ten years and then that was okay, and she's quit. I mean, that's fine. So, there are opportunities, but softball is a little different from volleyball. Softball and [inaudible] are really well organized, and soccer is now, to an extent. They're set up to give you these opportunities. Have you thought about that at all, how that's going to work out for you?

BK: Yeah. Every time I think about trying to find a job and completely cutting volleyball from my life, I have this feeling like I'm being, I don't want to exaggerate and say "suffocated," but I feel very sad at the moment because I don't know what life would be without this sport. Especially when you've played it for so many years like I have, for seventeen years, I don't know who I am outside of this bubble that we created, where you have your team, where you go to practice every morning, where you come from practice, then you go do something else, but basically practicing and games are in the center of everything. That comes first and then everything else. So, when I think about myself as an individual who is not a part of this group, I start going crazy. I don't know who I am. So, I can't. To answer your question, at this point, I cannot picture myself. I feel that even if I stopped playing volleyball, I would get involved in the volleyball world somehow. Maybe I would start being a coach or administrator for some club or something like that.

PC: To go the other half of your life, where do you think you're going to take your undergraduate degree and go look for a job? Are you going to look in the United States? Are you going to look back in Serbia? Are you going to look in both, or some third place? What's the plan there?

BK: Yeah, well, a lot of people keep telling me that I should use this opportunity that I got here and that I should stay in the States for a couple of years, maybe earn some good money, and then I can do whatever basically with this work experience here. But I just don't see myself here. It's so far away from my family--and I really need them, I'm very close to my family--and also from everything I know: my culture, my tradition, the way of living is very different. The mentality is also incomparable. That's why I really want to go back, if not to Serbia, maybe to Europe, so at least I'm closer. Italy is a twelve-hour-away car ride from Belgrade, and this is a thirteen-hour flight. It's not the same. So, I think I'm going to go back.

PC: I'm not in any way authorized to give you medical or epidemiology advice, but I will say that I do read a lot of epidemiology because I'm working on the pandemic. At this point, almost everybody who knows what they're talking about is saying we've got to expect this to be endemic, which means it's not a pandemic necessarily, but it's going to be with us sort of the way the flu is, but just more dangerous than the flu, for a very, very long time. If it matters to you to keep in touch with your parents, then you're probably making the right choice, and obviously, it does.

BK: I'm so glad you said it.

PC: That's what I would do. My grandparents were French, and getting over to France has always mattered to me. They're obviously not alive anymore, but I still have relatives in France

and both my children grew up knowing what France was and being there a lot and they go back as well.

BK: That's great, that's wonderful.

PC: That's about it for now. What I told the other two women when I got the interview was I'll probably see if you have to time for me to just sort of drop in after your season is over, after whatever tournaments that you get in or don't get in are over, and just see how things have gone for you. Are you going to need to take courses in the spring in order to graduate?

BK: Yes.

PC: So, you're here for the whole year.

BK: Yes, until May.

PC: Yeah, okay. I'll probably try to get back to you and have an opportunity to just sort of round it out and hear where you stand and talk a little bit about what has happened in the volleyball year as well, because we don't know what's going to happen in any of these sports.

BK: Exactly.

PC: We can cross our fingers and hope that everything is going to go okay, and in the classroom.

BK: Of course. I really hope you get to come to one of our games.

PC: I will.

BK: Yes? Maybe to the one against Penn State in two weeks. I would really love to meet you in person and just have a little chat.

PC: I looked on the schedule and I did see the Penn State game. I have a feeling I'm doing something that day, and I can't get there. But you've got a long season; you've got a lot of big-time Big Ten teams coming in.

BK: For sure.

PC: I'll definitely get to some Friday or weekend matches before the season is over. Maybe I'll wave at you. [laughter]

BK: Please do. I would love, just like for two or three minutes, if you have time, I would love to just meet you in person.

PC: If you don't see me, Madyson might recognize me up in the stands, too. We had a nice long chat. I've actually interviewed three of you. Or your coach might [recognize me] because I interviewed her as well and said hi to her in the parking lot over at Werblin the other day, when just by chance I walked right by her as I was going to exercise in the gym. I was shocked. I said, "I know you."

BK: [laughter] "I know you from somewhere."

PC: It's strange. It caught me off guard. Okay, well, thanks a lot for helping out. Good luck with your academics, and good luck with your volleyball this season.

BK: Thank you so much for taking this time, and I'm looking forward to reading this in the future. It doesn't matter if it's in five or ten years.

PC: Okay, you take care.

BK: Take care. Nice seeing you. Bye. Thank you so much.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

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