



KOSOVO

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Kosovo conflict never far from his mind

By Mike Klingaman, Baltimore Sun

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Sirens blare, bombs whistle toward their targets and the earth convulses with the shock of war. At night, as he sleeps, the past haunts Milos Kocic.

Nine years later, the Kosovo War plays out, time and again, in the mind of Kocic, 23, the Serbian-born goalkeeper for Loyola College's high-flying soccer team.

The nightmare, he said, is often the same:

"I'm 14 again and playing soccer with friends in our yard in Leskovac. We hear the [NATO] planes coming to drop their bombs. I hear the screams of my mom to 'come back home,' but I can never get there. Something always comes between us."

Then Kocic awakens in his bed at Newman Hall, on Loyola's campus, a world away from his native land and the tumult that erupted there in the spring of 1999.

Life now is tame by comparison. One of the premier goalies in college soccer, Kocic leads the No.8 Greyhounds (10-0-1) against visiting Marist (3-6-2) at 4:30p.m. today.

It has been seven years since Loyola cracked the top 10 in Division I, and Kocic has played a key role in the surge. With seven shutouts, he ranks sixth nationally in save percentage (.900). Last season, he racked up 17 shutouts and led Division I in goals-against average (0.4).

The higher the stakes, the better Kocic plays, said Mark Mettrick, Loyola's coach. Last season, in the second round of the NCAA playoffs, Kocic held Maryland scoreless for 110 minutes before the Terps won on penalty kicks.

"Milos thrives on challenges. Before big games, you can see his focus and feel his energy in the locker room," Mettrick said. "He rises to a higher level, and he passes that on to the rest."

Tension? Bring it on, Kocic said.

"I love pressure," he said. "My defenders are a huge part of this team, but I want to be the leader. When I make a good save, I feel really cool about myself - and when we win a shutout, I feel good, having survived that."

Such stress is insignificant compared with the terrors Kocic endured as a youth during



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the bombings. Then, NATO planes, ships and submarines attacked Serbia (then part of Yugoslavia) in response to the ethnic-cleansing policies of the country's dictatorial regime.

Kocic remembers scrambling to the basement to escape the bombs, some of which landed less than a mile from his family's home.

"You heard the planes and ran inside, leaving the [soccer] ball in the yard," he said. "Then you heard a whoosh, closed your ears and waited for the house to shake. Every day was dangerous stuff. I had friends living near military bases whose houses were destroyed, and I knew soldiers who died."

The war affected Kocic deeply.

"Nobody liked [Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic], but we also didn't like a third party coming in to try and solve our problems," he said. "I don't hold it against the American people - I have more friends here than back home - but I do blame politicians. If you want to get rid of one man, why bomb innocent people?"

Given a chance to attend college in the U.S., Kocic grabbed it. After one year at St. John's, he transferred to Loyola, where he will graduate in December with a degree in international business - and a future in pro soccer. At 6feet4, he is as intimidating as he is agile, Mettrick said.

"Milos commands his box," the coach said. "Sometimes big men in the goal can be not as quick as you like, but he is explosive."

Having Kocic in the net is like giving the job to a linebacker, Mettrick said.

"You really don't want to [collide] with him," he said. "Simply put, if I was a forward, I wouldn't want to run into one of his knees. That would not end well."