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Getting to the top in a roundabout way

Vladimir Petkovic is leading the Swiss national football team to the World Cup – something hardly anyone would have imagined just a few years ago. But pulling off surprises is part and parcel of Petkovic's career.

BENJAMIN STEFFEN

Perhaps this is explained by a hazy set of circumstances when Vladimir Petkovic, born in 1963, was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Sarajevo. When Vladimir was born, his father ended his footballing career and began working at the deeper level of coaching. But during matches his son was always by his father's side in the dressing room and on the side of the pitch. Vladimir Petkovic once said ten years ago that he had "probably" learned a great deal during that time "that he was not even aware of today".

An air of mystery surrounds Petkovic's rise to the leading coaching position in Swiss football, becoming manager of the national team which will take part in the World Cup in Russia in June. Petkovic did not enjoy a glorious playing career. When he joined Chur in the second tier of Swiss football in the 1980s, everything began with a misunderstanding. When they signed him, Chur thought Petkovic was a striker who would provide a regular supply of goals. But Petkovic was a midfielder. His was a journeyman career playing for various Swiss clubs. He had a spell with FC Sion, but not in a key role, before playing for Martigny, returning to Chur and then turning out for Bellinzona and Locarno – nothing remarkable by any means. He was only really noticed by people who made the effort to get to know him. Petkovic was reserved, but if someone asked him for advice he gave it. This is the view of a former teammate at FC Chur who went hiking in the mountains of Grisons with Petk-

ovic and other foreign players at the club.

Community worker with Caritas

Petkovic did not push himself forward and therefore long went unnoticed. This is how people saw and described him for a long time. He had a respectable coaching career at the lower levels. Wherever he went, he achieved some degree of success, and if he remained with a team for a longer period he generally improved it. Petkovic settled down with his wife and two daughters in Ticino where he coached almost every ambitious club from 1998 onwards, including Agno, Lugano and Bellinzona. He led AC Bellinzona to Switzerland's top flight and the cup final in 2008 and suddenly started to attract attention and media interest. Yet still this was not simply due to his coaching career, but just as much to his main job. Petkovic was employed as a community worker by Caritas and managed projects for the unemployed until summer 2008.

Nobody suspected that he would be leading the Swiss team to the World Cup ten years later. Throughout his career people have underestimated him. Outside of Ticino few people had noticed that Petkovic had embarked upon a remarkable career, usually with the firm intention of encouraging his teams to play attractive football. When he signed a contract with Young Boys in August 2008, there was once again much talk about his career in community work and how he was the exception to the rule. Petkovic also

continually heard how he had come to Berne from far away – as though Ticino was on another continent. And when the officials from the Swiss Football Association appointed him national coach in summer 2014, they had initially identified someone else as their preferred candidate and openly revealed their wish list. It included Marcel Koller, the coach of Austria at the time, a position he still holds. It was hard to tell if this upset Petkovic, whether he felt slighted to be underestimated and regarded as second choice or rather saw it as an opportunity. When somebody once asked him what convinced him that he could become a good coach, Petkovic replied: "Nothing really!" It was a moment of equanimity and humour which Petkovic only provides when he feels comfortable and sure of being understood. The deep belief that he would become a top coach had long been held mainly by himself, close friends and people from Ticino, this far-flung region on another continent.

Strategic self-belief

It is not blind confidence or arrogance but strategic self-belief that has taken Petkovic so far in his career. He has learned to believe in himself because he spent so long living out of the spotlight, because he was not an acclaimed international player with lots of caps who people naturally assumed would make a good coach. Yes, he has come a long way, if we are talking about where Petkovic started out rather than Ticino. He had to spend a long time showing what he could do in con-

trust to former star players who are often given big jobs before ever having coached a team.

There are probably lots of things that Petkovic has learned along the way that he is not even aware of today and not just dating back to the 1960s and 1970s in Sarajevo, but also later when he arrived in Switzerland as a 23-year-old player and was left waiting at Kloten airport. As the result of a misunderstanding nobody was there

It is a similar story with the national team. During the qualifying campaign for the 2018 World Cup, he led the team from one victory to the next for nine consecutive matches, but everyone was waiting for the tenth game away to Portugal. Switzerland lost and had to play off against Northern Ireland. Doubts were raised about the strength of the team, that it too is punching above its weight and has been doing so for years. But Petkovic

ability and skills as a coach. Petkovic, who now holds dual Swiss and Croatian nationality, had big shoes to fill in 2014 as the successor to the world-class coach Hitzfeld, and the man before him Köbi Kuhn, a national hero who was popular as a player and later also as a coach. Now he has the opportunity to surpass both of these coaches. He will try to lead Switzerland into the quarter-finals of a tournament for the first time since 1954.



Petkovic, the composed motivator (with Swiss striker Haris Seferovic)
Photo: Keystone

to pick him up. This was followed by another misunderstanding when Chur mistakenly thought they had signed a striker who turned out to be a midfielder. You might say that Petkovic knows no other way than having to continually prove himself, and hardly any other attribute could help somebody more in the football world where what happened yesterday counts for little today. The best example: Petkovic's YB team played some magical football, but his tenure is mainly remembered for failing to win the title in 2010.

calmly led them through the play-offs and the period of doubt as though he had been coaching at the top level for 20 years and not just ten and as if he had been through it all many times before.

That was not actually the case. In contrast to his predecessor Ottmar Hitzfeld, Petkovic had not experienced dozens of big matches in packed-out stadiums. There are still situations that he is going through for just the second, third or fourth time and the fact that he is overcoming them reveals a great deal about his

Two years ago at the European Championships in France, he also fell short of this mark, losing to Poland in a penalty shoot-out in the last 16, but he has probably also learned things from that defeat that he is not even aware of today.

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