

OBILIC TAKE 5

And the mighty Obilic Royals have etched themselves as the most successful and dominant club in Draza Mihailovic Cup history after claiming the ultimate prize a record five times – OK, they are on the same par as Sydney Sokolovi, who are currently defunct, or should I say dormant, because they surfies from the Northern Beaches still have their heads stuck in the sands of Mona Vale beach – apart from Milan Jaglica who joined the chorus of Obilic fans at DMC '09 (what does that tell ya ;). Anyway, back on song. The Royals have also become the only interstate side to claim a record three DMC titles in Melbourne – '02, '04 and '09. The '09 win against the Melbourne White Eagles – which can be seen as a delayed Déjà Vu of the '02 grand final – marks the club's maiden “repeat” or back-to-back titles; prolonging its success since toppling the Brisbane White Eagles 83-81 in Sydney '08. Winning the most coveted trophy within the entire Serbian community is a marvellous feat. The Obilic lads know all too well what it's like to lose the trophy's grip; failing to seize “Steve/Stevan” for the second year running. It causes a diminuendo effect among the fans, and most importantly, the players, who have sacrificed a year's worth of intense training to get all prepped up for two of the most important days of the Julian calendar. It hurts. You see it in their eyes. Tears of sadness and repressed emotion. Loss of words – except for swear words and one's sharing of contrite remarks. Then the clouds appear above you despite the torrid weather ... you lot get the picture, well it's actually a metaphor [now I lost us both!].

DMC 2009 placed an insurmountable burden for the Royal Blues. For starters, the junior boys [both under 16s and 18s] and open women sides failed to make it onto the podium this time round. It was a disappointing result, especially with all sides – bar the under 18s side – winning in their respective divisions in Sydney '08. As the old sporting adage goes, “they lost to the better side on the day”. These things happen, and sadly, despite one's reassurance, the ending does not justify the means. In a nutshell, the Obilic club were on the verge of a dry campaign. No trophy at all would prove to be one of the lowest ebbs in the club's history. No excuses. Failure is not an option. It's all about living up to the mantra of being victorious and as I mentioned in one of my earlier columns, defending the cup is an arduous task. It requires the same tangible elements as the previous year: determination, commitment and heart. The Obilic Knights, featuring club president and captain Stevan Sipka – yes, he did come out of retirement for the umpteenth time – fell short of a whisker in reaching the semi finals. The undersized – or more like, “under height” side – had the offensive firepower but were desperately lacking in the forwards/centre department. The return of super guard Zoran Salipur after a four year sabbatical proved to be a frightful reminder of the powerhouse Obilic sides of yesteryear. Salipur's scoring prowess was still intact, yet, it wasn't enough for the Knights. The side boasted several youngsters, namely, rising star Mirko Djeric and partygoer Nenad “Tripod” Vlaisavljevic. The Knights were almost certain of a victory in their second match against KK Otpisani [DMC hosts]. Otpisani, led by former NBL star and Australian representative Nik Miric, were dealing with a razor edge of an Obilic side. It was one sturdy game. Miric, the tallest of both sides at 205cm, was at odds with the likes of Miljan Miric, Dejan Piljevic and Dejan Bogic in the paint. At one stage, the Knights had the upper hand, playing at an above-optimum level. Yet, it was greed and a lack of concern that caused the Knights to “lose the swordfight”. The ever-so endowed Tripod failed miserably to erect the simplest of all shots, including the lay-up! But, what is done is done. It's history. Well, sort of, as history was being rewritten in a positive light.

The 2009 version of the Royals can best be summed up in two words: young and fresh. Easy bedfellows. The captaincy, bequeathed onto heartthrob Vladimir Jankovic, 25, ensured that the Royals were in safe hands yet again, despite losing veterans Stevan Sipka, Dejan Piljevic and Milos Salipur. The Royalists experienced a shaky start on Day One. Game One against the Brisbane WE caused the reigning champions some grief. Reminiscent of the '08 Grand Final, it was tit for tat. Both sides knew each other's strengths and weaknesses, so sensing the next move didn't seem to be much of a problem. It resulted in an impasse - 45 apiece. Usually, the first game can dictate how well a side will perform in the ensuing games. It rests with the deep feelings of the entire roster and whether the "determination, commitment and heart" combination is still intact. Game Two was against BC Red Stars [from Liverpool], led by Milorad Djinic. Two weeks prior to DMC, the two sides played a friendly which resulted in a 15-point deficit - Royals' way of course. Game Two saw the Royals make it two-zilch, but this time, winning by almost quadruple the result: 73-33. A big win sure puts the heart back into place and confidence reaches new heights. The final game of the day was against the boys from the "City of Churches" - Adelaide Beograd. As expected from the Obilic faithful - including mums, dads, brothers and sisters - the Royals triumphed.

Given the dramatic circumstances and fate of the other Obilic teams, the Royals knew that it was make or break. Their Semi-Final was more akin to a Grand Final. And all thanks to KK Otpisani. The Otpisani side were fired up big time. Big Nik, along with the tournament's leading scorer Vladimir Tankov and versatile guard Stevan Ostojic, wreaked havoc on the Cabramatta-based side. Despite the side's lack in speed and athleticism, the Melburnians relied on brute force. Jankovic admitted he couldn't do much - or anything - against his counterpart Miric. Having played college and professional ball, Miric knows the ins and outs of playing in the low-post. You can see it in his body language from the spectators' lounge, but on court, it was quite difficult to read his next move. The rejuvenated Otpisani side regained their offensive touch. Tankov was the equivalent of former Seattle Supersonics centre/power forward Sam Perkins [who was renowned for his deadly three-point accuracy] as he was unstoppable from down town. The Royals were locked in the key. They simply couldn't find an easy route through the perforated line. Enter David Strbac and Petar Cvjeticanin. One's a shooting guard and the other's a power forward. Their perimeter game saw the tables turn - and the results too. Strbac's three-point shots propelled the Royals to a four point lead in the first half, taking the scores to 26-22. Cvjeticanin, known for his dynamic inside moves, was in shooting guard mode, nailing some big shots near Threenville. Strbac's offensive bubble burst when he clashed with big Nik - it was a real David and Goliath moment, with Goliath winning the "fight" this time round. David stood his ground but was easily repelled by the intimidating stance of the man once dubbed as the new Vlade Divac. Strbac was benched to rest his temper. All in all, the Royals powered through, winning 50-39.

Come match of the day - the Grand Final. The Melbourne WE also consisted of a younger side, but it lost none of its originality, as club veterans Vladimir Gak and Milorad Mendebaba - aka Arkan - were still on the scene - the two have donned the same jerseys for 17-odd years straight! Melbourne boasted several fresh legs, including upcoming star Stefan Uzelac, the son of "DMC Super Coach" inductee Jovica Uzelac, along with guard Allister McDonald, forward Ognjen Opsenica and centre Chris Patton. Also, former Otpisani member and guard Branko Martinovic was back in his original whites. Despite the offensive

competence possessed by both sides, the game was largely based on impetuosity. Mistakes were ripe in both quarters [sides that is], along with the surge in turnovers. Don't get me wrong, the game was an all-out-assault, but sometimes you have to be realistic and observant of some of the most critical moments that occur on court - and off-the court as I was the cameraman ;). It all came down to who wanted to win the most. It came at a cost. Nonetheless, the first-half saw both sides engage in a shooting frenzy. Eventual MVP winner Dejan Marjanovic got the scores rolling with a nice layup seconds after tip-off. Shooting expert Sveto Gavrilovic was on song, sinking several threes to keep the side afloat in the early minutes of the first quarter [with scores 6:2, Royals' way of course]. Small forward Sinisa Skoric was, according to Sipka, "mistake free", as the jump-shot maestro played with his heart on his sleeve, proving his vitalness in both O and D.

Throughout the duration of the first half, the Sydneysiders and Melburnians were playing "hot potato" at certain stages. Think bricks and air-balls to say the least. Even "thievery" was obvious. However, Jankovic, Nemanja Kovacina and Pezza had full control of their domain - that being, the paint, a crucial part of the frontcourt. The promotion of Uzelac to the first side proved to be a worthy treat. Since last year, Uzelac's game has matured immensely. His attention to detail has become a revelation, adept with a soft touch and a daring drive to the basket. The first quarter ended with 12:11 and as soon as the second quarter passed off [re: inbound pass], Pezza assumed his role as a true power forward, banking two shots under the bucket. Uzelac and McDonald weren't afraid to penetrate to the hole, scoring a cluster of buckets. The Royals had their chances ruined several times. For instance, point guard Marko Savic, known for his adept dribbling skills, managed to fumble with the ball,. Depressing. Blacktown resident Gavrilovic and Marjanovic put the final touches extending the lead to 32:29 at half-time. The second half emerged into a bullfight and the mistakes flourished once more ... and as the cameraman, I had to contain myself, it's a pity Milan's camera lacked the "beep" button. Forty-three year old Arkan got the scores levelled at 32 apiece. The ensuing actions saw Marjanovic and Martinovic going tit-for-tat, exchanging threes, pushing the score-tometer to 35-all with 5:59 remaining on the semaphore. Twin-towers Vladimir Jankovic and Nemanja "Nemz" Kovacina put in a solid performance. Their conjoined effort put the Royals back on the map. Kovacina was firing shots from the top of the key like he was New Orleans' David West - except West is slightly taller. Jankovic, who struggled to find the hole earlier in the game, was able to tip in several missed shots. At three-quarter time, Obilic led the way with 49-42. The final and most important quarter of the game saw Obilic reinstated as an offensive firepower. Albeit, the early minutes were quite dusty. Arkan, McDonald and Uzelac had a few comfortable shots, extending the scores to 55-50 [Royals' way]. It didn't take long for the visitors to recommence their boastful and sagacious style of play. Martinovic was in "no man's land", failing to capitalise in offence, as he was heavily guarded by small-forward Milos Prlic. Martinovic, a product of the White Eagles junior system of the late-nineties, was no match for the Adonis-esque forward. With 4:33 to go on the LED board, scores were at 57-51 and WE were in panic mode. Their vision of winning a third DMC title seemed far-fetched. Marjanovic took over command and showed us all why he's MVP material. The reigning Obilic 3-on-3 Slam Dunk champion had two successive steals and three fast break layups. Melbourne's Martinovic made a Barry Crocker of pass that ended up in Marjanovic's hands that eventuated in a speedy Gonzalez of finish - a right-handed layup from the left side. As Rale Rasic would say "It was a su-perb finish". Nearing defeat, the WE were struggling. Centre Patton scored last for the

Whitelings, making a soft right-hand hook shot. Savic had the last honours, banking two from two at the charity stripe. End score: 69-55. As soon as the siren sounded, the court was en masse with pure jubilation and excitement. President Sipka was once again hosted into air by his former teammates – immersing himself in victory. I on the other hand, hoped for the same gesture, but got stacked on by the entire Royals squad ... fair treatment for a cameraman eh? At presentation, Sipka thanked KK Otpisani for their support and commitment in maintaining the old tradition of DMC. To top it off, Sipi signed off saying: “If you want to get your hands on Steve, you have to come and get it!” The night ended with most of us heading to Dandenong [Da,da Kafana] – the Melbourne equivalent of Liverpool. Some of the guys stayed in the city centre and went to Crown. Overall, it was a fun night filled with jokes and tonnes of laughter. We serenaded/mimed to some of the old classics such as Tozovac, Zdravkovic, Miric etc. Anyway, that’s it for me. I hope you had enjoyed reading my latest [as in late] report as much as I had fun writing it. All the very best for 2010.

Kind Regards,

G-Mac

PS: Despite the high-octane finish at last year’s DMC, the Obilic Knights and Obilic Royals have narrowly missed the opportunity of progressing onto the Grand Final of the 2010 Bankstown Summer Competition. The Knights, who made the semis after a half-decade drought, lost to the Knicks, despite being the better and dominant side throughout most of the half. The Knicks’ Adi Causevic was “too hot to handle” after knocking down more threes than former Pacer Reggie Miller. The semi-final also marks the retirement (yet again) of Stevan Sipka, along with the “temporary hold-off” of Dejan Piljevic and Aleks “The Gunner” Kuzmanovic. The Royals, on the other hand, met the same fate the following week, losing to the Knicks in the preliminary final. The DMC champions lost by a lion’s whisker, 76-75 [big Pero fired from down-town, to lessen the deficit, ah, if only THAT line was worth four points ☺]. Once again, Adi, along with versatile centre Ufuk Isbicer, proved to be more than a handful for the experienced Royals.

PSS: It wasn’t meant to be. Let’s don the shoes of an optimist. Yes, yes, it’s a condescending thought, as I am often replete with a diminishing sense of hope, but both sides have made it to the finals. The Knights, an undersized side (unless you add Nenad Vlasisavljevic to the equation ;) did remarkably well to cement a spot in the semis. The Royals boast a grand side on A4 paper, but often seem to take one step forward and three steps back. It’s a riddle that I can’t solve. I say the finals are more of a plausible achievement than sitting out in the dry with a wooden spoon.

PSSS: Next season awaits ahh the intrigue.

PSSS: Sorry for keeping you ya’all in the lurch for so long.