

= Nikola Vukić =

Nikola Vukić ( Serbian Cyrillic : ?????? ?????? , IPA : [ nʲkɔla vʲukʲit͡sʲ ] ; born 25 September 1980 ) is a Serbian international footballer who played as a centre forward .

Vukić was born in Bačka Topola , in what was then SFR Yugoslavia . He began playing football as a youngster with AIK Bačka Topola , and scored 68 goals from 76 first @-@ team matches over a three @-@ year period in the third tier of Yugoslav football . Military service took him to Bar in 2001 , where he was able to continue his goalscoring career with the local second @-@ level club Mornar . A brief spell back in the third tier with Kolubara preceded his turning professional with First League side Red Star Belgrade in 2002 . He spent time on loan at third @-@ tier Spartak Subotica before making his Red Star debut in 2003 . Despite suggestions that his height , of 2 @. @ 02 m ( 6 ft 7 1 ? 2 in ) , made him better suited to sports other than football , Vukić ended the season as First League top scorer , domestic player of the year , league champion and scorer of the winning goal in the cup final . He won a second league ? cup double in 2005 ? 06 , a second player of the year award , and finished his three @-@ year Red Star career with 70 goals from 109 appearances in all competitions .

In August 2006 , Vukić signed for Spanish club Racing Santander ; his goals and his partnership with Pedro Munitis helped them achieve a mid @-@ table finish in La Liga . He then moved to Valencia , but was unable to establish himself as a regular in the starting eleven . He spent the second half of the 2008 ? 09 La Liga season back with Racing on loan , for whom he scored 13 goals in just 19 matches . Vukić joined Birmingham City of the Premier League in 2010 , and in his first season , he scored in their League Cup win . Even after relegation to the Championship , and despite increasing efforts to remove his large salary from the financially struggling club 's wage bill , he remained with Birmingham for the full four years of his contract . Having been without a club for a few months , he rejoined Birmingham for the second half of the 2014 ? 15 season .

Vukić made his senior international debut for Serbia and Montenegro in March 2004 , and following the breakup of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006 , he played internationally for Serbia until 2011 . He won 57 caps for his country and scored 20 goals . He was a member of the 2006 and 2010 World Cup squads , and briefly captained his country in 2011 .

= = Personal life = =

Vukić was born in Bačka Topola , in what was then SFR Yugoslavia , the son of Jovan , a former footballer , and his wife Milica , who had been a basketball player . He completed his secondary education at the mechanical engineering school in Bačka Topola . His brother Branko , 15 months his junior , also became a footballer , as a central defender with clubs including Cement Beo?in and Serbian First League club Proleter Novi Sad . During the Yugoslav Wars in 1999 , Vukić 's hometown was beneath the flight @-@ path of NATO bombers heading for Belgrade ; for much of that part of the conflict , the family home was without electricity or running water .

Vukić is married to Sanja ; the couple have two daughters .

= = Club career = =

= = = Early career = = =

He joined his hometown football club , AIK Bačka Topola , as a youngster , and graduated to the senior side in 1998 ? 99 . He began as a centre back , but soon realised he preferred scoring goals to defending . Vukić 's parents did not want him to take football seriously until he completed his education , and he remained with AIK Bačka Topola until 2001 , scoring 68 goals in 76 matches in the Serbian League Vojvodina , the third level of Yugoslav football . When military service took him to Bar , he was able to play for the local club , Mornar , for whom he scored 15 goals from 23 appearances in the 2001 ? 02 Second League of FR Yugoslavia . After trials in France with Saint

@-@ Étienne and Créteil came to nothing , ?igi? returned home where he played 8 matches for third @-@ tier club Kolubara , scoring 3 goals .

?igi? then signed his first professional contract , with Red Star Belgrade , one of the biggest clubs in the country . Because he was not considered ready for first @-@ team football at that level , he spent the latter part of the 2002 ? 03 season on loan at Spartak Subotica , another third @-@ tier side , for whom his goalscoring rate was even higher : 14 goals from just 11 league games .

= = = Red Star = = =

Returning head coach Slavoljub Muslin brought ?igi? into Red Star 's senior squad for the 2003 ? 04 First League season , and gave him his debut in the starting eleven on the opening day . That first game ended in defeat , and ?igi? 's physical appearance ? a growth spurt from the age of 16 had brought his height to 2 @. @ 02 m ( 6 ft 7 1 ? 2 in ) ? provoked suggestions that he might be better suited to basketball . He scored the second goal as they beat Hajduk Kula 2 ? 0 in the next league match . In between , he produced a hat @-@ trick against Nistru in the 2003 ? 04 UEFA Cup qualifying round , and went on to contribute a further three goals as Red Star beat Odense 6 ? 5 on aggregate in the first round . He scored twice in the 3 ? 0 win in the Eternal Derby against Partizan , and celebrated by miming a basketball shot . By the mid @-@ season break , he had 12 league goals as well as the 6 in the UEFA Cup , and was named Player of the Year for 2003 , both by the captains of the First League teams voting via the Ve?ernje novosti newspaper and by the Football Association . He finished the season as the league 's top scorer , with 18 , as Red Star won their 23rd title , and scored the winning goal in the cup final .

Resuming the partnership with Marko Panteli? begun in the second half of 2003 ? 04 , ?igi? continued to score freely in the new season . With Red Star two goals and a man down in the first leg of the Champions League qualifier against Young Boys , he netted twice in the last 12 minutes to give his team an away draw . Domestically , Panteli? top @-@ scored with 21 league goals and ?igi? contributed 15 as Red Star finished in second place , behind Partizan . ?igi? scored against Partizan to help Red Star reach the cup final , but was one of five regular starters unavailable for that match through injury or suspension , and his team lost to a last @-@ minute goal to ten @-@ man ?eleznik .

In September 2005 , ?igi? signed a one @-@ year extension to his contract , which had been due to expire at the end of the season . He helped his team progress through the qualifying rounds of the UEFA Cup , and accrding to Reuters ' correspondent , " capped a brilliant individual performance with two goals " as well as providing the cross for Milan Purovi? as Red Star beat Roma 3 ? 1 in the third match of the group stage . His first goal , a header , appeared to have been scored from an offside position , but for the second , in the 86th minute , he dispossessed Philippe Mexès , evaded two more opponents , and bent the ball into the top corner from 25 m ( 27 yd ) with his weaker left foot . He said afterwards , " I 've never scored a goal like that in my entire career . I was going to pass the ball but there was no one ahead of me so I just decided to go for it and see what happens " . The win left Red Star needing to win their last group match to stand a chance of qualifying for the knockout rounds , but they failed to do so .

For the second time in three years , ?igi? was chosen as domestic player of the year in the captains ' poll , and was also honoured by the Red Star Sport Association as best male athlete of 2005 , an award open to athletes representing the club in any sport , not just in football . After Panteli? 's departure for Hertha BSC , Red Star 's goals were spread more evenly among the remaining forward players . In the league , ?igi? and Bo?ko Jankovi? were joint @-@ top scorers with 12 , and Purovi? contributed one fewer , as the club won their 24th title . They completed the double with a defeat of city rivals OFK in the cup final , coming back from 2 ? 0 down via ?igi? 's 67th @-@ minute free kick under the defensive wall and Purovi? 's equaliser to take the match into extra time , during which ?igi? gave Red Star the lead with a header and Du?an Basta made the final score 4 ? 2 . After the match , ?igi? refused to answer questions about his Red Star future .

= = = Racing Santander = = =

Žigić began the season with Red Star , but on 29 August 2006 , he signed a four @-@ year contract with La Liga club Racing Santander . The fee , officially undisclosed , was variously reported at anything from ? 4.5M to ? 7M . Although better offers had been rejected , those offers had arrived at the wrong time : the pressure on Red Star to win the domestic title meant they were unlikely to dispose of a major player in mid @-@ season . The player felt he was more likely to start matches with a club at Racing 's level . Partnering the diminutive Pedro Munitis , he contributed 11 goals ? including a hat @-@ trick in a 5 ? 4 win over Athletic Bilbao ? four assists and five penalties won in league competition over the season as Racing finished tenth . The efficacy of the pair earned them the nickname of Dúo Sacapuntos ( the Two Point @-@ getters ) ; ahead of the coming season , new coach Marcelino García Toral recalled how " we all know how many points Racing picked up when Žigić and Munitis weren 't there . Without them , Racing didn 't add points " . His performances earned him the captains ' vote as best player based abroad for 2006 , and contributed to his 2007 Football Association of Serbia Golden Ball award .

= = = Valencia = = =

Žigić signed for Valencia in August 2007 . The fee was unconfirmed , but suggestions appeared in the media of ? 15M , ? 18M , and around ? 20M , a figure possibly including the player 's wages over the five years of his contract . He had been linked with numerous other moves , and Fenerbahçe made an offer that was better financially for both Racing and the player , but Žigić preferred to stay in " the best league in Europe " in a country where he was accustomed to the language and culture . He was suffering from an ankle injury when he arrived ? which delayed his integration into the first @-@ team group and , according to Mundo Deportivo , undermined the coaching staff 's confidence in him ? then aggravated the injury by playing in a Euro 2008 qualifier in September , and did not appear for Valencia until October .

He made his debut as a second @-@ half substitute in Valencia 's Champions League group @-@ stage defeat at home to Chelsea , and started the next league match , another home defeat against Espanyol , but was selected only infrequently either by Quique Flores , who had signed him , or by successor Ronald Koeman . With the transfer window approaching , Koeman had given Žigić two weeks to convince him he was worth keeping . Prior to the Copa del Rey on 19 December , Valencia had not scored for six matches , and they were soon 1 ? 0 down to third @-@ tier opponents Real Union . Žigić came on and scored twice to turn the match around , and followed up with another goal three days later as Valencia came from behind to secure a 2 ? 2 draw at Real Zaragoza . A mooted loan to English club Portsmouth fell through when Koeman changed his mind about the player leaving , but he made only nine league appearances ( two starts ) in what remained of the season , and was sent off in the first of those .

Speculation regarding moves to the Premier League came to nothing . By October , Žigić had appeared just once for Valencia , in the UEFA Cup , and an opportunity arose to join his former club , Racing Santander , on an emergency loan . This depended on the league allowing Racing to release Luis Fernández on medical grounds , because of a degenerative condition of his knee , thus freeing up a space in the first @-@ team squad . The LFP 's medical committee decided that the condition was not yet clearly career @-@ ending , so any agreement with Žigić had to be held over until the January 2009 transfer window . In the meantime , he played in four more cup matches for Valencia , two domestic and two UEFA , and scored in three of them , but took no part in the league campaign .

The loan agreement was duly revived , and Žigić returned to the club and the city that " feel like home " . Racing were to pay his wages and write off the debt outstanding from the sale of Mario Regueiro , and there was no option to purchase . Resuming his partnership with Munitis in the first game of his second spell , Žigić scored the only goal of the visit to Real Valladolid , repeated the feat at Getafe two weeks later , and scored again in the next match , a 2 ? 0 win away at Sevilla . He finished the season as Racing 's top scorer , with 13 goals from only 19 games .

In the 2009 close season , there were rumours linking Žigić with moves to clubs including

Sunderland , Monaco , and Bordeaux , but the player insisted his intention was and always had been to be successful with Valencia . He made 26 appearances for the club in 2009 ? 10 in all competitions , more than in the previous two seasons combined , but only 5 were league starts . Within four minutes of replacing the injured David Villa in the league match against Racing in October , he took advantage of a defensive error to score the only goal of the game ; out of respect for his former club , he did not celebrate . On 2 January 2010 , his 93rd @-@ minute header against Espanyol took Valencia third in the table , and his double against Deportivo La Coruña in the 2009 ? 10 Copa del Rey put Valencia 2 ? 0 up at half @-@ time ; the game finished 2 ? 2 and Valencia lost 4 ? 3 on aggregate . With four minutes left of the Europa League quarter @-@ final second leg , Valencia were denied a penalty when an Atlético Madrid defender pulled ?igi? to the ground so forcefully that a large hole was torn in the front of his shirt , apparently unnoticed by referee or goalline official ; the tie ended goalless , so Atlético progressed on away goals from the first leg and went on to win the competition . Away to Espanyol on 1 May , again as a substitute for Villa , he scored both goals in a 2 ? 0 win that secured Valencia a place in the next season 's Champions League .

= = = Birmingham City = = =

On 25 May 2010 , ?igi? signed a four @-@ year contract with Premier League club Birmingham City for an undisclosed fee , which media speculation suggested to be in the region of £ 6 million . He made his debut on the opening day of the season away at Sunderland : replacing Garry O 'Connor in the 58th minute , he came close to scoring from outside the penalty area and " injected a note of panic hitherto undetected " in the home team 's defence as Birmingham came back from 2 ? 0 down to secure a draw . ?igi? 's first goal for the club came as Birmingham beat Milton Keynes Dons 3 ? 1 in the League Cup on 21 September . He scored his first Premier League goal on 16 October , opening the scoring at Arsenal with a header from Keith Fahey 's cross , but Birmingham lost the game 2 ? 1 .

In a hostile League Cup quarter @-@ final against local rivals Aston Villa , ?igi? had an apparently valid goal disallowed for offside against another player , and with the scores level after 86 minutes , was about to be substituted when he produced a " mis @-@ hit , deflected , scruffy late goal " that secured the win . He opened the scoring against favourites Arsenal in the final with a short @-@ range header , and with one minute of normal time remaining , he flicked on a long clearance , Arsenal 's goalkeeper and central defender got in each other 's way , and the ball fell to Obafemi Martins to tap in the winning goal . Football manager turned commentator David Pleat wrote that " Birmingham earned their victory through terrific teamwork and astute deployment of ?igi? 's strengths . " Because of " niggling " hip and groin injuries , he made only two more substitute appearances . His absence deprived the team of what the Birmingham Mail 's reporter called their " most effective style : getting the ball forward early , pressing up the pitch and playing off him " , as they were relegated to the Championship .

Despite his agent Milan ?alasan 's insistence that his client would not be playing in the lower divisions , ?igi? underwent groin surgery in the close season and resumed his Birmingham career in September . He told the Mail that he would be happy to stay and that any move would depend on the club , which was in increasing financial difficulty , wanting to sell . His first Championship goal gave Birmingham a 1 ? 0 win against Leeds United . Early in the Europa League group match at Braga , Birmingham were awarded a penalty . In the absence of regular penalty @-@ taker Marlon King , ?igi? took on the responsibility . His attempt was saved , Braga won the match 1 ? 0 , and Birmingham finished the group one point behind them and Club Brugge so failed to qualify for the knockout rounds . Away to Leeds , ?igi? scored all four in a 4 ? 1 win , and he finished the season with eleven in the league and one in the play @-@ off semi @-@ final as Birmingham lost on aggregate to Blackpool .

Ahead of the 2012 ? 13 season , ?igi? was close to a return to Spain with Real Mallorca . Birmingham were prepared to give him a free transfer to reduce the wage bill by his reported £ 50 @, @ 000 a week , but the deal fell through when board and agent could not agree a payoff for the

player , who earlier in the summer had expressed his intention to see out the two years left on his contract . He began the playing season on the bench , coming off it after 85 minutes to produce a 94th @-@ minute equaliser at home to Charlton Athletic on the opening day , and was used more as substitute than starter by new manager Lee Clark , who preferred Peter Løvenkrands or Leroy Lita . On the eve of the January transfer window , chief executive Peter Pannu confirmed that player sales were necessary to stave off the risk of administration . Even if the club could raise as much as £ 6M from the sale of England goalkeeper Jack Butland , ?igi? 's wages were more than the club could afford , and the player needed " to go out and showcase himself . " The club had failed to include a clause in his contract to reduce his wages in the event of relegation , and it emerged later that they had agreed to substantial annual increments .

He did not leave , and in February , Clark publicly criticised him for producing " possibly the worst training session in terms of a professional footballer I have ever come across " , despite knowing he was due to start the upcoming game against Watford . Up until this incident , he had scored six league goals at a rate of one every 165 minutes , and been sent off twice . Clark said that ?igi? would not be involved against Watford , but that it was " in his hands " as to whether he would prepare properly for the Sheffield Wednesday fixture three days later . His response must have been acceptable , because he played the whole of the goalless draw against Wednesday , started all the remaining matches ? the longest run of starts of his Birmingham career ? and ended the season with nine league goals , second only to King .

?igi? missed the first few weeks of the 2013 ? 14 season with a back problem , and once fit , played regularly throughout the season , as one of a small number of senior players in an inexperienced and youthful team with numerous short @-@ term loanees . The team struggled , and reached the last day of the season needing at least a draw away at Bolton Wanderers and for other results to favour them to avoid relegation to League One . Two goals down with 12 minutes left , ?igi? scored , and three minutes into stoppage time , his close @-@ range header was cleared off the line to Paul Caddis , who headed home to preserve Birmingham 's second @-@ tier status . Birmingham were reported to be " quietly confident " of retaining his services for another season , at a much reduced salary , especially as he was believed to be keen on applying for British citizenship , which required five years ' residence , but he left at the end of his contract . He was the last remaining member of the League Cup @-@ winning team .

Having been without a club since his departure , ?igi? began training with Birmingham again in November 2014 . After a successful appeal to be granted a work permit , for which he did not qualify automatically , he signed a contract on 4 December to expire at the end of the season . He made his second debut as a late substitute in the Championship match at home to Reading on 13 December , with Birmingham already 6 ? 1 ahead . He played only infrequently ? nine substitute appearances in the league and two FA Cup matches ? and the club confirmed he would be released when his contract expired .

= = International career = =

Coach Ilija Petkovi? gave ?igi? his international debut for Serbia and Montenegro on 31 March 2004 , as an 84th @-@ minute substitute in a 1 ? 0 friendly defeat against Norway in Belgrade . His next appearance and first start came some 14 months later ; in a friendly against Italy in Canada , he ran onto a through ball and went round the goalkeeper to open the scoring and also hit the post in a 1 ? 1 draw .

He also scored in his next match , against Poland in another friendly , and established himself as a regular selection , but it was his substitute appearance in a crucial World Cup qualifier against Spain in Madrid in September 2005 that brought him wider international recognition . After a poor first @-@ half ? Petkovi? said they " were lucky to be only a goal down at half @-@ time " ? ?igi? was introduced , and the tactic of " putting him in the centre of the opposition defence and playing long high balls to him ... was remarkably successful " . He pressured the goalkeeper into missing a cross which dropped for Dejan Stankovi? to set up Mateja Ke?man 's equaliser , and 12 minutes later , his pass left Ke?man clear on goal but he mis @-@ hit what might have been a winning shot . The

result left Serbia @-@ Montenegro top of the group , and they confirmed their qualification at home to Bosnia and Herzegovina when ?igi? 's assist gave Ke?man a tap @-@ in for the only goal of the game .

?igi? 's only start at the 2006 World Cup came in the last fixture , when his team had already been eliminated after losing the first two group matches . He scored early in the first half off a long ball from Stankovi? against Côte d 'Ivoire ? the goal was Serbia @-@ Montenegro 's first of the tournament ? but the match ended in a 3 ? 2 defeat .

Still an automatic choice under new national manager Javier Clemente , ?igi? scored the only goal in Serbia 's first competitive match as a separate country , a Euro 2008 qualifier at home to Azerbaijan in September 2006 . He scored once , missed two more good chances and was then sent off for elbowing an opponent in stoppage time of the March 2007 qualifying defeat in Kazakhstan , so missed the next , a home draw with Portugal , and also missed the Finland fixture in June after surgery on a facial injury . He still scored seven goals as Serbia failed to qualify .

?igi? played regularly through the 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign under the management of Radomir Anti? , contributing three goals and partnering former Red Star teammate Marko Panteli? as Serbia qualified for a major tournament for the first time as an independent nation . Ahead of the tournament proper , he spoke in positive terms of his development since 2006 : " I went to Germany as player with no reputation or real experience to speak of . Tactically , I have learned a lot and I 'm in much better condition , both physically and psychologically . This is my World Cup , I think I can play a lead role and I want to show I 'm a player that can do it in big games . " After losing to Ghana in the opening group match , Serbia went on to face Germany . Within two minutes of Miroslav Klose 's first @-@ half dismissal , ?igi? headed a cross down to Milan Jovanovi? who scored what proved to be the only goal of the game ; Lukas Podolski 's second @-@ half penalty was saved , and Anti? dedicated the victory to the Serbian people . In a game of missed chances against Australia , Serbia lost 2 ? 1 and finished bottom of the group .

Goals in four of Serbia 's five internationals in the latter part of 2010 brought his total to 20 . He was not selected to start the other match , a Euro 2012 qualifier in Italy that was abandoned after six minutes because of crowd trouble ; UEFA awarded the match to the hosts as a 3 ? 0 win . After Serbia failed to qualify for the tournament , both Stankovi? and Nemanja Vidi? retired from international football , and ?igi? was appointed captain of the national team . He captained the team in friendly defeats to Mexico and Honduras in 2011 , his 56th and 57th appearances for his country , which proved to be his last .

= = Style of play = =

?igi? 's extreme height predisposes him to an aerial game . He is dangerous from set pieces , scoring many headed goals and knocking the ball down for others : when he joined Red Star , the coach set out the team in a 4 ? 3 ? 3 formation , with ?igi? at centre @-@ forward and two wingers to feed those strengths . He tried to use his physical presence to disrupt opposing defences , both for his own benefit and to draw their attentions away from others . Pep Guardiola said in 2009 that ?igi? was not easy to defend against , " almost unstoppable " in the air , but the best way would be to keep him as far as possible away from the penalty area . Speaking in 2010 , Radovan ?ur?i? , then assistant manager of the Serbia national team , described him as " the king of air play , he is the finest there is in Europe . He possesses the sense of space and movement without the ball and can assist his teammates with headers and set up goal @-@ scoring opportunities . "

As exemplified on his debut for Racing , a performance in which he demonstrated his aerial power , he is capable of playing with his back to goal , and his height was not incompatible with agility . He prefers to play not as a lone striker but in partnership with a shorter , speedier , teammate . Racing 's fitness coach , Javier Miñano , was surprised that ?igi? was " well coordinated , to the extent that he doesn 't seem so tall when I see him in training . "

He prefers to receive the ball in the air , because he can always beat smaller players in the air but they can take advantage of better acceleration and quicker reactions on the ground . According to David Pleat , a major factor in Birmingham 's 2011 League Cup win was " telling him to do what he

does best and flick the ball on with his head from direct diagonal balls played from both wings " . Nevertheless , he is technically competent , scoring goals with his feet and providing assists for others . A 2009 feature in Mundo Deportivo assessed ?igi? as one of those few tall players with a good touch on the ball , and in 2010 , German international defender Per Mertesacker described him as " technically a good player and very smart tactically " .

= = Career statistics = =

= = = Club = = =

As of end of 2014 ? 15 season

= = = International = = =

= = = = International goals = = = =

Score and result columns list Serbia 's score first . Source :

= = Honours = =

Red Star

Serbia and Montenegro League : 2003 ? 04 , 2005 ? 06

Serbia and Montenegro Cup : 2003 ? 04 , 2005 ? 06

Valencia

Copa del Rey : 2007 ? 08

Birmingham City

Football League Cup : 2010 ? 11

Individual

Serbia and Montenegro League : top scorer 2003 ? 04

Serbian Footballer of the Year : 2003 , 2007

Ve?ernje novosti captains ' pollDomestic player of the year : 2003 , 2005

Prva zvezda ( Player of the year based abroad ) : 2006

Red Star Sport Association Best Male Athlete : 2005