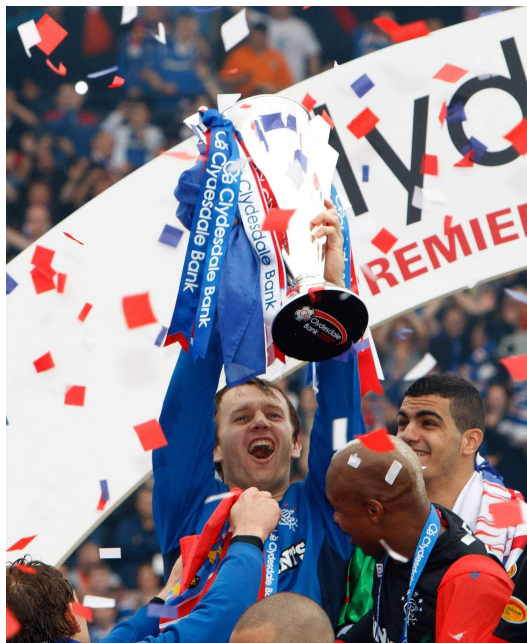


## An interview with cult Ranger - Sasa Papac



*Photograph by Willie Vass*

Sasa Papac checked out of Rangers more than a decade ago - but his love for the Ibrox club has never waned.

The 43-year old from Bosnia and Herzegovina spent six happy years in Glasgow, winning eight medals, including three Premier League titles in a row.

Now Papac - who transitioned successfully from central defender to left back - can tell you everything that's going down on Edmiston Drive.

These days, he's back in his native Mostar, the principle city of Herzegovina, and almost 2,000 miles from Glasgow.

He said: "I might be a couple of thousand miles away, but I live in a household where we still have a great love for Rangers.

"Every time there is a Rangers game on TV we watch hoping for three points. Every day I keep up to date with what is happening at Ibrox. That news is still very important to me.

"I like to know what's going on because the six years I spent at Ibrox were the best and most fulfilling of my career.

"My other clubs were fantastic but my time at Rangers pushed me to become a much better player and that is something I will always be thankful for."

Papac insisted that personal fulfilment and the happiness of his family - his wife and four children - were always a priority over the riches that being at a top club brings. His career started at local club FK Velez Mostar, where he trained as a kid before the Bosnian War broke out towards the end of 1991.

Papac was 15 when the devastating conflict ended and he was soon snapped up by Siroki Brijeg, who were located around 20 miles from Mostar.

From there he moved north to Austria, to play for Karnten, and then Austria Vienna. It was while at the latter that Paul Le Guen came calling - but not for Papac. First he signed Libor Sionko, and then Filip Sebo, leaving Papac at Austria's then biggest club. Papac recalled: "Sure, I wanted to go to a big club like Rangers, but I wasn't sad at being left behind as I was still part of a wonderful club.

"I spoke with Filip and Libor regularly and they told me of how magical it was at Ibrox. When they spoke of the stadium and the atmosphere it really got me."

The Bosnian international didn't have too long to wait, and when Le Guen returned to plunder Vienna at the end of August, 2006, Papac was boarding a plane: destination Glasgow.

He said: "It was a great moment. Because I had heard so much about Rangers I couldn't wait to see it all for myself, and when I walked into Ibrox my reaction was just WOW!

"Suddenly everything stepped up two or three notches. Everything, from the quality of player, to the stadium, the size of the crowd, the atmosphere. I had been playing in front of eight, maybe 10,000 fans, but Ibrox was off the scale with 50,000 at each game. That brings its own pressure.

"At Rangers only one thing matters. Well, three things, and that's the points. At Rangers you must win. But I had no chance of that in my first game as I was sat in the stand due to problems with the paperwork. It gave me an idea of what the standard of play was like - and I quickly realised it was two or three steps above what I was used to.

"To address this I needed to play football and improve, and I worked so hard to make it happen. After watching the first game from the stand I couldn't wait to get started. The atmosphere was fantastic, and it gave me such a lift.

"We had a great squad so whether it was a league game or a Champions League tie, drop your standards and you suffered the consequences. It wasn't an option."

When Papac arrived at Ibrox he was a central defender, but after a conversation with manager Walter Smith, he was moved to left-back - and he never looked back.

He explained: "Walter told me that if I wanted to play more it would be better for me to become a full back. I was okay with that because in Scotland you need your centre backs to be strong and physical.

“The move definitely suited me and I slotted in pretty quickly. I played a couple of games there and it soon became permanent.”

Papac credits Rangers’ iconic boss, Smith, with helping to shape not only his playing style, but also his outlook on life.

“There was one time when we beat Celtic 4-2 at their ground,” he said. “After the game we were celebrating wildly in the dressing room. Walter came in and told us to calm it down a bit, and to show our opponents some respect.

“He was big on respect, and single-handedly taught me to respect our club, its supporters, my teammates, the journalists, in fact everything and everybody. It was an excellent life lesson that I carry with me to this day.

“I had five great years working with Walter and it was the best time of my life.” It would be easy to point to the UEFA Cup final of 2008 as a low point. Rangers went all the way to the final, where they played Zenit St Petersburg, in Manchester. They lost, but it was the scandal which preceded the final which caused a degree of bitterness for those involved.

The SFA refused Rangers’ pleas to ease fixture congestion, whereas the Russian football authorities went out of their way to help Zenit.

It all took place fifteen years ago, but Papac said: “Of course it was a major disappointment; the low point of my time at Ibrox. To lose any final is upsetting, but a European final? I always believed the Scottish football authorities would want to give one of their members the best chance possible to win the trophy.

“But we were hit with so many games around that period and, of course, it all became too much. We were asked to play four games in nine days, which wasn’t great. By the end of the season we had played 68 games.”

Only Barry Ferguson, David Weir and Carlos Cuellar, of the outfield players, made more appearances than the ever-dependable Papac that season.

The popular full back left the club in 2012. He had suffered a bout of pneumonia as well as a problematic groin injury. He had a feeling his days were numbered, and then came the club’s well-publicised financial issues.

He recalled: “My last year at Rangers was a tough one, for a number of reasons. But the way I look at it, I had so many great times at Ibrox and that’s what I choose to focus on.

“Three successive league titles was a fantastic achievement, and I was so proud to be a part of that. We had a great team spirit, which is worth its weight in gold. The quality of the footballer is important, but the character of the man even more so.

“I prefer to think of these things instead of the negative parts. Ibrox was a great place to work and I loved going in every day.

“These days I keep in touch with Rangers and like to know the news. I go to the occasional Champions League game, but I’m not involved with football in any official capacity. I like it that way.

“What I achieved at Ibrox no one can ever take from me. I have the medals and the memories and that’s the perfect way to remember it.”