

Tennis star Novak Djokovic holds copies of Serbian street paper Liceulice. "Liceulice has contributed significantly to the empowerment of marginalized groups in Serbia and all those individuals who are participating in this important project," he said.

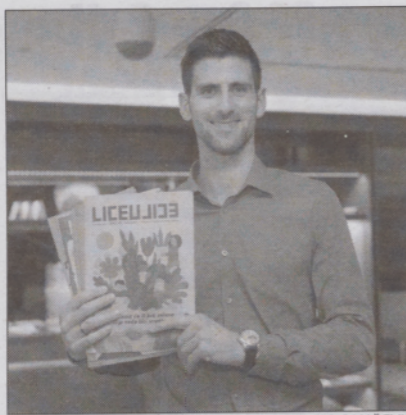


PHOTO BY MIRALEM CAUOEVIC

BY LICEULICE STAFF
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

The world of professional sports is typically associated with stories about competitive sports records, record earnings or record-breaking events. This story about a professional athlete is entirely different.

Serbian street paper Liceulice interviewed Novak Djokovic, the most famous Serbian tennis player and athlete whose public work is a testimony that not all successes are solely achieved through competition. On the contrary, it is through solidarity and care for one's community that significant achievements are made. A child survivor of the Yugoslav Wars between 1991 and 1999, Djokovic today dedicates his off-court time to helping other Serbian youths rise above adversity.

"Every single wrong decision is also a step towards the final goal."

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

Liceulice: Many celebrities, as well as prominent and successful people, have their own foundations, but not too many of them have demonstrated such an interest in the communities they come from. What was the crucial reason that prompted you to emphasize that part of your story?

Novak Djokovic: It was a personal feeling that it was necessary to help the community in which I grew up and where I evolved, and also the awareness that we cannot expect others to do absolutely everything for us. I was immensely lucky to have had the opportunity to meet wonderful people from various humanitarian organizations, and to raise awareness about the importance of supporting of every single individual in resolving large, systemic problems.

Early development is a topic that my foundation identified as its priority, and it is at the center of our mission and vision. A lot of research showed that the very first years in children's lives are crucial for their development, and that this is the period when they need a lot of stimulation and attention. That's why it is important for them to go to kindergarten, to be able to learn and evolve, because that is the starting point for all of their future activities. Otherwise, if they enter that race unprepared, other children will overtake them, and they will get discouraged, will leave school, and then we will all have a huge problem. The number of children in Serbia is decreasing every year. Our duty is to invest in children if we want them to live in a country that will be

developed and progressive.

L.: Who inspired you in your humanitarian work?

N.D.: They are those people who are using their current popularity to promote good things, fair play, equality and diversity, and protection and support of minority groups. I admire Oprah Winfrey for her efforts to empower young African-American girls, but also Zlatan Ibrahimović, who participates in many humanitarian activities Leonardo DiCaprio, David Beckham – there are indeed many of them.

L.: What would you single out as your foundation's particular achievement?

N.D.: The foundation was established 10 years ago and is focused on early development of children and on the improvement of conditions in which children are learning and developing. Of course, we are doing our best to complete our mission and vision and to make the foundation as streamlined and striking as possible, to embrace various projects we are currently pursuing, including the development of the magazine Original (a monthly magazine that seeks to engage young Serbians in culture, education, arts, sports and science).

The reasons to establish the foundation were of an exclusively personal nature. I wanted to help, and I had the unconditional support of my family who understood it completely and joined my initiative.

L.: Prominent people often show a certain level of responsibility toward the societies in which they are famous. Do you think that approach is an exception or a rule? For instance, you refused to advertise with casinos on a couple of occasions. Are there things that are more important than sheer profit?

N.D.: For me, the values that I promote and live by are paramount, and that is why I attach the greatest importance to them when I am deciding who to work with, what kind of messages to send and who will be my partners. I always endeavor to have one unified message. In that sense, I have not made any compromises thus far. Neither the foundation nor myself personally is working with companies and industries that – in our opinion – are not promoting good values. I did refuse to advertise a casino, but I am not judging those who choose to do so. We all have our way.

I do think that it is extremely important that publicly known people show not only what they do on sports courts, television or through other things that made them famous, but also demonstrate a high degree of

responsibility and utilize their popularity to help those who are most in need of that help.

Voices of prominent people can be heard far and wide, and it is not by chance that humanitarian and other organizations have relied on them as a support for decades. The number of people who are following celebrities and trust them is enormous.

In traditional media sources, sometimes there is no space for the promotion of things that someone is doing, and that is exactly where social media serves its purpose. When you look at the social media accounts of world-famous people, particularly professional athletes, you realize that they spend a lot of time promoting exactly those issues that pertain to social responsibility and empowerment. I think that this is very important and am happy that I am also participating in it.

L.: Ever since you started winning big tournaments and achieving historic results, children around our country started to improvise conditions in public spaces in which they can play tennis rather than football or basketball. You became a hero to many. What kind of influence would you like to have on them? Do famous people, precisely because they are role models to many, have additional responsibility for what they say and do?

N.D.: Of course they do, but there should be the correct measure about that as well. Everyone should have the right to live the life they want to and to stick to their values. The message I would like to send to young people is that the most important things in life are to do what you love, to be grateful for everything you have, and to pursue your dreams and goals. That was my path – an enormous love for tennis, a lot of hard work and sacrifices, but I had my dream. Once I achieved it, I was deeply grateful for it. Very often we forget to see all the good that we have. We are too focused on the things we are waiting for, and on those things that we do not have. I would be happy if young people would adopt these few

Novak Đjokovic

He's one of the greatest tennis players of all time – and he's creating opportunities by investing in Serbia's children

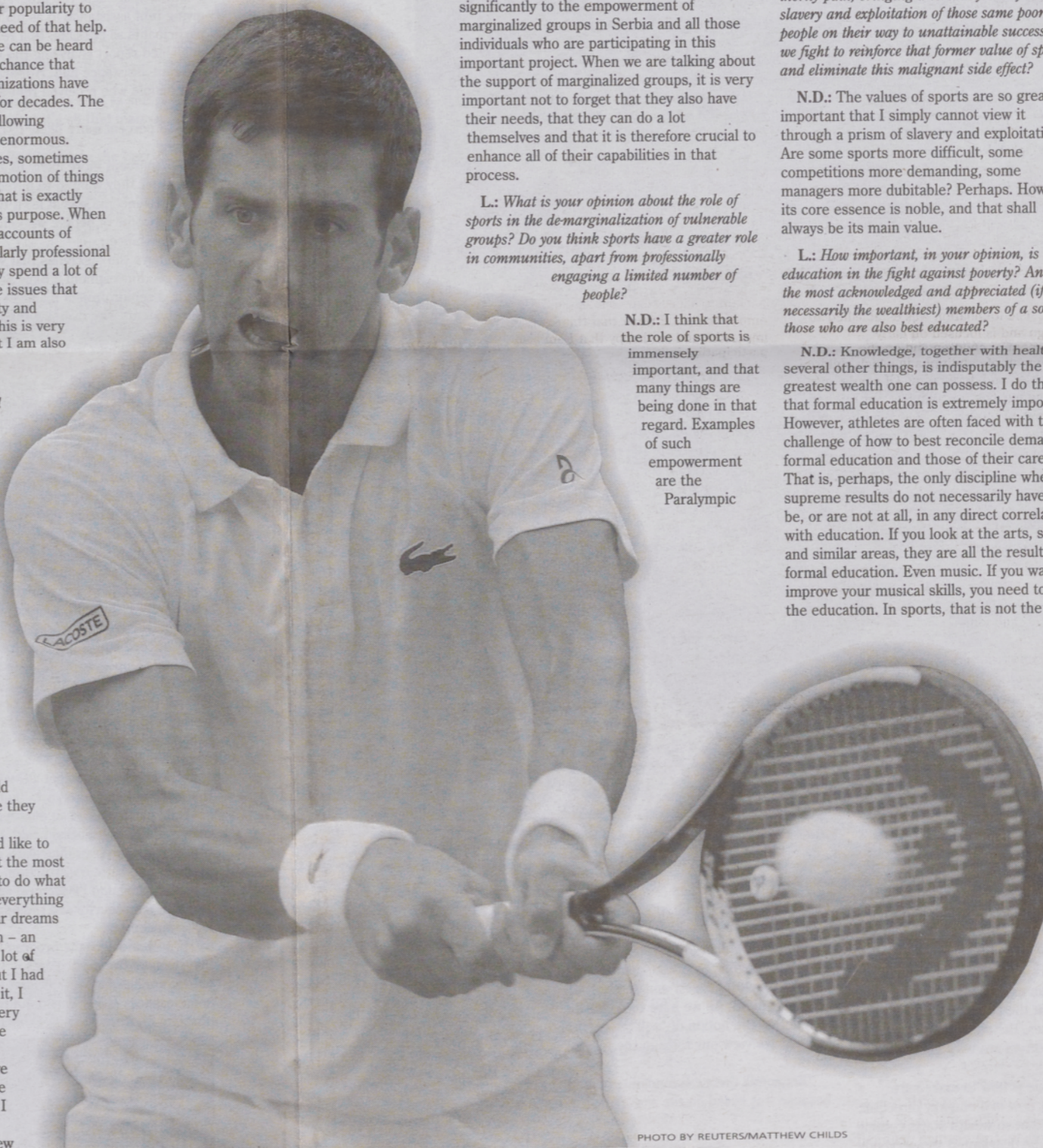


PHOTO BY REUTERS/MATTHEW CHILDS

pieces of advice. But I am also aware that we are all masters of our own destiny and that some lessons are exclusively ours.

L.: As you travel a lot, you must have come across street papers sold by marginalized people around the world. Do you ever buy them, and what is your opinion about that way of economic and social empowerment of those who need help the most?

N.D.: I always buy them and am very happy when a community organizes around helping a marginalized group, thus empowering those people to do some good things and to be able to benefit from that and personally feel that they contributed to those processes. I would like to congratulate and thank all the people who are behind the Liceulice project. Liceulice has contributed significantly to the empowerment of marginalized groups in Serbia and all those individuals who are participating in this important project. When we are talking about the support of marginalized groups, it is very important not to forget that they also have their needs, that they can do a lot themselves and that it is therefore crucial to enhance all of their capabilities in that process.

L.: What is your opinion about the role of sports in the demarginalization of vulnerable groups? Do you think sports have a greater role in communities, apart from professionally engaging a limited number of people?

N.D.: I think that the role of sports is immensely important, and that many things are being done in that regard. Examples of such empowerment are the Paralympic

Games and Special Olympics. I was very happy when, a few years ago, I was in the position to help our national team to participate in the Special Olympics. They brought back a lot of medals. Many professional athletes joined forces to help, which produced results. If we look at the very essence of sports, we can see that it promotes what is the most valuable. It enables one to fulfill one's potential. You get as much as you deserve on a court or field, and your body and mind are going through an exceptional development. Hence (there is the) recommendation that sports should be an obligatory activity for disabled and non-disabled children.

L.: For many young people, sports are a way to escape from poverty. But that can also be a thorny path, bringing a certain form of modern slavery and exploitation of those same poor people on their way to unattainable success. Can we fight to reinforce that former value of sports and eliminate this malignant side effect?

N.D.: The values of sports are so great and important that I simply cannot view it through a prism of slavery and exploitation. Are some sports more difficult, some competitions more demanding, some managers more dubitable? Perhaps. However, its core essence is noble, and that shall always be its main value.

L.: How important, in your opinion, is education in the fight against poverty? And are the most acknowledged and appreciated (if not necessarily the wealthiest) members of a society those who are also best educated?

N.D.: Knowledge, together with health and several other things, is indisputably the greatest wealth one can possess. I do think that formal education is extremely important. However, athletes are often faced with the challenge of how to best reconcile demands of formal education and those of their careers. That is, perhaps, the only discipline where supreme results do not necessarily have to be, or are not at all, in any direct correlation with education. If you look at the arts, science and similar areas, they are all the result of formal education. Even music. If you want to improve your musical skills, you need to get the education. In sports, that is not the case.

However, I was doing my best to compensate for the lack of formal education by constantly working on my own development. I am continuously learning new languages, and I have a need to keep improving in every possible way, as a person, a human being and an individual.

Recently, our foundation launched the magazine Original, dedicated to young people eager to learn and read good stories. Last week, for instance, we organized a huge human resources conference for students, with the aim of simulating first job interviews and enabling them to understand what the recruitment process looks like. On that occasion, we heard how important education is, but also that it is not the single most important thing in our personal development.

Unless you work on yourself and are willing to constantly learn, formal education in itself does not mean much. Every one of us should nourish that great need for knowledge and growth. Life and work practically only start after a formal education is acquired. There are so many things that people are doing at present, especially when we talk about new industries and professions, where very little is learned from faculties. There are well-known examples of successful people who are running world-renowned IT companies who did not get the knowledge necessary for their work through formal institutions, but rather by doing it day by day, and learning through their experience. My message is that you should keep learning during your entire life and that it is necessary to keep evolving all the time. That process must never end.

L.: You are originally from a region in which tolerance is not a broadly accepted term. Yet, through your own example, you are trying to promote some other values. Is the absence of tolerance merely a fear of the unknown? If so, how can we get to know each other better?

N.D.: In my opinion, tolerance is a result of several things – openness, love you carry within you, and the capacity to understand other people without being judgmental. Tolerance requires constant work; children look up to parents as models of behaviors, and if we are not open and tolerant, our children will not be either. But I also believe that things are changing and that people are increasingly more accepting of each other, regardless of their mutual differences.

L.: Is there anything you wish you had not had to experience in your life?

N.D.: I guide myself with a belief that everything happens for a reason, both good and bad. My impression is that things appear much worse when we look at them closely, compared to when we take some distance. Usually those ugly, difficult situations are crucial in prompting us to action, in lifting us and forcing us to find the best in ourselves. There are negative examples, of course, but I choose to believe that everything that happened in my life helped me to become who I am now. And I am very grateful for everything I have become and everything I have; I am, therefore, grateful for those less pleasant things that have also been part of my life.

L.: You have had a lot of successes, but there were surely some mistakes, too. What are the things that you would have done differently today?

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