WATER POLO

Scoring Leader Roko Pozaric '25 Elevates Princeton's Goals

BY BRETT TOMLINSON

AS A CROATIAN HIGH SCHOOL student hoping to be recruited by American collegiate water polo teams during the COVID pandemic, Roko Pozaric '25 knew that few people would have a chance to see him play in person. So he cast a wide net with online introductions.

"Every coach in D-1 received my email, definitely," Pozaric said.

Princeton's Dustin Litvak was one of the coaches who replied, spurred by an endorsement from American water polo star Alex Bowen, who'd played a season with Pozaric's home club in Zagreb.

Litvak had some sense of Pozaric's size, speed, and academic credentials, and when the 6-foot-3 freshman arrived on campus, the coach was thrilled to learn he had a work ethic that matched his formidable skills. But it was a teammate, Keller Maloney '23, who first put a label on what Pozaric could be for Princeton water polo: a generational player.

Four years later, Pozaric stands alone as the program's career goals leader — by early November, he had 268 — and was on pace to reach the No. 2 spot in career assists. The Tigers won three straight Northeast Water Polo Conference (NWPC) championships in his first three years and were aiming for a fourth when Princeton hosted the league tournament Nov. 22-24 (after this issue went to press).

Through it all — from the homesickness of his freshman year to the challenge of being routinely double-teamed by defenders — Pozaric has been all that his coach could have hoped for.

"It's really hard to put his value into stats," Litvak said. "You just have to be around him every day to see the impact he has. He makes everyone around him better."

Take, for example, the sprint to the center line that begins each quarter of a game — water polo's version of a faceoff. If you swim fast enough to win the ball more than half the time, you give your team an advantage. Pozaric, in more than 400 career sprints, has won 90% of them, earning his team nearly four extra possessions per game.

Speed, Pozaric said, was part of his repertoire from his earliest days in the sport. He'd been a competitive swimmer

from the age of 5 or 6, but he became bored with the repetition and switched to water polo when he was 10.

By the time he reached high school, he was eager to follow the path Croatian players had taken to top teams like UCLA and USC, until Princeton piqued his interest with the promise of elite academics and water polo. Having fellow Croatian Antonio Knez '22 on the team, Pozaric said, helped him navigate freshman year, his first time taking classes entirely in English.

Pozaric has also been quick to credit teammates for his success in the pool. The senior class includes two other players who've climbed to the program's top-20 list of career goal scorers (Vladan Mitrovic '25 and George Caras '25), and sophomore goalie Kristóf Kovács joined Pozaric among this year's nominees for the Cutino Award, which recognizes the national player of the year.

East Coast water polo has historically trailed the California schools, which have been national champions and runners-up every year since the sport's first NCAA Tournament was held in 1969. But Princeton is expanding the potential of what an Eastern team can do. After NCAA quarterfinal losses to UCLA in 2021 and USC in 2022, the Tigers broke through in 2023, defeating UC-Irvine to reach the Final Four. Princeton played a competitive semifinal game against UCLA before falling 17-13 to the Bruins.

Earlier this season, Pozaric scored four times in an 11-9 win at Cal, the three-time defending national champion. As he looked ahead to the NWPC Tournament and a potential return to the NCAA Tournament, he envisioned a chance to shoot for history.

"The goal is, of course, to be the national champions," Pozaric said. "And I think ... that's never been more possible than this year." ◼