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SPORTS

The Greatest Week in Sports History—for Slovenia

Pogacar vs. Roglic at the Tour de France. Luka Doncic on first-team All-NBA. Goran Dragic in the bubble. Slovenian sports have never been so hot.

By [Joshua Robinson](#) and [Ben Cohen](#)

Updated Sept. 20, 2020 10:22 am ET

PARIS—The choice facing the voters in Slovenia’s Male Athlete of the Year poll was unprecedented. The excruciating decision had come down to a pair of exceptional sportsmen: a world-class cyclist vs. a basketball sensation.

The cyclist won over NBA superstar Luka Doncic.

It looked like Primoz Roglic was about to win another stunning victory over the weekend—and then he was beaten by another Slovenian.

His countryman Tadej Pogacar rolled onto the cobblestones of the Champs-Élysées on Sunday as Slovenia’s first Tour de France champion and the youngest winner since World War II. Just 24 hours earlier, after Saturday’s decisive time-trial, Pogacar had staggered off his bike after one of the greatest rides in Tour history and was handed a phone. His girlfriend, also a pro cyclist, was on the line.

But not even that monumental comeback is enough for Pogacar to guarantee himself the coveted Male Athlete of the Year crown. The competition has never been stiffer.

As Pogacar stood atop the podium in Paris, just above Roglic, he capped the greatest week in his country’s sporting history—or at least the greatest week not in the winter. As the cyclists were ripping through the Pyrenees and the Alps, Doncic was being named to the All-NBA first team, while Goran Dragic was the leading scorer of the hottest team in the Disney World bubble, the Miami Heat.

“Nice times. Nice times in Slovenia,” said Luka Mezgec, one of five Slovenians to start this year’s Tour. “It’s quite euphoric at the moment.”

Slovenia isn’t used to such a bounty of sports triumphs, but these are heady days for the republic of the former Yugoslavia. Slovenian riders are one-two at the Tour de France. Slovenian basketball players are NBA phenoms. A Slovenian woman is the First Lady of the United States.

This is all from a country with the population of Queens. Their cyclists have made almost no mistakes while covering more than 2,000 miles. The Mets can’t even make it 90 feet.

Almost every Slovenian is a sports fan, according to the Slovenian government, and Slovenia does not care what sport you play—only that you are Slovenian. Being a sports fan in Slovenia will keep you awake until the wee hours of the morning to watch the NBA playoffs and require you to spend three weeks in the summer watching a bicycle race. And that’s before the Winter Olympics roll around and the entire country stops to watch skiers race or jump down mountains. (Not by coincidence, Roglic is a former ski jumper.)



Luka Dončić was named to the All-NBA first team this season.

PHOTO: DAMJAN ZIBERT/NURPHOTO/ZUMA PRESS

Pogacar’s thrilling comeback on Saturday on the last competitive stage of the Tour was a breakthrough moment for a 21-year-old Slovenian sensation. As it happens, it was not the first.

Dončić’s buzzer-beater in the first round of the NBA playoffs was a breathtaking shot for the league’s most promising young superstar. This week he was named the youngest first-

team All-NBA selection since LeBron James, and it's become clear that the kid from Akron will be leaving the league in the hands of a kid from Ljubljana.

Doncic's season with the Dallas Mavericks is over, but there is another Slovenian still in the NBA playoffs. Dragic is the top scorer for the league's most surprising team, the Heat, who have a 2-1 series lead in the Eastern Conference Finals. He may be isolated from the outside world and far, far away from his native country. But what's happening across the Atlantic isn't lost on him: Dragic took a quick break from bubble tedium last week to retweet compliments for the Tour cyclists.

For a country that only gained independence in 1991, athletic successes were once few and far between. Slovenia didn't win its first summer Olympic gold medal until 2000, and the country's shiniest hardware is limited to rowing, shooting, judo and throwing hammers. As it turns out, when you have only 2 million people, it's tricky to find 11 who can play soccer.

"We never really believed in ourselves," said Samo Peter Medved, the vice mayor of Maribor, Slovenia. "We didn't believe we could be a nation of winners."

That changed when Doncic and Dragic powered Slovenia to a stunning EuroBasket title in 2017. Winning alone would have been enough for Slovenia. What made it even sweeter was how they did it.

"We won the final match against the Serbs," Medved said, "who always thought we were only good in skiing."



Luka Doncic, left, and Goran Dragic during Slovenia's 2017 EuroBasket run.

PHOTO: OZAN KOSE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Medved led a delegation of more than 5,000 Slovenians, by his estimation, that descended on Miami this year to bask in the national glory of Doncic vs. Dragic at a Heat-Mavericks game. There weren't as many Slovenians in the crowd for a Mavericks game against the Los Angeles Lakers a few months earlier. But something happened on that night that would stick with Doncic forever.

In the middle of the game, to his great surprise, he overheard a familiar language coming from a fan in courtside seats. When he looked behind him, he recognized the speaker: Kobe Bryant was taunting him in Slovenian. Doncic had never been so delighted to be heckled.

For the past three weeks, the sound of Slovene has been heard all over the French countryside, too. Slovenian national television and radio have been at the race for three weeks. Tony ski resorts in the French Alps now have Slovenian flags painted all over the road. And Roglic and Pogacar have been firmly in charge since the moment the Tour turned into the mountains. On Stage 15, one of the hardest of this race, the pair of Slovenians went 1-2 ahead of a group of pure climbers from Colombia.

“For me,” Roglic said, “it was a Slovenian day.”

That prompted Slovenian president Borut Pahor, the man for whom every day is a Slovenian day, to share a photo of a letter he had written Roglic after a stage win in 2018. The letter featured a stick-figure doodle, on presidential letterhead, of Roglic racing downhill to the finish while defending champion Chris Froome struggled on the climb.

It was a blunt message: Don't mess with Slovenia on a mountain.

That's the one place where Slovenians were already established as world beaters, including two-time Olympic skiing gold medalist Tina Maze, double-world skiing champion Ilka Stuhec and ski jumper Peter Prevc. Now the skiers are the ones in awe of the basketball players and cyclists. Stuhec has become the country's most decorated Instagram commenter, systematically leaving a crown underneath their posts on social media.

"It's a small country," Mezgec said. "Everybody knows each other—especially the top athletes."

But also the not-so-top athletes. One fan waving a Slovenian flag in Bourg-en-Bresse, France on Friday claimed his own close connection to the man in the yellow jersey: He was the first cycling coach of Roglic's first cycling coach.

Stanislav Pernat, 55, had traveled to the middle of France just to catch a glimpse of his countrymen blazing past him, and Slovenia's national cycling federation expects hundreds more to make the trip on Sunday to party on the Champs-Élysées.

"It's nice to see that Slovenians now are accepted like a big nation," Pernat said. "Like USA!"

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