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Ex-judge hired to represent coach in admissions scandal

By Glenn Jeffers
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Former federal judge and prosecutor Stephen G. Larson has agreed to represent Jovan Vavic, the USC water polo coach indicted in a nationwide college admissions scandal involving several elite schools.

On Monday, Vavic hired Los Angeles-based Larson, a founding member of Larson O'Brien LLP. Larson will accompany Vavic when the coach appears in a Boston court March 25.

"Jovan is one of the leading and most decorated water polo coaches in the United States and a family man of renowned integrity," Larson said in an emailed statement Wednesday. "He is innocent of these charges and he will prove so in court."

Larson's involvement is just the latest in a series of high-profile cases for the seasoned trial lawyer. In 2016, Larson served as an independent monitor overseeing reforms to the Orange County district attorney's office in the wake of its jail informants' scandal.

Larson's firm also represented a former client of attorney Michael J. Avenatti who alleged the onetime presidential candidate pocketed money secured in a settlement, then later tried to loan the money back at 10 percent interest.

In one of his better-known cases, Larson successfully defended Rancho Cucamonga developer Jeff Burum and two former San Bernadino County officials following an eight-month-long corruption trial in 2017. Prosecutors alleged Burum paid \$400,000 in political contributions to county officials to push through a \$102 million settlement in favor of Colonies Partners LP, Burum's investor group.

Vavic is charged with accepting \$250,000 from William "Rick" Singer, the owner of the Newport Beach test-prep service at the heart of the national admissions scandal.

According to the federal indictment, Vavic took the money as payment for designating two students as recruits for the water polo team,



Larson O'Brien LLP founding member Stephen G. Larson

Daily Journal photo

facilitating their admission to USC. Singer also made payments to the private school Vavic's children attend in exchange for future designations, according to the indictment.

In a phone interview Wednesday, Larson said. "I have a long history of working on federal criminal cases on all sides, and I draw from that experience in our representations."

Larson said his involvement in this case is somewhat personal. A graduate of USC Gould School of Law, Larson acknowledged "an affinity" for the university and its many athletic programs before touting Vavic's accomplishments as a coach, including 16 combined water polo national championships.

"He has led the water polo program to greatness across the country," Larson said of Vavic. "I've gotten to know him personally. He's a good man, and I'm very proud to be representing him."

A spokesperson with the U.S. attorney's

office for the District of Massachusetts declined comment.

Larson is one of several California lawyers heading to Boston, including Perry J. Viscounty of Latham & Watkins LLP, who is representing actress Lori Loughlin, who is charged with her husband, fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli, for allegedly paying Singer to secure spots for her daughters at USC.

David K. Willingham and Michael V. Schafner, partners in Boies Schiller Flexner LLP's Los Angeles office, are representing Davina Isackson and her husband, Bruce, president of WP Investments, a commercial real estate development and investment company in Hillsborough. They allegedly paid more than \$600,000 to get their daughters into UCLA and USC as student-athletes.

Federal prosecutors charged both Loughlin and the Isacksons with conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud.