
“Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History from SEED Project to the Basketball Africa League (BAL)”

An Information & Knowledge Exchange project funded by SOAS University of London. *Under the direction of Dr J Simon Rofe, Reader in Diplomatic and International Studies, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London* jsimon.rofe@soas.ac.uk

Transcript: Will Voigt

Head Coach, Angola Men’s National Team (2017-Present)
Head Coach, Nigeria Men’s National Team (2015-2016)

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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Could you please state your name, age, and how you first become involved with basketball?

Will Voigt

My name is Will Voigt. I'm 43 years old and I first arrived to the basketball world as a young player in rural Vermont shooting on a basket that was put up in a barn on an uneven floor.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff:

And you certainly had a very wide career in and around the game since then both as a player and then coach at all sorts of different levels. How did you first become involved with basketball and Africa?

Will Voigt

My first experience, I was friends with Masai Ujiri and Masai was talking about what later became GOA [Giants of Africa] and what later became basketball without borders. This is before any of those events had happened but he had the vision of it. So, the very first year he was going to do camps in Nigeria, he asked me to come and be a part of it. That was the first time for me being in Africa.

Back then it was actually in Zaria, but I came back later to work additional camps in Lagos, and we'd do stuff at Seed Academy in Senegal as part of those trips. So, I got to say I think 2003 was the first time I went over. And then I've been over obviously a lot since. But that's what started the ball rolling.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And you have also much more recently been involved with basketball in Angola as a coach of the men's national team, correct?

Will Voigt

Yeah. Well, I also coached the Nigerian men's national team.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay, great. Terrific. And so first thinking more broadly and generally, what is it about basketball's growth and development in Africa that is driven your continued interest in work on the continent?

Will Voigt

Well, I mean again, I have to thank Masai for really pulling me in to that environment. But there's just that thing about ... There's just something about Africa that's so unique. And I think

for me the biggest thing was just seeing how these kids blossom when given an opportunity. So, I felt compelled by that and if there was a way for me to help then I wanted to do that. But then the national team stuff really came about in a different way.

So, obviously I think the national team isn't necessarily about giving and, you know what I mean, there's obviously high stakes when you're competing and all those things. But part of what I always wanted to do as both the Nigeria and Angola national team coach was to really build the grassroots infrastructure for the game as part of that.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Certainly, I think on the national team side, it's a very different side of sports diplomacy a little bit more formal, right? You are representing the nation in different tournaments and so forth. But I think maybe more generally, can you articulate a little bit or to the extent that you can, how basketball has changed in both Angola and Nigeria over the years that you've been involved and witnessed it?

Will Voigt

Well. Certainly, with Nigeria you're seeing more and more Nigerian players playing at a really high level. It's more and more Nigerians in the NBA and high-level Nigerians. And even some players who maybe weren't initially associated with Nigeria thinking about Giannis Antetokounmpo and Victor Oladipo and some of these guys are really identifying now with their African roots, which was cool to see. And same with Angola. Bruno Fernando was the first Angolan player ever drafted to the NBA.

And then there's some young players in the space too that are really promising. You're seeing more and more of these guys have an opportunity to matriculate to the U.S. and to the NBA. But there's also such a heightened awareness of basketball culture on the continent. You see Joel Embiid and [Pascal] Siakam and all these guys who were now having success. I think it has really driven that interest level for everyone else.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, in what way when we talk about role models and what helps to drive and inspire kids to play it, do you think it is in your sense, if the kids seeing these homegrown stars who are making it in the NBA and elsewhere, or is it driven more by American NBA stars or a combination? I find that everyone sees this playing out a little bit more differently. Or is it national team stars or community leaders who help to inspire, encourage kids to really get to the game?

Will Voigt

I mean, I think it's all of it. There's a resource component, that I think you didn't list that is crucial. I mean, something as simple as a court and a ball and shoes can't be taken for granted. I

think really the work that Masai and Amadou have done. And then now as a result the NBA being involved and now BAL and all these things, it's just providing more and more resources to young children. And then you combine that with an awareness of, "Hey, people have done this."

It's always great to see the famous guys all the time coming back. And I think that's really important too. So, the NBA signing up their game every year. Basketball without borders, the NBA academies, all these things are driving that awareness, but they're also providing resources for these kids to develop.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Which is a key part of the equation. Thinking rather broadly still, how do you personally from your experience and perspectives views the intersections of basketball and diplomacy as they relate to the African continent and, or more specifically to Angola or Nigeria?

Will Voigt

Well, it depends on how you define diplomacy. I mean, basketball is tied to Angolan culture in a much stronger way than it's tied to Nigerian culture.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How so?

Will Voigt

I mean, there's a long tradition of winning in Angola and winning with homegrown players. And that makes it the big difference. So, we were able to start a momentum with Nigeria when I was there that has since continued. But the majority of those players grew up in the U.S. Even though they were born in Nigeria, they have Nigerian parents, they didn't ... They weren't necessarily products of Nigeria. And I think that's what's really exciting about the BAL [Basketball Africa League].

And I think one of their big goals is to have somebody from start to finish develop within the continent. It's going to be really, really big. In terms of diplomacy, basketball and all sport really ... For me it's been a really interesting experience because you play against countries from all over the world and all of them have a different take on the game and they play it in a different way. And you see different styles they play and the styles generally reflect those countries as well, which I always thought was pretty cool.

I think the more that the game grows on the continent, the more that hopefully the people for these countries will see that. I'm in a unique position where I go all over Africa and we play against other African teams and I could see how their teams reflect their cultures. But there are plenty of fans who maybe don't realize that. So, that's always been a takeaway that I've had.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Drilling onto the Angola side a little bit obviously it's a country has a very different history in a very different relationship with the sport of basketball than the Nigerian one. I've heard it said and written a little bit that there was one thing that really helped, the divides during and after the civil war in Angola and that part of that was basketball and sport.

Will Voigt

Yeah. Obviously, I can't attest to what life was like before or during. But, it's been a part of their culture and a source of pride for them for a really long time. And certainly, when you're in the middle of the civil war you're searching for any bright spot. So, the players from that era, I can attest firsthand. They are still legends and are still around the game and in gyms and really revered by the fans. And I know that I was in a million conversations, obviously just listening but from people talking about, who are the best five players ever?

Who is the best shooter and who is the best point guard, which national team was the best one? So, those teams and that history are still a really big part of the country. And it's just like anything. When you're successful at something, it's a source of pride. And so, for Angola, men's basketball is really the flagship. Football has never been big there. So that was also a big difference between Angola and Nigeria where they've had interest in football and football will probably always be King in Nigeria. Whereas Angola I can't imagine a day where they don't associate Angola with basketball.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, for basketball in Angola, is it mostly a men's sport? Is it a sport women are also encouraged to and accepted as playing? Every single culture has very different takes on this.

Will Voigt

No, women are definitely encouraged. There's a professional women's league in Angola. The women's national team has done well. In Nigeria the women's national team has done extremely well. But using a lot of American based players there. I don't know when you go into North Africa if that changes, but certainly in those two countries, yeah, it was big on the women's side as well.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Right. Which now leads to a more general question about who plays and when we think about what potential, the growth of basketball in Africa has and certainly it's opportunities in the sports and diplomacy nexus and how that intersects with the United Nations, SDGs and gender equality. Do you think from what you've witnessed and experienced, do you think that basketball affords, perhaps greater opportunities for gender equality either in Africa or in either one of these two countries, than other sports like football, cricket or rugby?

Will Voigt

It's hard to me to compare it to another sport without really knowing the intricacies of how those other sports operate. Certainly, just on its own I think all of the opportunities that have been created for young boys exist for young girls as well. And I know that's popping up with Masai and with GOA to open these opportunities up for girls and boys. How it compares to football, that I don't know.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. Fair enough. And then coming back to this idea of representation and communication specifically with a view towards either a national team, how have you witnessed or seen how ... For a player representing the nation, how that plays into this equation of basketball and diplomacy and what they're communicating to the rest of the world?

Will Voigt

Well, it was different. So, for Nigeria, most of those players again were primarily American, had been raised in America but had Nigerian roots. And so for them it was a way to honor those roots and honor their family members. And for some of them really be introduced to that culture for the first time. I don't know what the best way is to describe it. Those teams were so excited about the opportunity to be with the national team because it was for them so much bigger than basketball.

Compare that to Angola where now our guys are all homegrown and coming from a place with a long history of success. I think the Angola national team felt pressure to represent the country. It wasn't about this discovery for them it was about, "Man, all these other teams have done so well, we have to continue that legacy." And they've put a lot of pressure on themselves from that. But anytime you get into a national competition there's pressure ... We went to the Olympics, we won AfroBasket for the first time ever with Nigeria. We went to the world cup with Angola.

When you get on those stages and you understand that you're representing your country on those stages, it's a huge deal. And especially when FIBA changed the format where now you're hosting games, when we played home games in Angola, it was unbelievable. I mean, what happens there in the arena was incredible. And there's no way that our players couldn't realize how important it was to perform for our fans.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Yeah, very much. Kind of as a sidebar to that question ... something that's come up with some of my other conversations on this topic is that basketball has helped in the sports diplomacy nexus by affording players an opportunity to travel within Africa and to discover some of the different cultures and places that ... it's been emphasized to me that there isn't the same intra-African

travel and tourism that there is in other regions of the world. Have you experienced any of that? I mean, obviously with the national teams you do travel quite a bit around the continent.

Will Voigt

Yeah. that's a really good point. We take for granted travel. So, you might be going somewhere that on a map doesn't look like it'd be far, but it involves flying a thousand miles North of it to connect somewhere to then find the regional plane that takes you into it. That goes to what I was saying earlier, where all the different countries in Africa have their own unique style of play. When you play North African teams, their style of play is much more similar to Europeans because, they're not as athletic, but they're really big body post players versus okay, now go to West Africa and Nigeria and like these really big athletes.

And then you moved to Senegal and Senegal are these wiry athletes and then you start thinking about, "Why is that?" And then you look at the diet, right? So, Nigeria all the starch and meat and then Senegal, all this vegetables and fish. You were talking about how their teams represent their countries. And that's been one of the coolest things. All these games that we now go to because of FIBA changing it to qualifying games, definitely has opened my eyes as I'm sure the eyes of the players about what these other regions are like. Because they're so different from each other.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

We're going to come back to that when I get into the BAL. But how would you describe the Angolan style of play then?

Will Voigt

Angola is really unique. I have not been to all of Africa, but from my experiences Angola is one of the more European feeling countries in Africa. Their culture represents a lot of Portuguese culture. So, because of that, I think it's an interesting mix of some of the athleticism you see in West African basketball mixed with some of the European style. Typically, Angolans tend to be much smaller and as a result we have to play in a different kind of way. But Angola, because of their history of basketball I think have a really strong feel for the game, which you don't always see on the continent.

Oftentimes you see players with amazing athleticism, but maybe not a great feel, especially at the guard position. And Angola has traditionally had really showman guards. And that's a big part of, I think the culture too. There's just this, if you think like Brazilian culture, there's that similar vibe of just really wanting to have fun and dance and partying and all that. It's a big part of the culture. And the way Angolans play are similar.

It's about a performance, like you won't just grind out a win, you'd have to do it with some style. The guards I think play totally different than the other countries in Africa.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. Speaking of performance, you've now been working in and out of Africa for almost 20 years. How have you noticed the way that people in Africa, their consumption of basketball has changed?

Will Voigt

Well, exposure and availability are crucial components to that. So, being able to watch the games, whether it's televised or streamed. Obviously as internet has improved over those years and connectivity on the continent has improved over those years, that's now exposed more and more people to the game. Whether that's NBA games or national team games within Africa or league games within Africa. And then the things that I already talked about. Basketball Without Borders and GOA and Seed Academy and NBA Academy, all of these things are increasing the awareness of basketball.

So, the more that you hear a story of the kid that went to ... Bruno [Fernando] and Silvio De Sousa are great examples. These are kids just like anybody else and the one that who got an opportunity and now are having success. And believe me, every kid knows that story. So, the more stories like that, that are out there, the more there's an awareness of what basketball can do. I just think as it continues to grow, there's more and more examples for these kids to now look up to and aspire to be.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, that was my next question. How can one continue to inspire kids to dream through the game?

Will Voigt

Yeah. That's where I think the BAL is kind of big. The more that kids can believe that it's possible for them, the better. So, these stories, the outcomes and Bruno Fernando and these kids that made it, I think it'll continue to inspire. The more that you have like that, the better. And then now to have a league on the continent to aspire to, it's just another avenue for them. I think it's only going in a positive direction right now.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. That plays into a related question about identity. From your perspective, your experience, how does basketball help play a role creating identities in Africa?

Will Voigt

Sure. I mean, like I said, first of all the style of plays are unique and I think reflective of the countries themselves. But then something like Angola where, you have a war-torn country that's faced a lot of hardship and had something they could lean on as a source of pride. So, for sure it's a huge part of Angola's history and culture. And I think with Nigeria, as they continue to have success internationally, if they can get homegrown players to come back, it will start being the same way for them.

But there's no question, I think smaller countries too, maybe it has more meaning, but anytime you have somebody ... Everybody loves the rags to riches story. So, I think the more that you have, some kid that came out of nowhere and is now having success, it's a source of pride for the entire country. And I think there's going to be more and more kids that are going to fit that description.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Yeah. So, you did talk about the BAL a little bit with regards to this and certainly inspiring kids through. But curious more generally, how do you think the BAL might help to foster this concept of basketball and diplomacy as representative of Africa and what Africa is communicating about itself to the rest of the world?

Will Voigt

Yeah. I mean, in my own experience, I'm always reluctant to talk about stuff like that as a white American, but Africa has a history of outsiders coming and taking these amazing resources that they have. So, whether that is slave labor, moving forward, diamonds, oil, all of these other resources, you can't help but feel how they feel. I think it's really important now that there's these great stories of these guys that we're talking about who made it to the NBA. But the story of somebody who did it all within the continent is something entirely different.

So, when that happens, the day that happens, and to me that's what the BAL can provide, that is going to be a huge sense of pride. And I get that and I understand that and I'm always trying to be sensitive of that with all of the coaching and all the work that I've done on the continent. And hopefully people see me as that, not somebody trying to take. But I think you have to be sensitive of that side and the history of what's taken place on the continent.

There haven't been a lot of home-grown success stories and if this league can become that and provide opportunities for kids, I think it's going to be tremendous.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And this brings another question to mind; there's been a lot of discussion in terms of whether the BAL is a new colonial thing or not. Certainly, it's created and conceived and implemented by

Africans. It's African initiative, but it's also an initiative in the NBA which is American or most people acquainted us American even as the NBA self has globalized.

Will Voigt

Yeah. I think the people behind it are what makes that different. I mean, Amadou [Gallo Fall, President of the Basketball Africa League] I've known for a long time, I have referenced him already, several times in our conversation. And I think he's really been the driving force behind all these things. Basketball Without Borders and the NBA game being played on the continent and all of these things. This isn't just an NBA directive. I mean, they have Africans who are spearheading these movements. So obviously, Masai and all these people are going to be sensitive to that fact.

But I also know [Senior Vice President, NBA International Basketball Operations] Kim Bohuny and Kim is an incredible person, and her ability to understand cultures and connect all the dots for people. And she wouldn't be a part of something that was like that. So, I think an outsider that probably didn't know the inner workings of the BAL and how it came about and what it's initiative and goals are, maybe would say something like that. But I think if you look deeper, you'll realize that it's not that at all.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

You've mentioned you've participated in Seed Academy, Seed Project work before. From where you sit, how has seed project impacted basketball and diplomacy in Africa both in the continent as well as outside of it?

Will Voigt

Well, to my knowledge, it was the first basketball Academy on the continent. Obviously Amadou could speak on this better than I could. But he knew from his own experiences the opportunities that could come from basketball and set up a school which could provide that for kids. And as these kids first started coming over to the US and receiving scholarships and gone on to have success in not just basketball but in other walks of life I think it really shined the light on the possibilities of doing that. He did this in just one spot on the continent.

I think that really opened the door for what you're seeing and what you will continue to see. So, with NBA academies now being developed and more, more basketball facilities being built and more and more projects coming about with the same premise of, "If you just provide these kids with the resources, you're going to be amazed at what they can achieve."

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Great. And I guess a very similar question, but through the lens of giants of Africa, which is quite different, how has that program impacted basketball and diplomacy in Africa?

Will Voigt

I think it's the same. My first year with GOA, we had several kids who walked miles and miles and miles barefoot and had never seen a basketball before in their life, came to a week-long camp that we provided and then moved on to get division one scholarships in the US and get an education. So, I think it's all the same thing. It showed people what happens when you provide these kids even just the minimal resources. Even with just a week of basketball and shoes and introducing them to the game and look what these guys were able to do with that.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. And now going onto the BAL, you were one of the coaches at the combine that was held in New York, in Brooklyn back in December? Are you involved in the BAL in any other kind of way?

Will Voigt

No. I don't have any official role with them. I've gotten to know most of the people involved in the league, both at the NBA New York headquarters, and the NBA Africa offices. Obviously Amadou and I have a long friendship together and I've gotten to know Kim well. So, I've just tried to be a resource to them. They came to Luanda for the African final four last year, which is the template from which the BAL is built around. So, I was there and tried as best I could facilitate what they needed while they were there and also help them transition.

For some of them from the New York offices, they'd never been to Africa or never been to Angola. I'll continue to do that. I explained to them to use me as they see fit and obviously all of us want to see the league be successful.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Right. I've met just entire enthusiasm across the board. It's a big project they've undertaken. From where you sit, what are maybe two of the biggest challenges that the BAL is ... Has to tackle to get off the ground?

Will Voigt

Well, I know there's a lot. I know that they've already spent a lot of time going to each of the host cities, really understanding what the facilities look like. Understanding, the security apparatus for each one. I think one of the biggest things is learning how to deal with the federations within each of the countries, learning how to put some people at ease in terms of what their intentions are with the league. There's got to be travel stuff that we already touched on. Sometimes getting teams from place to place isn't as easy as you'd think.

The leagues within the continent are all very, very different in terms of levels of professionalism. So, they're definitely going to be some teams in the BAL that don't have a lot of experience in

operating a team at the level of professionalism that the league has aspired to. So, what's the learning curve for those clubs? I think that could be a challenge in the early years.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

That's a really interesting one that hasn't come up yet. But there was certainly a lot of opportunities. Looking into your crystal ball, what does success for the ball look like in like five years?

Will Voigt

Wow, Five years. Again, I think the more that these teams become self-operating and providing opportunities for homegrown players to play at a high level with teams that they can trust will pay them on time and be professional in how they develop them, would be awesome. So, if they've established even 12, ... Even if it's still just 12, but it's 12 reliable teams throughout the continent, I think that's a great starting point.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. Terrific. Thanks. I know we've touched on a lot of different areas. Is there anything I have not yet asked you about basketball and diplomacy in Africa that you think I should ask or you'd want to ... You want to raise and mention now?

Will Voigt

I don't know. Honestly this whole conversation I've been trying to put my head around, how would I define diplomacy? It's a broad word.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

It is, which gives us a lot of flexibility.

Will Voigt

Yeah it does. Again, I think it's about opportunity and I think to me ... I think the BAL and the national teams in some ways do the same thing. Now Nigeria is unique in that they still have a lot of technically American players. Obviously, they hired Mike Brown for this Olympic cycle. So maybe less so for Nigeria. But if you look at all the other teams, they're representative of their country. And I know I've had conversations with the NBA about this because they feel the same way I do.

As we grow the BAL into one of the hopefully more competitive leagues in the world, there should also be a goal of building the national teams to a global standard too. Because I think when you get into those competitions, World Cup, Olympics, whatever it is, and you're starting to play against teams from around the world, it is kind of reflective of those countries. You know

what I mean? There's certainly plenty of countries we've played against where I would have no idea what the level of basketball was in that country until I played their national team.

Korea has a domestic league. Japan has a domestic league. Every country has its own domestic league, but truly understanding what the level is of that league, is hard to know until you play against their players. Right? So, to me that's, I think, an important part of basketball and diplomacy as you move forward. The more that these teams can have success on a global stage against teams from other countries, I think there's an overall respect level that then comes with it. And there might be certain stigmas that are associated with these countries right now. They can be eliminated through that.

END

Interview with Will Voigt, Match 2020

Basketball Coach; Head Coach, Men's National Team (Angola)

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