
“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 Mbiakop
Senior Director Africa, National Basketball Association

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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Will Mbiakop

My name is Will Mbiakop. I'm 40 years old. How did I get into the basketball world? I started playing when I was in high school and I was not too bad, so I got selected into a higher level and enjoyed the game very much. And after playing at the age of 17, 18, I kind of stopped playing seriously and my parents advised me to focus on my studies, which I did. But meanwhile, I still had the passion for the game and therefore started organizing basketball camp, basketball events, basketball properties and that's how I've always been connected to the basketball world.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Where did you grow up and what was basketball like in that area at the time?

Will Mbiakop

I was born in Cameroon, but I grew up in France. So, I started playing in France, in the outskirts of Paris and then a little bit up North in the area that we called Picardy, which is the name of the region. Yeah, so that's where I played.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How did you first become involved with basketball in Africa? What was your transition from basketball where you were growing up in France to bringing the game back to the continent?

Will Mbiakop

So, a friend of mine created a basketball academy many, many years ago and he was also helping me as a basketball coach in my basketball camp. So, we both have the same thought and belief. We believe in the transformative power of sports. It has helped me a lot as an individual and as a professional as well. So, I thought that I would help him with his basketball academy that he was running in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

You've had all kinds of experiences with basketball diplomacy and Africa, certainly from a variety of different angles. How do you view the intersections of basketball and diplomacy as they relate to the African continent?

Will Mbiakop

Well, I think it's really powerful because basketball is sport, and sport has this unbelievable power of uniting people. There's very few venues around the world where you put a hundred thousand people in the same arena and all of those a hundred thousand people would experience

the same emotion and will all be brought together instantly. The emotion of the buzzer beater in basketball or a goal in football. And that helps because in our continent, obviously, there are often issues that are related to war, ethnicity, lack of tolerance, discrimination, and all this stuff. And I think sports is a powerful vehicle to oversee, to overcome those challenges, and obviously boost the diplomatic efforts.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And how has your understanding of the intersection of basketball and diplomacy changed as a result of your work in and around basketball?

Will Mbiakop

In Africa? Or as a...

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Yes. Well, both.

Will Mbiakop

I think it's very different. I think last time we talked about... intangible assets. Intangible assets. So, you questioned about my perception of sports diplomacy in Africa versus another continent. I feel like Africa has inherent qualities, assets and that the other part of the world may not have. And I'm talking about the intangible assets which can be summarized as values, norms, heritage, customs, education, way of behaving. So, you can definitely establish some behavioural trend that Africa has and that are very specific to Africa. So, I feel like sports and diplomacy gets a special boost because in Africa, because of those intangible assets that are part of the African DNA. If that makes sense.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Yes, it does. I'm wondering, do you have a particular anecdote or example that springs to mind that could illustrate this?

Will Mbiakop

Yeah well, the obvious one is the fact that, obviously on the continent because of those challenges that we're experiencing every day, I feel like sometimes kids or people in general, not like kids, but people will appreciate things more. The little things that you'll do, they'll appreciate more because the environment is slightly more challenging than in the Western world.

So, because of that better appreciation of things, of gesture, of activities or whatever you do, or even in terms of behaviour, appreciating the fact that someone will come and talk to them and share their experience, share what they've learned from different experiences, they will definitely

appreciate more. And as you relate to people in the ground of tribalism, which is a big thing in Africa, the issues that we have between tribes. So, sports, for instance, has that ability to unite and to go over the tribalism issues that we have.

For instance, in Côte d'Ivoire, I recall that game, it was a football game a couple of years back. It was prior to the African Nation Cup, and Côte d'Ivoire was playing against another team, and Côte d'Ivoire won that game. And back then, there was the civil war between Ivorians. And I remember at the end of the game they interview football legend [Didier] Drogba, and Didier was... Instead of talking about the game, he actually kneeled down with the entire team and begged the entire nation to stop the war. So, I felt that was powerful because during those minutes of football game, our country was rooting for one team, but that team was made of people representing Ivorian unity, Ivorian culture, Ivorian nation.

So, I thought that that was a powerful a story. And also, another story is maybe during the war, civil war in Angola, I remember the basketball legend Jean Jacques Conceição was telling me about... He was in the army back then. He was playing ball for army team. And he was saying that the only time during the civil war, the only time where there was cease-fire was during basketball time, where team were playing the game. And afterwards actually the president of basketball had an ability to unite people. That's why basketball is so big in Angola. So those are couple of examples.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I wanted to kind of drill down a little bit. You've done a wide variety of work across the African continent, through the NBA and through other initiatives. From your perspective and experience, who are the key stakeholders in developing or conducting basketball diplomacy in Africa. And what do you think their impact has been? And what kind of success do you think they've had?

Will Mbiakop

Well look, I think obviously the NBA has played a transformative role, I'll always be biased here because I work for the NBA. I think the NBA played a role in partnership with two groups. I'd like to mention the U.S. Department of State and the Sports Envoy program, I think that's something we can definitely not discount. I also want to mention the people who never get the spotlight, they never get the shine but they are people who are working on the day to day basis with kids across the continent. Those people may not have an established association, club or organization but they train work.

And I think those guys are the key people to actually boost diplomacy on the continent. Obviously, they need help, they need to be structured better, they need to learn the code of the rules of the game of engagement. But again, those people to me are critical. They are community leaders, but they are critical to the success of sports diplomacy on the continent.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How are the changing ways of consuming basketball changing the ways that people both learn about the game as well as is starting to impact this intersection of basketball and diplomacy? Do you see this as having an impact in basketball in Africa and basketball diplomacy and how it can be used as a people to people exchange and knowledge exchange?

Will Mbiakop

Yeah, I think the digital world has revolutionized the entire world, not only from a basketball perspective but, from a sports perspective, from a social perspective, from a business perspective. I think the way we consume things now has changed, I think information is more accessible and it's actually a good thing. Even in education when look at the massive online courses, those are great. The move to make education more accessible. So definitely it's changed. I think it allow us to talk skill ability now. Before, you were able to reach 1,000 maybe 2,000, now you're talking about millions. So, the scale and the reach that you can get through those digital assets are quite impressive.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, how is basketball playing a role in creating identities in Africa, whether it's regional identities, smaller identities, larger global identities? How is basketball helping to format this?

Will Mbiakop

I think that basketball, like any other sport, help from a certain perspective, from a cultural perspective. When you talk about pride as well makes you sense of belonging, all those different elements. The great thing specifically about basketball is that in the NBA we have roughly 10% of our players who are from Africa, are African decent and a little less than 20 players being African nationals. That means he's growing up in the DRC in South Africa, in Algeria, in Senegal. Kids, they have people and players to relate to. They can proudly say that, 'Oh, these guys coming from my village or my area, my region, and he managed to make it to the NBA.' So those success stories bring role model inspirational people who would definitely inspire the youth.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And how do you inspire a kid through basketball in Africa, even if it's not to be the next grand star in the NBA?

Will Mbiakop

My view is that you can be inspiring without being an NBA superstar, an NBA player. I feel like the game itself, it's value. The way it's played the way it's experienced, the game itself suffice,

it's good enough. Because you can inspire kids by teaching them the game of basketball. And I'm going back to those community leaders I was telling you about, those guys who are working day in and day out. Those are the people I really praise because if they teach the game the right way, there's so many great values attached to diplomacy that you will develop. Tolerance, learning from each other, discipline, respect, all of those things.

Like when we talk respect and tolerance in a team of five or 10 people, you're going to have people from different tribe, people from different colour, origin, religion, and you're going to have to play with them because you can't play the game on your own. If you want to win that game, you have to leverage on the skillsets of all your teammates. And sometimes you have to catch up for their weaknesses just like they will do for you. So, this sense of teamwork and togetherness is to me, what is the most inspiring. The players and the stars come as a bonus but the game itself should suffice.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And certainly, women are part of this. From your point of view, in what ways does basketball in Africa afford perhaps greater opportunities for women and girls in terms of working towards a Sustainable Development Goal 5 Gender Equality?

Will Mbiakop

Well, I think that first of all, the sport of basketball as I think you pointed out, the sport of basketball speaks to male and women equally. When we look at the stats and the reports done by Nielsen in terms of our fan base and practice of the game of basketball, we are almost equal, we almost 50/50. I think it's 55 male and 45 female.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Even in Africa?

Will Mbiakop

That is in Africa, in Africa yes. The Nielsen report showed that. So obviously it's great, it shows that our games speak equally to both genders. And again, the great thing about it is that we have female African players who have made it big internationally in Europe, in Asia and also in the WNBA.

I'm thinking of, for instance, Astou N'diaye from Kaolack. She's from a small village in Senegal, played the game of basketball, embrace her difference, because she was different from the average Senegalese. She was tall, she was strong, but she was good and she was good with herself, her self-esteem was okay, she embraced who she was. She takes pride in her identity, she took pride in her difference and she made it big in the US, WNBA champion. So those are the type of stories you want to tell.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, how has SEED Project and the Seed Academy impacted the intersection of basketball and diplomacy in Africa? Certainly, it's focused on Senegal in West Africa, but it has a little bit more of a weight to it, more globally.

Will Mbiakop

I think it's been a great platform, it's been going on for 20 years. So, 20 years of relationship building, of a youth training and development, of international connection, which is great because when we talk international, I'd like to think Africa first and obviously the world second. So, they've been able to establish relationships with other neighbouring countries and beyond. I'm thinking of Côte d'Ivoire Mauritania, Kenya, Nigeria, Gabon et cetera, et cetera, Cameroon. So, I think when you talk full diplomacy, you definitely have to consider those international relationship.

But also, actually I'd like to point out the fact that a couple of years back in Kédougou, a region of Senegal, there was some issues. People want to be independent. So, I think somehow with their contribution to the donation of Senegal, the country of Senegal, they've been able to help keep people together. Talking about Senegal pride and talking about the culture, hospitality, spirits. Those things are kind of helpful in an environment where people want to split. And that's what was happening with the Kédougou conflict a couple of years back.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How do you view the potential of the BAL to develop basketball in Africa as well as to serve as a basketball diplomacy initiative?

Will Mbiakop

Well first of all, it's the first time ever, it's history in the making. For the first time you're going to have a professional pan-African league on the continent. This is huge, it will provide opportunity to a lot of people across the continent. When I talk about opportunities, I'm not talking about players only, I'm talking about older people who will be working on this. Knowing the clubs and the teams, I'm thinking of the people who are going to do the marketing of the BAL, the people who are going to do the event side, all the different jobs, the sports jobs that are attached to the organization of a legal event for game.

So, number one, it provides opportunity, sporting opportunities, but also business opportunities. When you talk about sports diplomacy, I'd like to think that the BAL will play its part in uniting people. Right now, the BAL is a pan-African league, meaning that we have 12 countries represented, so 12 country represented, that means 12 different nations, 12 different cultures, 12 different nation representing the diversity of Africa. And talking about peace relationship, growing relationship between countries, growing relationship between people, making sure that

people understand each other, learn from each other and teach to each other and grow from that experience. I hope that BAL will be that back home.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How do you think that BAL might help to facilitate greater communication and representation about Africa to the wider world?

Will Mbiakop

Well, I think the BAL is an innovative initiative and I think people appreciate innovation. So that's number one. Number two, the BAL is a pan-African league that will give a platform for success locally to Africans. So, you don't see need to go to the NBA to become a professional basketball player. You can be a professional basketball player leading in the city you grew up, that city that you were dying to represent when you were a kid. We have this sense of belonging and sense of pride when you grew up in a certain neighbourhood. So now the BAL is giving you a chance to do so. And last year I think the BAL will be that platform that showcase that Africa got talent. And again, the talent is not only on the basketball court but all around the game. And I'm thinking about the infrastructure, I'm thinking about the marketeers, all the events manager, all the people who will be working on it. So hopefully the world can see that Africa can deliver a primetime event, the five-star event across the continent.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What do you think BAL success looks like in five years?

Will Mbiakop

Wow. I don't know. I honestly don't know. I hope that fans love it. We have great audience in the arenas around the arenas, we managed to showcase talent across the board. We obviously, we on digital, we are inclusive. I think the success of BAL is not only the success of the NBA, I think the success of BAL, the true success of the BAL is that that people of Africa fully embrace it and make it their success.

END

Interview with Will Mbiakop, March 2020

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