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

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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Amadou Gallo Fall

My name is Amadou Gallo Fall, I am 56 and I grew up in Senegal. I was introduced to basketball in my late teenage years. Our [Senegal's] national team at the time was pretty dominant on the African continental stage, both the men and women's teams. My brother, who was studying in France at the time, brought me back a basketball during one of his summer trips back home, so I started playing. At first, I was playing on my own and then someone suggested that I should join a team. So, I joined the Dakar University club. I learned very fast. I didn't realize [at the time] that I already had the tools [height, athleticism] that were actually an advantage in basketball. We all grew up playing around with a soccer ball, anywhere, everywhere and all the time...

Playing basketball, so to speak, was not really planned. Nowadays children engage in all kinds of activities at school, whether it is music or sports or swimming. This was not a luxury we had at the time. And so, you play soccer, because that's what you see and have access to. You can play it anywhere making it a privilege to play another sport. But I was lucky.

Again, as I said, my brother brought me a basketball. But then, once you have the basketball, you need to find a court. And it is not like there are courts everywhere. So – I vividly remember these times – when in my hometown, Kaolack, I would jump the fence of the local high school that had the only court, and then the watchman would come chasing me off away with a stick. So these are maybe some of the reasons why today I am so passionate about really making the game accessible, to make sure young people don't have to go through experiences like that. We want to have courts everywhere so children can play if they wish to... Make the game accessible, allow young people with talent to discover that maybe they have a special talent, much earlier than I did, and a lot of people who played in my era did.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And when you were growing up, did you have a sports idol, or a sports inspiration who drove you?

Amadou Gallo Fall

Certainly, but it is in a diverse array of sports. You watched Muhammad Ali. You followed football, especially at the national level, there were so many big local stars that you heard about on the radio and watched on TV. And then, as you get exposed to international sports, especially through the Olympic Games, you notice some incredibly gifted track athletes, other high performers from around the world. That's the beauty of sports, it goes beyond borders. And then in basketball, some of the names you were reading about, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Larry Bird, obviously Magic Johnson, Patrick Ewing during his Georgetown days. They are the names that stood out in our game. Then you hear about Hakeem Olajuwon who was really a central figure, seeing someone from where I was from, Africa, dominating on the global stage.

Those are discoveries that allow you to dream, and everything. You kind of actually start forming certain ambitions once you get to a platform. You get closer to any international opportunity to play your sport. So yes, I was inspired by sporting idols. Muhammad Ali certainly, Kareem, and Kipchoge Keino. In my country, especially for me, it was our women's national basketball team that was a big source of inspiration in terms of team sports in Africa. I used to know the names of all those ladies on the team through listening to national radio broadcasts. Those names remain legendary to this day. They were winning African Championships to the tune of, I don't know, seven, eight in a row. I think a total of maybe 11 or 12 all time.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How did basketball and basketball diplomacy help you as a student when you were in Washington DC to learn about the United States, while also allowing you to teach your teammates a little bit about Senegal and your own basketball culture?

Amadou Gallo Fall

I think it all happened organically. Again, it was never planned. I got a scholarship from the University of the District of Columbia to study biology and play basketball. It happened through the course of life.

I was living in Tunisia, and I met Kevin Lineberger. Kevin was a friend of the [basketball] coach at UDC and when he went back [to the states] he talked to the coach. The coach sent me a full scholarship offer without having seen me play, just because he was told I was six foot eight. So, I think when things like that start to happen, then you can only imagine that this is bigger than yourself.

When I arrived in DC, I had no preconceived notion about the people for sure. I watched TV, there is always this fascination about America, especially the culture, whether through music or basketball, cinema. So, when I got to DC, it was a wake-up call, because language was a big barrier. And even if you knew a little bit of English, [it was difficult] with the slang and different accent. I took all that in stride, I was very curious, very adventurous. I got excited about discovering something new. In fact, one of the things that I really enjoyed when I moved back to Africa in 2010 after 21 years in the United States was just the opportunity to travel across the continent to different places and discover different countries. So for me, I think maybe that my predisposition, my open-minded attitude and my desire to learn and to discover, was very helpful. It allowed me to put everything in and not be afraid to meet people, interact, and learn new things.

Sport actually was the perfect conduit. That's what it does. It breaks down barriers. Because I was brought to school [UDC] to play the game and study, I had an entry point, just like an ice breaker. Instead of people coming up to you with "Hey, who are you, what do you do?" people knew who you were because you were on the school team, you were passionate about the game of basketball, and you went to classes.

I remember my first week, I was like, "Man, do I really fit in? Am I good enough?" I worried as I was brought over from across the world, given a full scholarship without being seen. What if I'm just terrible and don't fit there? I worried about that, but it was more from a standpoint of wanting to make sure that the faith they put in me was justified. At the end of the day I knew that I would work to make it work. Whatever sacrifices, effort or hard work, it would never be questioned. It turned out to be a great experience. Once you start playing, and everything is okay, now you fit in. And then the rest is really an open canvas from there.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Given this background and how you've subsequently used basketball diplomacy in a variety of different ways after university, both in the United States as well as in Africa, how has basketball diplomacy played a role in Africa over time?

Amadou Gallo Fall

This is a contextual question. I think, when I look back at everything, people did not just one day wake up and decide, "We're going to use basketball as a tool for diplomacy." Things happen in stages.

For me personally, there have been some epiphanies. My journey was always a journey guided by self-discovery. Using basketball as a tool for diplomacy was the natural progression on the general map of where I was going. I always think in terms of purpose, and the purpose for me was to be impactful. And [impact] starts with an individual. You prepare yourself, you acquire tools and skills. And then you either have a platform, or you create a platform, or you find a platform to use your skills. I feel blessed to have gone through the experiences I have gone through. And to ultimately get confirmation that sports is truly a conduit, it is a vector. I have lived that.

I got a scholarship to play basketball and then was exposed to the wonderful people I have met throughout this journey. And meeting people in the [sports] network and having people from that network want to pay attention to whatever I was proposing. So, from the standpoint of trying to figure out a way to combine sports and education as a tool for self-realization for others, we tried to extrapolate these concepts to community development and nation-building. And I think this is where I thought that, okay, diplomacy is served here, right? [For example, when an athlete, like myself, comes from another country]. It can be more effective in some ways than what embassies could probably do from a practical standpoint of obtaining access to universities.

Understanding the network of a major college town with a very strong base of people who are business people, community leaders, or senators, that network becomes interested in where [the athlete] is from. It puts [the athlete's] country on the map. These athletes were playing on

national TV in the US. And many of these young people were not from Dakar, some of them were from other countries, and saw their cities and countries mentioned on ESPN and the likes. I think for me that is the biggest illustration of the diplomatic foray that you speak about.

So, this is something that you realize much later, that you are actually exercising diplomacy without realizing it. I have had the privilege of meeting the under-secretary general of the United Nations. And I guess we were talking about the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals]. As I look at the goals, I realized, okay we have been through this. I think we have been ticking all these boxes. Now it is conceptualized, it is defined. Which is great. But I think what I have learned is that a lot of the things that you get involved in – this is what I talked about earlier – is about committing to a life of purpose, and impact, in terms of caring about something beyond your own individual self-interest. You do so many things without realizing the meaning of it at the time. As you go through life, these things crystallize and get more defined for you. So, in a nutshell, we did that. That is confirmation of sport as a tool. I think whether it is with diplomacy or pushing economic development, or equality across gender, all those notions just magnified once again why sports should be taken seriously and be a part of mainstream conversations around development and community building.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

That's a very good bridge to talk about SEED Project and SEED Academy, which is in its 21st year. And over time SEED has brought together different cultures and nationalities in pursuit of its mission, which you've articulated. Now we understand some of your earlier investors or partners were from the American or French or other basketball worlds. Can you talk a little bit about how some of these early influences may have played a role in how you developed SEED's vision, and its sports diplomacy role?

Amadou Gallo Fall

When you talk about influencers, do you mean people who inspired me, or are you talking about people who have invested initially to help launch the organization?

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Both.

Amadou Gallo Fall

Okay. Again, this is an outgrowth of my story, how I almost stumbled onto the game. I really did not grow up saying I dreamed about basketball. I was a pretty good athlete in multiple sports. I could probably have ran track, we all played football and I was not a terrible at it either. I could hold my own. I was even messing around with a little bit of handball and volleyball. But it was nothing really formal or a serious pursuit. In fact, I had ran a 400 meter track race one time in high school, and the Physical Education teacher was suggesting that I should really think about running track seriously.

But yeah, when I started playing the game of basketball, that was something special. Because the skills that I had were definitely suited for this game. And also, I liked the speed and the fastness. There's no dead time. I liked all the values that this game was forcing me to see and live by. Like being an altruist and developing work ethic. And obviously developing my confidence, because you have to have confidence to open and catch the ball and truly play when the opportunity is there.

In my formative years, I was really always drawn to Africa. At a personal level, I think it's just human nature, we all want to be part of something big, special and unique. Whatever misconceptions or negative portrayals that were indifferent. And deep inside I knew that, not that I am more special than people from other places, but I definitely knew that I was from a place that is special. And then when you read through history, all the great people who fought in so many ways to usher independence of our countries, some of these people did it through literature or art, some through politics, some by force, or by any means that they saw necessary. So, you read through all those stories and the literature. And yes, there was a special identity, especially a cultural identity. Through the historical literature that you read, you really get enamored by how you can contribute to bringing respectability to the continent and let other cultures in the world know that the negative things being portrayed [about Africa] are blatant lies. And that there is an

opportunity for anybody who wanted to really learn the truth about Africa to see that, through whoever you come in contact with from the diaspora

So long story short, I saw that sport was a path and the door was opening. Even in the US here in school, some people were thinking that I was different. Different from what? They thought I was different from the perception that they had of Africans. And okay, I was no different. Just that I had a chance to live here, and because I played sports it kind of broke stereotypes and misconceptions, so I allowed myself to learn. So, the influence was that of all those independence intellectuals, such as Frantz Fanon. And my brother gave me a book and actually made me read about all these guys. I developed a consciousness. You want to be part of contributing to the growth, the image, the knowledge of Africa, and the life that you want it to be. This is why everything I've done using sport as a platform is really coming from that background. You meet likeminded people, like [Donnie] Nelson, who's currently still the president of basketball operations for the Dallas Mavericks.

That's where it all started. And then you start realizing there is no limit to really where you can take this. And in fact, talking about the starting point, we started in 1998, but officially had a program that we launched in Senegal in 2002 when I traveled with Tariq Abdul-Wahad. At the time, he was on our team at the Mavericks. And we went to Senegal because of an inspiration. He was from French Guyana, had never been to Africa and wanted to go. So, we went and had an incredible time, and he saw a lot of the work we were doing. Clinics with coaches, players, and camp after camp. And then it was really when I shared the vision I had. Instead of maybe taking one player every year, one or two to follow my footsteps to go to the US, play in high school and ultimately in college, we wanted to build the system in Senegal to reach more young people. And this is where we spent the time in 2002. Tariq was the first person to commit to get that off the ground.

And from then, it was really the NBA communities, people that we used to run with. They all started in the [sports] business. And scouts of different teams like Lance Blanks, Kevin Pritchard, who's now the president at the Indiana Pacers, all contributed. Many of these people went on to run teams now. Masai Ujiri, the NBA champion with the Toronto Raptors, and now

an incredible workhorse in this field with Giants of Africa. Tim Connelly who is at Denver. I am now happy to see all these guys running teams and doing big things. And also Mark Cuban, once he bought the team, he was a big supporter of the work we were doing at SEED.

And then it grew from there. Nike was a big supporter from the beginning. I used to get jerseys for the camps, they were donated, and that is what we used. And ultimately now we have a partnership with Nike that is providing shoes and uniforms for our boys and girls from the grassroots to the elite groups. The journey became part of the movement. Sometimes it had nothing to do with basketball. But basketball was the common denominator that brought everybody together.

We do these events to improve the current group at a Hoop Forum every year. Hoop Forum is an annual event. The idea was to use the game to bring people to our conversation around many topics that all, at the end of the day, center around how we move Africa forward. It involves basketball camps, clinics and tournaments. You have a Sports for Development conference, and you have a cultural event that is actually put together by the kids who are participating in the program. They become actors, dancers, and singers. Just to showcase their talents in some ways and to lead projects of impact. Whether it is from promoting responsibility toward the environment, cleanliness and hygiene.

So, the [Hoop] Forum works now. And there are so many things that come out of it. Over the years, people from other countries would come experience it, and now they are talking about expanding it to their respective countries.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Still keeping the focus on SEED, which uses the prism of basketball to help develop leadership and education, and much more. There is a strong commitment by SEED to focus on developing female leadership and empowerment through education and basketball. In what ways do you think basketball provides unique or perhaps greater opportunities for women and girls?

Amadou Gallo Fall

You recall that I was speaking earlier about how my exposure to basketball was because of the dominance of our national team on the pan-African stage. But I was actually usually more interested, I think I was a bigger fan, of the women's team. Just because, like I said, these ladies were incredible. And they were student athletes, most of them. There were some student athletes on the men's team too. These were all students and they were incredible athletes. And that's the beauty of basketball, women who every day were world class athletes. You look at the WNBA today. There are some big personalities, and very charismatic players who went on to get their college degrees and played in the WNBA.

For us at SEED, and really in our effort to grow the game in Africa, it was very clear that we were not going to achieve growing participation, growing numbers, by ignoring more than half the population. And luckily, it is not something we ever had to do by organization. We never show up somewhere to say, "Okay, we promote gender equity because it's a politically correct thing to do." [What we did] was organic. It came from an authentic place. Because we have ladies among us who are also carrying the torch and are inspiring, they are role models. They are the first Africans who played in the WNBA, such as Clarisse Machanguana or Astou Ndiaye. And we are working with some of them actually right now, through the NBA Academy Africa, through what we do at NBA Africa, and at the Basketball Africa League. These ladies are contemporary role models that this younger generation of athletes can really identify with. It is this, for example, the reference I was making about those women's national teams from Senegal that inspired me. And women have consistently had leadership positions in our sport.

We started at SEED with having a program for boys, but girls started coming during the trainings. Then at some point, a group of girls would literally come and demand that SEED takes them too, they wanted to be part of it. And so that happened. I'm so proud of these ladies. I am always more impressed with them, just because of everything we are trying to impart in these young people. Because at the end of the day it is about molding global citizens, promoting leadership and creating the next generation of young people who are going to move the continent forward. That's the reason why SEED was created. It was about using sport as a tool. And it

stands for Sports, for Education, and Economic Development. We think both boys and girls will have a role to play.

To me, the path that we are proposing to these young people is a realistic one. If they do their part in terms of acquiring skills, both on and off the court, and working equally as hard to achieve, get a degree, and play their sport, they will succeed. If you can go play professionally, great. That's really for me the icing on the cake. But what we demand is to make sure that you get to class on time, you study, you get your degree. And they do. I know that when I get a group of young ladies in the program, they are all going to make the most out of the opportunity. And they are going to become productive members and contributors of our community. So from that standpoint, that has always been there. And we continue to push the agenda to expose both boys and girls with an equal opportunity, at least at the entry level.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

While the BAL is waiting out the current storm, the first seasons are going to be focused on its men's league. But what role do you envision for women in this league?

Amadou Gallo Fall

I think that the sky is the limit. First of all, the league actually is an evolution of what we've been doing on the continent all these decades. From a grassroots standpoint, it is about making the game more accessible, creating participation opportunities for youth, both boys and girls, building the infrastructure. I'm talking about grassroots infrastructure, courts, providing equipment, building the local expertise in terms of training of trainers and coaches. And we have done all these across gender. Ladies have contributed to this. Basketball Without Borders Africa is our forum to sustain our proactive development and community program that we do in partnership with FIBA [International Basketball Federation], to continue to embody the approach. We started the camps in 2003 in South Africa and it was hosted outside of South Africa for the first time in 2010. That was in Senegal where we had the first girl's camp. From that point it became an annual event. And through those camps also, girls have won scholarships and went on to study. And some are coming back. A lot of them are coming back. And the players I was talking about earlier, Astou Ndiaye and a number of other former WNBA players,

they are coming back too. They are there every step of the way and are big contributors to our efforts to grow sport. They come, they teach, they read and do the events in the summer alongside the men.

So similar to that, again the girls are going to help concentrate our efforts to grow the entire basketball ecosystem on the continent. We are going to build an industry that is going to be an economic growth engine. Because now governments start enabling development by building major infrastructure – like the Dakar Arena or the Kigali Arena – and [use] digital innovation to enable the explosion of smartphones that drives the demand for content. And we are going to create compelling products on the court with the tremendous amount of talent that we have in the African diaspora and right here in Africa, with all these young people that are going to come back and play in our league. We are going to create demand. And ultimately, we are starting with a league of men, but it will also come to the other side of the aisle. I see how the women’s game continues to grow and progress. And again, you have on the continent many countries where there are very strong women’s teams, and the women’s game is very popular. So that day will come.

For now, when I think how women will participate, what I talk about is an ecosystem. We are looking for marketers, we’re looking for engineers, sound engineers, light engineers, communications specialists, lawyers, finance people. And this is where will hire a lot of women too. I think the ecosystem is going to be working for all ages and genders and talents. The determining factor is going to be the skillset and the expertise.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so from the BAL, to what extent do you hope that Basketball Africa League helps communication and interaction within and across Africa?

Amadou Gallo Fall

I think look at the footprint of the league. I think even the local audience in Kigali [during the 2019 BAL Qualifiers] expressed that diversity across our continent. We have 12 teams coming from 12 different countries for our inaugural season. From the north, the west, east, and south.

And this is only going to continue to grow. Our partnership with FIBA to launch this league to me cements that assurance that all countries on the continent will have a chance to be a part of this league. Because we also host the qualifiers, where the champion teams of all the leagues from all the countries across Africa have a chance to line up and compete to be part of the BAL. We understand the role of sports as an economic growth engine, and are determined to run, in my opinion, one of the best professional sports league in the world.

And we will put social responsibility and being a member of the community at the core of everything we do. This is what we are already doing with our BAL teams. In this very challenging global coronavirus situation, our teams are all involved. Some players, like Luol Deng, our Global Ambassador for the BAL, are on the forefront of messaging and talking to people about precautions to take. And following the guidance of global health organizations like the WHO, the World Health Organization, and the CDC and local governments, we decided to postpone the launch of our season.

It is really about putting the BAL at the service of the greater community for the greater good. And at this day and time, the coronavirus is a big challenge. And we are going to put a great effort to combat it and follow the guidelines of global health organizations and local governments. We are up for it, and looking forward to launching once the situation evolves.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What were some of the main elements of your risk analysis in establishing the first pan-African professional sports league? And what does success for the BAL look like in, say, five-ish years?

Amadou Gallo Fall

Having worked on the continent for many decades and having really been involved at every level, from grassroots to seeing the evolution of the game, I think there is an opportunity, both from an indigenous standpoint and with the national teams. And, seeing African players now who we have seen in our grassroots activities coming into the NBA, and now playing major roles, there is incredible momentum for Africa in the NBA. So I think it is that momentum that we feel that we have to make sure translates on the continent. We are filling a gap. There has not

been anything like this done. And you have an incredible amount of talent on the continent that, until now, only gets exported. Now we want to make sure that we create a platform that allows this talent to be showcased, nurtured and developed at home. And in the process you create an entertainment property that fans of all ages can enjoy.

Infrastructure is developing, we create a product, and then you have an ecosystem that could be commercialized. The risk was minimal. And there is always a risk in any venture, but, it was a no-brainer for us. First of all, because we are committed to Africa, we are passionate about Africa, our sport, and our youth. Also we think that we have an incredible opportunity to combine all these engagements to build the Basketball Africa League into a world-class professional basketball league. Success for us is that the ecosystem takes shape. You have more basketball arenas across the continent and more youth training services across the continent. We are going to develop our force, and our practical industry across different lines, whether it's through marketing, merchandising or broadcast. That is the opportunity, really to grow that infrastructure, grow that ecosystem, and to help provide more opportunities for talented African players to have an opportunity to compete at home, to make a living playing the game. This will impact national team players, and hopefully we will see soon African national teams competing on the global stage when they go to the Olympics or the Basketball World Cup, to go and have a legitimate chance to be medal winners.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Last two questions. First, so then how do you see basketball playing a role in creating identities within Africa or across Africa, and how does the diaspora play into that? And then the last question, do you see yourself as a sports diplomat?

Amadou Gallo Fall

We are going to build the Basketball Africa League into the number one lifestyle brand on the continent in a few years. And the reason being, the NBA, which is behind it in partnership with FIBA, is one of the top lifestyle brands in the world. Our players are global icons, they are influencers. They are the greatest athletes on earth, because you see the combination of size,

speed, fitness and athleticism. You just do not see often a seven-foot guy who can run like a little man, and jump, and handle the ball with grace and dexterity.

And we have seen these type of players, Magic Johnson, Kevin Durant, LeBron, Kobe, all these guys. Michael Jordan, obviously, one of the greatest of all time. And we have that abundance of talent on the continent to create this kind of story. We are going to create local leaders that our communities are going to rally behind. So, this is how I see it.

We are a youthful continent too, the youngest continent on earth. This continent is going to be the center of the world, any way you look at it. For us it is about focusing on the youth and being a youth brand so that we are really in the place where we want to be. For us, what we are excited about is basketball. It is also the opportunity to impact all the creative industries; music, fashion and art. This is something that I think speaks to and attracts the best of the best in all these areas. So that is the opportunity we see in Africa.

I think that young people are going to be drawn to the product. Because they will be the makers of this product. Whether they are incredible athletes who play the game, or they have talent or interests in music, fashion, technology. This is why we are excited. As far as being a basketball diplomat, I'm committed to service. That has always driven me. And I think being able to contribute to the upliftment of ideas and the growth and development of my community is a top priority. To organize, to rally and galvanize. So if that's diplomacy, then I guess we are sport diplomats. But we use whatever tools sports allow us to use to engage.

END



On 28 May 2019 the National Basketball Association (NBA) named Amadou Gallo Fall President of the Basketball Africa League. Photo Credit: Basketball Africa League.

Interview with Amadou Gallo Fall, April 2020

President, Basketball Africa League; NBA Vice President and Managing Director for Africa; Founder, SEED Project; Basketball Hall of Famer, University of the District of Columbia.

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