
“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? You've had a long, distinguished career in the basketball world, but what first motivated you to start playing? What was basketball like when you were growing up in Côte d'Ivoire, and how has it changed over the decades?

Alphonse Bilé

My name is Alphonse Bile and I am 69 years old. I started playing basketball very young, in youth categories (11-12-13 years) at the boarding school of Bingerville in Ivory Coast. All sports were played in our middle school. I liked volleyball and basketball. Sometimes we saw civilian teams like the "Jeanne d'Arc" come to play in our middle school. It was beautiful and magic. I finally chose basketball because I had my uncle, Ambroise Kakou (aka Morou), who played on the Côte d'Ivoire national team. I can't thank enough a leader of Africa Sport Club, Mr Saad Hussein, the President-Founder of the club and the captain of the team, aka Toto François, who really believed in me and did everything to make me play since tenth grade in high school at the Africa Sport Club of Abidjan in the national civil championship.

I learned everything from those moments, and I think that's where my passion for this sport really came from and led me to this level of player, framer, coach and leader.

Yes, I ended up becoming Captain of the Africa Sport and the National Team (African Champion in 1981), coach of the Africa Sport and the National Team (African Champion in 1985). Then I became National Technical Director then President of the Federation and finally I was elected Secretary General and Executive Director of FIBA Africa.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when I was playing at the Africa Sport Club of Abidjan, basketball had already made great strides in terms of number of players and a style of play with more potential, and we also started to have the possibility to see some NBA games.

Today, basketball in Africa and around the world has moved closer to that of the NBA, especially in terms of athletic and technical qualities. This is another level of basketball: more physical and more aggressive with much more skills. The skill I think makes the real difference.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How did your career in basketball and medicine mould your understanding of sports diplomacy more broadly—the communication, representation and negotiation (formal and informal) that occurs in and around the hardcourt—as well as the role of basketball more specifically?

Alphonse Bilé

In my time, we could study and play basketball. Professionalism already existed in Europe but not in Africa. All the African basketball players I know of were students in various faculties or in

the military. Today, it has become a little more difficult in Africa because basketball has become a profession.

Combining medical studies and this sport was not easy at all. But I think that this opportunity to study has allowed most athletes of my generation to become great executives in administration and even in politics. I think this combination has probably led to a more intellectual approach to sport in all these areas: game, communication, negotiation, etc., in fact what you're talking about in your question.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How have you used sports or basketball (and sports/basketball diplomacy) personally to communicate, represent, and negotiate? Do you have an interesting anecdote to share in addition to your 1981 African Championship win? And how have these experiences influence your vision of the possibilities and uses of sport?

Alphonse Bilé

Personally, I think I fell in love with this fascinating sport integrating quickness, intelligence, speed, skill, game vision and altruism.

So, I would say that I grew up with it and that was helpful in some negotiations. I was determined and convinced that we would be Africa champions with those of my generation once, for fun, for our record, and also for the future. I was also convinced that this sport could become a profession over time like in Europe. I believed it. Why? I do not know, but it did not comfort me only for me but for the future.

Anecdotes, yes there have been so many but one that is close to my heart is the match of the final of the 1981 African Championship in Mogadishu against Egypt with within it, one of the greatest players of our generation, named Mohsen Medhat Warda.

Our pivot Bah Florent didn't take defensive rebounds and as Captain I turned him so bad that, to prove to me that he was the best rebounder of the continent, he picked up all the defensive rebounds from the second period and to give me back the change made me no pass as he was angry at me. It was very fun and childish to live... and we won thanks to him, it must be said. At the end of the match his anger gave way to a great joy immortalized by the photographers (see photo).



Alphonse Bilé and Bah Florent celebrate Côte d'Ivoire's win over Egypt, 81-65, at the FIBA African Championship final in Mogadishu, Somalia on 22 December 1981.

Photo courtesy of FIBA Africa.

Alphonse Bilé

And there were also times when teammates got upset because I made too many passes to Djadji Clément, who was of a phenomenal skill level. And when others complained about not receiving the ball, I said it was because Djadji and I were of the same ethnicity. It drove them crazy. So, some of them pretended to learn our dialect, the Agni.

I would say that all this trains you and teaches you to know others, to appreciate them, and especially to listen to them to move things forward. These experiences really influenced my vision and practices in our sport.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

To what extent do you consider yourself to be a sports diplomat?

Alphonse Bilé

Subsequently, I have been very lucky because after my medical studies and the title of African Champion as a player (in 1981), I continued as a coach, and I won an African Champion title with the Côte d'Ivoire national team in 1985. It was then that I understood that the notoriety that one could have as the big stars of World Sport, but at my small level, could make this sport evolve in Africa and in my country by being kind of an ambassador, a builder. This served even within FIBA at the time because my business card was respectable at the level of African basketball and I think it has been decisive in my election to AFABA in 2001 and then in negotiations with the late Patrick Baumann Secretary General of FIBA.

It has also been useful in negotiations with some countries for the organization of AfroBasket in their new formulas and the acceptance and respect of National Federations for the work accomplished by FIBA Africa.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Why does the concept of basketball diplomacy appeal to you, and why have you sought to build the sport in Africa through this lens at FIBA and beyond? What has inspired your work and what do you hope the end result(s) will be?

Alphonse Bilé

I think basketball in Africa, with all the athletic qualities we have, should be much closer to American university basketball or the NBA in several years. Over the past few years, we have considered that developing the competitions and training technical managers should enable us to improve the quality of African basketball. We improved the African Championship Men and Ladies, the youth competitions and today with the NBA, the creation of the BAL for the club champions, I think we are moving forward. The goal is to make African Basketball attractive with professional structures such as National Federations and National Professional Leagues. I also think it would help to curb the emigration of young talents outside of Africa and create real jobs. Aside from its playful aspect, basketball in Africa should be a business.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, how has basketball diplomacy played a role in Africa pre/post-1980s—and what are the challenges that basketball diplomacy in Africa faces today, including any regional specificities?

Alphonse Bilé

For a long time, and as paradoxical as it may seem, sports in general have served as a diplomatic card in the hands of African countries to make their voices heard and to assert themselves as an essential player on the international sports scene. This sports pan-Africanism, if I can call it that, served as a kind of political expression, playing first in the struggle against neo-colonialism in the 1960s and most importantly, as an action against the apartheid policy in South Africa and the boycott of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal. In my opinion, it was one of the first diplomatic expressions of sports in our continent.

As far as basketball is concerned, our institution, which was created in 1961, was one of the first African confederations to be created after the independence of our countries. This creation, which responded to the need to affirm the identity of our countries, provided an area of solidarity and cooperation that allowed us to go beyond cultural and linguistic borders and thus to promote peace, friendship and mutual respect.

As the place of basketball in Africa has not ceased to assert itself up to cover all the 54 African national federations, our vocation has been strengthened over the years until it has now become a value and a constant of our organization. It is in this sense and in the wake of the political authorities that the diplomacy we show on a daily basis, allows us to invest even more in strengthening our relations with our whole community.

This collaboration not only concerns competitions, as some might think, but also covers other equally important areas, such as the upgrade and development of African national structures, human resources training and development, the expansion of the practice circle and the expansion of people who love basketball in the Continent... The result is that our competitions are more regular and have a greater participation of the Federations. Our communication is more sustained, and the sense of belonging to the same community is rooted in our members. Our common memory and our heritage are valued.

It is certain that we are not content with these achievements, even if they are important, we consider that we still have a way to go to persevere in improving our actions and consolidate and perpetuate our achievements. Among the challenges we face, I will mention as an example, the disparity between our Federations that makes our basketball develop at two speeds, a speed specific to Federations which have great means, and a speed of small Federations whose means

are not up to their aspirations. It is for us to find the way to pull up the deprived Federations and help them to acquire the necessary standards in order to gradually rise to the high level.

The aim is also to make certain countries aware of the lack of infrastructure they face and of the need to make up for this deficit.

It is unacceptable that a country like the Democratic Republic of Congo does not have a single Hall approved to organize competitions when it is able to have produced players like Dikembe Mutombo, Bismarck Biyombo or Mwadi Mabika, who is a double WNBA champion, twice WNBA All-star with the Los Angeles Sparks, and a formidable Women's National Team in the 1985-1990 period. The same can be said of Nigeria and other countries.

Regarding FIBA Africa, it should be noted that the development program of the African National Federations that we have started in recent years, requires significant resources for its realization and it is up to us to find a way to generate even more revenue to finance this program.

Concerning regional specificities, it should be noted that Africa is a huge continent with 54 National Federations. For better management and to meet development needs, FIBA Africa is subdivided into seven zones, each of which brings together, according to their geographical position, a number of National Federations. While some areas experience sustained activity at their level, others find it difficult to fulfil their role, either for reasons of geographical specificity or for reasons of communication.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Most people think first of football or running when they think about sport in Africa, but from your perspective, why is basketball a key growth driver in ways different from football, cricket, or rugby (i.e. what are the unique opportunities of basketball), how do you reconcile the relationship between football and basketball in complementary fashion, and what (if any) is the relationship to wheelchair basketball in Africa?

Alphonse Bilé

It is true that the disciplines mentioned had a head start on basketball because of their popularity, the case of football, or because of the medals gleaned by African runners during the Olympics, the case of athletics. Moreover, the popularity of football in Africa is a direct consequence of the liberalization of the media and the penetration of the African market by satellite channels.

But despite this situation of the predominance of football, basketball has a margin of manoeuvre which it uses in recent years to have a prominent place in the African media landscape. I will admit that the role played by the resonance of the NBA around the world, on the one hand, and the media coverage of our AfroBasketball both male and female, on the other hand, allows

basketball to reduce the gap to which you refer. Moreover, the participation of professional iconic players playing abroad, especially in the NBA, adds to this media coverage. In this regard, the role of these players is very important, because many of them are involved in sports projects with the creation of local sports associations or youth training centers, equipment aids and a commitment to promoting the benefits of sport at the societal level.

On another level, basketball is considered, more and more in Africa, as an educational instrument and a vector for the development for children. In this spirit, we encourage our National Federations to invest in mini-basketball, which is the Basketball for children aged 6 to 12. Moreover, to embody its commitment, FIBA Africa has created within its organs, a Council specific to this movement to develop its practice in Africa.

I would say that with respect to football and wheelchair basketball, we don't have any relationships. But I think things should change with the BAL.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Who has played/is playing leading roles in developing or conducting basketball diplomacy in Africa (community leaders? National team players? Africa-grown NBA players? Global NBA players? Other?), what do you think their impact has been?

Alphonse Bilé

I'll answer everyone, everyone at their level. It is true that the players of the national teams play a very important role as locomotive in the promotion of basketball in their countries. This role is also played by African players in the NBA. They are icons not only in their respective countries but on a continental scale. Players should get closer to their National Teams and vice versa so that they can participate in the major FIBA (AfroBasket, World Cup Basketball and Olympic Games) competitions. This would have a definite impact on the results and the promotion of basketball in their countries. I would like to take this opportunity to salute the National Federation of Nigeria, which is making great efforts to integrate their NBA and abroad players in these competitions. The results are there, and Africans are already getting to know and relate to them.

Just imagine Joel Embiid, Pascal Siakam and others with the national team of Cameroon, I think that there, things would be different in all points of view (promotion, results, interests etc.)

And there are also the people working behind the scenes that are leaders at the level of the National Federations, the State Institutions of the countries as well as the members who militate within FIBA Africa and its organs. Everyone has a direct or indirect impact on the conduct of basketball diplomacy on the continent.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How do you hope to use basketball to help kids across Africa dream and work to make their dreams realities (even if it is not a career in basketball)?

Alphonse Bilé

As I said, mini-basketball is by excellence a means of education and a vehicle for the development of African children. That is why we are committed to putting this practice at the forefront of African sport, emphasizing its many facets, including training, education and development. Because, beyond its purely sporting aspect, mini-basketball is to be understood as one of the appropriate means for the education of children and an educational tool that contributes significantly to their personal development. Then the NBA already makes all the kids dream from a point of view of dress style, practice, video games etc.

We believe that the BAL should in the future open the doors to this type of dreams among young Africans. We hope so and we work for it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Given the changing sports consumption habits in North America and Europe--not watching a 2-hour game in its integrity but watching short 2-minute clips on social media--what are basketball consumption habits like today in Africa? How are people learning about the game and its wider culture?

Alphonse Bilé

The trend of watching game summaries either on TV or on social networks or on specialized sites surely increases among young people. With social networks, the news has become quite dynamic in Africa. With the race to the number of views on their various accounts, they can hardly devote 2 hours to follow a basketball game. However, there are still those who watch the games from start to finish. In a broad sense, the young people prefer the show side of basketball with the prowess of players like the dunks, the double and the dribbles.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, how does basketball play a role in creating identities in Africa based on who plays or consumes it, and why, and what role do the various diasporas play (particularly those in London, the United States, and Paris) in this equation?

Alphonse Bilé

The majority of young Africans, like other young people around the world, have always tended to identify with icons, whether they belong to the music industry or to the world of sports. Basketball has indeed played a role in this identification, through which we try to differentiate ourselves from «others», to display a kind of success, even merit. NBA players and professional

iconic players of diasporas are a big part of this expression of identity. In the eyes of young people, these icons represent success, merit and social advancement.

In a general way, this identity is expressed by the look or the dress style that makes understand the passion for basketball: the Nike Air Force One pair, the cap, the jersey, even the ball.

I think that in a few years this identification will be clearer with the African players of the NBA and those of the BAL. Things should get bigger because of the promotion of basketball in Africa. Why not a typical African BAL brand?

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In what ways does basketball in Africa afford (greater?) opportunities for women, and how does it work towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 Gender Equality? And how does basketball help FIBA Africa's broader work across the SDGs?

Alphonse Bilé

Women's basketball is important to us and counts as a strategic axis in the development of our discipline. In fact, AfroBasket is the first women's competition in Africa. In addition to the women's competitions that we program at the level of national teams and champions clubs, our actions also involve the training of referees, coaches and officials. At the level of young women, competitions are organised at a regional area and at a continental level. FIBA Africa is becoming aware of the importance of women's basketball and this, especially since the excellent results of our representatives at the last World Women's Championship 2018, Nigeria and Senegal, not to mention them, constituted for us, additional motivation to invest more in this practice. And despite the cultural heritage that persists in some countries, in the coming years, we aim to further broaden the audience of women's basketball on the continent by making its practice even more widespread. The objective is also to integrate the maximum of African technical frameworks in the management of this championship. Have female coaches, more female referees and female leaders. Today, we only have one woman as President of a National Federation. There was a time when there were three. But this is far too low.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What has been the impact of the FIBA-NBA Basketball Without Borders programs on basketball in Africa, and how does this relate (if at all) to the basketball-diplomacy nexus?

Alphonse Bilé

The BWB in Africa at its beginnings seemed unclear to us and we considered that the NBA was only looking for some exceptional and rare talents in Africa to continue its own promotion. So, there was some reluctance also related to the disturbing way the NBA Africa operated. There

was also a lot of misunderstanding, but it's in the past. The results are palpable when we know that Joel Embiid, Gorgui Dieng, Serge Ibaka or Pascal Siakam went through the BWB and are today the pride of Africa and the NBA Africa. In addition, NBA diplomacy in Africa has opened many doors. At the political level, this has allowed some federations to have more listening from politics. It would be interesting to see how to evolve this BWB in all African countries for the detection of young talents that would integrate the BAL or the national leagues and even the NBA for the most talented. The National Federations are beginning to appreciate the BWB better, and FIBA Africa perceives its implications better, including the Diplomatic aspect. Things should improve in all parties involved.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How does your work with the BAL fit into your longer-term work using basketball as a tool to develop the next generation of African leadership through basketball?

Alphonse Bilé

The BAL in the beginning was an idea of FIBA. It is partly due to two observations: the first being that too many young African talents were deserting the continent. When they do not succeed outside of Africa, they are lost by Basketball and sometimes it can be worse.

The second one is that the NBA Africa has started to implement many of the NBA Juniors Camps everywhere in addition to the development of the BWB including the NBA Academy in Dakar, we thought that the purpose of all these activities should be to set up a club competition to integrate all these young talents and make it the mirror of African basketball.

The NBA accepted the principle and from there things fell into place with what the NBA represents in the world of sport, you understand that things would be easier to put in place. It is therefore clear that this opportunity in the future can be one of the ways to help develop African leaders in all areas of basketball and other economics. This should be a school of life through Sport.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How will the BAL impact Africa's communication, representation, and negotiation to the wider world?

Alphonse Bilé

From the start, the promotion of this activity exceeded all limits. This shows the media power of the NBA. This has been beneficial for Africa and so you understand how much has been facilitated things for FIBA Africa in various negotiations. The NBA, the FIBA, the BAL, are real keys for African basketball and others.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What is BAL (or NBA Africa) doing to address HIV in Africa as well as contribute to the SDGs more broadly?

Alphonse Bilé

For the time being, not all the charity or ancillary actions related to the BAL have been considered. This is just the beginning, but FIBA Africa is already working with WHO to fight HIV. I am convinced that the 'CARE' actions will soon be on the agenda. But this should affect many sectors especially in the field of health (the fight against malaria, HIV, etc.)

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What does success for the BAL look like in five years' time, and how will it intersect with or feed into creating players for the NBA or EuroBasket leagues or elite Olympians from Africa?

Alphonse Bilé

The dream is done, and reality will be effective in five years. We are convinced that the BAL in five years will position itself as the best African sports competition and even ahead of football or at the same level (I continue to dream but I believe it).

I also believe that the quality of play at the BAL should allow young talents to integrate all the world leagues and probably allow the African National Teams to better appear at the Olympic Games, at the Basketball World Cup and have the best positions in the FIBA ranking. I think the BAL is a great adventure, promising, difficult to set up in view of the African context (even football has difficulties), but I am convinced that it will be a great success that will dazzle the world of basketball and promote African basketball.

END



FIBA Africa Executive Director Alphonse Bilé. Photo Courtesy of FIBA Africa Media.

Written Interview with Alphonse Bilé, April 2020

FIBA Africa Executive Director

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