
“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

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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Stevy Worah-Ozimo. 37-year-old, former professional basketball player. Founder of Youth Sports Academy Development, Vice President of Don Bosco Basketball. Basketball came to me basically, that was a fluke, because I was playing soccer at the time. But the thing is, I was growing so fast that all my friends wanted me to be the goalie and I didn't think that I had enough action of just standing by the pole and I went to kick the ball and put goals. So eventually I moved to basketball because I had friends who were actually playing basketball. Naturally by God given talents, I felt like I was doing great. I decided to stick with it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, you grew up in Gabon, what part of Gabon did you grow up in? And what was basketball like there when you were a kid?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes, I grew up in Libreville, Gabon up till I was, I would say 10 years old. Then I took a national exam and eventually I went to Senegal to a military academy, prestigious military academy, Prytanée Militaire de St Louis which produced many African leaders, and that's exactly where I discovered basketball and where I started actually playing basketball. To me, I would say basketball in Gabon was the 2nd biggest sport. A lot of people were interested in that but I had more impact in basketball when I was in Senegal.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Were there any basketball players who inspired you when you were a kid when you first began playing or who you took as a role model whether they were from Gabon, from Senegal or from elsewhere?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes, definitely. In Gabon, because every summer I would go back to Gabon for about a month or two months because I was at boarding school in Senegal. I would definitely play basketball there and the time that I would go back, throughout the neighborhood we had decent players who assimilated themselves to the likes of the Kobe [Bryant]s, Michael Jordan, Kevin Garnett and stuff. But if I have to speak about the Gabonese players themselves, as I did play for the national team of Gabon as well, so I would say that we had two great players that I'm still good friends with. That was Marius Assoumou and Fabrice Nollet, Jason Fanga. Both of them were actually the best scorers in Africa at the time. These were the guys that we were actually looking up to and who actually boosted the basketball agenda, the level of play in Gabon at that time.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so how did your schooling and your early career as a young basketball player influence your outlook about what the role of sport could be?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

The thing is because at the military school, it was pan-African, so we had different nationalities from different parts of Africa. We had national curriculum from Senegal; And sport activities where actually one of the biggest aspects, being military entourage, so I would say that always put the emphasis on the communication skills that we could gain playing sports, but also mingling with the other peers at the academy.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, being an international player in the NCAA, that is a type of sports diplomacy, it's informal perhaps, but you're still communicating and representing your home basketball culture. And so, I was curious to ask, how have you experienced the intersection of basketball and diplomacy over the course of your career?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes, that was quite interesting. First of all, I would say that I am where I am because of sport and particularly basketball. Because, coming to America where I had no friends, I didn't know anyone really. I didn't speak the language at all, I was speaking French and German. So that was kind of tough, but because I played basketball, I could go to any basketball court within the U.S. or here in New York where I landed the first time and made friends easily. Just because of basketball. I could actually create a network around it and make sure I get looked at from different coaches and stuff of that nature. So, I think the intersection of basketball and diplomacy is great but many people don't even realize the impact of it until later on when they actually see the results. But without basketball I don't think that I would be able to secure... you know, first of all I had that scholarship that got me here but also making all the friends that I have without speaking any English at all. Playing for my university (North Carolina Central University) as a student-athlete.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Is there an anecdote that you could share about one example of how you taught your teammates about Gabon or how you learned more about the United States or American culture through your teammates?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Definitely. The first thing is that actually I would learn English in the classroom as an ESL student and I would go back and practice with my peers on the basketball courts even though

we have limited basketball language and vocabularies and stuff. But I would practice [English] with them while I'm playing ball because I have to communicate, I have to speak, I have to make conversations with people. Definitely that helps with accomplishing that goal. I would show Gabon on the map, share pictures and videos. But the biggest thing was international nights organized by the international department, we had to dress traditionally if applicable and cook delicacies of our country.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

That is a great question because without knowing it, I was a sport diplomat just for the fact that I left Gabon with a scholarship from the government to come to the United States because of my accomplishments with my club and national team. And here in the U.S. I secured another scholarship from the university to go to school. And, learning English not only in the classroom but also practicing with my peers and the fact that I'm from a different environment, culture, background and I interact with people from different parts of the world through basketball. I think that was a game changer because people could actually learn and were so curious about my upbringing, where I was coming from, where Gabon was actually situated and learning about my family, the food that we have there, the economy and stuff about nature. So, that opened a lot of gates to so many different people and different cultures.

And I had a chance to take some of my friends and former teammates to Gabon and see where Gabon is and how things are being done there, the cultural experience, the food and all that. Also, being basketball savvy, I was able to learn about "the American way," that's exactly how we call it, "the American way" because that way was very specific to North America: the way that people were speaking, the way that people were conducting themselves, and all that kind of stuff. So, I think that made me a sports diplomat.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I'd like to zoom out a little bit to ask you how you view the intersections of sport and diplomacy for Africa at large.

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Africa is a large continent with 54 countries. The aspect that we have to focus on or speak the most about is that you have people of different cultures coming together and practicing sports without any preconceived thoughts. They would mingle, they would learn about different parts of Africa and the culture. Even though you have no countries at war, sports unified this population that never had the chance to actually visit each other or interact. I think that's a

great game changer that has always been in place. Sports is a unifier and diplomacy comes naturally through sports.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, in what ways do you think that sports helped to provide fewer tangible benefits for Africa? You know we usually talk about data points like GDP or number of voters or the economy or digital connectivity, for example, when trying to measure different degrees of development. But in what ways do you think sports adds in intangible ways?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

I usually say to peers that we should not see sports as just an activity where you pick up a ball and a racquet and just go for fun. Sports is also a business and that being said, we have so many different countries in Africa and also around the world, who use sports as a vector of development for their economies. And now that we are speaking about diversification of economies throughout the world and also here in Africa, you can see where governments, especially who are number one employers in many countries, actually go deep into the budgets to actually develop either cultural activities or sports activities to bring revenue.

And now we can speak about sport tourism and since we are in a context of basketball in Africa, you can see where the BAL is actually coming in and developing that aspect as well.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay great. We'll come back to BAL. But first, you have been involved in growing the game in Africa, both in Gabon as well as elsewhere in a variety of different ways. Could you just tell us a little bit about some of the different ways you've helped to grow the game in Africa and what inspires you to do that.

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes. I've been involved. I call it giving back to the community, for about I'd say 13 or 14 years. And the reason for that was just the way that I was brought up to playing basketball. As I said I played soccer, which is actually now the number one sport in many countries in Africa. And the way that I received a full scholarship from the government of Gabon, sent here to America after playing on the national team, getting to America, making so many great friends, getting another scholarship to go full ride at university.

So, I feel like I had somehow to give back because so much was given to me since a young age. I'll go back a little bit further down when I left my country and my family when I was 10 years old to go to a prestigious military academy. So, everything was taken care of, I was on a full scholarship then as well. So, I was like 'You know what? I cannot be selfish' and just go and

give back to these youth who actually need all these experiences and resources and mentoring and stuff. So, I did start an organization, a basketball organization, Youth Sports Academy, and that was when I was actually playing professional in Singapore. Then eventually coming back to the States it became a little bit bigger and during summer I will go back to Gabon and I will run basketball camps for the kids, but my mindset was always not to run a basketball camp where there will be no outcome because I'd like it to be encompassed in the developmental world where people gain from it and opportunities can come and arise out of it.

So that was basically my mindset. I run basketball camps where we'll teach the fundamentals of the game, and also, we incorporate life skills, aspects of it, where these kids can be role models on the basketball court and outside of it. And also, we had nutritional courses where we teach the kids what to eat, how to avoid certain drinks, how to hydrate themselves while they play sports and also at home, the stretches and stuff like that. But also, we had the financial literacy aspect of it where we'd make sure that these kids know the value of the money, and even if they have a dollar, they'll know what to do with that dollar, know how they going to divide the dollar to actually go by, for example, a day or maybe a month. How to save, because I felt there was a need to actually grow and create those leaderships using sports.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, could you tell me a little bit about the kids who participate in your camps. Where are they from, what are their age range or is it just boys or there're girls as well?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes. So, these kids, most of the camps are being ran in Gabon and also in Asia. I ran multiple camps in the U.S., in Asia, especially in Hong Kong and Singapore, but also in Gabon. So, these camps were comprised of youth from the age of 6 to 16, so basically under 18, and they came from different parts. Basically, in Gabon, because the population of Gabon is very small so we have a large rate of immigrants living in the country. These kids will be from different backgrounds. It was always Pan-African, and we'd make sure that the camp is also run for the girls. So, we had thoroughly girl camps and the last one that I had we about 30 girls and 59 boys from the age of 6 to 10. Then we had about 85 kids all together comprising 32 girls and about 60 boys from the age of 7 to 16.

That was very diverse. And we put the emphasis more on the girls because I think with my roles at the United Nation global compacts, talking about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we want to make sure that the girls get equal opportunities and I think they're doing a great job by taking on the opportunity given to them to actually showcase what they can do at high rates.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Which brings me very much to this question of gender equality. In what ways do you think that basketball offers, perhaps greater opportunities than certain other sports for women and girls, and how do you view basketball as helping to promote SDG-5 gender equality?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes, that's a great question. Usually when I discuss it, because I have a lot of mentoring sessions and one on one talks with the youth, and usually when I discuss with the boys they're like 'Oh no why do we put the emphasis more on the girls because we are good...', and when you talk to the girls they're like 'Yeah, we can do exactly what the boys can do and maybe we can do better.' They've shown that they can do actually better than many of the boys and I'm very proud of that.

That's the reason why I'll even put more emphasis on the girls even so. But you know, the narrative is very diverse because some of the boys understand really why we're doing that and now you have to come down and explain to them and show them with graphics and statistics that many of their sisters or moms or aunts and stuff, never really had the opportunity either to attend school or maybe go to basketball camps. So, the opportunity has always been scarce for the girls and the women. But now, you show that moving forward with the professional leagues. You show them like, for example, the rates of attendance between the NBA and WNBA, how the disparity is great.

So now they can understand with graphics, because we are more visual learners, so they can see the importance of the fact that we put more emphasis on the girls. And, talking to parents letting them know that it's fair because, you letting your daughter coming to camp that she cannot do her homework, that she cannot fulfill the work that she needs to do in the house, it's going to give her more opportunities to expand and get access to leadership and maybe getting that great education at a great university. So that's basically what it is.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, moving this forward a little bit, who are the key stakeholders involved in developing basketball or in conducting basketball diplomacy in Africa and what do you think their impact has been?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

When it comes down to Africa I think we have so many different stakeholders from various fields. On courts, at the executive levels, as sports agents... So, of course the most famous that we can cite, because there are so many of them, we have Dikembe Mutombo, who actually came to the U.S. not trying to play basketball but he was a medical student. His goal was basically giving back to the community using science. Getting that scholarship because he's just tall and

he did great on the basketball court. Great citizen, going back to his native country and building hospitals. So that's one of them.

You have Amadou Gallo Fall, who actually came to the United States under the same conditions [to play study at university on a basketball scholarship]. While he was playing sports back in Africa, because he was just tall he came to the U.S. on a full scholarship, never saw the coach. And now, he's into the Hall of Fame at his alma mater [University of the District of Columbia] and now running the BAL, senior vice president of the NBA, founder of SEED Project.

So, so many different things that come into place just because of the sport. You have Bouna N'Diaye who's actually a great sports agent representing so many French and African descended players. But he also gives back to the community by hosting exposure camps where so many talents who come and find that opportunity to actually fulfill their dreams. So many different people. You have Luol Deng, leaving after retirement from the NBA going back to Africa to run the South Sudan Basketball Federation. So many different people, Masai Ujiri, president of the Toronto Raptors. Pops Mensah-Bonsu, General Manager at the Capital City Go-Go in the G-league.

So, so many different people who came into place and are doing it for the continent. So, I think as we usually say: the narrative needs to change because Africa is now. Africa has the potential. Africa is building infrastructures. We are ready to take over the opportunity that's brought back into the continent.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Before we go on, what in your opinion, what are some of the challenges for basketball or basketball diplomacy in Africa? And, are they more unique than some of the challenges you've encountered elsewhere such as in Asia?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

I think when it comes down to sport and diplomacy, I think the challenges are the same. Whether you are in Asia, in Africa or anywhere else in the world because it's basically having athletes coming together, interacting and learning from peers, while practicing the activity. I think especially in Africa, the only challenge is mainly having infrastructures and overseeing more events where people can actually come together and showcase. That's the only thing that I can really see because you have so many different countries who come together for sport purposes and it's very encouraged by so many different countries to host these events because they are part of the peacemaking aspect. We have countries who actually do not communicate. They can share the same borders but cannot cross them. I can cite Sudan, the North and the South. same for Korea, North and South. Through sports, you can actually bring these people together and

see how beautiful peacemaking is coming together.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, given all of this, in your experience from your perspective, how does basketball play a role in creating identities? And, what role do some of the different African diasporas play in this equation?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes. So, when it comes down to identity you can actually throw the question because now you have so many people... based on their personalities, they're extremely shy. They cannot be shown in front of cameras or anything. But when they actually get to exercise or practice the activities, you can actually see that at sports they're themselves and actually opening up to others. And I think sport is great because it transcends so much, that's also a matrix of creating these opportunities where people can express themselves.

In Africa so many people, because now we are talking about different religions, different cultures and upbringings, so, so many people actually treat themselves in a different way where they have to abide by certain rules and norms. But with sports you can actually just be yourself. You can show to anybody else that you can actually express your feelings and it's going to be okay. You can be who you think you are and who you want to be and be successful with it.

Many Africans from diaspora are coming back to the continents and sharing the knowledge, experiences and resources.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, how does this play into the larger global basketball identity that exists?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

If you look back, and I will give an example, when I was actually growing up back there in Gabon or when I was playing at the academy in Senegal. On Saturdays we had a great show that was on television that was 'NBA Action.' That was like the recap of all the major moves and action that actually took place during the week from different teams and different players. So, every Saturday at about 3PM or 4PM we would all be connected and watch the 'NBA Action.' See all these dunks, these ankle breaker moves and dribbles and stuff and these lay ups. And, we'll use it and go back on to the basketball court right after that and you'll see everybody just trying because we are visual learners. People would actually try to imitate or mimic the same thing that they saw on NBA Action on the basketball court. That was fantastic to see people trying to actually play like Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant or Kevin Garnett and stuff.

Actually, a friendly story, back then people used to call me when I was in Senegal ‘Gary Payton.’ They thought that I was actually playing just like him. So that was funny to actually see that. And also, talking about the culture, the sneaker movement and all that, we have so many sneakerheads back there in the continent that would just watch any new sneakers that come out, they just want to get them.

You have people actually that are so addicted to Michael Jordan that they would just wear Jordan brands all the time. That’s exactly how they identify themselves to the game. But not only the game, but also the culture because this is a movement. This is a culture. They’re trying to develop so many things. Now you have so many brands coming to the continent to manufacture this product there. But not only that, you have also these brands actually sponsoring teams back there in the continent. You have Nike sponsoring... the Jordan brand actually, running leagues and camps in the continent with The BAL and stuff so you see that... that becomes something really big. And the kids are very keen on it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Bringing this back to The BAL a little bit... In your view, why are people so excited or, why are you so excited about the BAL, The Basketball Africa League, and how do you view it’s potential to develop basketball across the continent?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes. I think The BAL is a movement. This is something that the continent awaited for so long. Through NBA Africa, we have different activities and events that took place. Talking about the NBA Africa games. Talking about Basketball Without Borders. The Hoop Forum at SEED projects and all that kind of stuff. I think that people don’t just see it as a sporting activity or event, they see The BAL as a movement that can actually come in and showcase the talents of the continent Africa altogether. It is going to be basketball-wise, it is going to be the musical sense of the event or maybe just bringing people together in these arenas.

Because we saw that when at the NBA Africa games, the arenas were sold out completely. And even when we have concerts, not too long ago there was this year of return in Ghana and at the end of it they had a major Afrobeat concert. You had people from different parts of the world, all these American celebrities who flew to Ghana for the Afrobeat concert. So, just think and how Afrobeat is actually taking over the world and the music industry. So now, you have all these events coming to the continent where people don’t have to fly out so long or so far spending so much money just to attend them. They can actually have them in the continent, I think that’s major. That’s exactly what people were waiting for on the continent. And especially with the NBA which is actually one of the major sports leagues in the world.

So many people are actually looking up to what the NBA has been doing for not only Africa but

the African descendant players and stuff like that. So, I think that will stimulate you, to right away, to the concept and the brand and they just want to be a part of it. So that's going to be major.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Do you view the Basketball Africa League as neocolonial in any way? Yes, it's an initiative by an African, Amadou's vision. It's being administered by Africans, yet the NBA for all that it has globalized, is still identified primarily as an American sports league...

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

That's a difficult question but I can also say that because we live in a world of globalization, so I think that we are all interconnected, rather we are talking about the cares which is, the not for profit aspect, the charity parts of the league. If we talk about the BAL operation or the business side of the league, they all work together because that's going to develop more economies, that's going to bring people together and the league also will actually make sure that so many different labor factors actually merge. So now we can actually talk about the referees. We can talk about the commentators, t.v analysts, the journalists, you know so many different aspects of the game who actually come to light and create jobs in the continent. So, I think that's the major move.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What is your role or relation to the BAL?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Well, I'm a former athlete and somehow, I have executive roles with many African organizations, especially the SEED Projects, which is actually the grassroots. Actually, that should develop more sports into the continent. So, the BAL uses the SEED Project to actually lay out all the grassroots camps and basketball activities in the continent. So that's basically how I come into place. I don't have a specific role with the BAL, but because we are all interconnected and all work together, SEED being a partner of the NBA Africa and the NBA itself, also about being a league created by the NBA so we are all working together making sure that we putting Africa on the map and giving these opportunities to the youth because we use sport as a tool of development for so many different people.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And then, a few last quick questions; how do you think the BAL will enable greater communication and representation between different countries within Africa?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

The BAL will be a connector. It is going to be on the basketball courts or if it's going to be on the business side because so many different things will actually come into place. But now that we have the league, of course that's entertainment. Entertainment, now you have to know the culture. Culture, music, you have the fashion that comes into place. So, all of that will accomplish creating opportunities so people who actually assimilate deeply... Rather, they like basketball or not, but no, they can also mingle because of the music entertainment or maybe the fashion.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And, how do you think the BAL will help communication and represent Africa to the rest of the world?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

I think that's going to be a major driver of communication for the continent because now people will know exactly a little bit more about Africa. They will know about different countries because now you have different talent and different artists who actually come into place playing or showing their talents in opportunities we feed the continent. So, I think that will transcend to the rest of the world because the games will be televised, so many different countries will actually connect and see what's being done within the continent. So that's on the basketball side. Also, giving that opportunity to people who never actually met to actually come to create the friendships and partnerships using sports or fashion or music... That's fantastic.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And, looking into your crystal ball, what do you think the BAL might look like in 5 years? What does success for them look like in 5 years?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

That's going to be huge so I think... We usually joke about it, but I think the BAL might be as big or maybe better than the NBA here in North America because we are talking Africa now.

And, if you look at the NBA draft, for the past maybe 4 or 5 years, maybe longer than that, you see most of the first-round picks are African descends or all coming from Africa. So, we have the talents in Africa. The only thing that was needed was the infrastructures and now they are being built, and so many countries already have these infrastructures in place.

So, I think that's going to be huge. I think the rest of the world needs to watch out.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, in closing, do you think basketball can take over in Africa in the 21st century?

Stevy Worah-Ozimo

Yes. Basketball is already there. Actually, basketball has been there. The only thing is that it was a lack of infrastructure and also the structure of the activity. But now, we have all this coming together. So many different camps, especially that now we've been focused on under 18. So, making sure that these kids get to know the fundamentals of the sport at a young age. They get familiarized to the activities early on where they can grow in it for so many years and become a finished product.

Now you have the NBA Academy in the continent, so I think that's doing a great job. We have A SEED project there and so many former professional athletes or maybe current, going back into the continent running camps, recruiting players. You have Luc Mbah a Moute, you can see what he did running his camps where Joel Embiid was actually discovered. Pascal Siakam, stuff of that nature. I think that's fantastic. We need to keep going in that route and make sure we showcase what we have, we keep growing the talents and we put Africa on the map as the grass root and this is the continent that can actually deliver and deliver the right way.

END

Interview with Stevy Worah-Ozimo, April 2020

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