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

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Transcript:
Carmine Calzonetti
Former Coach and Professional Player

Kenny Grant
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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

If we could start by each of you giving your name and your age for the record, as well as how you first arrived to the basketball world?

Carmine Calzonetti

My name's Carmine Calzonetti. I am 73 years old. I live in New York City. I played basketball at St. John's. Prior to that, I played basketball because my father said go outside and don't come in the house. Do something. And I went down to the park and I played with everyone. And, I think most of my contemporaries started the same way, just played all the time. I went to Europe in the 1970s, stayed there until about 1980 but maintained contacts with international basketball. Different countries, I was in France for the most part. And, little by little, I was involved in certain projects in different African countries, Angola, Senegal and South Africa.

Kenny Grant

My name's Kenny Grant and I'm from the New York area. I grew up in the city. I'm 73 years old. Everyone played basketball in the city so it was normal for us. We didn't have room to play any other sports. There were baskets everywhere. I went to Saint Peter's College and played there in Jersey City which was right near-by. And then later, my good friend, Carmen, here got me on this international team and took off for Europe in the 70s and I stayed about 30 years as a player, as a coach, and then later as a player's agent helping guys get to Europe and European guys get to the States. And when I came back to the States which is about 20 years ago, I just stayed involved in doing the same thing.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, each of you really came to the international basketball world through your European work. How did you first get involved with Africa? What was the connection?

Carmine Calzonetti

Through France. It was initially through Senegal which was highly competitive and organized in the 70s compared to the other African countries.

The women's team was the African Champion year-end and year-out and they had the French structure through a federation and they had funding from France too. So, that was my initial contact. Angola was something that happened by accident in the early 1980s where when I was the Assistant Coach at St. Johns, Lou Carnesecca and a gentleman would sit in the stands breaking all of our drills. I went up to him and I asked him who you are and he said, "I'm the National Coach of Angola", and I said... because I lived abroad, I was aware that this was a very sensitive topic right now, we had no diplomatic relations. And over the course of two or three years, we planned and exchanged basketball, an American team to Angola for the first time ever.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And specifically, with regards to when you went to Senegal, and later with Angola, did you have a sense of who played basketball at that time?

Carmine Calzonetti

Well, in Senegal, everyone played basketball in Senegal because they saw that was ticket to get to France to play basketball. And in the period, say, around 1974 or 1975 when the French Federation opened up these *réintégrés*¹, there was this ton of talent that left Senegal to play in France.

In Angola, because it was a former Portuguese colony, Portugal, itself, which is similar to France, had their own federation, their own leagues there, and basketball was a big sport in Angola and, they were hungry to see more of it. They didn't have the Americans at that time. They didn't have diplomatic relations. There was a war going on. Nevertheless, the sport of basketball was something that was important to them and they were preparing for the African Championships. They wanted to vie against and beat Egypt or Senegal. They were the two major competitors.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And with Angola, there's been this historic trajectory more for soccer players from Angola, as well as Mozambique, going to Portugal and playing pro and doing really well. You think of Eusebio, for example, being well-integrated. Did you have a sense that was the same for basketball or not quite in the same way as it was perhaps for France?

Carmine Calzonetti

Football was still fun... basketball wasn't fun to the same degree in Portugal. Although, there were Angolans that did go, leave Angola and play in Portugal. But the teams were not as rich, say, as Porto; the soccer teams. But even today, there are many Angolans playing college basketball here, in the United States. So, they had good coaching. This gentleman was a great coach. They practiced hard. The government wanted them to succeed. That's the most important thing. If the government wants you to succeed, they give money to the federation, they hire coaches, they train the players, they feed them, they give them good facilities and they're going to have good results which they ended up having.

¹ *Réintégrés* were players born in France's former empire in Africa who could regain French citizenship, enabling work opportunities throughout metropolitan France in the post-independence era. Within the basketball context, at the time this meant that they were not considered "foreign" and thus did not count towards a team's 2-foreign-player limit.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, with France at the time, for example... now basketball was considered this hidden sport, right? Something that everyone learns how to play in school. That people play but was never really mediatized or consumed, even at that time in the 1970s and 1980s, certainly no professional funding. Did you find that that was somewhat similar for basketball in Senegal or Angola?

Carmine Calzonetti

The basketball world was a small world in Angola. All right? It would be in Luanda, maybe Huambo. There weren't basketball courts, there weren't coaches everywhere, there weren't equipment, there wasn't food. It was a very tough time. I guess, it was centralized. There's a small group of people, all right, that benefited from this. Although, there were spectators and there were smaller clubs. But just like anything else, it did evolve. More towns started supporting their teams and better recruiting. And when peace came, they were able to expand the federation and put more money into it and develop players. However, the really talented players knew that there were better opportunities abroad so they wanted to leave to go to Portugal to play or perhaps the United States, for the chance of eventually playing in the NBA.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, it seems like there was, for quite a long time, this idea of sports migration. Using sports for economic opportunity.

Kenny Grant

Yeah, exactly. I don't think there was any professional sports there that I saw. I think it was all the players wanted to get out, the coaches wanted to get out, but there were economic opportunities abroad.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. So, perhaps you could tell us a little bit more about how you first got involved in basketball in Africa?

Kenny Grant

I was always interested in Africa and visiting it. And I'd been to North Africa a bit, but one year when I was playing and coaching, I took off one summer and traveled overland in Africa from Kenya down to Rhodesia, at the time. And I just always had this interest in it. I didn't see any basketball along that way. It was the mid-1970's, I guess.

But later, I spoke with a friend, Terry Schofield, a good friend and coach, and said, he had been in contact with FIBA to do Olympic clinics in various countries, in Asia, and in Africa. I told him I would be interested in Africa and we contacted FIBA and they set up for me to do a

coach's clinic in Rwanda. I was prepared, but a few weeks before I was to go, the civil war broke out in Rwanda so, rather than cancel it, they asked if I would be willing to move the clinic to Kenya instead which was fine for me. And we had the coach's clinic there in Kenya right near the border (just outside the western side of Nairobi).

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

But with Rwandan coaches?

Kenny Grant

No, they did it with Kenyan coaches. They switched it to the Kenyan Olympic Committee. And the coaches were hungry for knowledge. They were very excited. I remember I brought some video cassettes with me back then and we'd put on games and explain them and stuff after the basic part of the clinic was finished. And it would be packed every night. Except, one night it was empty. And I couldn't understand why and I asked them and they said, because WWF was on TV. They loved wrestling. I had no idea, they were crazy about wrestling.

But, when they'd bring the kids down and we'd run clinics, after a while you realize, we've got 20 kids, we've got 1 ball, and we've got six pairs of shoes, how are we going to set this up?

Same in my later clinics in Nigeria, which were more players clinics. There was an outdoor court, two outdoor courts, behind the main place where we had our clinics and we were on one court and on the other court were people running up and down. Young guys, playing hard, no shoes. No shoes, jumping on bare feet, running on bare feet. This was a poor man's sport. There was no money in that. For them, the money would be to achieve something that gets you out of here. And that is what we tried to help them with, see who we can get out. If they were good enough, even if they get into a college or into a European team and stuff.

It was before the Cotonou Rule so it was very hard for them to compete right away on European teams. After the Cotonou Agreement² came in, European teams, especially Spanish teams, started recruiting more in Africa to get these guys as young players and develop them because one day they'd be able to play for them. Whereas before, there was a limit on the number of foreign players you could have so they would have to beat out Americans.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In your interactions with both the coaches in Kenya as well as the players in Nigeria, did you get a sense in terms of who actually plays? Was this something that people played based on a class

² The Cotonou Agreement, first signed in 2000, guides relations between the European Union and countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific and enables people from signatory countries to work freely across Europe. Within the sports context, it allows African, Caribbean, and Pacific Island athletes to play on teams throughout the EU without being considered a "foreign" player (and thus not counting towards caps on the number of foreign players on rosters).

or what kind of economic background they come from? Based on religion? Based on urban versus more rural? Men versus women?

Kenny Grant

I would think anything rural probably didn't have a court then. There weren't many courts. So, I'd say it was still, also, their city sport, it appeared to be. And like I said, it was people playing that didn't all have shoes. So, I'd say it was the every man's sport, it wasn't the wealthy sport.

Carmine Calzonetti

The counties also kept their eyes open. If there was a 7'3, 15-year old, living in his tiny little village, he'd find his way to the capital and get him on the team. So, talent did migrate to the organized teams.

A big influencer was when cable TV came in and all of a sudden, they can watch NBA games and see players, Michael Jordan, and even before that. And once you had [Hakeem] Olajuwon, the first African in there, and they could see them on television, it just motivated more Africans to play the sport. And then you've got more people involved that could make some money off of this. And then, you've got agents and bird dogs and you have talent in Africa but they still needed a landing spot before they can get to make the money to develop them and give them the coaching, the nutrition, the discipline, before they made the league to be in the NBA so they go to Europe or Greece or Spain, Canada, Australia. Then they try to get to the United States to play college and then into the NBA.

So, talent, migration, landing spot, formation for another year somewhere, two years, and then it's give it a try.

Kenny Grant

The Australian League had many South Sudanese because of the war going on there, they became refugees as kids and stuff.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Do you have any sense whether there was much recognition about the NBA or key NBA players such as they were prior to 1984, when the league started very much courting overseas broadcast contracts and there was greater ability to watch tapes through VHS?

Carmine Calzonetti

Well, when did Olajuwon come in?

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I think he was in 1984 draft.

Kenny Grant

The Barcelona Olympics in 1992, that's when it kind of, exploded with the Dream Team, NBA people and stuff.

Carmine Calzonetti

Oh, Barcelona was '92.³ Everything's changed with the amateur thing. Cable TV, agents finding talent, pledging people and you see where we are today. Almost every top college team has one African on it.

Kenny Grant

I think we were the only ones who thought it was amateur. We had an amateur team. No one else did.

Carmine Calzonetti

Exactly, we were the only amateurs.

Kenny Grant

We were the only ones that thought it was amateur.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, even the Africans... and those players were getting paid.

Kenny Grant

Yeah, not big money but they made something.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, does either of you have a sense in terms of who were some, and you touched on this a little bit, of the original inspiring players that started to get kids in different parts of Africa to dream about pursuing the game or just taken up basketball?

Carmine Calzonetti

Well, Michael Jordan, obviously, was a phenomenal athlete, and did things and had a long career, and his games were everywhere. The Chicago Bulls were like, the world's team. Michael Jordan was... up until that point, Muhammad Ali was the biggest name in the world of sports. Michael Jordan, almost equaled Muhammad Ali; his ability.

Kenny Grant

Because people could identify-

³ The 1992 Barcelona Summer Games were the first Olympic basketball tournament in which professional players could participate.

Carmin Calzonetti

I remember some tiny villages in Africa, and I'd say, "Oh, I know Michael Jordan". They'd go, "Michael Jordan!" Who's your favorite player, Michael Jordan. You ever seen him play? No. They knew him because he had Nike, too, that was everywhere. So, you had this... the perfect storm was happening there. And then they had this ability to get into France right away. That was a big one.

Kenny Grant

France was the first country that had a lot of African players.

Carmin Calzonetti

Yeah, yeah.

Kenny Grant

And then there were many in Britain too, but there was no real basketball to the Brits. It didn't develop in the same way.

Carmin Calzonetti

Yeah. They have a couple pretty good players, they don't have enough of them. Like, back when you were going to Rwanda was a former Belgian colony and Belgium did have a pretty organized Basketball Federation, whereas Kenya, they didn't have a... nobody played basketball for the most part. That doesn't mean that coaches weren't interested but it was just not part of their history.

Kenny Grant

When I got to Kenya, Paul Westhead, a very famous coach, was there to evaluate a player for his university team.⁴ [The player] got selected, he was there. [Westhead] came to the gym, he was looking at a player to bring back to college. The coaches were looking for them. They were out there looking.

Carmin Calzonetti

I went to South Africa. I had a similar experience then. I was doing clinics in one of the homelands out there and they take me to this court, it only had one basket with the rim, the kids showed up, no one had shoes on and they said, "Oh, we have equipment." They had one basketball that didn't have air in it. So, all they could do... they couldn't dribble, we just threw it back, and you just run up. You couldn't shoot because it wasn't a court, and you'd come down the other end and nobody had any talent anyway. So, the Federation wasn't involved. You have to have the government to finance the Federation and it has to go down, but that doesn't exist.

⁴ Westhead, who coached the Los Angeles Lakers to their 1980 NBA Championship title, was head coach for the George Mason University men's basketball team from 1993 to 1997.

Kenny Grant

Also, the British Colonies didn't play basketball, I think, most of the time.

Carmine Calzonetti

Zimbabwe, Zambia, you never see players from these countries.

Kenny Grant

Have you spoken to Masai Ujiri? I was his agent. He is Nigerian, he got into England, started playing basketball and then I think I put him in France because he had a passport and they could move around because of the EU stuff. He went to Sweden, also. It's an amazing story, his success.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

It is. And how it's helping to feed the whole pipeline and the ecosystem [with Giants of Africa]. Zooming out a little bit, in each of your experiences, which are quite different, how do you view the intersection of basketball and diplomacy, again, taking that very broad brushstroke understanding of what that is with relation to Africa, either past or present?

Carmine Calzonetti

My thing was, specifically, diplomacy.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Yes. So, perhaps, this is a good time to delve a little bit more deeply into that story.

Carmine Calzonetti

Did you read the article that I sent you? The one that explained a little bit about it. And the letter that I sent you is, after five months of waiting... that's the letter that gives us the green light from the government to pursue this. And then they put me in touch there with... and then I spoke with Richie Lapchick, and Richie... we had to develop a nonprofit that would get monies donated that we can use for our trip so Richie went to this guy, Franklin Williams, who's a former UN ambassador. He was executive director of the Phelps Stokes Foundation in New York City. So, they became our conduit for the publicity, press conferences, television, radio, and then dealing with Mobile, Total, Exxon... not Exxon. The big ones. Three or four oil companies that the State Department told us to go to, but we couldn't go to them.

But they were already alerted that they had to give money because they wanted to better relations. Because they wanted to pump more oil out of Cabinda. Cabinda's a province offshore of Angola where all these huge oil rigs in... what ocean is that, the Atlantic Ocean about five miles out. And there's this island, it's called Cabinda. Then you just have all these... as far as you can see, oil drilling thing. So, the person that was in charge of Total... I still think he's involved,

a guy named Stuart Nelson. He was the first person that we said, Okay, Stuart Nelson's throwing money into this. So, we used that. The person that we worked with at the State Department... a guy Jim Overly, he was the guy who made sure that things were safe and things were organized from there. And even though they said, "We are against this..." Verbally, they said, "We are against this exchange, we don't want it to happen." But behind the scenes, they go, this is how you have to do it and these are the people to do it.

So, they arrange it... when we finally put together the itinerary, we had a meeting at the UN with the Angolan people. They had us protected by Cubans, which no one can understand, 'why are Cubans protecting us against South Africans or being funded by the United States?' But that's the African world. That's exactly what went on. And then we had to give them schedules so the South African army wouldn't bomb the cities that we were in. So, they would bomb on the day before or the day after. So, we played seven games, around two or three. A tournament in Luanda then we went to, I think, Huambo about three or four other cities. Under police escort and everything. And as I mentioned, when we were there, there were 15,000 people in this huge stadium and the first time, the flag goes up, people are cheering and then the Angolan Coach said, "this is the first time I've seen this flag not on fire."

It was the Big East All Stars. And it was a life-changing experience for many of them; all of them. It was something that, certainly... most Black-Americans had never been to Africa and very quickly, they realized they were American, they weren't Africans. With flies everywhere. You wait a half-hour for your coat to come, there's no more food. But when it came to basketball, there was competitive basketball. We're playing the Senegalese national team in the tournament, the Angolan national team twice. When we're playing the village teams, the Angola team was good, so was Senegal. And we ended up winning all our games, and it was just a huge success.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What do you think you learned about Angola in any way, shape, or form from that trip, or a result-

Carmin Calzonetti

War is not fun. I'll tell you that. What causes war is very hard to understand, and how much poverty there are. At the same, how much hope they have. The people cheering us, cheering Angola. Wanting to shake hands and whatever. Nobody had, really, cameras, except us. And we were taking part in an episode that would potentially, change the course of history which it eventually did. Two years later, everything was hunky dory.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And did your interactions with your Angolan counterparts help to provide, maybe, a better understanding of what the political and war situation was like there? Was it something that you didn't really talk about?

Carmine Calzonetti

All they wanted to do was be free. They go, why can't we run our own country? You guys did it in 1776. They were educated people, the blacks and the whites. There were white Angolans and Black Angolans. We want to be independent. Obviously, when you're independent, then you get a leader and a leader doesn't want to leave, which is like in most... every country, just about. But then in the first step, they wanted to be independent. That's all they wanted to be; independent from Portugal.

Carmine Calzonetti

And Portugal wanted to be out. When Portugal realized they couldn't win this revolution, didn't have enough people to fight a whole country, Portugal took everything. They took every light bulb, every toilet paper, everything that they can get their hands on when they left the country. So, the country was really stripped of everything. And then there was an embargo and, plus, it was tough to get anything into that country anyway, except they had oil. And that was the thing that people were putting pressure on... and the United States said, you've got to rectify this because we need their oil, you need their oil.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Did they also take their basketball coaches and the lines of basketball migration back to Portugal?

Carmine Calzonetti

No, they had one or two players that, eventually, from that tournament, ended up playing in Portugal. It was just young there. They had a couple of 6'8, 6'9 guys playing at Portugal. They were sort of, like the *réintégrés*. They could play as Portuguese citizens in Portugal.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff:

And Kenny, certainly taking, maybe, a slightly different, less formal interpretation of the intersections of basketball and diplomacy, how do you view that vis-a-vis Africa?

Kenny Grant

When I was in Kenya, all the basketball people were very nice, very kind, and made it clear that they needed help. You know, financial help, whatever. When I got back, I got my son and his friend... we lived in France at the time all together and filled up boxes and boxes of basketball shoes to send down, which we did, for the kids down there because they really needed that. But I

didn't see any other political problems. There was crime on the street problems, that's a different thing. That was not political.

Carmine Calzonetti

I forgot. What you just mentioned is true. When we left Angola, we left everything. All of our players, happily, gave the Angolan players, their sneakers, their socks... everything that they had, they gave them to the players that they played against.

Kenny Grant

They had a real shortage of equipment. For me, in Nigeria, I'd see people running up and down along the court, sliding on defensive and they'd have no shoes on.

Carmine Calzonetti

The Federation had stuff, but they didn't have enough stuff. They just didn't have enough.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Usually, when we talk about development and growth of countries on an international nexus, we usually talk about tangible things. GDP, population, growth of the middle class, but in what ways do you think that basketball diplomacy or sports diplomacy, more generally, can provide a different type of metric?

Carmine Calzonetti

I think the word should not be diplomacy. I think it should be sports... international sports exchanges, something along those lines. Because diplomacy is a more political term. And many of these things are really non-political in nature. So, of them are, like this Angolan thing. But, most of the things are very basic, it's sports exchanges. But, diplomacy, I think, is more of a political word rather than an exchange.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, in an age of social media, when LeBron James is perhaps a better ambassador for American ideals and values than, perhaps, certain institutions... or certainly, much of the rest of the world has a very good understanding of certain aspects of American culture or ideals through LeBron James and following him online.

Carmine Calzonetti

But you're talking about 2020 right now.

Kenny Grant

I think sports gave us an in. We were accepted right away. There was no hostile... looking at, oh, these are ugly Americans or anything. There wasn't none of that. They were happy we were there to help and they made it clear that they had needs, if you could help them.

Carmine Calzonetti

And we also... you just didn't show up. You were the guest of a club or a Federation or somebody. So, there was advance warning... or not warning, that somebody is coming here to help so they opened up doors. This is my friend, Kenny. Kenny's from America, he's going to help give 20 of you guys pointers on how to coach-

Kenny Grant

But, more than the basketball knowledge, they'd want people that could somehow help them economically with their Federation, with their basketball programs and stuff like that. It wasn't just the knowledge to teach coaches how to coach.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay, that's a good point. And you found that across the board?

Kenny Grant

Yeah, they needed that. They made it clear too. They didn't hide it. They needed that. And help make sure when you go back and talk to people, you tell them we have needs, we're working hard at it but it's very limited what we have. It wasn't that, please send more coaches.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

You were representing, you were negotiating and communicating. So, do you think of yourself, past or present, as a sport's diplomat of sorts?

Kenny Grant

Well, the team we played on, we represented American basketball to people that had never seen it. So, from the beginning, we were doing that. People would come out and say, oh, there's American basketball. And then we played... we were sponsored by Levi's so they've seen people in jeans that they've never seen, all these things. So, we certainly represented certain American, not just style but lifestyle. And that was part of that lifestyle. And that's why people'd come out but they're excited about it. It wasn't just let me see what I can do with my jump shot.

So, we were in the habit of doing that. We'd been doing that all through Europe. I took the team, we went to South America, we went to Asia, we went to Australia, we went everywhere doing this, so to go to Africa was just more of the same but I think the big difference was getting there and seeing the different needs there.

Carmine Calzonetti

One of the things that could have been transferable was that we also had sponsors. Big name sponsors like Levi's, and Coca Cola, or Pepsi or Gillette or TWA.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And here you're talking about -

Carmine Calzonetti

Jim McGregor⁵, or even with Mobil Oil or something like that. And at the same time, multinational corporations were now coming stronger into Africa because they saw the opportunity to sell products. In essence, that's a big one. So, maybe the Federation's and maybe local teams started knocking on doors and saying, Oh, we want a sponsor, we'll put your name on a uniform or we'll put your banner up there. I'm not sure that existed. And when that came in, when they started finding sponsorship in order to generate revenue in order to put back into the sport.

Kenny Grant

I think the McGregor team probably didn't go to Africa because it wasn't in the sponsors interest.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, you're probably right.

Kenny Grant

Gulf, they want to go to the Middle East. We [on the McGregor traveling team] used to alternate between playing for Coke and Pepsi, we had two different shirts [crosstalk 00:33:40]-

Carmine Calzonetti

To the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. We were Coke in one country, Pepsi-Cola in another country. Pepsi Big Ones.

Kenny Grant

Pepsi had the bigger bottles than Coke. We were the Pepsi Big Ones. They loved us in the Philippines.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, they're great.

⁵ Jim McGregor was an American coach and agent whose teams toured internationally in Europe and Asia in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. Both Calzonetti and Grant played for McGregor.

Kenny Grant

You'd have 25,000 [people] at the games, it was amazing.

Carmine Calzonetti

Matter of fact, one of the guys we played with, Jaworski, became a big-time politician and a movie star.

Kenny Grant

Freddie Webb was the mayor or assistant mayor of Manila. That sport's important there. And it was before martial law, they even had guns. I think I told you, they played out in the provinces and in one place, the local warlord wanted a game for his family and Pepsi said, if you can do it, we'd appreciate it because we're going to have a hard time selling here if you don't do it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Drilling down on the basketball side with Africa, here we can start to incorporate your observations for how things have changed, in the interim, since. There has been significant growth of basketball across Africa, both in terms of who is playing, so the number of people who are playing, but also consumership and mediatization of, particularly, the NBA, but there's certainly a trickle-down effect... Because of this phenomenon, there's an argument out there that basketball is, perhaps, well placed to serve in the sport's diplomacy function in Africa. Would you think that it's, perhaps, better placed than soccer, rugby or cricket and why?

Kenny Grant

Cricket, you'd throw out right away because it's just British. Maybe in East Africa as well, I don't know. Soccer's, really, a world-wide sport. I think it probably works everywhere. In many countries in Europe, basketball was a higher-class sport than soccer. I didn't see that in Africa because I didn't come across any soccer so I don't know.

Carmine Calzonetti

When you have soccer, like in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and these guys are playing in the top division and top teams in Europe, but you don't really have basketball in Liberia or Sierra Leone at all.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And the other thing that actors in here is also, who plays? In many countries, even to this day, soccer is seen as a man's sport, it's too masculine for women to play. And there's a lot of social religious stigmas about that in Africa, as well as elsewhere, Europe, Latin America. But from everyone I've spoken to thus far, women and basketball have never had that sort of, stigma, even in some of the most conservative, small, rural communities in Northern Senegal, or in different parts of Africa.

Kenny Grant

They have more of a stigma here in America. Back when we were in college trying to get a woman's team, the colleges then were just starting out, and they never had that over there. There were woman's basketball teams everywhere.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff:

Why do you think that was?

Carmine Calzonetti

It's easy to do. As I mentioned, when I coached Clermont-Ferrand when we were down in Senegal, the Senegalese team was great in 1973 and '72. And then we brought the whole team to Jacky Chazalon's camp the following year, the women's national team from Senegal. And they stayed for two weeks on their own private camp preparing for the African Championships. So, they put money... they flew 30 people up to France and spent two weeks. They wanted to win. But then once again, the French system was intact in Senegal and they just went with it. I don't know much about any of-

Kenny Grant

There was no difference between male and female teams. They're both treated the same. There would be sponsors that would treat them differently. American sponsors were going to put more money until the NBA and stuff.

Carmine Calzonetti

And the women's soccer. They want the same... salary based on the men's national team.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, what do you think might be the opportunities for basketball diplomacy in Africa?

Carmine Calzonetti

The more kids play and the better coaching they get, more doors open and more scouts are there and bird dogs are going to try to make money off that. So, there's going to be... and Africa's a huge continent. And more and more players are going to try to land around... everywhere around the world. So, you're going to have more and more Africans playing in the United States and playing in the NBA going forward.

Kenny Grant

What will be interesting to see is if they have those opportunities ever in Africa. Now, the opportunities are all in leaving and they see it that way now. Will this be... it won't change immediately, but be the start of a change that eventually will happen so they can see a future at home.

Carmine Calzonetti

It's very hard to compete with somebody making \$20 million a year.

Kenny Grant

It doesn't have to be that extreme though, to make a really good living.

Carmine Calzonetti

The countries have to be mentioned, the standard of living, GDP, stadiums, sponsorship. Somebody's got to pay, not the Federation. And around the world, these teams that are most privately owned, so somebody's going to have to say, I'm going to devote \$5 million and there's 10 million. I don't see any African League being started... Finding 20 businessmen, each guy putting \$50 million up the starter team. I don't think that's going to happen.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, that brings me to the next related question, what are some of the biggest challenges for basketball and diplomacy for Africa?

Carmine Calzonetti

I just said, they don't have the infrastructure, the financial wherewithal or the organizational there, you don't have extraordinarily rich people that are living in these cities that are going to start a league. If the opportunity is away, and they have the ability to go away, maybe that's a saner thing.

Kenny Grant

European teams don't make money. The owner doesn't make any money. He just puts money into it. American teams have a value, they make money. It's a business. Basketball where it's not really a business even if other people are making money off it. The people at the top are giving something back.

Carmine Calzonetti

Senegal and these other countries already have leagues. All right. So, the best players aren't there. They're elsewhere. So, the league will always exist. So, you're going to have this of league in Senegal or Mali or wherever their league is, but the kids with talent will leave. They'll never be able to compete with away. You just can't compete. If a guys-

Kenny Grant

They do it on the national team level. They bring these people back because of passports, for Olympics, World Championships, stuff like that.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, for that, but their long-term... their life is going to be-

Kenny Grant

The best Australians don't play in Australia, they're gone. Australia has a salary cap so they put in for one player on each team, you can ignore the salary cap to try to get these guys to come back. Of course, it's a financial thing. But, Olympics comes, they'll have them all. World Championships-

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, perhaps, through this lens of Olympics, and perhaps, slightly less so, FIBA World Cup, what is still the main draw for players who play elsewhere to come back and play and represent for their national team and what are they trying to communicate about their home country? Or what do they communicate on court about their country?

Kenny Grant

In general, players that are away, they like to go home and show how well they're doing. But besides that, I don't think players were asked so much to play for the national teams, they were told. And I think that's part of it. That, we let you make this money, you went away, you did this and this; be here.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Do you think that's still the case today?

Kenny Grant

Yeah, I do think it's pretty much. I'm not saying in every country, but you see that in a lot of European countries already. Someone doesn't go away, he's going to have problems.

Carmine Calzonetti

Some NBA players do have in their contract that they can't play other than for their own team for fear of being hurt. And sometimes the season is so long, they want that month off or two months off because they don't want to jeopardize their livelihood either.

Kenny Grant

But there's insurance now.

Carmine Calzonetti

You get retired players like [Dikembe] Mutombo who comes back to the Congo and he tries to develop the sport there and he has money and contacts, but it's still hard. Even with a guy who's trying to do something. He's one guy in a whole country and he lives here.

Kenny Grant

You need more.

Carmine Calzonetti

He represented Mutombo.

Kenny Grant

The company I worked with at the time represented him, I had his brother to take of.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

That introduces another question here in terms of who helps to conduct and develop basketball and basketball diplomacy especially, but also the technical transmission.

Kenny Grant

I think FIBA has a program within it. That's what I went through, probably, that was... it's an Olympic program for the Olympic Committee's, but the Olympic Committee deals through FIBA and someone within FIBA... I can't remember who I dealt with, but my friend Terry Schofield, he's done about 10 of these. And we talked, at the time, about doing this. I was supposed to go to Yemen also, but I had to cancel that at the last minute because my mother came to visit me and she was very old. I couldn't leave here there alone.

Carmine Calzonetti

If you were the current president of the Zimbabwe Basketball Association, and you walked into the United States Consulate, and you say, we'd like to have a basketball coach here, the State Department has a budget that they can send people there that be the national coach or assistant coach or something, and for free, they'll find somebody to do this.

Kenny Grant

It's what McGregor did, I think, in Central Africa. He went there through the State Department.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, so they can find people but those people are not... what their goal is, is to teach somebody and that person would run the Federation. But it's not somebody who's going to be their permanent. Like Victor de Cunha was there for 10 years, 15 years being a coach, so if they have continuity and the government behind it, you're going to have results.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In what ways do you think that basketball helps to create identities either in different African countries or regions or for the continent of Africa, more generally? Past or present.

Kenny Grant

Well, I know what it's done in the past, sports victories give a lot to national pride depending on how much it's publicized at home and stuff like that. I think people get really into it when there's a local team that's doing well at some big international competition. Suddenly, they're all following it. I think in that way, if that gets people to put more money into it, maybe, but I don't know who the people are that do that. I think that refers to a part of culture that I wouldn't know what their culture says. In certain cultures, it's, no, we don't put money in, the government's supposed to take care of it. Others, just people that have made money, that throw it in there. They feel that's their responsibility to pay it back. I don't know well enough to say which countries that would be.

Carmine Calzonetti

The measuring stick would be comparative to soccer. Right, can you get to the World Cup semifinals, can you get to the Olympic semifinals? Africa is light years away from getting to the semifinals in the Olympics. They don't have the infrastructure to... even though you only need 10 players, it's hard for them... I don't even know, has an African ever got through the first round, ever?

Kenny Grant

The most publicity they got was that the Olympics against the Dream Team. Angola played the Dream Team and their star, Jean Jacques Conceição, got into a fight with Charles Barkley.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, that was the extent of it... they published. But, they're still away to get to that point. They'll never make it. And that's the measuring stick. However, in soccer, they have made it to the semifinals. Nigeria did one year, a couple other teams did too. But, that is the measure of success in Africa, it's still way far away.

Kenny Grant

There's no reason why they can't get there. They have the base. They have people that are tall, athletic, whatever you need, in different places. They expose them to the game, but then they, maybe, don't have enough around it to keep them going, that's why they have to leave. Now, will you get enough of them that leave and comeback that are in the same age group, the same year, to get together and have a good team? I don't know the answer to that.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What of the notion that regardless of where you are in the world, even if say you're in France or Angola with very long, proud basketball traditions of their own... what if the concept that basketball is still seen as an inherently American sport, best marrying in that or do you not see that at all in Africa?

Kenny Grant

I think it's an American sport. I don't the part... that's a negative thing, you mean?

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Or just how you have observed that factoring into this question of how does basketball help to build identities?

Kenny Grant

Uh-huh (affirmative). Like, a Mutombo or Olajuwon that goes away, I'm sure they know everything they do back at home. They're representing their country. They're not just going there to make money. To make piles of money, this and that. They're representing their country. It's success for their country and I think that people feel that for sure. Sure.

Carmine Calzonetti

I think basketball is global right now, because there's a period Russia, just dominated. There's a period Yugoslavia dominated. Any of these countries can come back with just two or three players, any of them, like Kenny said. If Senegal ever got all of their players together and then whipped them in shape and had them for two years straight and taught them how to take care of the basketball... I mean, tactical things. They were athletically... they should be great. They had size.

What I think that's missing out of Africa are guards. They don't have the experience of... What was the guy, Malcolm Gladwell? The guy that wrote the book. The 10,000-hour theory, that's what they don't have. 10,000 hours of being a point guard.

Kenny Grant

I think, also, people went there to look for big guys because we don't have any. They bypassed the young guys. There was no interest. They didn't have the same possibilities to get away and go to-

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah. But because of that, the guards don't have the savoir-faire, the knowledge, the coach, and they haven't played enough of basketball to really become a premier point guard. I don't think... The only African point guard is from Germany, right? Schroder.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, I've also heard this argument about the concept of basketball and identity. That basketball is a global sport. It's a universal language and at today's point in time, because of the prevalence of the NBA, and the fact that NBA culture has kind of, infused part of this global concept of basketball, not just style of play, but also music, sneakers, fashion. Yeah, the larger culture that

goes around with it, that basketball is, perhaps, a global identity in a way that even soccer cannot be. I'm very curious about what each of your reactions is to that argument.

Kenny Grant

I think, referring back to when we were traveling with, say, Levi's or something like that, we weren't just there for basketball, we were showing an American image. And people look at the image that basketball promotes nowadays. I think its part of what draws kids into playing it. It's the fun, it's the Hip Hop, it's everything else. This is all part of it. You'll see kids that are terrible, but they've got the other part down. I think that's one of the advantages basketball's had, that it's attracted people all over the world because of its image. I don't think soccer has that same image at all.

Carmine Calzonetti

And then you have tennis where you have Maria Sharapova and then you have Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, they're selling, all the time, \$100,000 watches and magazines. You don't see that... You don't see players that that's their focus. Basketball started with Air Jordan's and sneakers. That was the beginning of it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective and what you've observed, especially given some of your past clients, what is the role of different African diasporas in helping to develop and grow the game back in Africa?

Kenny Grant

I think the people that have done that stuff have been connected to the US, maybe not originally, but they realized this is where there's money and this is where there's the interest in doing it. People like Masai, Amadou [Gallo Fall] and stuff. They try to go back and do that. I always said, if I was a better agent, Masai wouldn't have all these positions he has now, he'd still be playing.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From each of your perspectives, which are slightly different, how do you view the Basketball Africa League in terms of... it's got many challenges, but it also has a lot of interesting promises of opportunities?

Kenny Grant

It's interesting, the idea that they're going to get together and play some games that limits the cost of traveling so some thought has gone into it, that way. I think the fact that the NBA is saying, we don't deal with salaries, does that themselves, that have, maybe, a wait and see for now. They may have an agreement to help those teams with money that they want to keep private because what's going to happen with all the people going in and many won't be paid.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah. And once you're not paid, that's the end of it.

Kenny Grant

Unless there's an agreement. I don't know if they have to submit budgets or anything like that. France is one of the few places with teams to say, this is how much we're going to spend and this is where we're getting the money, but it doesn't always work out exactly. Most countries, they don't do that at all. You make up a figure.

Carmine Calzonetti

Once you put the label... Okay, it's an NBA... people are going to expect to see cheerleaders, big television screens, all of this, full houses, food...

Kenny Grant

The stadium in Rwanda, right, where they're going to have the final four.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah. The average salary is \$5 a day in many of these countries. Who's going to buy tickets?

Kenny Grant

I think they'll get big crowds. But the tickets will be cheaper.

Carmine Calzonetti

You have to find out who the owners are and how much they're going to put into it. If people expect to see NBA quality, they're not going to see NBA quality, or organizational skills, or what they've seen on television. They think they're going to see that. It's not going to be the case. Now, we'll see it on page one.

Kenny Grant

You have to give it time.

Carmine Calzonetti

Well, will people be patient, or the organizers have deep enough pockets to see this through?

Kenny Grant

You don't see it in Europe. They don't have the same NBA games.

Carmine Calzonetti

No, but they have cheerleaders, they have sponsorships, they have a high level-

Kenny Grant

They don't play in an NBA Arena. You never have big arenas like that. About 5000 seat arenas, 8000, 9000 seat arenas.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, they have them and-

Kenny Grant

Australia has big arenas-

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, I know but-

Kenny Grant

A good show. It's very similar to NBA.

Carmine Calzonetti

Well, at least I know in Luanda where we played, there was a whole place which holds 15,000. I don't know about Senegal. The one we played in was all outdoor courts.

Kenny Grant

I don't think they have a lot of big arenas. Rwanda's supposed to be the biggest, but I'm not sure.

Carmine Calzonetti

No. It's a wait and see though, basically.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Thinking about the BAL through the lens of basketball diplomacy, where teams that play in the BAL, the players, the team owners, the fans, there's going to be a lot of communication, representation and negotiation, and especially the fact that this is an intra-African tournament, that certainly says a lot. So, thinking about it through that prism, how do you think that the BAL might help to facilitate intra-African basketball diplomacy?

Kenny Grant

The ideas are out there now, and they have a big name behind it. I think that helps get people on board to see how it's going. I think at some point, the NBA is going to have to step in and help them financially, whether that means help them get sponsors that are doing the help or whatever. I think that's the difficult part. I don't think the hard part's playing the games, getting the people there, this and that. I don't think that's the hard part. I think the talent is there. I think there's plenty of talent in the world of basketball. I think though, that they'll need help and someone

watching over financials... financially, to keep it going. Giving sane salaries, not promising a bunch of money that they can't pay. I wouldn't be surprised if the NBA is not involved in making sure that transport and all that stuff is taken care of to keep the league running. I would think they would be doing that. Because they always said, salaries are not us.

Carmin Calzonetti

You would think the NBA would put their name on something if they don't have control over it. But stating that they don't want to have control over it is at odds with what the game plan should be.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

But then what do you think the BAL and NBA's investment in the BAL says or communicates to the rest of the world about Africa?

Kenny Grant

It gives it stamp of approval. I think, for sure.

Carmin Calzonetti

I think there's a political public relations route for them too, the NBA. You have all these Afro-American people, let's try to help... give the impression that we're helping basketball over there. They could have subsidized all the Federation's which probably would have reached more people, more kids. Get more basketballs, more seats, more courts, more clinics and things like that. But now you're only talking about 72 players.

Kenny Grant

The NBA sees a gain in this, eventually. I don't think they're in it just for charity. I think that they're spread basketball around the world because we'll come back and make new fans, new people watching, better TV contracts in different places and stuff. I think their long-term plans is, it's a business.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And then in closing...is there anything that we haven't yet discussed that you think we should get on the record in terms of basketball diplomacy in Africa, past or present, or future?

Kenny Grant

I think the major points are made but I think the Peace Corps thing. Peace Corps was financed by the U.S. to spread goodwill and appreciation of American culture and basketball ended up being a part of that in a lot of places. And I think that's an interesting perspective because it's back to the late 1960s or early 1970s. And those people probably would have a picture of what African basketball looked like. McGregor is a little different because he takes the Central African

Republic, probably on the State Department thing... takes them to Europe, runs a tour and makes money off it. He's not giving that back to Central Africa. No, it's just who he was. And I think that's also a bit of what the NBA is doing. I don't believe the NBA is doing all this just for charity. I think they're doing it because they see some long-range plans that will help them.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Do you see the NBA's Basketball African League as being neocolonial? Or is it just really difficult to make that statement?

Kenny Grant

I don't really see it that way but I think stuff the NBA does, basically, it's to increase their own profit line, eventually. Maybe not immediately, it's an investment. And I think the BAL is an investment and they're trying to be careful about the investment. They may have agreements with teams on salaries, and this and that, that they're not saying because they don't want people to-

Carmine Calzonetti

I don't think the BAL, in itself, is the reason there'll be more and more Africans coming here. I don't think that has anything... there's just going to be more and more scouts and bird dogs and NBA scouts and college middlemen going to Africa, cutting deals and getting a 6'10 because there's 300 junior colleges, 300 NAIA, 300 Division One. So, you're talking about 900 schools that are all looking for 6'9 kids, if they can walk. There's a place for everyone. So, the more and more people who keep on coming here, as long as the way that they track at these guys is not stopped-

Kenny Grant

The business of the NBA is selling viewers to sponsors and if they can create more viewers... viewers in terms of app games, TV coverage, and the whole continent this hasn't been used and, maybe, eventually, as economies get better, companies that want to sell them things, they'd have a very good financial position. It's a new exposure to this market.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, that's what they do. But the individual player, can still go through the channels to get here to hope to get the golden ring.

Kenny Grant

There's a scandal going on right now with colleges paying players and their families or friends to get the players because schools make a lot of money out of this and the coaches make money out of it. And it's the same type of situation.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

One last related question into this then, with regards to Africa, to what extent is the corruption equal to, less than, or perhaps more than what we see in, say, the soccer world which FIFA and many other soccer entities in Africa have very poor track records?

Kenny Grant

I'd say it's probably similar but less money. I know soccer has more money to deal with.

Carmine Calzonetti

There's more paperwork to come through the traditional system. You have to get a visa, pass a university exam, you've got to get in a high school first, you've got to get a family to take care of you, someone's got to pay for the flight, and someone's got to change your birth date. All of these things. And then paperwork to get into the American system. Nevertheless, you have 200, 500 kids every year.

Kenny Grant

There's a woman that has been charged, I think, down in North Carolina, because she was helping them get their visa's by showing those students their grades or something like that.

Carmine Calzonetti

So, that will never stop and that's what the kids want. I don't think anybody's thinking, I want to play for the BAL. No, 15-year old. They saying, I want to play for the NBA.

Kenny Grant

They may think it's a step towards it. To play at home. They'll be good in this league, and then they'll take it to the next league. Like the G league. That's what the G league does.

Carmine Calzonetti

I know. Talking about a 15-year old kid, 7' kid, he's going to find his way to the United States.

Kenny Grant

It may be a way to get to the United States, by getting them to BAL and doing well.

Carmine Calzonetti

Yeah, but if they're going to the BAL, they're professional, they can't go to college. Is that right?

Kenny Grant

College is not the aim. I don't think college is the aim. If someone's 15, they could play in the BAL.

Carmine Calzonetti

Oh, that's true.

Kenny Grant

At 18, they can play in the NBA.

Carmine Calzonetti

Well, if they can develop the BAL as a G League and get kids that don't have to worry about coming to the States and have great coaching and all of that and the NBA is really following these kids, maybe there are opportunities like that, that make this league a showcase league as an option rather than college. If they can get to that point, but you need infrastructure.

Kenny Grant

They have an interesting idea, though. I think about the idea of teams getting together and they can play three or four games in one city right away. They do that every two weeks, that saves a lot of money.

END

Dear Carmine

Wanda 24.3.82

I hope that this letter finds you and your family in good health. First of all my apology for only now I answer you, but during this time I do my best trying to persuade my superiors to allow the contacts with our Federation and the USA Basketball.

Finally, we have the agreement. From now we can arrange, with your help, all type of contacts in "Basketball affairs".

Our purpose, if it's possible, is make a clinic and a tournament with a team, between 23 July and 7 August, in this summer.

I think it's better call Mr. Lapchick, because he is very interested in such a kind of project, and eventually with the help, in terms of funds, of Mr. Stuart Nelson. Please call also Mr. Tomlin and tell him that from now we have the green light. By the way, I don't know if it's necessary a contact with "ABAS", but I think that is easy get the approval from them.

To arrange all the things quickly I'm going call you next month, in 22 of April between 5 and 6 p.m. hour of New York. In the meantime, please, send me informations about the project.

Once more my apology, but I make in the future, our contacts will be "great".

Sorry, my English is not good, but I propose do my best.

Kindly, "Kiss" for me the old man "Joe" and all the people.

Victorino Lutha.

Letter giving Calzonetti approval to proceed with his 1982 trip to Angola.

Source: Carmine Calzonetti.

s Fund

enckpnet

August 24, 1982

Mr. Jeff Allen
175-39 Dalny Road
Jamaica, New York 11432

Dear Jeff:

Now that the dust has settled and you have had the chance to eat a few dozen Whoppers, I wanted to reopen lines of communication.

I hope that you saw Lou and Gary on the CBS Morning News last week. They did a good job in assessing the accomplishments of the trip. The press coverage has been extensive and positive. I have enclosed a copy of the press release that we sent out from the Fund.

Jeff, I want to personally thank you for the important contribution you made toward the success of this trip. I know that you were able to see how pleased the Angolans were with the results. I have had several conversations with representatives of the State Department in Washington and they were equally pleased. You were an important part of the whole effort that made this possible.

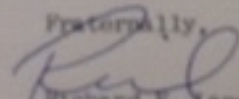
I know that some of the times were hard with sickness and food problems. But you survived and learned a great deal about Angola- a nation which few Americans know anything about. Now you must teach what you have learned to your friends, neighbors and any others who may be interested. By the time we landed at JFK it was clear that you had grown and become stronger, had your eyes opened, and had let your heart become attuned to a whole new reality.

You were a part of history. Your visit gave an entire nation a two week respite from war. Angola was bombed the day before we entered. The South African raids resumed on Monday morning, August 9th- only hours after we left. More than 350 Angolans were killed that week.

Jeff, you and the others on the team captured the hearts of 8 million Angolans and brought two seemingly irreconcilable nations together. Everyone should be very proud of you. I know that I am.

If I can ever do anything for you, please do not hesitate to call on me. Hopefully, our friendship has only just begun. I look forward to seeing you play this year and wish you all the best in school and in basketball.

Fraternally,



Richard E. Lapchick
Director, Southern Africa Program

*Letter from Richard Lapchick with impressions from Calzonetti's 1982 trip to Angola.
Source: Carmine Calzonetti.*

Interview with Carmine Calzonetti and Kenny Grant, March 2020

Calzonetti, Former Coach and Professional Player; Grant, Agent and Former Coach and Professional Player

Conducted by Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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