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

An Information & Knowledge Exchange project funded by SOAS University of London. *Under the direction of Dr J Simon Rofe, Reader in Diplomatic and International Studies, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London* jsimon.rofe@soas.ac.uk

Transcript: Youcef Ouldyassia
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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Youcef Ouldyassia

Hello, my name is Youcef Ouldyassia, I'm 45 years old. I came to the basketball world when I was a kid. I think I was around nine years old when I first started with basketball. I was in France, where I grew up.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And how did you first become involved with basketball in Africa?

Youcef Ouldyassia

How I was involved with basketball in Africa, I was playing professionally in France in the first division [today's ProA]. I was a member of the French National Team [U23]. The Algerian National Team—because I'm Algerian by my parents, they are both born and raised in Algeria then they came to France—the Algerian National Team didn't have resources or money to make players from all around the world come to play for the national team, so for the longest period, they didn't call other players. But in 2000, they decided to call the players [with Algerian ties] who played professionally around the world.

I was there. I played for the Algerian National Team. We won the silver medal in the AfroBasket Championship in 2001. This is where it all started with Algerian basketball.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Could you talk a little bit about that experience playing for Algeria and what it was like for you to communicate and represent the country of your parents?

Youcef Ouldyassia

It was a great honour to represent the country of my parents, and it also was a great honour to represent France. For me, having the two countries was a big strength and I'm really proud of it.

It was something different, and in my opinion every new experience, good or bad, we learned from it. This one was a great one.

In France, or in Europe, everything was very structured, and everything was kind of really easy to run. It was different in Algeria. It was not as professional as it was in France, or in Europe, but it was something really nice, because you came back to the spirit of it, and to the essential things.

My first and my only fear was, ‘how would all the other players accept us coming from another country?’ You don’t know. Would they be nice to us? How would they feel about us coming on their territory? I used to go to Algeria as a kid to visit my grandparents and family. But to play basketball [there for the national team], the welcome was so warm, and you could tell you are part of a family. This is something that was amazing. This experience was one of the best in my life.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

This was your first involvement with basketball in Africa, but it certainly has not been your last. Over the years, you’ve worked extensively through the lens of basketball across the African continent. Could you tell us how that first came about?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

That first came after my professional basketball career. I moved to journalism and to be a host on TV at Canal+ and InfoSport + at the time. Canal+ Afrique had a request: they were looking to have a show for Africa, because in France, we have a lot of African athletes in all sports, so Canal+ Afrique wanted to have a weekly show about the performance of African [athletes] in France or in Europe. Canal+ Afrique asked me if I want to run this, to be the head of this, and I was really happy to do it.

That was my first step for sports in Africa. Then during that time, the show grew up a lot. Now it’s one of the biggest African sports shows I think, ‘Talent Afrique,’ it’s a huge one. And after that, Canal+ Afrique had the rights for the NBA in Africa. Today in France, BEIN Sports [has the NBA broadcast rights], and for Africa, Francophone Africa, that’s Canal+ Afrique. Canal +

Afrique broadcasts in 27 countries. We are the show, and on our show, we wanted to really focus on African players, because Africa has talent.

We had never really focused on that, so we focused on African [players], but we didn't forget that the NBA was also a show, so we talked about the NBA as regular TV [journalists] should do, talking about Steph Curry, LeBron James, and all those stars. But also focused on the African players.

So, working on that, you have some opportunities to know the players more. It's like an ecosystem, African NBA players. It's the African family of basketball. We are all together, and when we are reunited, everything is really smooth and really nice, so you forge relationships. I have a great relationship with almost all African NBA players, so we talk a lot. They all do amazing stuff on the continent, so I told them, 'Guys, you do some great stuff, but nobody knows what you are doing. Let's show the great stuff you are doing, the great person you are, and how much it is important for you to give back to your continent.'

I've been working with them on some content and some documentaries, showing what they were doing.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

To what extent do you consider yourself to be a sports diplomat? You've certainly engaged in and conducted sports diplomacy, both more formally through representation of Algeria and informally in communicating and talking about different cultures in basketball as a journalist and documentary producer.

Youcef Ouldyaassia

Sports is for me kind of the last diplomatic tool. I mean, we can see that dialogue doesn't always work that well, and sports, as we all know, have no limit, no gender, no borders, no race, nothing of that. Using this amazing tool ... I call it a tool, it is something that is easy, that helps. Anywhere in the world, kids and people play football or basketball or rugby. You can communicate really well with them through sports. I don't know how I'm a diplomat on that

front, but I'm trying to show all the good stuff that sports can bring to the world. I've witnessed it.

I've travelled a lot in Africa. During the last 12 months, I've been to 13 different African countries. You can tell that sports unites people, sports break all the barriers. I've been in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in the war zone, and I've seen how basketball can be an amazing tool with the NGO Promo Jeune Basket, PJB, the same in Senegal with the SEED Project. We have a lot of great stuff in Togo with MILEDYOU. All around Africa, a lot of people use sports as a tool, a diplomatic tool.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What continues to inspire you to help develop the game in Africa?

Yucef Ouldyaissia

I feel like I'm on a mission. There are so many beautiful things going on in Africa. I'm not talking about business, because Africa is growing a lot. Economies are going well in Africa in a lot of countries.

I really want to show the good stuff going on in Africa, and the potential that Africa has. We can see it a little bit with the NBA. When we have structure and everything, we have some amazing talent. But it's not just about rising stars or NBA players. It's more about how we can use sports to educate the kids, use sport to teach them the rules, use sports to motivate those kids.

It's like a mission. It's hard to describe, you have to feel it, but when I'm in Africa something happens... I remember I was interviewing Masai Ujiri, the president of the NBA champion Toronto Raptors. I asked him a little bit the same question you asked. Because I saw Masai in Toronto, and I saw Masai in Africa. I told him, 'Why do you come so often to Africa?' Because he comes a lot. And, 'What do you feel?' He told me, 'When I'm in Africa, I'm different, more relaxed.' Because he's telling me that's home We know it's the youngest continent in the world and we have to inspire those kids.

Because we need to make those kids and people dream again, for me this is our mission: we need to make them dream again. They're going to dream, because there's a lot of great stuff going on.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Who are the people, the key stakeholders, who are helping to develop basketball across the African continent? Or conducting some form of basketball diplomacy?

Youcef Ouldyaassia

Back in the day, we had great players, like Hakeem Olajuwon, Dikembe Mutombo, Manute Bol. They were the pioneers, they opened doors for the next generations. They show the world that Africa has talent. Also, Africa did a nice job from the field, trying to raise the game in Africa. We shouldn't forget the role of women in basketball in Africa, and in sports in general in Africa. Basketball is really popular for women. The first was Mwadi Mabika [former WNBA All-Star] from DRC. She was really famous, and some people like that.

Now, for a few decades, Amadou Gallo Fall is one of the people most responsible for the growth of basketball in Africa. His story is beautiful. He's a former basketball player who went to the United States to study [at University of the District of Columbia, UDC], then went to work for an NBA franchise as an international scout. He wanted to come back to Africa to develop basketball. So, Amadou Gallo Fall, for the work he did in the last few decades developing basketball on the continent. First of all, he's a beautiful human being, and he's really good, and you can see where basketball was in 2010, and where it is now with the number of players in the NBA, or in the best leagues in the world.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Through some of your documentary work on basketball in different African countries, you've gone in and communicated and helped others to understand a little bit more about what the game is like there. Do you see this work through this sports diplomacy lens of informal culture exchange?

Youcef Ouldyaassia

Yes, definitely, you can see the diplomacy over here. My documentaries are not just documentaries in Africa for Africa; they also to show the world a different perspective and how people can be really clever and smart with nothing. Sometimes you go to Africa or on some coasts, you don't really have a basketball or the hoops are not in a good condition, but they don't care. They just practice. Sometimes kids don't have really nice shoes or they have shoes with a hole, but they don't care. They just practice. I think it helps the world to understand that you don't need to have the nicest shoes, the nicest basketball, or the nicest basketball clothes if you have the passion of the game.

You don't complain. When you see this kind of stuff, you cannot complain. We in the United States or in Europe, we are really lucky, because we have great conditions. But if you really love the game, you practice anywhere, everywhere. Those people [in Africa] show us what it is like to have that faith, and that love of the game. Also, when those people leave or they have scholarships to study in the States or in Europe, they are ready to fight for everything, because they came from more challenging conditions.

This is where I'll see the diplomacy. For example, I shot a documentary about Promo Jeune Basket, PJB, in the DRC, in Goma. It was live on Canal+. After this, the French embassy called me to see if they could release it in their own agencies all around the country to show the good stuff around there. That's diplomacy for me.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How have the changing ways of consuming basketball, and thus the changing ways that people learn about basketball in Africa, impacted the intersection of basketball and diplomacy?

Youcef Ouldyaassia

You're right, they consume basketball in Africa in a different way. First of all, we have to be aware that the Internet connection and the price of data can be something that is complicated for Africa, so you cannot really ... You can go on the Internet, but not to watch a full game or you will need to have Wi-Fi for that. Of course, Canal+ Afrique helped a lot, because when we had

the [broadcast] rights for the NBA, we worked hard on the Canal NBA show. It was something a lot of people followed, and that helped everybody to have games, live games, and to be aware of the latest news.

But also, with the Internet you can find everything right now. Especially, as I said, the African population is the youngest in the world, so they are really into the Internet, social media, and all this kind of stuff. This is what everyone is really focused on. It's something really important. Also, I've been talking to a lot of African coaches, and they told me that they can now work on having the best results, the way maybe Gregg Popovich is coaching, or some other great coaches thanks to tutorials on the Internet. It's really easy to find an exercise. For example, 'OK, maybe I would like to work on defense today, what should I do?' And you just go on the Internet, you check for exercises for defense, and you can pick the one you want.

It's not something that you have to follow somebody and do exactly what he does, because every team is different. But you can choose, you can learn, so it's an easy way to learn, if we know we still need to improve in Africa, in a lot of stuff, but we can also improve that way.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

That is a really great illustration of an informal sort of knowledge exchange through the Internet, one example of what sports diplomacy could be. In tune with that, what are some of the unique opportunities and challenges for basketball in Africa?

Youcef Ouldyaassia

Opportunities, we have a lot. I really think the momentum is Africa now in sports, but not just in sports. You can see other investments made in Africa by all the huge worldwide companies, which is really normal for me, because Africa's got talent. You can see it in football, you can see it in basketball, you can see it even in rugby now. Things are really moving, so this is one opportunity.

I say a lot of the time that Africa has talent, the potential is here. We knew it for a long time. We didn't know how to use or make that potential bright. Now we do in all sports, and of course like

basketball with the NBA and FIBA, they work on that and they work really strongly with the Junior NBA. There was the Junior NBA, the NBA Academy now in Africa, the Basketball Africa League (BAL). All those opportunities. The challenge is: now we need more infrastructure.

It's moving really well. You can see the Dakar Arena, the Kigali Arena. I've been traveling a lot for the BAL lately, and you can see that lots of countries now have an arena to host really high standard games, or high-level quality games. We still have infrastructure problems, but it is getting better.

We need to teach the teachers [the coaches]. But we have talent, but we need to ... and it's a plan to do clinics with basketball coaches, because they are the ones who are going to teach the kids, and the younger you start, the better you get, faster.

For example, I remember during one of my documentaries, I was talking to Emmanuel Mudiay, he was born in Kinshasa, and now he plays for the Utah Jazz in the NBA. He told me, 'I started basketball at a young age...' Because he left the DRC when he was two years old, I think. He said, 'I started basketball, I was five years old in the [United] States,' and he was one of the best kids in the States. And now in Africa, kids start sometimes a little bit later [older], maybe they are 12 or 13, but during the younger age, this is where you learn the faster, not just sports, but even how to read or they remember everything.

I think it's a challenge to educate our kids, and our Junior NBA is really good for that.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In what ways do you think basketball in Africa may provide greater opportunities for women and girls, especially thinking about gender equality?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

This is a real thing. I really think Africa teaches the world about that, because you play basketball in Africa no matter your gender. Everywhere you go in Africa, you have girls playing,

you have boys playing, you have them playing together, when against each other they play on mixed teams.

Yeah. It's a really nice message to the world, and even the national teams, like the Malian National Team, the Senegal National Team, they do really, really, really well in worldwide competition. It's really common, for example when I went to Algeria with Evan Fournier, an NBA player, his mother is Algerian, and I organized with him a camp over there for him with the Algerian [Basketball] Federation. We had a camp. Of course, we didn't mention that it has to be a mixed camp for boys and girls, but the federation automatically did it half boys, half girls.

The good thing is that even in those countries, maybe you can think, 'Oh, Muslim women cannot practice sports,' but you have girls having the hijab on their face, some didn't have it, and it was totally open. You want to wear it, you wear it. You don't want to wear it, you don't wear it. It's like the case a little bit everywhere in Africa. At the end, as I said, no matter what your gender, you practice sports, and nobody cares. Basketball is really big for women.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

With reference to that specific camp in Algeria, I think one of the MVPs of that camp is now on a scholarship in the United States, right?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

Yeah. That's a great story. You have stories. There's also an Egyptian girl who was with the NBA Academy Girls on the camp, and she had a scholarship with a really nice university. The Meriam story is beautiful. She came to the camp, and it was a camp with boys and girls. She was the MVP. That was normal. We didn't do it because she was a woman, we did it because she was great. We didn't care. Everybody agreed. The nice thing is when we say, 'Okay, the MVP is Meriam,' everybody applauded. All the guys applauded, all the men, the federation, everybody was really happy for her.

Now, she's in the States, she's doing really well. She's a really good student. For me, that's diplomacy. Because a kid from Algeria, she goes to the States, she does well, she's really well-

educated. With that, I'm sure people around her in the States will say, 'Maybe we should go check what's going on in Algeria, so maybe there is talent, but not just sports talent, maybe also talent for studies or something like that.' The same thing happened in DRC in Goma with PJB. Some kids had scholarships to go to the States, and they are doing really well. Now, more and more scholarships are coming.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How does basketball help to create identities in Africa?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

The first identity is global of course, because it's the sport of basketball, but to have different sensibilities depending on the region in the world you are. For Africa, it's like there's an African family of basketball. Everybody is aware that we are having some challenges, but if we go through these challenges, and we make things better, the rest is going to be amazing.

I know the giving back of the NBA players is something really, really important. Like what Gorgui Dieng is doing, he plays for Memphis [Grizzlies] now; he's Senegalese, he's doing an amazing job. He's working on agriculture [in Senegal]. He's building a hospital, and it saves thousands of babies' lives, because he built hospitals for premature [babies] in different parts of Senegal. He's feeding a lot of people, because he's working on agriculture [projects].

This giving back is something really important. Everybody does it in his own field. Mine was working on documentaries, and I was a journalist for a long time, telling those stories.

It's global, it's worldwide, it's also the same family. It's like if we are the kids of the mother and father basketball, and we are the African kids.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How in your opinion, how have programs like SEED Project and Giants of Africa impacted the intersections of basketball, diplomacy, and Africa?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

Those programs are great, because they show the world that we have great things going on in Africa, and they show the world that we have talent. Masai is the head of Giants of Africa. He's spending one and a half months every summer in Africa because he's on a mission to go to talk to those kids. Because they need to hear it from him or his staff, same for SEED Project. I really think that goes beyond African borders. It's really nice to have those messages. It has to go beyond borders. It has to be a global message. Africa is now, I really think Africa is now. I mean those projects, SEED Project has been around for more than 20 years, 22 years now.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

From your perspective, what is the role of Basketball Without Borders in growing the game in Africa?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

Basketball Without Borders is a program that is worldwide, so this partnership is all around the world, every continent has it. The Africa one is really important, like a rendezvous, because it's an opportunity to showcase the most talented players coming to Africa together, and the great thing is that they are coached by NBA coaches, but real NBA coaches. I remember Gregg Popovich was there, and Doc Rivers, so NBA team coaches, and NBA players come. So, for the kids, it's amazing, because they see their idol, and they learn from them.

For the coaches, GMs, or NBA players, they have the opportunity to see the talent. Africa can showcase this talent at that time. A few players from Basketball Without Borders became NBA players, like Pascal Siakam went to BWB, Basketball Without Borders, Joel Embiid, lots of them. It's a good opportunity. Even Meriam, because you know Meriam the MVP from the Algerian camp, she won the MVP and with that she won the rights to participate to Basketball Without Borders. When she was at Basketball Without Borders, somebody saw her and proposed her a scholarship.

This is the story. It is a good platform, it's a very good ramp for some.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Youcef Ouldyaasia

First of all, as I said, it's not even work for me. It's like a mission or something I want to accomplish. I want to show that we can do great, and I really, really believe in the Basketball Africa League. That was definitely a need. The first thing is that in my opinion, it's really nice that the NBA and FIBA are working together. Everybody's really happy about it. They are not fighting, they are working hand in hand, and it's a really nice message we send to Africa and to the world. We are united and we are going to launch something like great with great thunder, because we want to show that we can have great thunder in Africa.

Having this kind of league, it will also help to keep the talent on the continent, which we know unfortunately that a lot of African ... not a lot, but a few of them try to go abroad thinking of a better life, which is often not the case. Now we're going to be able to keep this talent, and to inspire the youth. The goal is for them to identify with the BAL players, like a player from AS Salé in Morocco or Rivers Hoopers from Nigeria, they would be able to identify to the star, or the team, or to another player on the team. This is the goal. The BAL will showcase African talent.

The best players would of course go to play in Europe or the NBA for the cream of the crop. But the goal is to keep the talent in Africa. This is how we're going to raise Africa. It is exciting, because we are launching something new from scratch... Because yeah, I'm sure having this pan-African league is something that was needed, and it's something that is really nice to be united like that for a league.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How are you creating or thinking about creating a fan experience for the BAL? What kinds of things are you keeping in mind?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

What I'm trying to do is to tell stories, I love to tell stories. That's why my previous job ... that's what I was doing, telling stories, great stories about the continent. Not only like ... as I said, not only for stars or NBA players, we have beautiful stories. We have talent, we have great teams in all of the 54 African countries, so it's not really hard to create stories, and also to get people identify.

On all of the 12 teams, you have African players. For example, on the team from Mali, AS Police, you can have four non-local players and two of them need to be African., so maybe somebody from Zimbabwe, maybe somebody from DRC, or Côte d'Ivoire. So, people from DRC play on other teams, so they [people] can identify [with them]. My goal is to get Africans to identify with the teams, and show that we can have a very high standard professional league in Africa: the BAL.

Take the example of football: you have the Champions League. [This, the BAL, will be] like a champions league in Africa. With all the standards of the NBA working with FIBA, I really think we're going to achieve and have fan support. When we're going to launch the league, I think it's going to work really well. And from my experience traveling in Africa, the feedback is really, really good, and people are waiting for it. Even when we have to postpone the league [due to the novel coronavirus pandemic], I received a lot of calls, and a lot of people were sad, and we were really happy that we just postponed it, and not cancelled it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How will the BAL impact intra-African communication?

Youcef Ouldyaasia

If you look at Africa from an outside perspective or you think Africa is a country, people make mistakes. Africa is not a country, it's 54 countries, and a lot of different cultures, maybe 54 different cultures, even if you have similarities sometimes. Of course, somebody from Senegal doesn't really know what's going on in Kenya, which is normal. We don't know in Europe what's going on in all of the [European] countries.

Basketball is worldwide, and it's one game, but everybody has particularities. For example, in Madagascar, they don't have really tall guys, so they focus on their speed. In Senegal, they are really long and thin, and they can also be strong, so all those particularities make it special and really nice and really interesting. For example, Madagascar GNBC when they came to qualifiers, nobody thought they would qualify. They were really shocked. When they are telling it, they are shocked. But they did it with their heart, with their strength, and with their all that.

Our goal is not just basketball. Our goal is to have NBA standards coming to Africa, to show we can do well, and also develop everything that is around the BAL. Because with this league, we're going to have people working on this league in every country we're playing. It can be a restaurant around [the arena], it can be some company that will have the BAL in the country. There will be more than basketball, and for me, and for us, it goes beyond basketball.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Looking into your crystal ball, what does success for the BAL look like in five years?

Youcef Ouldyassia

In five years, the BAL will have a lot of people following it in Africa, around the world also. We will have players who went through the BAL that are doing well, that are stars in Africa, youth identified to them, the all ecosystem of basketball improved ... And some former BAL players may have joined the NBA. This is one of the goals. And yeah, it's going to be like the champion league of football in Europe, but for Africa.

END

Interview with Youcef Ouldyaasia, April 2020

Basketball Africa League Senior Director – Head of Content

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