
“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: Astou N’Diaye
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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

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

Astou N'Diaye

My name is Astou and I'm an African born in Senegal, and I started playing basketball at age 13 when a high school friend, Fatoumata Fall, introduced me to her skills coach and thus to the game that ended up changing my life when I set foot for the 1st time in the Lycée John F. Kennedy in Dakar, Senegal during the Fall of 1989.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And when you were growing up, what was basketball like in Senegal? Who played it? Was it popular? Was it a niche sport?

Astou N'Diaye

It was popular enough before my generation, but I accidentally fell into basketball. It wasn't something that I saw somebody playing or was inspired by some icon or was looking up to somebody who played. I was brought into it by a friend who's been playing; but as I grew up in the sport, the following years and I learnt a little bit more of the history of people that were before us.

As I started improving, I learned more [about] Senegal's basketball history or who was the dominant club, and [I came to find out that] there was a lot of history about Senegalese women's and men's basketball.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

You mentioned women's basketball in Senegal. Could you talk a little bit in terms of how acceptable it was for girls to play basketball? Was it normal? I know in certain countries, certain sports are stigmatized as being too masculine for girls or certain sports are seen as being better for girls. Was there any of that in Senegal when you were growing up or even today?

Astou N'Diaye

I think there was some of that and still, today, you can encounter people that think that, let's say, weightlifting transformed a woman body so much that they don't find them attractive. There's still some of that, less today than before. But before, you wouldn't see women lifting weights. Women would not be doing certain things that could make them look 'masculine.' Even just playing basketball, putting your shorts on and going to places to train, it was not the norm.

Unfortunately, because some of the raw talent would drop off the grid a little bit when they got married, for instance, or started having children. That wasn't my case, personally. I had my kids in the United States when I was playing in the WNBA. My guess is that out of 10 Senegalese women, more than half would not continue to play because of different social reasons.

So, back then and today, things have changed for sure because you see women giving birth and returning to the court really in record time, as it was in my case. Some returned and were in their best shape, which used to not be the trend.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What is one of the biggest challenges in basketball's growth or consumption in Senegal today?

Astou N'Diaye

The first thing that comes to mind is infrastructures at many regional levels for grassroots learning, even though state-of-the-art arenas are being built a little bit across Africa, like in Senegal with Dakar Arena and in Kigali, Rwanda. Small level infrastructures that can develop the sport in regional areas, and the support that goes with it, are needed (i.e. coaches, materials etc.). These have been and still are the biggest hurdles.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Thinking about your own trajectory: how has basketball diplomacy helped you during your career as a player in Senegal, coming to the United States and then, in your subsequent roles within the basketball world?

Astou N’Diaye

Basketball has been my saving grace as a student athlete and a professional today. To give you a little history for myself, I finished high school in Senegal before going State-side to get my bachelor’s degree in business.

When I was at home, it wasn’t like I was getting up dreaming that I’ll be playing at the university level or the WNBA someday. Basketball was something that kept me balanced when I was home, kept me in the competitive world and gave me many opportunities to travel and see what else was out here. This started in Senegal when I joined the national team at age 16 and was able to play international basketball worldwide. This made me international in many facets, opened my eyes to what level this sport really could be played at and every aspect of these international events was pure diplomacy at work..... [At] international competition, [there are] encounters with people from different walks of life, programs that take place during these events. It ranged from people you meet, cultures that one experiences, situations that you resolve and victories that you garner on and off the court as you share yourself and other doing the same celebrations that happen. This was also the case when I travelled and played for different clubs worldwide as a professional: keeping contact with people. Sports and its ramifications are powerful.

Moving State-side because of basketball is also the result of pure diplomacy two years after the World Championship in Malaysia, where I was exposed to recruiters who thought I had a decent enough talent to compete in the USA. This changed the course of my life. I watched the U.S. senior team and their standard of play, their level of excellence and how they approach everything on and off the court—I knew things could not be the same for me anymore. This was a huge eye opener for my career. It’s true that I did not watch somebody on the girls or boys side specifically and was [instead] inspired [by] being exposed to international competitions. So, sports diplomacy and interactions/relationships showed me how basketball could be played at the highest level and helped me raise my bar.

[More than] twenty years after living in the USA, I am still in basketball and am affiliated with the NGO SEED Project that works in partnership with the NBA. This is in addition to the

personal initiative I take to promote girl's education, which also to me are examples of sports diplomacy in action as a former athlete.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So then, to what extent do you consider yourself to be a sports diplomat?

Astou N'Diaye

Besides the fact that when your flag is raised and your anthem is being sung in a full arena and then both teams shake hands, what we represent there is huge. I can't imagine a bigger picture of sports diplomacy in action than that. This, I believe, no statesmen can really do on his/her own no matter how popular they are.

After very competitive matches, we congratulate one another and get to share meals, talk about culture, communicate sometimes in different languages to understand each other, show respect, share cultures and hopes. This is sports diplomacy to me. Also, how a team and its individual components behave is important. It's not that one person is going to allow others to judge a whole country, but we definitely are ambassadors when we are representing our country. People look at us and see Senegal, so how we behave is of the utmost importance and tells others about our country. So, definitely yes to being ambassadors or being sports diplomats.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, if we take a general understanding of diplomacy to be communication, representation and negotiation, how do you view the intersection of diplomacy and basketball as they play out in Senegal or within the West Africa region more generally? And do you think that, basketball diplomacy has any tangible or less tangible impact on growth and development within Senegal or the region?

Astou N'Diaye

I think organizations, and now a lot of people, are creating centres and trying to draw more kids to come practice sports for this very reason: kids negotiate their talent to access good training centres, parents negotiate with coaches and vice versa to aid in keeping that dynamic going. I see

in Senegal specifically, an organization like SEED Project doing a lot of what we're talking about, to the level of its capacity because it's an NGO. Sports is the hook to these kids, and I don't know to this date how many of them have gone on to other horizons to pursue their dreams and continue their education and then return home. This will aid Africa's development. However, not everybody goes abroad from SEED. There are many kids it touches who are making a difference in Senegal and impacting growth in Africa through their work and that of their partners. It also affords a great development platform to SEED alumni.

Taking myself as an example, God knows if I wasn't in basketball, what I would be doing today or as a teenager what I would have gotten myself into that could have been wasted potential. I'm from a good family but teenagers are teenagers, so there is a responsibility to find a way to help them find their path by giving them a little bit of direction. I think basketball has done that for me and many of the youth in Africa.

One way to measure impact is through representation. Many of the final selectees come from centres that are structured and the rest from the professional ranks either in sports or in the business world in Africa and in the western world.

So basically, we need to find a way to scale what NGO's like SEED Project do to increase impact, which aids in local development.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

You've hit on several good points there. So then from your perspective, how does basketball help create identities? Either a global one or thinking about the upcoming Basketball Africa League, how that might help to create a more African identity around basketball?

Astou N'Diaye

The aim of every athlete is most of the time to play at the highest and best level. So, once there is a product good enough to be displayed and marketed there is a great platform to create a togetherness and identity around something people are passionate about—especially in Africa, where we have so many different cultures and perspectives.

Today, the NBA has exemplified what a basketball identity can be and its known around the world, especially with what happens off the court. It's also done at the university level. So, the Basketball Africa League (BAL) will most likely also capture experiences and organize events in a way that will capture the identities of its product from across the continent. When done right, you can connect very easily on many different fronts because the values of the sports go way beyond just putting sneakers on. There is also a transfer as players retire their sports identity, [they] remain as people [who] grow in and out of the sport.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, what is that more holistic approach that you take at the NBA Academy in terms of, the work that you do with young players?

Astou N'Diaye

We pointed out earlier the problem with infrastructure, though the issue that we face in Africa is multidimensional—not just in terms of infrastructure, but also human resource, technical, tactical aspects and mental aspects of teaching the game, academics. This gap imposes the need for a holistic approach to the growth of each individual athlete to be successful in the NBA Academy as an elite centre. The idea is for our African youth to have a good head on a good body. Many of these teens (12- to 15-year-olds) come into these sport centers as novices to the sport, they didn't start playing until very late, so there's a lot of ground to be covered. It would be great if you're lucky to have a kid that's well-rounded because some of them come from homes that are not necessarily well-balanced. So, they have to be taught a lot of new and basic ways of doing things. It's a new beginning for them, from the fundamentals of the sport to the discipline required to succeed, whatever success means to them. You're building a whole new individual, trying to build basically a whole well-rounded human being.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, a little bit about these kids just for the transcript record. About how many do you have there at the academy? And are they from other countries not just Senegal?

Astou N’Diaye

No, absolutely. The group is housed at the Diambars Center in Saly, Senegal. Diambars has two football academies inside of it and the NBA Academy represents basketball. The Academy can house up to 24 boys, and right now we are at 22.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay, and they come from all over Africa or mainly West Africa?

Astou N’Diaye

They do, there are three Senegalese and everybody else is from ten other countries.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, that’s pretty diverse? And what is their age range?

Astou N’Diaye

Yes, absolutely. Between 14 to 19 presently, I believe.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, since you have such diversity, in what ways do you view the academy as being this basketball diplomacy influencer? It’s a place where obviously there must be some cultural exchange going on between the students as they get to know each other?

Astou N’Diaye

Absolutely. Well, the perk of being part of NBA Academy is that these players travel a lot within Europe and the Americas for competition and exposure. Diplomacy, yes for sure every day starting on the Academy campus. Each one of them represent a different culture and upbringing. When they travel, they are representing themselves, their families, the Academy, and the NBA. So, basically, they are at the intersection of many different cultures and organizations. They become global citizens because of where they come from, what’s being instilled in them in their multiple encounters throughout their basketball journey.

They share, they learn, they love, they tolerate, they grow, they compete, they go out there and try being the best they can be in front of the world after all that work. If Africans can connect on one platform, are able to show the continent's greatness through our youth with their different identities—that's powerful. It's Africa diplomacy on full display. They are diplomats in many capacities.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In your perspective, how does the NBA Africa Academy help to drive the growth of the sport?

Astou N'Diaye

They have done a great job, it's been huge. If you follow the growth of NBA Africa, starting an office in South Africa in 2010. Yes, it's been 10 years. A lot of work has been done since then in [terms of] growing this game across the continent. It's amazing. It's allowed access to the sport to people that didn't [have] the slightest chance. People are able to connect to the game in so many different ways now with media outlets (i.e. internet, phones etc.) through different grassroots programs (Jr NBA, players camps, Basketball Without Borders, the Academy, SEED Hoop Forum etc.). The reach has been tremendous. In a short span of 10 years, a lot was accomplished, and we are looking forward to what the next 10-20 years holds. The groundwork of the pyramid has been laid to help bring some positive changes to the continent through sports.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And one of the things I do need to ask as well, what is the intersection between the NBA Africa Academy and SEED Academy other than Amadou Gallo Fall, who's the big connector?

Astou N'Diaye

Yes, his story inspired all of this. He has empowered a lot of people through his vision, but SEED Project's track record for the last 20 years counts a lot of people other than Amadou. He has not lived in Senegal since his college days. Yes, he is the big connector but there are a lot people in the NBA and outside the basketball circle who support his vision because they ultimately yield positive results for our African youth. For many who have experienced playing and trying to compete in Africa, the vision makes sense and that's the driving force.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Your work with girls through the basketball lens. Could you tell us a little bit more about that? Because, the NBA Academy is predominantly boys there, but you're very involved in girls' basketball?

Astou N'Diaye

In regard to the girls, the NBA Academy organizes a camp in the Fall, and this allow girls to have more exposure throughout the year overseas. The best are selected from there to participate in the Basketball Without Borders camps, the NCAA Next Generation selection and other tournaments that gives them more exposure for high schools and American universities. Opportunities for the girls are there but still limited. It's in need of [greater] push. I personally do camps and clinics twice a year with my own funds in Senegal and other countries with the help of sponsors to help the ladies in leadership, health awareness, education and citizenship.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In what ways do you think basketball offers greater opportunities for women and girls?

Astou N'Diaye

The education piece is the biggest thing, because when these girls start as teenagers, most of them don't hold jobs. All your focus is to get educated and set a future for yourself. So, to my image, being able to finish up high school and get a college scholarship to the U.S really paved my path for everything that came subsequently. So, being able to stay focused, have the discipline, and the support to follow through with our education as women is huge. Women bear a lot of the grunts in our African society. Our careers are very short lived, so being an African girl/woman on the continent and uneducated is not an option.

So, whoever I come in touch with or have the opportunity to assist, to continue their education here or anywhere else, I do because to me, that's key. Basketball, soccer ends, whatever sports we do ends at some point but whatever we have between our ears does stay.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

There has been a significant growth of basketball in terms of its popularity and the number of people who play and consume it in the past 10, 15, 20 years. Do you think that one reason behind the sport's growth in popularity is because it is a way for girls and women to play and to have exposure to other opportunities like education or everything you've just mentioned?

Astou N'Diaye

I think, not just women, but both genders have benefited a lot from these opportunities. I'm talking from Senegal's perspective, but so many other countries, too. What we see today is kids that have played and are educated tend to come back and run high-level organizations, which is tremendous. They bring a lot of know-how, discipline and team orientedness to businesses, which is much needed.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, let's talk about the BAL. In your view, why are people so excited about it and how do you view it's potential to develop basketball and much more across Africa?

Astou N'Diaye

I can't go too much in detail about it, not being involved day to day with the project; but having grown up during a time where there were no real professional sports on the continent with all the strides that have been made: **IT'S TIME**

An African league affiliated with the biggest basketball organization in the world is a huge opportunity for Africa. It will give our children opportunities at home they have never seen and grow the ecosystem economically around the game too. It's an exciting opportunity, a huge step forward for basketball in Africa.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Thinking about the potential of the BAL in a different way, how do you think the BAL could enable greater communication and interaction between different countries in Africa? Do you see

the BAL as helping to let Africans from different parts of the continent be in greater communication and interaction with each other?

Astou N’Diaye

I think it was already happening to some level in many different aspects. I think the BAL is going to take it up a notch. Head of states are talking more about basketball during their encounters. On the infrastructure side, Senegal built a state-of-the-art facility in Dakar Arena and the Kigali Arena followed suit. Other countries are thinking about doing the same. The BAL is helping to bring powerful people in. They’re thinking about development and this is just at a preliminary phase.

So, an endeavour that gets leaders across the continent talking—and not just talking about sports, but economic, tourism, management, health, media—all different aspects of development that has nothing to do with what is happening on the court. It’s grand! It will affect people’s lives in more ways than hoped. So, it definitely, I think, will increase the communication and the connection positively between people on the continent.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

How do you think the BAL might impact the way the rest of the world views or thinks of, or communicates about Africa?

Astou N’Diaye

The media does not showcase a true picture of Africa, if we’re honest with ourselves. A lot of the greatness that is hidden in the continent has not really been displayed to the world. Sports can do it best because it’s an equalizer and a unifier.

The BAL is going to put on a show broadcast on the international stage, work that’s being done with the NBA, FIBA and the federations. It’s just going to give people opportunity to showcase, our people expertise Africa at its best.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

My last question to you is: is there anything that I have not asked you about or we have not touched upon that you would like to get on the record about basketball in Senegal, basketball diplomacy in general, or your own experiences as an athlete ambassador?

Astou N’Diaye

I came back to the continent because there’s a lot of work to be done here, so we need more of our people to come together. There’s a lot that can come into exchanging: so, leaders, experts and sons, daughters of the continent come more often together and share and unite our expertise to move the needle in the right direction.

A call also to encourage stakeholders and sponsors that are out there to join in and sponsor best practices and programs that work and help scale them across Africa. Our continent’s population is so young, when you look closely at the numbers, and if we don’t prepare our youth for tomorrow or provide them with opportunities to be successful, it will not be pretty.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Who inspires African youth players? Do they have role models, basketball or otherwise?

Astou N’Diaye

I think now, more than ever because, if you look back in time ambassadors of the game, a few of them from different cultures and different nationalities have come to the continent. Abdul Kareem Jabbar is just an example; but now we have African NBA veterans who were raised on the continent like Dikembe Mutumbo (Congo), Hakeem Olajuwon (Nigeria), Luol Deng (South Sudan & BAL Ambassador), Clarisse Machanguana (Mozambique), Hamchetou Maiga (Mali), myself, just name a few. Now Tacko Fall, Gorgui Dieng (Senegal), Pascal [Siakam] and Joel Embid both from Cameroon have been coming back to the continent and sharing their experience with the kids. These players have gone through the same process as these kids and these encounters are very important in our overall youth development. They are also coming back and doing camps with partner organizations like, FIBA & NBA Africa on their own. That’s giving back!

END

Interview with Astou N’Diaye, April 2020

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