
Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History Project with FIBA Foundation

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The FIBA Foundation is the social and legacy arm of FIBA that addresses the role of sports and particularly basketball in society, preserving and promoting basketball's values and its cultural heritage. The FIBA Foundation believes that basketball has the power to empower, educate and inspire youth and facilitates this by implementing Basketball For Good projects around the world. In our eyes, all actors initiating positive change in communities through basketball are part of the Basketball For Good family.

The following interviews all feature Basketball For Good advocates in Africa and show the heart and soul of the Basketball For Good Family.

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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Could you please state your name, age, and background in terms of how did you first arrive to the basketball world, and what has been your personal journey through basketball?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

My name is Isaac, Robert Kwapong. I'm the founder and director of Impact Youth Foundation, a sport for development NGO based in Ghana, West Africa. Our mission is using Basketball For Good to create opportunities and to nurture and to build leaders in underserved rural and urban cities across the country.

I have been doing this for the past 13 years. I started just focusing on doing basketball camps, where I was teaching basketball skills and introducing student-athletes to the importance of character and community service. The organization was formerly known as Dynasty Basketball until in 2018 I changed the name to Impact Youth to better communicate my vision and focus on the youth.

Impact Youth is based in Accra, Ghana and we currently run our programs across various regions in the country. Our goal is to use basketball as a tool and vehicle for human development, economic growth, and community building.

Myself, my journey with basketball started in middle school. I got introduced to basketball officially in middle school when I got the opportunity to have a classmate of mine who was a

Ghanaian, but his parents were diplomats in the United States, and they had moved back to Ghana. So having been in America, he had played some basketball and he was good at basketball.

He came to our school, which was very new to basketball and he literally represented basketball, introducing basketball to the whole school. So I started enjoying the game when I was introduced to watching the NBA, and saw Dikembe Mutombo, Shaq, Kobe and Michael Jordan. That is where, I would say my interests for basketball started growing.

I moved on to high school but didn't really play much competitive basketball, but when I got to college, that is where basketball... I would say that's where I really got close to basketball because I started coaching as a teenager right after high school. Being involved with coaching young people and also seeing how they were very passionate about basketball, for me, gave me a responsibility create opportunities for the youth in Ghana to benefit from playing it. My mission from then was to intentionally use basketball to provide young people with an avenue to develop physical, emotional and mental well being while creating opportunities for them to use their skills to also better their livelihood.

Another reason why I got involved in sport for development was seeing how many coaches in Ghana only focused on just winning games. I didn't really see a transformational process going on with the sport in terms of the kids' relationship with the sport, in terms of how the sport was transforming them character-wise, leadership wise, how was it creating opportunities for them?

Even though they knew that they could get opportunities playing sport, but it wasn't really available, so it became more of a transactional relationship.

So that was what really got me in tune to saying that, "Listen, we can do this. We can do things better," because from watching and learning from the NBA, I saw the whole transformational purpose of sports with the NBA Cares, how players were doing community service, how the NBA was involved, not just in broadcasting games, but also impacting communities. That also inspired me to be more involved in sports-for-development.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

That's really interesting, in terms of what I'm hearing from you is, part of it was seeing how the NBA modeled basketball beyond the court, in terms of opening up the possibilities of what basketball could do. And just for the purpose of our audience, could you tell us a little bit about basketball in Ghana in terms of who plays, how it's perceived, and is it just at the school and university level, is there a professional league that helps to feed into this? Is it a sport that is well?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

So basketball in Ghana, I would say has a rich history because Ghana was part of the founding members of basketball in Africa. So that history is there, but over the years, basketball has not been developed and also has not been given the needed attention. Basketball is predominantly played and followed by young people.

In Ghana, it can arguably be the second most played sport among the youth, and also the second most popular sport next to soccer. I would say basketball is actively played at the high school and the university levels, played by both girls and boys. Ghana doesn't have a professional league, but we have an amateur league. There are a couple of basketball leagues or amateur leagues that are spread within different regions. And which has actually been organized by individuals who are passionate about the sport.

Our national Federation is the Ghana Basketball Association, which has been pushing and trying to really grow the sport. Despite the lack of government support, they have been trying to push the game and trying to find stakeholders they can collaborate with. So there's a great interest and a great following of basketball across the country. It's just a matter of time of harnessing that interest and then making it into something big that can put the country on the map, and also add to the development of the country as a whole.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Thank you. That's helpful context. So given that, what does basketball mean to you?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

For me, basketball means a lot. First of all, it means two things. It means a vehicle and a tool at the same time. I know many a times, many people interchange it, but for me, I think there are two different things. It is a vehicle because it can take you to places, it can create opportunities for you.

When you play sports, even now in the US and different places, where it is more evident, you can get a scholarship playing basketball. If you're good at it, and you combine that with your education, it can take you through high school and university, and which maybe on your own, you wouldn't have been able to do that.

So basketball creates that vehicle that can take you to places, introduce you to people. And the tool is that the game itself presents structures, and presents experiences that helps you to develop yourself as a person and develop yourself character-wise. It's a team sport, it develops you to be able to work with others. It helps you to be able to develop various traits, your attitude, your mindset, your work ethic. It helps you to develop that character. Personally, with the many young people I coach and guide, especially underserved youth and at-risk youth, I've seen how basketball has brought a certain sense of hope, and also brought opportunities to them.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I'd like to tease out this concept of basketball as a tool, and think of it through the prism of what happens when basketball intersects with the acts of diplomacy, communication, representation, and negotiation, whether it's on the court or off the court? This is something we call basketball diplomacy and it is a tool and imprisonment of framework. So from your perspective, how do you view the intersections of basketball and diplomacy as they relate to the African, or a continent, or Ghana more specifically?

Isaac Robert Kwapon

I think there's a great relationship to it. First of all, basketball, just like many other sports, is one that engages one's passion. It connects with the emotions of people. So anything that connects with the emotions has a very strong place, and has the power to do a lot of things.

Also basketball, being introduced in different regions presents the opportunity to see how it is tactically played in different countries. Also in terms of culture, it kind of bridges cultural boundaries. For instance, in Ghana if a person is from the Eastern Region travels to play basketball in the capital Greater Accra Region, it gives them the opportunity to compete with different teams and also experience a new culture.

Now, on the global stage and in relation to Africa, we've seen it basketball diplomacy at play from Basketball Without Borders, with FIBA collaborating with the NBA. Lastly, FIBA's international tournaments, people are able to travel to and from different countries to compete, experience, and share cultures with each other.

So, there is a great connection between basketball and diplomacy, and I think that is something that, as it continues to be harnessed, will attract more stakeholders to see opportunities to get more involved. And the fact that a lot of young people have an interest in travelling to play basketball outside their communities, gets them involved in this whole basketball diplomacy.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Are there certain personalities who you think play leading roles in developing or contributing to basketball diplomacy, either in Africa or again, in Ghana?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

I think when it comes to Africa, one name that definitely we will always mention, Dikembe Mutombo, and in terms of the fact that he represented Africa in the NBA, and how he has been able to spearhead the whole Basketball Without Borders movement in Africa, creating opportunities for many other young people to kind of get that same opportunity that they got.

Other people like Hakeem Olajuwon, Masai Ujiri, these are people who have really represented and have been great diplomats of Africa when it comes to basketball on the world stage. In Ghana, I would say, in terms of the international stage, we've not gotten a lot of players play on the bigger stage.

Even though I'll struggle to mention names, I've seen individuals who have gone to play like college basketball in the United States, and they've been able to represent Ghana at that level, where they open up the Ghanaian culture to the communities in America, and get people to want to visit Ghana.

I know that Pops Mensah-Bonsu who played in the NBA and for the Great Britain has Ghanaian background, he was actually born in Ghana. Despite him being raised and everything in the UK, he's kind of coming back to his roots, and representing Ghana through his work in the NBA. Pops Mensah-Bonsu is doing well to get Ghana Basketball noticed in the USA using his platform, and also the opportunities he has. So, I would mention Pops Mensah-Bonsu being a great basketball diplomat of Ghana.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So looking at this overlap of basketball diplomacy and basketball for development, how do you think that this fits together with developing the sport of basketball in Africa and in Ghana? Particularly here, I'm thinking about how basketball can be used to work across the various different SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

Yep. I think the good thing is that if we take basketball, takig the Basketball For Good initiative, it can be clearly seen that basketball is able to make a difference in communities and the life of many young people. With my organization Impact Youth Foundation, I can count five different SDGs we are achieving through our programs.

One of our programs is focused on developing FIBA 3x3 in Ghana. FIBA 3x3 for me, promotes the message of equality, because one, the ball used is a size six ball with the weight of a size seven, and it's played by both men and women. For both genders to play using that size six ball, is a great example of how basketball is been used to close the gender gap.

Also, my organization through basketball has been able to create opportunities for girls in the underprivileged community of Ayenya in the Greater Accra Region, to gain access to quality education through us building a an education through their participation as players.

Also through basketball, we are able to raise funds to support less privileged communities with infrastructure and skills training. This is how I think basketball can be used to work across the various SDG's.

Now, in terms of diplomacy, you always need individuals to kind of spearhead these things, and that is the beauty of it, such that when you have an individual who is exposed or has an opportunity through basketball, they become a good representative whereby they're able to go back and become a great ambassador to tell their personal story and that of way they came from.

We just hosted a WNBA player, Imani Stafford from the USA for 10 days. Through our programs she toured the country and reached 600 girls within seven days, and also was involved in a community service project, that is basketball diplomacy. Through basketball and our sport for development work, we were able to attract and bring her to get involved in the community and share her story, and also inspire many other girls.

So there are so many ways basketball can be used as a developmental and diplomatic tool.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

You've mentioned the NBA, you recently hosted a WNBA player. I guess the question is how do youth in Ghana consume basketball? And if they're consuming the NBA, are they consuming the WNBA? I'm just trying to think about who helps to inspire them in and around the game?

Isaac Robert Kwapon

We all know that the WNBA is not as old as the NBA. And the NBA is consumed more than the WNBA. I would say that despite that, the WNBA is making great strides. In Ghana, now the youth watch and follow the NBA through social media and various video streaming sites. Unlike

some years ago when there were hard copy magazines, now it's more about social media, and also a few people have got satellite television. Nevertheless, it's difficult to watch live games. So many of the games, you watch are a highlights on YouTube. And when it comes to the WNBA, very few people have access because one, it's also not available, even online, as much as NBA is.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Right, access is everything. And just on that point, to what extent, if at all, were they watching or accessing, or following the recent BAL tournament in Kigali?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

Oh, it's been a craze since the BAL was announced, especially when we got to know that it was still going to come on this year despite the COVID, it was exciting. And I know a couple of people who actually, literally traveled from Ghana to Rwanda to go and watch the games. I know people personally, who did that.

There's been a craze behind it, and it has brought a sense of hope to the fact that, yes, it's not everybody who will get the chance to play in the NBA, but at least now a few more people get

the chance now to play on the biggest stage, which is just like the NBA, because this is an NBA, FIBA collaboration.

The interest is there, the following was there, people were consuming it, I think more online, social media, also through digital TV, ESPN Africa. That's the great thing, ESPN Africa was also a partner to the BAL, so it enabled us to also kind of have a direct viewing of it. So it was a lot of following.

Ghana doesn't have a team in the BAL yet, but we still supported it more, the fact that it's a continental affair and everybody's behind it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I want to return to this concept of Basketball For Good and drilling down a bit more. To what extent can Basketball For Good programs help to delineate between sport development and sport for development?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

I think Basketball For Good, does that. One, let's take in terms of for sports for development side, when kids have access to playing basketball, it takes them away from social vices, also gives them an escape, where they are able to express themselves more. It's able to better let people see sports for development in action.

I think Basketball for Good programs encourages governments to see the need to invest in sport development. Even using the initiative of FIBA Foundation's Young Lions Cup, various national federations are encouraged to invest in youth programs and select youth national teams to compete against other countries and also learn life skills off the court. Such programs pushes governments and national bodies, to see the importance of investing in sports.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What are some of the challenges that are involved in Basketball For Good programs in Africa, and/or using basketball diplomacy in Africa?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

I would say one of the challenges that we have would be access. Definitely access to facilities, access to structured programs, also access to funding. When it comes to Basketball for Good programs, these are some of the challenges experienced. And when it comes to diplomacy, I would say opportunities for young people to play the game and also travel around locally to play the game. It also comes down to access.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So, thinking about this question of opportunities and challenges, tell us more about Impact Youth Foundation and what have been some of your greatest challenges over time, and how has that helped to make your organization what it is today?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

Impact Youth Foundation, is a sport for development organization using Basketball For Good. And we are mainly focused on the youth and we use basketball as a vehicle and a tool to inspire, mentor, provide opportunities that unearths and enhances talent and life skills of the youth especially those living in underprivileged communities.

Some of the challenges that has helped pushed us to become who we are, I would say, is access to funding and sustainability. That challenge has pushed us to be more innovative and more creative on approaching what we do as a social business, rather than just settling on getting grants or getting donors we have created various income generating programs that helps us to fund some of our community work.

We have been able to develop programs that are marketable, whereby we have people who can and are willing pay for it, we then use the profits to also subsidies our programs for kids who can't afford it. So that challenge of sustainability and access to funding has challenged us and has helped us to kind of develop a more sustainable model of funding that will help us in the long run.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. And what are say, the two or three biggest ways that Impact Youth Foundation has changed since its inception to today?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

We started off by doing camps and working primarily with kids in the cities. But now, we've evolved to also having programs dedicated to underserved and at-risk and underprivileged youth. This has created an opportunity to bridge the gap between the privileged and underprivileged youth where we get them to all enjoy basketball together despite their backgrounds.

Another way we've also evolved is the involvement of more skilled and experienced professionals in the development and management of our organization in various capacities. Technology has helped us to also create opportunities for individuals who are not physically in Ghana to still be actively involved in our work via virtual platforms and workspaces. So we've evolved over the years and we are looking forward to more things happening.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And what would you say to others whose goal is to start something similar but might not know how to take the first step? What would you point to in your story in terms of what can give them hope or inspiration?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

My first advise is for them to not shy away from asking for help. They have to do a lot of asking, and that is always seeking knowledge. Now, the internet is a great place to find knowledge and ask a lot of questions. When you go on Google and you type a question, maybe, "How do I start

a basketball team, or how do I start a basketball non-profit?" You will definitely find a lot of resources that is available to you.

Also when you go on social media, you can connect with so many sports for development, and non-profits out there who are trying to do something similar. You can connect with them, and learn from them.

Myself, my story was basically just learning, watching the NBA, how the NBA did things on the back end, in terms of with their community projects and NBA Cares. I was watching and learning from the comfort of my home in Ghana, just from sitting behind my PC connected to the internet. I also took courses online in sports business, sports administration, marketing, sponsorships, and sport for development. So in summary I would say ask questions, look to empower yourself with knowledge, and experience by volunteering or serving with other non-profits.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And that ties into the question of continuing on hope and optimism. What is unique between the relationship of basketball and Africa, or basketball and Ghana? Why basketball and maybe not rugby or football, or cricket to the same extent, in terms of some of these sport for good, sports diplomacy programs?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

When it comes to Ghana, football is the primary sport, and football is a national sport.

So why basketball? Because in Ghana, arguably, I would say basketball is one of the most played sport amongst the youth. And especially if you want to do a matrix, when you even go to the high school level, like when you go into the schools, it's very clear that there's a huge following amongst students when their schools are playing basketball compared to football.

Also, basketball is one of the greatest team sports that you can ever play. It's played in a smaller space unlike football, but it presents opportunities for young people to really develop their team skills and their ability to work with each other, which we need more of every day.

Lastly, because young people love it.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay. And then last question, kind of tagging onto the end there. So in your perspective, what role does basketball play in creating identities, either regionally, in Ghana, in Africa, or more globally?

Isaac Robert Kwapong

I think when we take basketball itself, it is a universal sport. I would say the same way it's played in America, that's the same way you play it in Ghana, you can't play it differently. So the game on its own, is universal, but the unique thing about it is the people who play, and where they come from, and their identity and beliefs.

The power lies in the fact that a group of people in a community, or from a country, who have different cultural norms, playing a global sport, use that sport as a vehicle to tell their story, and to show their culture to other people in different places.

I think at the end of the day it's more about the people who play it, and how basketball is able to open people's eyes and give people the opportunity to learn about different places, and also to share where they're from.

END

Interview with Isaac Robert Kwpaong

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