

Ex-college hoopster joins fight to quell HIV/AIDS

WASHINGTON (AP) - Stephan Bekale came to the United States to pursue the basketball career he had long dreamed of, like so many of the children in Gabon who look up to the NBA's stars.

But after his parents died of AIDS, back home on the west coast of Africa as the 6 foot 9 inch forward played for Penn State, the personal loss gave Bekale something else to strive for.

Bekale (pronounced beh-CAH'-lay) set aside his dream of NBA stardom and created Hoops4Africa, to use the appeal of American hoopsters to spread the message of AIDS prevention to Africa's youth.

After losing his parents, "I was not hungry as much as I was," Bekale, 26, of Alexandria, Va., said in an interview.

"I told myself that maybe I should educate young kids. Young kids in Africa."

And he would use basketball to do it.

"You can touch kids through basketball," Bekale said. Not long ago, he was a teenager in Africa, wishing he could "be like Mike" — Michael Jordan — and idolizing such other stars of the hard court as Charles Barkley and David Robinson.

He now spends his days and nights networking and raising money to fly 10 athletes, five each from the NBA and WNBA, to Kenya for a week in September to talk to schoolchildren about HIV/AIDS. Visits to AIDS orphanages also are planned.

It won't all be sober talk, though. Basketball clinics will teach the children how to shoot, dribble and maneuver on court for their own games, and sightseeing is expected.

"Our main focus is to get the information out on AIDS and how deadly the virus is, and our means of doing that is through basketball," said Washington Wizards forward Michael Ruffin, one of the 10.

"Hopefully, by reaching the children they'll go home and talk to their parents a little bit and tell their parents

about it," added the 6-foot-8 Ruffin, a father of four.

AIDS has deeply affected sub-Saharan Africa, where more than half the world's HIV-infected people live. Millions in the region have died of the disease, including 2.3 million last year, according to United Nations statistics.

Bekale was a lanky 15-year-old when he landed in New York in 1995 after scraping together enough money for the plane trip that would bring him closer to pursuing his goal.

But he was stranded at Kennedy Airport when a friend's offer of lodging fell through.

To get by, Bekale said, he lived with other Africans in Brooklyn, N.Y., and peddled knockoff watches before coming to Washington, where a family took him in and sent him to high school in the Virginia suburbs.

He left for Penn State on a basketball scholarship in fall 1998.

His parents died not long after he started classes — his father the following June and his mother in March 2000.

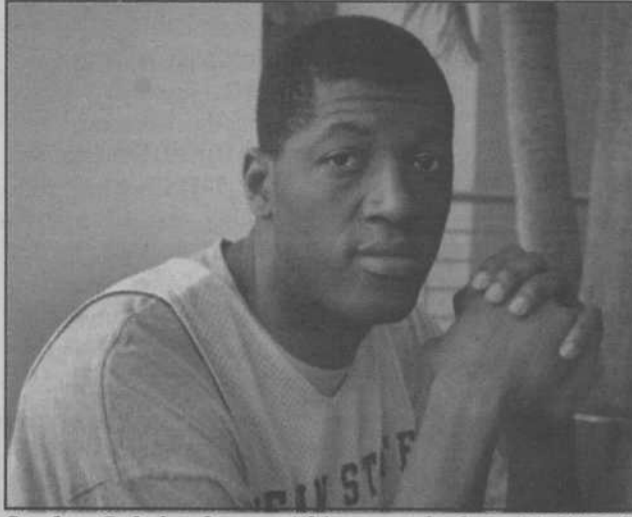
After earning a degree in business administration in 2002, Bekale focused on creating Hoops4Africa, following up on his attempts as a student to help improve the quality of life in Africa.

In college, he sent his teammates' used basketball shoes to Gabon for the players there.

Bekale also raised several thousand dollars to help provide clean drinking water in his native Tchibanga. Hoops4Africa is partnering with the Land O'Lakes dairy company, which works with farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The company has a regional office in Kenya and is helping Bekale with logistics on the ground, said Tom Verdoorn, a vice president of the Arden Hills, Minn.-based corporation.

Land O'Lakes will supplement Hoops4Africa's message about HIV/AIDS



Stephan Bekale educates African youth about HIV/AIDS.

prevention with a pointer of its own about the importance of good nutrition — including milk and other dairy products.

"Getting the right kinds of nutrition into people afflicted with the HIV/AIDS virus is a very important component of their well-being," Verdoorn said in an interview.

What Bekale is trying to accomplish is not unique. Celebrities often help raise awareness about AIDS, other illnesses and charitable

causes.

But knowing how young Africans admire American basketball players, Bekale and his supporters say what he is trying to do can save lives.

"The problem is so enormous. It's a pandemic," said Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.), an Africa advocate who helped Hoops4Africa qualify for tax-exempt status.

"I think that there's room for many organizations to spring up and try and get the word out to young people."

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Sports Pace

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Russian Maria Sharapova, 6-1, 6-4.

Both Williams sisters are in the tournament this year with Serena seeded number four.

Also playing is Mashona Washington, Malvia's sister, who has become a regular member of the Women's Tennis Association tour.

The tournament lasts two weeks. Mashona won her first match against American Amy Frazier, 6-3, 6-4.

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