

S. African trip a vivid example of how sports makes a difference

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I recently returned from Johannesburg, South Africa, as part of the NBA's Basketball Without Borders program. It was the sixth time I visited South Africa, a country I came to love while helping lead the sports boycott of its apartheid-era government during the 1970s, '80s and until Nelson Mandela was inaugurated president in 1994.

Since its first trip in 2001, BWB has become the largest global initiative of any professional sports league, reaching 11 countries on five continents, with more than 300 NBA players, coaches and staff having served as camp coaches and mentors for nearly 1,200 young athletes from more than 100 countries.

At the BWB camp this year there were 60 of Africa's best young basketball talents from 21 African nations. They drilled each day with the NBA players and coaches, including Orlando's Dwight Howard, Toronto's Chris Bosh, Dallas' Dirk Nowitzki, Los Angeles Lakers' DJ Mbenga, Charlotte's Vladimir Radmanovic, Detroit's Jason Maxiell, and former WNBA players Theresa Edwards and Nykesha Sales. The biggest attention-getter was recently retired NBA player Dikembe Mutombo, a son of Africa who is known globally for his humanitarian efforts and philanthropy. It is not all basketball, as the campers participated in daily seminars promoting education, leadership, character, healthy living and HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

For me, the most special basketball moment was when Milwaukee Bucks second-year player Luc Mbah a Moute addressed the campers. He pointed to a section of the seats and said, "I sat right there as a camper. I worked hard and ended up with a scholarship to UCLA and now have a career in the NBA. But it all really started for me when I was here."

He finished with what he said was the most important advice he could give. "Use this opportunity to get an education. Even if you never play professional basketball, the game can get you an education to prepare you for life." I looked around the room while Luc spoke, and all the campers were on the edge of their seats, keenly attuned to every word.

Off the court, the NBA players and coaches were hanging on every word and absorbing every image as they saw firsthand how far South Africa has come since the end of apartheid, but also how far it has to go. We all went to the Apartheid Museum, which has a moving and powerful display of the oppression that had been imposed on Africans by white South Africans who held power throughout the 20th century and especially after apartheid became the national law in 1948.

The players toured the township of Soweto and saw the large number of homes built by the new government as well as the thousands of shanties that remained from the apartheid era. The players all said that while they had seen poverty in America, they had never seen anything like this.

The rest of the week involved community service events. I believe no one does service as well as the NBA with its NBA Cares program and now BWB. Overseeing it all is Kathy Behrens, executive vice president for social responsibility and player programs.

The players and staff helped out and planted a garden for the children at Cotlands, a shelter for HIV-positive, abused, abandoned, orphaned and terminally ill children. The next service site was a Habitat for Humanity project in Ivory Park. Past block after block of shanties with open sewage and no running water, we came upon the small area where Habitat was working. The entire NBA entourage, which was made up of more than 90 people, mixed duhga (an African mixture of sand, cement and water), carried cement blocks and joyously laid rows of blocks as the walls of four new homes went up like an oasis amid poverty. Combining work and what he called "supervising," the NBA's humanitarian ambassador, Bob Lanier, wandered the four home sites, the compassion and concern showing on his face and those of all the players, coaches and staff.

On the final afternoon, we all walked through Kliptown, one of the worst areas in Soweto. Members of our group noted portable toilets positioned throughout the community. I knew that was actually an improvement because there was no potable running water and sewage poured down almost every street. After a 30-minute walk through areas that many in the group could never have imagined, we ended up at the Soweto Kliptown Youth Center. About 100 children performed amazing dances, and sang traditional songs. The NBA has been supporting the SKY Trust, which was founded in 1987 to address the needs of children facing poverty, poor or no education, abuse, HIV/AIDS and lack of motivation. These kids were among 500 participants in the SKY after-school program. The program has grown exponentially since the NBA and BWB came there in 2004. It built an impressive reading and learning center that has a multimedia/computer room, a library and staff offices. The NBA also built a dining hall and kitchen and partnered with Feed the Children to assure the SKY participants 500 meals a day. This impressive and powerful effort is a model for what sports can do to help make things better, no matter how hopeless they may seem.

The NBA has made children in Soweto, Ivory Park and Kliptown believe in what they cannot generally see. The children at SKY believe they can. They are motivated to achieve their full development potential. I have no doubt that they will never forget the towering human beings who spent the week with them. And none of us will forget the children.

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