

Basketball Star Dikembe Mutombo on Sports, Leadership

“You cannot succeed in life if you don’t know how to work with people, just like you cannot win a game without your teammates.”

That is what basketball great Dikembe Mutombo told young African leaders taking part in a June 26 live Twitter chat. For more than an hour, Mutombo, who was born and raised in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), responded to questions about topics ranging from sports and leadership to gender equality and his charitable health care foundation. The chat was the latest in a series hosted by the U.S. Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Network.

Mutombo, who serves as a global ambassador for the National Basketball Association (NBA), said future leaders need to stay focused. “You cannot let anything distract you when you’re trying to achieve something. You have to keep the course.”

Mutombo came to the United States from Kinshasa at the age of 19 to study medicine at Georgetown University on a scholarship. At 2.18 meters tall, he soon was recruited to play on the university’s highly regarded basketball team. After graduating in 1991 with bachelor’s degrees in linguistics and diplomacy, Mutombo was drafted by the Denver Nuggets. He played for five other NBA teams before retiring in 2009.

For Mutombo, the value of sport goes beyond spirited competition. “Sport isn’t about your height, your race, your gender. It’s about your ability to perform,” the athlete said. “Sport is an activity that brings people together” and can teach players “soft skills” such as ethics and communications.

The now-retired basketball player leads the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation Inc., which raises funds to improve health and education in the DRC. Through the foundation, Mutombo helped build a hospital in Kinshasa, which he considers “one of my biggest accomplishments in my life.”

“I knew that the ball would stop bouncing one day,” he said of his career switch. “Life has to go on.”

On perceptions of a disease that continues to have an impact on Africa, Mutombo said it is important that people have accurate information about HIV/AIDS. “Being HIV-positive does not mean you are sick. You can continue to live your life and fulfill your dream as long as you take care of yourself.” He noted that another former basketball star, Magic Johnson, played pro ball while being HIV-positive.

“HIV/AIDS ... continues to be a big challenge for Africa,” Mutombo said. “There are treatments, but education remains key. Like the Old Testament says, people perish because of lack of knowledge. Education will remain the source for us to save our future society.”

On leadership, Mutombo said that leaders “choose to make themselves leaders.” He encouraged his young chatters to “be devoted to your work, have self-discipline, devote yourself to the team and try to succeed.”

“My hope is that the Africa of my ancestors will be totally different than the Africa of my descendants. You will be part of that journey.”

To find out about future chats for young African leaders, tune into the YALI Network on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Photo credit: U.S. Department of State

Pro Basketball Players Teach Leadership, Teamwork in Senegal

What helps children learn leadership, character and teamwork? The NBA and USAID think one option is sports.

The U.S. National Basketball Association (NBA) has partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the nonprofit Sport, Education & Economic Development (SEED) Project to launch Live, Learn and Play, a program to teach leadership, character and teamwork in Senegal.

On May 7, representatives of the three partner groups gathered on a newly renovated basketball court at the John F. Kennedy High School in Dakar. More than 100 children from participating schools were put through their paces under the tutelage of Gorgui Dieng, a forward with the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves team, and SEED Project alumnus. Joining them was fellow Senegalese native Astou Ndiaye, a Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) legend.

Live, Learn and Play uses basketball and the values of the game as a vehicle to teach life skills and promote leadership to boys and girls between the ages of 13 and 15 in 20 schools across Senegal. Each school will conduct at least two basketball practices a week and hold games and tournaments on weekends. Practices will take place at all of the participating schools and will include both boys and girls.

Live, Learn and Play includes a coaching-development element with a curriculum designed by the NBA and implemented by SEED. Coaches will implement the basketball curriculum locally. The program includes a mentorship component to provide coaches with a broad support network. The partners plan to expand the program to other countries in Africa.

More than 30 African players have played on NBA teams since Nigerian Hakeem Olajuwon joined the Houston Rockets in 1984. Through NBA Cares, the league has created 37 places to live, learn or play in Africa and 11 times has held Basketball Without Borders Africa camps to promote the sport and encourage positive social change in education, health and wellness.

The league opened an African headquarters in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2010 and launched the Royal Bafokeng Sport Junior NBA development program in 2011.

Photo credit: AP Images

[Sport and the Power to Unite](#)

Sport can be a hobby or a competition. Even more, “Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination,” said the late South African activist and politician Nelson Mandela.

Mandela was a lifelong athlete. As a young man, he was an amateur boxer. During his 27 years in prison, he kept in shape through rigorous physical exercise.

The key moment in Mandela’s sporting life, according to *Sports Illustrated* magazine, was the 1995 Rugby World Cup in Johannesburg. Mandela had been sworn in as president of South Africa, the nation’s first black president, just a year earlier. Many of South Africa’s blacks were ambivalent about South Africa’s national team, the Springboks, which were dear to the hearts of South Africa’s white Afrikaners. Blacks saw the team as a symbol of apartheid repression. In addition, the possibility of rioting loomed over the final match between South Africa and New Zealand.

But Mandela convinced the nation to pull together as one and root for the team. South Africa went on to win the match, and South Africans, both black and white, celebrated the victory.

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to unite in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they can understand,” Mandela said.

Photo credit: AP Images

[NBA's Jason Collins Speaks to the YALI Network](#)

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The following is a transcript of professional basketball player Jason Collins’ interview with the YALI Network.

Q: Joining us to talk about the intersection of leadership and sports is professional basketball player Jason Collins. Collins most recently played as a center for the Brooklyn Nets of the National Basketball Association, or NBA, and in 2014 was named one of Time Magazine’s Most Influential People in the World. Thank you for coming to speak with the YALI Network, Jason.

J: Thank you. It's an honor to be here.

Q: So the NBA has initiated, or taken part in, several programs to kind of benefit the greater good. NBA Cares and Basketball Without Borders both come to mind. What makes the NBA a force for good?

J: I think basketball is one of those universal sports that it doesn't take too much to play. In golf you need certain equipment, but in basketball you just need a ball and a hoop and some flat land. (chuckles) And I've played with several African teammates, most notably being Dikembe Mutombo, and he talked about playing at a young age, or playing in Africa and then obviously coming to the States and playing for Georgetown.

And I think one of those things about universal sports — it teaches teamwork, it's sort of like soccer in that it's a fun game to play, you're active, you're running around, and it's something to enjoy with your friends.

Q: So you mentioned both basketball and soccer. Is there something about sports in general that kind of lends itself to community empowerment or community engagement?

J: Definitely. When you have a favorite team to cheer for, it's something that, especially with the World Cup coming up soon in Brazil, you're going to see entire nations, the entire world is going to cheer on their respective team, favorite teams. I think there's also something special about team sports, more so than individual sports, because in team you really have to, especially when you have a great coach, blend personalities so that there's one goal.

And in sport it should always be about winning, and having fun, and trying to do things the right way. And you see that with great teams. They all sacrifice a part of themselves for the sake of the team. And I think that's universal, as far as off the court or off the field, in your life, that you know that there's always a greater good that you can sacrifice for.

Q: So you mentioned off the court, and one of my big questions for you is, you know when you were playing at Stanford, where you were an All-American, what were the kind of leadership lessons that you took from sports that you were able to apply off the court and in other aspects of your life?

J: Well, I've been very fortunate to have some great coaches. You mentioned Stanford, Mike Montgomery was my coach there. It started — my dad, when I was a little guy, always tried to teach. I have a twin brother named Jarron, and as most siblings there's a little bit of sibling rivalry, but we always played on the same team so that I learned at an early age that it's about the team. It's not about going up against my brother or going up against —

When you're on the team, that dynamic of coming together. And when I got to the pros, played for some tremendous coaches. Doc Rivers, who coached me when I was playing for the Boston Celtics and now he's the coach of the Los Angeles Clippers, he had a lot of great lines. And I remember in a meeting he said, "If you want to go quick, go by yourself. If you want to go farther then you have to go in a group."

And he also said that leadership sometimes is hard. It's about making — when you're the leader of a team, you have to sacrifice even that much more for the sake of the team. And he talked about

sometimes leadership can be lonely. You have to be that much more dedicated to the team when you are the leader of the team.

Q: So you're talking about Doc Rivers, one of my favorites, and the leadership lessons that he taught you. What is the best overall leadership advice that you've ever received?

J: The best overall leadership advice? It goes back to what Doc Rivers says, that "making the hard choices." Because as a leader sometimes your perspective is different than someone who isn't. The everyday person might not see, have the same perspective on — I'll take it to, the coach has a different perspective than the guy sitting at the end of the bench. They have the same goal as far as what it takes to win, but the coach sees things, has to see things from multiple perspectives, 00:05:36 and has to get that person on the end of the bench to buy in and really come together. And so that there's only one voice really, you really want your leaders to be strong, to be vocal. And to make, sometimes make the hard choice for the sake of the team.

The one thing I learned from Doc Rivers was sometimes you just have to be brave and make the tough decision, tough, and have hope and faith that you're making the right decision.

Q: Thank you. You're named one of Time Magazine's Most Influential People in the World.

J: Yes.

Q: Your jersey, number 98, became a top seller at NBA, the NBA Store.com.

J: Yes.

Q: How did all of that make you feel?

J: (Sighs) It (laughs) Humble. It was — I'm extremely humbled and grateful for the opportunity that the Nets, from the ownership to the coaches, to my teammates, that they gave me. And I worked my butt off to stay in shape and to stay ready, and when the opportunity came I was ready for it. And I think that's something that the listeners out there also can take away from hearing me speak, as far as there will be an opportunity down the road, sometime in your life, you just have to be ready for it. And it goes into your preparation.

Q: So if you're just joining us we're speaking with professional basketball player Jason Collins about sports and leadership. So when you watch players like Dwyane Wade and LeBron James, what kind of leadership skills are they showing out on the court? And what of those skills can young Africans apply to their own lives, and they might not raise to the level of professional athlete, but certainly community leader. How can they kind of take those on and apply those to their daily lives?

J: Well, with regards to LeBron James and Dwyane Wade, again they're superstars, and they could score 50 points a game sometimes if they wanted to, but for the benefit of the team they know that they have to do it together. And we see that also with the San Antonio Spurs with Tim Duncan and Manu Ginobili. They have so many different pieces — Tony Parker from France — there are so many different pieces on a team, components that make it special.

But it takes that one goal of — to bring everybody together and everybody buying in. So for community leaders, I think the goal should always be empowering the next generation, or making it easier for people to live their authentic lives or, whether that be to get better education services, health services, to try to make life easier.

Because as we all know, sometimes in life it can throw us a curveball and things can be very difficult, so why not try to support each other and be a good teammate and be a good, be a good person and try to preach love and support. Those I think are lessons and ideals that I learned from sports and also my faith, being a Christian, that it's important to love your neighbor and support regardless of circumstances.

Q: So you've been mentioning a lot about teamwork and support. So for young Africans who want to be, who aspire to become community leaders, what sorts of activities should they be engaging in to develop these leadership skills, to develop these team-building skills?

J: I think you learn the most about yourself and also others through adversity. Challenge yourself, challenge yourself. When you're playing a tough — in sports, I always go back (unintelligible) to sports — but when you're in a tough game or a tough competition against a really good opponent, I think that is when you really reveal the most about your character and also your team's character.

When the game gets tough, do you start fraying at the edges? Do you start bickering with one another, or do you pull together and is someone going to rally everyone? Because in a game there will be ebbs and flows, there will be highs and lows, and it really takes a strong leadership to sort of right the ship if something goes off kilter, and when you have adversity you have to tackle it, you have to find that team to overcome it.

When you're in sports you might lose the big game but you're going to want to learn from it. When you're off the court and you're tackling whatever issue that you have, you have to find those people that have common ground with you, or even great minds, or someone that will make the team stronger.

It's okay to have someone on the team that you might not necessarily see eye to eye, as long as both of you come into the room, or anyone who, with that common ground, with that — we're trying to accomplish the same thing, that goal of winning or solving some problem.

Because sometimes you learn the most when you are challenged, and when, when you're uncomfortable, because it brings out, it brings out the best in me when I'm uncomfortable, and it also brings out the best I think in others when you really have to rise to the occasion. And sometimes if you see a teammate that isn't necessarily doing their best, pull them up.

And tell them it's okay, and tell them to keep going, because you have that belief in them, that we're all in this together as human beings on this planet. We're all — we should be here to encourage support, love, and push each other to be the best people that we possibly can be.

Q: And then I think you've mentioned a lot about having one goal as a team, and having everybody come around one goal. Can you talk more about why it's important that everyone get behind that one goal?

J: Yes, because it's important to have that one goal because sometimes, especially when adversity strikes, if someone has an ulterior motive it's easier for them to go off the path for whatever ulterior motive or ulterior goal that they have. But it's important, especially for a leader of a group, to focus, to have everyone focus on one goal, and if you see someone that isn't on the same path as the team, to speak up, because we all have to have accountability.

And we're accountable to each other, we're accountable to the team and to that goal. And again, that goes back to sometimes leadership is hard because it's not always easy to hold someone else accountable, to have that moment, because it might be a confrontational event. But there are ways that you talk to people. Sometimes you might, if a teammate, depending on the circumstance you might take them aside, as opposed to calling them out in front of the entire team.

You give them that opportunity to correct the ship on their own and get back on the right path. But sometimes they might need that public, in front of the entire team, so that it is for the benefit of the team, of the goal.

And I think the great leaders know the difference, because we're all not the same. We're not all the same, and sometimes some people can take aggressive tactics, and some people need a little more of a softer touch. And I think that's the beauty of a great leader is that he knows what personalities can handle what motivation and criticism, and how to talk to people the right way.

And how to talk to each individual person the right way, to send the right message that we're all on the same team and this is the goal. And this is how we deal with adversity and hold each other accountable.

Q: Can you give us an example of maybe a time Doc Rivers or Jason Kidd had to hold one of your teammates or you accountable and how they did that?

J: In basketball we have a saying, "The tape doesn't lie." What that means is, after each game, the majority of games, we will breakdown the game on a videotape, in a video session, where we will see, especially on the defensive end, where the breakdowns happened. And if someone's not in the right position or someone isn't doing the right thing, we're in front of the entire team and that's a great time, because you're not necessarily, yes, you're calling out on the videotape the example of someone not being in the right position, so that person knows, but then also it's great for the entire team, because everyone will learn that, okay, we need to be in this position when this happens on the court.

That's a great team building and also a great way to hold each other accountable, because you're watching the videotape, you can see the mistakes, everyone in the room, it's blatant, it's right there on film, and again, it'll help the team grow because you'll learn from your mistakes. Now if that happens multiple times, if we keep breaking down tape and the coach keeps seeing the same player in the wrong position, then ultimately the coach will make a change.

And that player will probably not play because you're not — the message has been delivered and you're not receiving it. And as a leader the coach of a team will say for the benefit of the team, when you're out on the court and you're not in the right position you're hurting us.

So we have to put someone else in there who will do the right thing. And it goes back to trust. The coach has to trust, teammates have to trust, especially on defense in a team sport, everything's on a string and if one person is out of position it affects us all. And you'll see that if you're watching the NBA Finals, two great defensive teams, San Antonio I think more than Miami, but where they cover so much court because they're able to, they have a great system in place and they know where each other is going to be on the court.

And so that's a great way, I think, that's a great example for people to learn from.

Q: Well, thank you so much for speaking with the YALI Network, Jason. We've been talking to Jason Collins, a professional basketball player with the National Basketball Association's Brooklyn Nets. If you'd like to learn more about the YALI Network's Sports and Leadership series, including how you can interact with former NBA player Dikembe Mutombo, visit our website at yali.state.gov. That's Y-A-L-I.state.gov.

J: And if I can add one more thing. If you have a chance to interact with Dikembe Mutombo, you have to take advantage of that. He is one of the funniest people on the planet. He is a great, great human being.

Q: Great, thank you.

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