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## Turning Promise Into a Commodity

Nigerians Who Dream of Playing Pro Basketball Often Become Pawns in an Unregulated International Market

By Eli Saslow  
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Kene Obi bent his 7-foot-2-inch body into an awkward sitting position on two concrete steps in Alexandria and glared out at the landscape he'd long imagined. For four years, this had been his dream: an American school and basketball gymnasium behind him, beautiful homes in front of him and a Hummer on the way to pick him up.

The vision had propelled Obi, 17, through four years of uncertainty. He had left his family's one-bedroom apartment in Enugu, Nigeria, in 2001 with eyes set on the United States -- only to be detoured through Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, then Senegal, France and Belgium. Coaches at each stop heralded Obi as emblematic of basketball's rapid growth in Nigeria, a country with at least 46 players on NCAA men's basketball teams this season.

But in his long journey to the United States, Obi also became proof of another trend, this one far less promising. Coaches, scouts and middlemen increasingly pursue young Nigerian players as commodities.

Five months after arriving in the United States on a two-year visitor visa, Obi's basketball future remains uncertain. He moved into the house of an Alexandria entrepreneur who owns several minor league basketball teams and showcased his potential for some of the area's top high school coaches -- many of whom anointed Obi as a future top pick in the National Basketball Association draft. He enrolled at Fairfax County's Edison High School last week, a move that required him to file for a new U.S. guardian and to join the Junior ROTC to satisfy high school district residency rules. Even now, Virginia high school athletic authorities have yet to rule on whether he is eligible to play varsity this season.

The basketball career he came to America for has yet to begin.

"I thought everything would be better here, but it's boring," said Obi, who grew up speaking both English and Igbo, the language spoken by one of Nigeria's principal tribes. "I don't think the U.S. is so different from Nigeria."

The two dozen or so Nigerians who, like Obi, are recruited to the United States each year with the promise of playing high school and college basketball often find themselves pawns in an unregulated international market.

A businessman in Philadelphia brings players to the United States and becomes their legal guardian, expecting those players to repay him with 20 to 25 percent of their earnings if they make it to the NBA. He has already brokered eight Nigerians' trips to the United States and has plans for at least a dozen more.

Scouting services charge subscription fees ranging from \$250 to \$3,000 to provide high school, college and NBA teams with height, weight and contact information for Nigerian players.

U.S. college coaches travel halfway around the world hoping to procure the next Hakeem Olajuwon, the only Nigerian to star in the NBA. Three Nigerian coaches, interviewed during a showcase camp in Lagos last October, said they had been paid by U.S. college basketball programs for identifying, and delivering, talented players -- a violation of NCAA regulations. The going rate is about \$5,000 per player, those coaches said.

"Maybe half the colleges are willing to pay," said Nigerian coach Ayo Bakare, who, along with the other coaches, refused to name specific schools for fear the payments would stop. "There's so much competition now that they have to pay. If you're a local coach and you can tell a player where to go to school, are you going to tell him about

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the place that gives you nothing or the place that feeds your family? There's no choice."

It was impossible to determine how widespread the practice is, but a current Division I assistant basketball coach and a former Division I assistant confirmed, on the condition of anonymity, that colleges sometimes pay for a guarantee that Nigerian players will attend their school. The risk of getting caught passing cash through numerous hands is so minimal some programs find it worth taking, those coaches said.

"It's so problematic now to get involved over there that you're really rolling the dice," said Liberty University Coach Randy Dunton, who has recruited about 10 Nigerians on behalf of the Lynchburg, Va., school. "I've turned down opportunities. Everybody has their motives."

Nigerian players, meanwhile, willingly try to market themselves. Unable to afford or procure visas to the United States alone, they reach out for help. They post classified ads on Internet basketball sites accompanied by grainy pictures meant to highlight their height. Some Nigerian coaches ask wealthy local players for money in exchange for helping them reach the United States, Nigerian players interviewed in Lagos said.

The number of foreign-born players in Division I men's college basketball has tripled in the last decade, and that globalization of the sport has left similar scars on other countries. Nigeria, though, offers an extreme case. Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation, with about 137 million people. U.S. visas are difficult to get and rampant corruption, Nigerians said, creates opportunities for profit seekers.

"Every basketball player in Nigeria wants to get to the U.S., but the whole process is a mess," said Masai Ujiri, an international scout for the Denver Nuggets who is from Nigeria. "Even for the luckiest players, the guys who make it, nothing is easy. They go through hell to get here, and they don't really know what they're getting into. They think once they get to the U.S., the NBA is guaranteed."

## **A Growing Interest**

That their oldest son left Enugu, a city of about 2.5 million in southeastern Nigeria, almost solely because of his height still astounds Godwin Sunday Obi and his wife Catherine, who both stand shorter than 5-10. They watched Kene Obi grow with an intense curiosity that quickly turned to fear. Godwin started measuring Obi every month when, at 12, the boy sprouted to 6 feet; he took his son to the doctor when, at 13, he grew to almost 7 feet.

"I took him to the hospital to see what was wrong with him," Godwin said in an interview in Enugu, where the retired school principal serves on the city council. "We couldn't understand why the boy was so tall. We thought it was a curse."

Obi's uncle, Ugo Ugochukwu, believed height could be a blessing, so he introduced Obi to a sport that, at times, would make both the father's and the uncle's opinions seem right. Ugochukwu told Obi he could use basketball to escape Enugu, one of Nigeria's poorest cities where Godwin makes \$200 per year.

At 13, Obi left the family's dilapidated, second-story apartment where he had often shared sleeping space with four siblings on the bare floor of the main room. Having seen a basketball only once or twice, he moved six hours away to live with Ugochukwu near the National Stadium, Lagos's basketball epicenter.

"He had to come to the big city to get noticed," Ugochukwu said. "Coming here was the first step to the NBA."

The next step proved considerably more difficult. Over the next four years, it would lead Obi to put his faith in several different men -- each with his own motives.

Ugo Udezue, an agent for BDA Sports Management, was impressed by Obi's performance at a prestigious basketball camp in South Africa. A Nigerian who played at Riverdale Baptist in suburban Maryland and then at the University of Wyoming, Udezue promised to help Obi reach the United States. Udezue regarded Obi as a younger brother and, he admitted, a prospective future client.

Obi returned to Lagos, though, with nothing more than Udezue's promise, and he quickly turned to local coach Toyin Sonoiki for mentorship. Tommy Lampley, a Florida-based Amateur Athletic Union coach, said Sonoiki offered to deliver Obi for \$2,500 in 2003. Lampley, who had never seen Obi play, even on a videotape, said he wired Sonoiki the money and bought an extra-long bed for a room in his family's house. Then he waited. "Noik [Sonoiki] told me Obi would fly into D.C. and I would pick him up in like a week," Lampley said. "I never heard from them again."

Asked about Lampley's allegation, Sonoiki said he would not answer any questions about Obi.

Raphael Chillious tried to get Obi next. Chillious, the coach at South Kent School in Connecticut, wanted Obi to play for his prep powerhouse, and he used contacts at the University of Connecticut to procure a signed letter from Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.). Lieberman recommended Obi's admittance to the United States, Chillious said.

Officials in Lieberman's office said they could neither confirm nor deny he had written the letter.

Obi said he took Lieberman's letter to the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria, where he arrived for his visa appointment also carrying scholarship papers to South Kent Prep. Obi said the embassy denied him, citing a lack of proof that Obi would return to Nigeria when his student visa expired. He would soon leave for the United States anyway, by a more circuitous route:

To Dakar, Senegal, mainly so Obi could escape Sonoiki, who Obi said had threatened to kidnap him and sell him to a team in Russia around April 2004.

To northern France, where Obi lived and trained with a club team in Gravelines for much of 2004 and 2005. Obi never enrolled in school in France. "He was depressed," Ugochukwu said. "He wanted to quit."

To Oostende, Belgium, where Obi lived and trained while awaiting another appointment for a U.S. visa, this time back in France. "I need to get the visa to the U.S.," Obi said then, from a cell phone in Belgium, "because I don't want to stay here any longer."

### **Play-for-Pay Propositions**

When Obi finally landed at Washington-Dulles International Airport in early September, the clamoring around him hardly quieted. He planned, initially, to use the ticket Udezue had bought him to visit the country for a few weeks. He would play some games, explore Northern Virginia and decide if he wanted to go to school in the United States. Then he would return to Europe and pursue a student visa.

But those who saw Obi play immediately longed for a more permanent relationship, so they helped Obi apply for a student visa without the requirement of leaving the country. No matter, they said, that his basic basketball skills resembled that of a typical American middle schooler. His broad shoulders and hulking chest looked like they belonged to a man of 30, and they gave way to long, runners' legs.

Obi was introduced to Melvin Coles, a businessman and acquaintance of Udezue's who owns several American Basketball Association teams. Within hours, Coles invited Obi to live in the house he shared with his wife and three children, his transportation to be provided in a green Hummer by Coles's personal driver.

In late December, Obi's parents traveled more than a hundred miles from Enugu to fax Coles paperwork that would make him Obi's guardian.

Others offered to help Obi, too, but they requested something in return. Joe Smith, a Philadelphian who makes a business of importing African players, offered to help Obi procure a student visa -- so long as the player paid him at least 20 percent of his future earnings. "That's my usual deal," said Smith, who talked to Udezue twice before giving up. "I guess I intimidated them."

Mark Adams, an AAU coach in Indiana, pursued Obi with hopes, he said, of "you know, him playing for my team and maybe some kind of money back down the line." Adams arranged for a scholarship at Lynchburg (Va.) Christian Academy and promised to set up private workouts for Obi with Indiana high school star Greg Oden. "I guess Obi just felt more comfortable with Ugo," Adams said.

"I've never seen so many people going after one kid," said Olumide Oyedeji, a Nigerian who played recently in the NBA and has paid for about five players to move to the United States because he wanted to help others like him. "I heard about Obi, and I wanted to help him. Then I found out about all the people involved, and it was like, 'Wait. This isn't normal. I'm staying out.' "

Obi floated from one Washington area gym to the next, chased by curious coaches eager to evaluate him. One afternoon, Obi played -- and held his own, coaches said -- against former Georgetown star Michael Sweetney, a 275-pound forward for the Chicago Bulls. Another day, he played at a gym in Bowie with Ruben Boumtje Boumtje

and Obinna Ekezie, two Africans and former local college stars who played in the NBA last season.

Several high school coaches were tantalized with the possibility of coaching Obi. In the summer, DeMatha's Mike Jones believed, fleetingly, that Obi might play for him. In the fall, Obi practiced frequently with the team at Bishop Ireton, an Alexandria private school. Coles and Udezue most wanted Obi to go to Bishop Ireton, which has an experienced coach, Chuck Driesell, and another talented 7-foot player, Mike Williams. Obi worked out with Ireton through September and most of October, but a last-minute barrier prevented him from enrolling.

In late October, Driesell realized Ireton's league, the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference, forbade students not enrolled at the beginning of the season from playing varsity sports. Obi would have to play junior varsity.

"It kills me, because when you look at his body, it's like, 'Oh my God, this kid is a pro,' " Driesell said in October. "It's just unbelievable what a kid like that could do for this school. He could be the guy that takes our program to another level. He could be the legend, the guy everybody identifies with our program for decades."

The hitch with Ireton left Obi with few choices except to enroll in public school. Coles's 8,000-square-foot home in Alexandria sits in the Annandale High School district. But Coles looked instead to enroll him at Edison, a school with a more internationally diverse student body -- and a better basketball team. On Coles's advice, Obi joined JROTC, a program that Edison -- not Annandale -- offered, allowing for his transfer.

It's an unlikely destination for a player with Obi's potential. Edison's basketball team is solid but unspectacular, a status Obi could quickly change. "He would bring attention to this whole area," said Edison Coach Frank McMillian, who knew little about Obi until he showed up at the school. "We'd have to add seats to our gym."

When Obi walked through the school's halls holding his schedule last week, his basketball future at Edison remained in limbo. Until the state's athletic officials decide on his status, he cannot play. But that bothered others more than him.

A few months before he made it to Edison, Obi considered, out loud, what he wanted from the American school experience he'd so long imagined. He needed good friends, he said, to help alleviate his loneliness. He needed good classes, he said, so he could catch up on the months of school he'd missed. And basketball?

"Other people care about all that, but I don't," Obi said. "Why does it matter? This is America. Anybody here can teach me to play basketball."

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