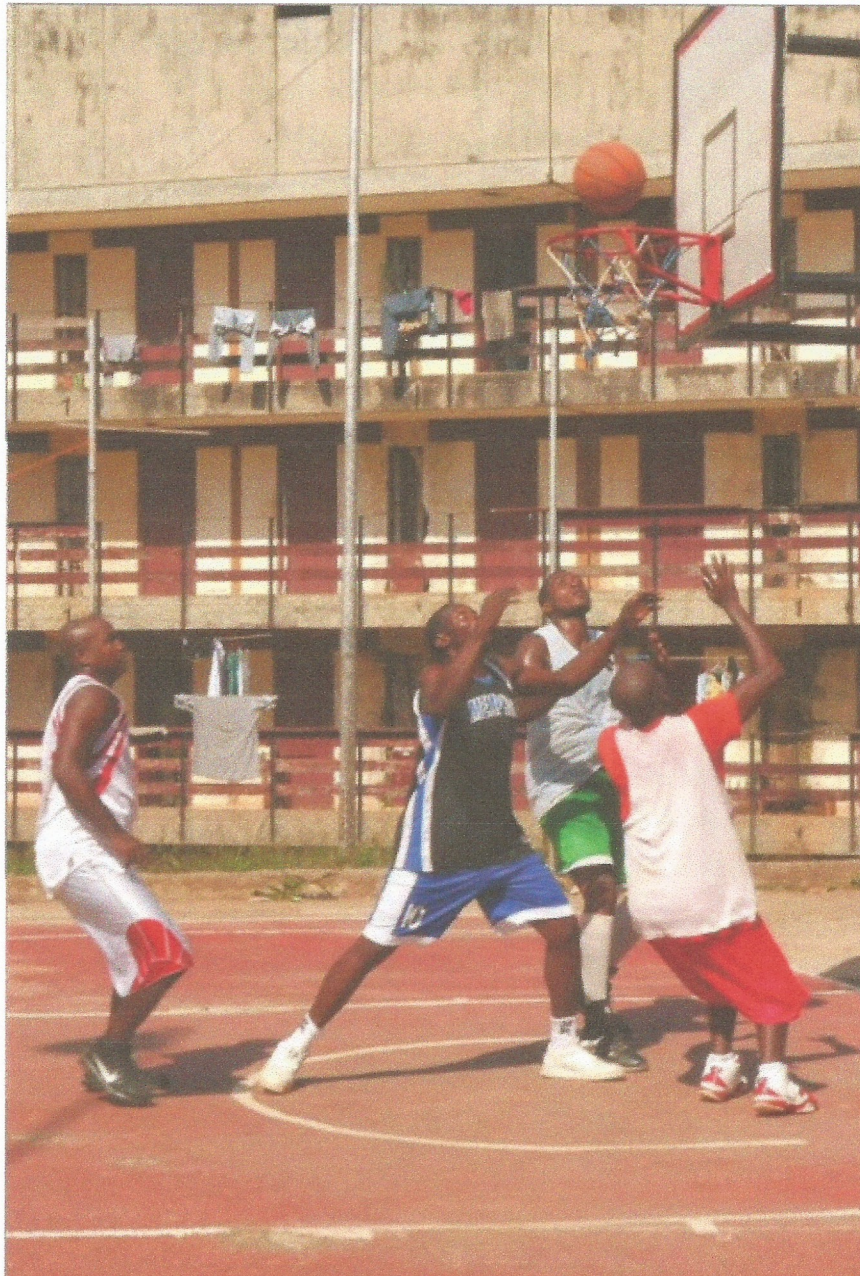


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Hoop in Cameroon: Part 2 — The City Game

May 7, 2014 Sports Column by Karl Lindholm



TOP-NOTCH HOOP PLAYERS battle for a rebound at Yaounde 1 (courtesy of Karl Lindholm)

For the past three weekends, Richard, Valentine, and I have been undertaking a bit of light hoop anthropology, visiting the outdoor basketball courts scattered about the city here in Yaounde.

My goal is nothing on the scale of Pete Axthelm's "The City Game" or Alex Wolff's "Small World/Big Game," classic studies in Hoopology, but rather to engage basketball as a way of getting me out of the house and into the world I am inhabiting this year, via an enterprise that captured my spirit long ago. Unsurprisingly, I have not always found it easy to be here in West Africa — it's quite different from, say, West Addison.

As I make my way tentatively around Yaounde, I do not see basketball being played, kids shooting hoops. I don't see outdoor courts, playgrounds, baskets mounted on poles. I do see football (soccer) in every vacant lot, intense games between brightly colored uniformed teams. Basketball remains mostly subterranean.

But it's definitely here.

Valentine is a student of Brett, my wife, at Yaounde 1 University, who declared to her his basketball passion. When I first met him he said his favorite players were LeBron James and Kobe Bryant (no surprise there), but Valentine is Muggsy Bogues' size.

I suggested he check out Chris Paul — and he did. Last week he showed up for one of our forays to the city's basketball dens in a shirt with "Chris Paul" carefully hand-lettered on the back.

Valentine fell in love with the game in grade school in his village of Akum (all Yaoundians call "home" the village from whence they came and where their people still live), in the northwest part of Cameroon. He has never played on an organized team, but aspires to.

Richard is our driver, and, frequently, our salvation. When he found out that we were embarking on a quest of basketball discovery, he told me of his younger brother, Patrick: "He is a coach!" he exclaimed, and then explained that Patrick was a basketball coach back in the family village of Kumbo. Patrick was taught the game in grade school by Catholic missionaries from Italy, and now travels to schools all over his region, sharing his passion for and knowledge of basketball.

The first outdoor court our merry band of three visited was at Yaounde 1, one of the best of the handful of courts in the city. It is modest by American standards, a single court with wooden backboards, but it did have nets on the rims. This court, I was told, is where the good players play.

Indeed so, good players in abundance on the Saturday we watched: big guys in their twenties, some older, a few younger. The guards could handle the ball, right, and left; the shooters had the smooth release and rotation; the slashers got to the rim; the big men boxed out and outletted the rebound. It sure looked like

basketball to me, a high standard of hoop, recognizable anywhere.

We next went to an outdoor court right next to the Yaounde Prison (a forbidding place) in Nkondagui, not far from Valentine's place in Embombo, an urban neighborhood just outside Centre Ville. This court is where Valentine "trains," practices, walking the mile and a half from his home.

The court was not visible from the road, so we parked the car and walked about 150 yards, past the prison itself, to a large open area, where a full football game was in progress on a broad expanse of red dirt that is Cameroon.



PLAYERS IN A tournament at the outdoor courts at the Palais des Sports in downtown Yaounde showed not only top-notch basketball skills — strong drives to the basket and good outside shooting — but also a real joie de hoop. / Photo courtesy of Karl Lindholm

Despite the conditions, the hoop was solid, impressive. The 4-on-4 game had especially good players — lithe, agile athletes. Twice I saw a player receive an ally-oop pass and jam. The facilities were crude, the play anything but.

Just last weekend, we accepted the invitation of Florent to watch his team play in a tournament at the outdoor courts at the grand Palais des Sports, a large modern arena, built by the Chinese in 2005, right downtown. Florent is a student in the Public Speaking course I am helping to teach at the U.S. Embassy.

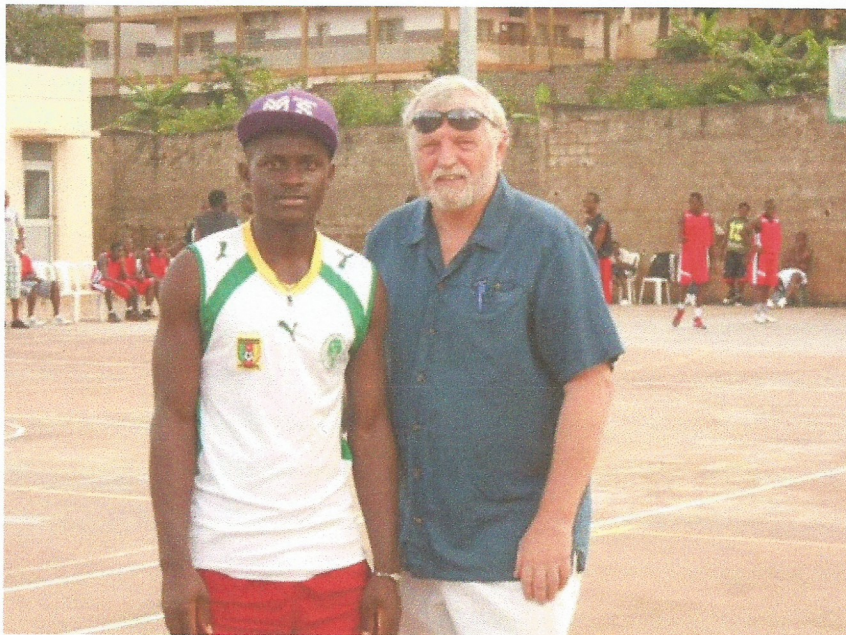
It was a festival of hoop, under sunny skies, temperatures in the 80s: official games, with teams in brightly colored uniforms, three referees per game, played on two well-maintained courts, side by side. These were club teams of young men between 18-24, good players, without exception, athletes, some better than others. There were fans too, maybe 50-100.

I felt quite at home, though I was the only white person there, or indeed at any of these basketball hotspots. In Cameroon, my family and I are Les Blancs.

I haven't found Middlebury Coach Jeff Brown his Joel Embiid, an agile seven-footer. But I have seen a number of young men who would look good in Middlebury blue, one in particular last Saturday, No. 5 for the team in sky blue uniforms. He had the whole package: the drive to the basket, the outside shot, and obvious *joie de hoop*. He was something to behold.

There is more than one Beautiful Game in Cameroon.

Editor's note: Read [Part I of "Hoop in Cameroon" by Karl Lindholm here](#).



KARL LINDHOLM, WHO is teaching in Yaounde, Cameroon, for a year, poses with his student Florent at a basketball tournament. Our columnist has found a great love for basketball in the West African country.