

Sizzling Sisters Slam Dunk Their Way To The Olympics

What a comeback for Angola's women basketballers at the African championships in Mali. Slaughtered by Senegal in the opening game, they recovered to take the gold in Bamako—a ticket to their historic first appearance at the Olympics.

BY SARA ENGELEN AND LULA AHRENS

Angola's female basketball warriors are pretty pleased with themselves right now in a country mad about the sport.

They came back from a thrashing from favourites, Senegal, to take gold at the 2011 Afrobasket Women in Mali; they were feted by President José Eduardo dos Santos and the Minister of Sport, Goncalves Muandumba, on their triumphant return to Luanda and now they have a shot, alongside the men, for a gold medal at the 2012 Olympics in London.

The progress of the Palancas Negras—which translates as 'black sables'—is being seen as a breakthrough for women's basketball. Behind this success is the former captain of the Angolan male basketball team, Moreira, who has coached the team for six years.

In the basketball courts of Luanda's number one sport complex, Citadela, a youthful looking, casually dressed and relaxed Moreira gave FORBES AFRICA the inside track on this heroic chapter in Angolan basketball.

How do you explain Palancas Negras' victory at Afrobasket Women in Bamako? This year's result is the fruit of continuous hard work and improvement. The Palancas Negras have already had a foot on the podium since 2007. We gained bronze at Afrobasket Women both in 2007 and in 2009. We lost against Mali twice in the finals. But now we've managed to beat them, which made the victory twice as beautiful.

What does this victory mean for Angola? Male basketball was already 'hot' in Angola. Now that the men have lost their ticket to the Olympics, the women will definitely be in the spotlight. This victory is of key importance for Angolan female basketball, which has very little support and lacks professional organization. Angola only has four female teams—Primeiro do Agosto, Maculusso, Interclub and Juventud de Viana—of which only two are represented in the national team.

What role did leading player Nassecela Mauricio, who was elected Most Valuable Player of this

year's Afrobasket tournament, play in the female team's victory? She really gave it her all. She's a fighter, and she definitely deserves this victory. But I don't like speaking about any player in particular because the entire team played very well.

What do you and your team strive for at the Olympics, and what are the greatest challenges? We'll do all we can to reduce the quality gap with the other Olympic teams. Whether we manage to do so will partly depend on the team's make-up. Height, weight, physical condition and defence are all challenges. Our tallest player is 1.92m. But we're fast and aggressive, we always seek the best positions, and we will train hard on our three pointers. In order to gain experience, we will try to train abroad as much as we can.

Isn't African basketball often deemed a 'nursery' for young talented players, who exchange their African teams for European or American teams as soon as they get a chance? Generally speaking that's true, but I think that would



Above right: Former captain of the Angolan male basketball team, Anibal Moreira
 Above: Felizarda Jorge dunking the ball
 Right: Left to right: Nassecela Mauricio, Angela Cardoso, Felizarda Jorge

be different if they had the same opportunities at home. Africa, except for maybe Tunisia and Egypt, lacks the right conditions for basketball. To professionalize, you need good financial resources. Angola has done that. Our country used to have many players in Portugal, including myself for 11 years. But when Angola started paying well, it managed to create its own great team.

What needs to be done to improve African basketball conditions? Focus on the basics: create more playing fields and schools.

Provide the minimum conditions. In the second phase, you can start thinking about remuneration and investments. The Angolan government plans to build a venue for basketball training purposes only, but so far it is only a concept.

What do you think of the Basketball without Borders camp that was recently held in South Africa? It seems to serve a 'double agenda'. The concept aims at promoting basketball as a common language for global peace, friendship and sportsmanship, but at the same

time serves as a recruiting platform.

I think it is an extremely valuable initiative because of the friendships, cultural exchange and experience it creates. I do agree that it's probably not beneficial for African countries. But what matters to me more is that it benefits the players. It allows them to play in much more competitive championships and to improve their very poor African working conditions.

How does it feel to be celebrated by the Angolan president? We're happy! This is an acknowledgement of our hard work. 🇦🇴