

# A Lesser-Known Human Trafficking Problem: Teenage Basketball Players

April 06, 2015 3:46 PM ET  
Alexandra Starr



Elsa/Getty Images

Monday night's NCAA men's basketball final will attract millions of viewers. One player on Duke's team — Sean Obi — hails from Nigeria. He's not the only African player who has enjoyed a successful hoops career in the U.S. The most famous is Nigerian Hakeem Olajuwon, who starred at the University of Houston before going on to a Hall of Fame career with the Houston Rockets and the Toronto Raptors.

But not every African student who comes to the United States to play basketball has a positive experience. In the April issue of [Harper's](#) and over [at WNYC](#), I reported on the story of four promising teenage Nigerian basketball players who were lured to the United States with the promise of college scholarships, but ended up with one homeless in New York City and the other three in foster care in Michigan.

And last month, the Department of Homeland Security [raided](#) the Faith Baptist Christian Academy South in Ludowici, Ga., and discovered 30 young boys, mostly Dominican, who had been living in the campus gym, sleeping on the floor. Apparently students had been housed there since 2013. These boys also had been recruited to America with the promise of a high school education and a shot at a college scholarship.

It might seem bizarre to bring underage immigrants to the United States to participate in an amateur sport, but it turns out there's a whole international network of scouts, coaches and agents looking to make real money by plucking rising-star basketball players from other countries and "getting in" on the player's circle of influence early on.

The biggest payday, of course, comes if you have a strong influence over a player who seems good enough to play for the NBA. Sports agents eager to represent a top-draft prospect will pay for an introduction to the player. In some cases, this has even [resulted](#) in coaches getting a percentage of the agent's fee for negotiating a first contract.

All of this hinges on having players people would pay for, which helps explain why scouts and coaches began prospecting for talent in places like Africa. Find a future star, and you stand to make a lot of money. Of course, the vast majority of recruits will not be that one-in-a million talent. And in a lot of cases, young boys seem to be treated based on what the adults in the basketball market think they're "worth."

"Ultimately, these players are just commodities to these coaches. They import them and they try to sell them. And if they don't find value, they trash it. They throw it away."

- George Dohrmann, Sports Illustrated

Some teenagers end up financially compensating their coaches. When Tyson Chandler, now of the Dallas Mavericks, was the No. 2 pick in the NBA draft in 2001, he reportedly gave \$200,000 to his Amateur Athletic Association (AAU) coach, Pat Barrett. And in 1997, as an 18-year-old rookie with the Toronto Raptors, Tracy McGrady signed a \$12 million endorsement deal with Adidas that stipulated payments of \$900,000 apiece to his high school coach and the scout who had discovered him.

Basketball handlers can make money even when their players don't rise to the professional level. That's because colleges will award coaching jobs and sometimes [find](#) ways to funnel cash to coaches and scouts who can steer top players to their teams. Officially, colleges aren't allowed to pay for players, but long-time sports observers say this happens with frequency. "You have these under-the-table transactions that occur," says George Dohrmann, a *Sports Illustrated* writer and author of *Play Their Hearts Out*.

The AAU is a driving force behind all of this, for rookies born at home and abroad. LeBron James, Kevin Durant and virtually every other NBA star started out playing for AAU teams. The best teams are sponsored by shoe companies like Nike and Adidas, which, on top of providing free shoes, jerseys and covering travel expenses, will sometimes pay stipends — read, salaries — to coaches with the best teams. Those payments can creep into the six figures.

In the meantime, no one's tasked with making sure the kids don't end up in situations like the one in Georgia. "It's like modern slavery," Chukwuemeka "Alley" Ene, the subject of my *Harper's* piece, told me. He was made to sleep on the floor during a placement with a host family in Mississippi, and one of his friends was at the school in Ludowici that got raided by DHS. "It's

not slavery where they put a chain on your hand or your neck," he told me. "But it's people trying to use you."

*SI's* Dohrmann, who has reported extensively on the AAU, agrees. "Ultimately, these players are just commodities to these coaches," he told me. "They import them and they try to sell them. And if they don't find value, they trash it. They throw it away."