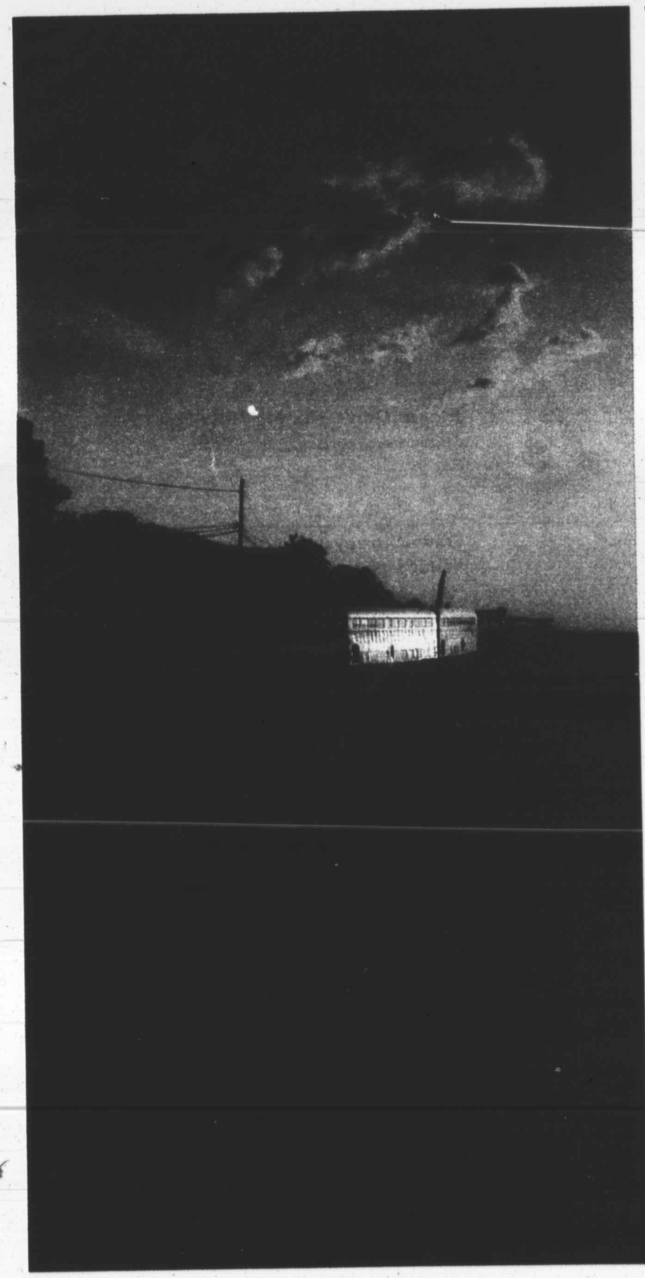
"LET'S TAKE A STROLL TO THE DINING CAR
AND SIT BY THE SETTING SUN."



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ALL ABOARD AMTRAK

BY RICHARD E. LAPCHICK

African Athletes IN THE USA

"Slam-Dunk Diplomacy"

Christian Okoye
Azusa Pacific Univ., Ca.

When Joe Lapchick retired as coach of St. John's University in 1965, he passed the mantle to Lou Carnesecca. Within days, a white businessman from Uganda contacted Lapchick about coming to Africa to train a contingent of Watusis to play basketball.

There were several incentives for Lapchick. First, his daughter, Barbara, lived in Uganda. Second, the man offered him $100,000 per year (despite 50 years in the game, Lapchick was retiring after making $12,500 in the previous year). Finally, a distinguishing characteristic of this Watsusi society was that many men were over 7 feet tall. (Remember, Kareem, then Lew Alcindor, was still in high school). No one could beat — or shoot over — a well disciplined team of 7 footers. Lapchick was known for well-disciplined teams.

Lapchick studied Watusi society and decided against the venture. The Watusis were a proud, royal society who lived in isolation from modern day Africa. They had never seen a basketball. he asked many friends in the game what they thought of sports in Africa. In 1965, Americans knew little about Africa, let alone if Africans played sports. Lapchick believed bringing them to America in the 1960's would be creating a freak show, demeaning their culture. He wanted no part of it.

In 1982, Lou Carnesecca brought a Big East All-Star team on a diplomatic mission to play in Angola. The United States had no relations with Angola. "Slam Dunk Diplomacy." Teams from Angola and Senegal were in the tournament.

While the Americans won all 11 games, many were won by a single point in the final seconds. The games were determined more by the game-savvy of the Americans than by their skill superiority. The Angolans had a man sinking 25-30 foot jump shots all day long! Louie drooled. He said it wouldn't be long before these skills were imported in quantity to the States. Louie became prophet in his own time. Not only in basketball. That Angolan jump-shooter never ended up in the States, but American basketball coaches regularly look to Africa for the future.

All fans will now naturally think of Akeem "the Dream" Olajuwon leading the Houston Rockets into a death struggle with the Celtics for the NBA championship. Most knowledgable basketball people will tell you that there is no better center in the NBA today. And this man has only been playing since he was 16. And Akeem's competition at the time was fellow-Nigerians, not New York City street-smart players.

They were a decade behind track and field coaches. Sydney Maree became the first black South African to complete when he ran at Villanova in the late 1970's. Schools like the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) won several national championship on the talents of African athletes. Men like Filbert Bayi competed for American universities.

The rosters of top university soccer teams are frequently filled with gifted African players. After all, this is the most popular sport on the Continent.

Yanik Noah was discovered in Cameroon by Arthur Ashe and went on to stardom in tennis, a sport dominated by whites. Now we see the emergence of Nkuka Odizor of Nigeria. A college recruiting service has been creaed which is specifically in the business of bring African athletes to compete in American universities. It started for tennis players but has now broadened to other sports.

Most surprising of all might be that the nation's leading football rusher was another Nigerian, Christian Okoye of Azuza Pacific University. The 6'3", 255 pound running back ran the 40 in 4.4. seconds. In fact, it was his speed in track that brought him to Azuza, which has an Olympic calibre track program. But football made made him famous. His selection for the Senior Bowl was based on all he did on the gridiron. That included 3,569 career yards rushing (1,680 for 1986 alone); a 186 yards per game average on 7.1 yards per carry. He scored 21 touchdowns. And he never played football before he arrived in the United States.

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Richard E. Lapchick is Director of Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society. His father was Joe Lapchick. Richard organized the 1982 Big East tour of Angola.