



## **An Unlikely Journey to the NBA**

***How one Toronto Raptor made his way from Cameroon to the NBA Finals***

By: Austin Rader

As professional leagues continue to add more staff such as talent scouts and research analytics experts, they are all competing with one another to find the next big star. Sometimes it comes as the number one draft pick who may have won the Heisman. Other times, it comes from finding a pitcher in the 36th round who has a 100 mile fastball. But recently, the NBA is finding talent halfway around the world, all the way in Cameroon, which is in Africa. How did this happen? How does it keep happening?

With a whole country behind him in a raucous crowd, Pascal Siakam isn't scared of the moment. The soon to be named Most Improved Player had a breakout performance in game 1 of the NBA Finals. In the biggest game of his life, Siakam scored a playoff career high 32 points on 14-17 shooting from the field (82%).

Whether it was in the post or knocking down shots from beyond the arc, Siakam came through when the Raptors needed him. Siakam excels in the paint and rarely misses contested layups in transition. He closed out the game with a tip-in with just under a minute to go to stretch out the lead to nine. How does a kid from Cameroon travel 6,000 miles to the NBA and take center stage on the game's biggest stage?

How did he get here? His road to the NBA started later than most players in the league.

Pascal Siakam grew up in Douala, Cameroon. He initially wanted to be a priest and had no interest in playing basketball, unlike his brothers who all had D-1 scholarships. He didn't start playing organized basketball until he was 18.

He didn't get noticed until he went to NBA player Luc Mbah a Moute's basketball camp in the summer of 2011. Mbah a Moute is from Cameroon and runs free basketball camps that provides chances for young athletes in that area.

Like Cameroon native Joel Embiid, Siakam possessed raw athleticism and competitiveness to go along with his unpolished talent. In Cameroon, young basketball players are measured by potential, not results which worked in Siakam's favor.



### **Next generation of Cameroon talent**

After his second summer at Mbah a Moute's camp, Siakam was invited to attend Basketball Without Borders (BWB) camp. He was shocked. Basketball Without Borders is the NBA and FIBA's global basketball development and outreach program. It has been conducted since 2001. 51 BWB campers have made it to the NBA with 47 campers being drafted while 4 signed in free agency. He knew he had to play well to get a ticket to America like his brothers before him. In his tryout scrimmage, Siakam played with a lot of heart, diving for loose balls, leaping to block shots. Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri noted, "his effort was memorable."

Siakam landed a scholarship to God's Academy in Lewisville, Texas. One year later, he transferred to New Mexico State. In just his second season, he averaged 20.2 points, 11.6 rebounds, and 2.2 blocks. He was named WAC Player of the Year.

Siakam decided to go pro and caught the eye of then - Raptors coach Dwane Casey with his defensive stance, his footwork and pursue of the ball. "He has the best motor of any player I've seen," Casey says. The Raptors selected him with the 27th pick in the 2016 Draft.

Siakam's skinny frame didn't faze scouts from taking a chance on him. It was his ability to absorb contact and be the most competitive player on the court that caught their eye.

Siakam has been an underdog his entire career. Whether it was getting demoted to the Raptors G League team or when he made it back to the NBA and having one of the worst shooters from beyond the arc Siakam embraces each challenge.

Even though he hasn't been home in over six years, Siakam plays the game with a heavy heart. He plays for his family and his late father who died just before he made his New Mexico State debut. He hasn't been in the same room with his immediate family in 15 years.

Joel Embiid who is an NBA all star had a similar path from Cameroon to the NBA. He was discovered at Mbah a Moute's camp and went straight to America for high school and college. Is this going to start a wave? Are there other African countries that will start producing NBA players?

What makes these players so unique is their road to the NBA. They are 6,000 miles away from home. Their will to give 100% on the court whether it's in a lonely gym or on the game's biggest stage. "I've never seen anything like that before. That's a pretty big stage for a guy to put that kind of performance on," Raptors coach Nick Nurse said after Siakam's performance in game 1. "He has a big engine with lots of energy that enables him to play with certain speed, athleticism and enables him to work very hard every single day."

While both Pascal Siakam and Joel Embiid are loved in their respected NBA teams fanbase, the country of Cameroon is rooting for their hometown heroes as well.

Maybe finding basketball talent in Cameroon is similar to finding baseball talent in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, or Venezuela. It's an exciting new development for professional sports leagues, and it will make talent analytics even more difficult and opportunistic in the years to come.