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SCENE ASIA

Dikembe Mutombo on Life After the NBA

By *Eva Tam*

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Before arriving at Georgetown University in 1987, basketball was the last thing on Dikembe Mutombo's mind. He didn't even like the sport.

The Congo-born 19-year-old had dreams of becoming a doctor and practicing medicine back home. All that changed the next year when coach John Thompson persuaded him to join the college basketball team. Under Mr. Thompson's guidance, Mr. Mutombo -- who stands 7 feet 2 inches (2.2 meters) tall -- became a shot-blocking machine that helped earn his way into the National Basketball Association, the start of his 18-year pro-basketball career.

Now, 26 years after arriving in Georgetown, Mr. Mutombo uses his status to achieve his lifelong goal: helping the lives of people in central Africa.

His legacy on the court is that of one of the NBA's greatest defensive players, and he will be remembered for his signature celebratory finger-wag after every block. Off the court, Mr. Mutombo is known for humanitarian efforts by setting up his own foundation, which builds

hospitals and provides health care in Congo. In 2007, he opened the capital's first hospital in 40 years.

Since retiring from the NBA in 2009, Mr. Mutombo remains focused on helping people in Africa as the league's global ambassador. He stopped by Hong Kong this week to receive a donation from Goldman Sachs for the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation.

He spoke with the Journal about life after basketball, his work in Africa and how he still connects with former Houston Rockets teammate Yao Ming. Edited excerpts follow.

What did basketball do for you?

It taught me how to be a good leader, a good competitor and how to win. It's not easy to teach a child how to win. I'm glad I had a great mentor. [John Thompson] told me, "I know you want to be a doctor, but you can go out to make a lot of money and go out to save lives at the same time." I think it was the right choice, and I don't regret that I didn't go to medical school. I can go to medical school today if I want to. What I've done now is more than just treating people today -- I've treated future generations to come.

Why did you build a hospital in Congo?

I got sick and tired of seeing people dying at a young age. It hurt me a lot. People were dying from diseases that were treatable. I thought I could be part of the change and contribute to society and to mankind.

What is it like to be a global ambassador? It must be hard to not be on the court anymore.

It's not hard, because I love my job. I thank the commissioner David Stern and the NBA organization for putting the trust in me to carry on this mission of social innovation world-wide. We're having such a huge impact to our youth with our game of basketball. We invested more than \$200 million in social innovation to improve health and literacy.

The NBA has been targeting China. What's going on there, and what are the aspirations of the NBA?

My good friend Yao Ming was the first big player in the NBA to come from China. He gave himself to the game and was successful. That inspired the NBA to invest more and do more for the game of basketball. We're building academies not just in China, but in India, Africa, Europe and South America as well. Our investment is going all over the world, but we thank the Chinese fans for loving our game. We're happy we're able to give them something back that they love so much.

Give us a 'Big Yao' story.

He's a great guy. He thinks I'm too old to be his brother, so he calls me uncle. He says I'm as old as his uncle so he cannot be my brother. I try to refer to him as a young brother but he doesn't want to. When I go to China, people call me "Uncle Mo" because they refer me as Yao Ming's uncle. I'm pleased to be his uncle as long as he listens to me!

Do you still talk to him?

Yes, I just spent four days with him in Chengdu [in China's Sichuan province], with the school that Yao and the NBA foundation built. We're happy that both associations are working together. He's such a wonderful young man and I'm glad he is using his gift, talent and the money he made to improve living conditions of his people.

Watch a video interview with Dikembe Mutombo above.

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