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# Total Baller

Basketball's rising star Ezi Magbegor talks resilience and the power of representation

By Alex Davies

Ezi Magbegor vividly remembers a schoolmate telling her she couldn't play basketball as a job. Then, at 15, she was offered a scholarship to the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra. "I was still at that [original] school for the next three months and we were asked 'what do you want to be when you grow up?'. I was comfortable to say, 'I want to be a baller,'" says Ezi, now 21. "I didn't hesitate - it was so nice to say that freely." Sure enough, she's proved her doubter wrong. Two-time WNBL youth player of the year; medals at a Comm Games and World Cup; spots with the Melbourne Boomers, Australia's Opals and Seattle Storm in the WNBA in the US. She's also Spalding's first-ever female basketball ambassador. As this star prepares to put on the green and gold in Tokyo, she reflects on the moments that have made her - on and off the court.

## A TIGHT KNIT FAMILY

"My two older siblings started playing basketball first, so I'd go to their games and that's how I got into the sport. Then I started playing for the Northern Rebels - a domestic club in Coburg, Victoria - when I was seven. A lot of the things I do, I do for my family and with them in the back of my mind. Both my parents are from Nigeria. They moved to New Zealand and had four kids before we moved to Australia. They're both so

strong and hardworking; I admire their resilience and how they've raised us to be good people."

## TURNING FAILURE INTO SUCCESS

"When I first played for the Victoria Metropolitan team, I was trying out for [an] under-16s spot. [I'd reached] the final top 20, and then I got cut. I was pretty devastated; I didn't expect to be quite as upset as I was. But that was a moment I realised how important basketball was to me. And I thought, 'I'm making that team next year.' The setback motivated me more."

## THE POWER OF FEMALE MENTORS

"I really look up to Lauren Jackson and what she's achieved and done for the sport. She had a prolonged career and

played in the WNBA [Jackson recently became the first Australian player to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in the US] and really showed people what she was made of. I'm also inspired by other Opals like Jenna O'Hea and Cayla George. Cayla's been a huge role model for me. When I went to my first Opals camp, she was super encouraging and made it a great environment for everyone. I've been fortunate enough to play with her with the Melbourne Boomers, too, so we've built a pretty close relationship."

## WINNING GOLD ON THE GOLDIE

"Career highlights so far? Winning a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games 2018 and being able to play in front of Australian fans on the Gold Coast. Also winning a silver medal in Spain at the 2018 World Cup. It's a surreal feeling [to have those achievements]. You don't really take it in until a few days or a week later where you just sit back, reflect and think, 'Wow, we actually did that'. The Opals have done a great job of winning medals in the past, so hopefully we can continue to do that."

## YOUNG FANS

"I didn't consider myself a role model until recently. Young people send messages or come up to me, or parents tell me their daughter looks up to me, which is really nice. I try to carry myself well, on and off the court, and just be approachable, relatable and a good person. I want to show people that nice is cool, I guess. For someone to look on TV and see a Black, female athlete is important. It can make [them] think, 'Hey, maybe I can do that; maybe I can be a basketballer and travel the world'. If [what I'm doing] touches even just one or two kids, [I've] done [my] job there."

## HOW RIO 2016 CHANGED ME

"I remember coming home from school and watching the Beijing Olympics [in 2008]. But it was seeing the Opals play in Rio that made me think 'I definitely want to be at the Olympics one day'. It's really exciting to be going to Tokyo. The more experienced players have created a great team culture - Sandy [Brondello - the Opals coach] has as well - so it's always so much fun whenever we have the chance to get together."

## WHY IT'S OK TO OWN IT

"My AIS coach Paul Goriss said something that's stuck with me for all these years: it's OK to be good. It's OK to show people you're a good player; don't shy away because you're scared that they might think you're showing off. It's about



## EZI IN 60 SECONDS

Your go-to energy snack?  
*A banana.*

Favourite basketball move?  
*A post move - so two dribbles and then a spin move.*

Top exercise?  
*Deadlifts. I like being in the weights room.*

Ultimate power workout tune?  
*Travis Scott's Sicko Mode.*

Current read?  
*The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho.*

Family aside, what do you miss about Oz when overseas?  
*A good brunch!*

embracing what you have and not being afraid of what others are going to think. If you're good or great at something, then definitely show that."

## SOLO SESSIONS

"I've always been quite shy and introverted, so taking time to myself helps to recharge my social meter. I read and write a lot, and I'm also in my undergrad studying psychology [at Deakin University]. I do pilates when I'm at home by myself. Basketball is super fast and go-go-go, so it's good having that moment to slow things down." **wh**