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They're not often in the spotlight, but these two Tiger basketball players have equally compelling stories.

Out of Africa

by Eric Smith

Great stories always abound on the University of Memphis men's basketball team, and this year is no different.

There's the story of a program trying to shed past disappointments and achieve postseason glory. The story of a high-profile coach trying to transform talent into a title. And numerous stories of star players trying to shine in the national spotlight.

All season long those household names will grab headlines and garner awards. Perhaps they'll etch their names into Tiger basketball lore by leading the city's most beloved athletic program back to the promised land of NCAA tournament success.

No matter what happens this season, the stories of two Memphis basketball players won't be told quite as often, simply because this supporting duo won't get as much playing time on the floor - or as much face time on TV - as the team's leading cast mates.

But Simplice Njoya and Almamy Thiero have stories as rich and compelling as anyone who suits up in Tiger blue.

Actually, Njoya and Thiero share similar stories. Both are seniors. Both are from Africa. And both have traveled a long, winding road that took them far away from their homes and brought them to Memphis.

A 'Simplice' kind of man

He's the one people usually call "Simp." He's the one with a smile big enough to match his 6-10 frame and gregarious personality. He's the one who graduated last August but stayed in school to earn another college degree and enjoy another basketball season. He's the one who jokingly offers to conduct an interview in

French, one of the three languages he speaks along with English and a tribal dialect from his homeland.

Simplice Nvút Njoya (pronounced "sim-PLLEECE n-VOOT JOY-uh") was born and raised in the capital city of Yaoundé, Cameroon, which boasts a population of over 1.5 million, making it much larger and more cosmopolitan than one might suspect. When people kid Njoya, 24, about what they perceive is a backwater locale - maybe asking if Yaoundé is big enough to even have an airport - he kids them right back.

"Believe it or not, when I was in high school [in the U.S.], some of my friends asked me, 'Do you guys got airport?'" Njoya says. "I got a joke for them. I say, 'No, the airplane land on the tree.'"

In 1999 Njoya departed that Yaoundé airport for the United States. Ahead of him was an American home filled with bountiful athletic and academic opportunities. Behind him was an African home filled with young siblings and other relatives who depended on him even though he, too, was just a child when he left.

"It was a really challenging childhood because I was the oldest in my family," Njoya says. "From an early age I had to take care of my sisters, my cousins. I mean you're talking about an African family - it's big. Everybody is your cousin. Everybody is your sister. From an early age I had to learn how to take care of all of them."

When Njoya came to the United States, he had to learn to take care of himself, something he did with aplomb, as evidenced by his communication skills. His English isn't perfect - he speaks with a French accent and occasionally struggles to find the right word - but it's remarkable considering that seven years ago he knew nothing more than a few phrases like "How ya doing?" and "Thank you."

"That's all," Njoya recalls. "Just really basic."



Often seen with a beaming smile on his face, Cameroon native Simplicie Njoya, 24, plans to take his signature smile into the world of international business after college, something he's been working on for years. "I knew what I wanted to be before I started school," Njoya says. "My ultimate goal is to have my own company - we're talking big."

Njoya's schooling helped him move quickly past the basics. He spent a year in Miami before moving to New York and graduating from The Masters School. He has since grown so comfortable with English he'll use it unknowingly when he's supposed to be speaking French - even with his own mother.

"Mom will ask, 'What you say?'" Njoya says, laughing. "I don't even know anymore."

What Njoya does know is that as his English improved, so did his basketball, which he didn't begin playing until his early teens. During his senior year of high school Njoya signed with Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. After two seasons at Duquesne he sought a change, and through the help of former Tiger basketball player Modibo Diarra, another African transplant, Njoya discovered Memphis. Here, he believes he's flourished under John Calipari, a coach known for preparing collegiate players for success at the next level.

Njoya certainly came to America to learn in the gym, but mostly he came here to learn in the classroom. So far, he hasn't been disappointed, and neither has the family who bid him adieu six years ago.

" United States is a great country. It's a land of opportunity," Njoya says. "The whole world knows about it, even my granddad, my dad. The dream was that my dad wanted to give his son an opportunity for a great education."

Njoya met and exceeded his father's dream. He's already earned a bachelor's degree in international business, and when he decided to take advantage of another year of athletic eligibility he began work on a second degree in economics. But for all the impressive schooling he'll possess when he leaves the U of M, for all the complicated exams he will have passed by the time he leaves, Njoya admittedly personifies the name his parents gave him. According to Njoya, the word "Simplice," means to "keep things simple, cool" - which has become the very definition of Njoya himself.

"I think I'm like that," he says, coolly. "I'm really simple."

Njoya's short-term goals are indeed simple - play professional basketball, whether here or overseas. He also wants to see his family, who he hasn't seen in three years. If he doesn't make it back to Cameroon soon, the plan is for some of his family to make the long journey to America and maybe, just maybe, watch him play as a pro somewhere.

"I hope, I hope," Njoya says, as that signature smile beams across his face. "That's one of my dreams."

Almamy's anguish

He's the one who misses his son. You can sense it in his eyes when he speaks of him, when he nods toward the framed pictures of the son that adorn the walls. He's the one who also misses his wife, whose photos hang next to those of their child. No matter how much he wants to wrap his strong arms around his son, though, he is simply too far away right now. Thousands of miles and many time zones away.



Mali native Almamy Thiero, who stands 6-9, was always tall for his age, but around 15 or 16 he experienced an extremely huge growth spurt, prompting disbelief from one of his older brothers, who hadn't seen him in a while. Thiero recalls the brother exclaiming, "No, that can't be you! You're too tall!" Thiero and his wife - who is 6-3 - believe their 2-year-old son will carry on the family tradition of tallness.

muscular frame. He looks more like a football player - and before he leaves the U of M, he might become just that. He plans to try out for the Tigers football team next summer as a defensive lineman, end or linebacker.

"Whatever Coach (Tommy) West wants me to play," Thiero says. "I'm definitely going to give it a shot."

Thiero just wants to compete. If that happens on the gridiron rather than on the hardwood, so be it. Thiero has the build for football, but he's never played before, so would he have the knack for it? More importantly, would he have the knees? Thiero's right knee is keeping him off the basketball court this season, and his disappointment and frustration with being sidelined is apparent. It will be the third season Thiero has missed. He sat out 2002-03 and 2003-04 as a red-shirt. He

Almamy Thiero (pronounced "al-mah-MEE cheer-O") has three middle names, and he says his first name means "pastor in the Muslim community." Thiero, 22, is from Segou, Mali, in Western Africa. Like Njoya, Thiero grew up in a crowded household. Unlike Njoya, Thiero is the youngest of 10 children. Thiero's father passed when he was young, so his older brothers helped take care of him by taking on the paternal roles.

"[My brothers] teach me how to live life, take care of myself, not get in trouble," Thiero says. "I was well-protected. If anybody wanted to fight me, they had to go through my brothers."

Nobody would try to fight Thiero now. The once-small boy grew into a 6-9, 267-pound man with an imposing

saw limited action last season, averaging about five minutes per game.

Now, while his teammates run drills, shoot hoops and practice defense, Thiero lifts weights. He targets that knee, which has had three surgeries and needs to be strengthened further. He laments how uncooperative that knee has been, just as he laments how much he misses home. Home is where Thiero's heart is, because home is where his family is. The group of Malians living in Memphis who meet once a month is nice, serving as a sort of surrogate family, and when he cooks Malian dishes he can sort of taste home. But it doesn't begin to make up for the great distance between Thiero and his kin, all of whom are still in Mali.

"I'm the only one here," Thiero says.

Thiero's journey to the United States began in France. That's where he once traveled with a Malian junior basketball team for a tournament. People he met over there saw him play - saw his raw ability and natural athleticism - and told him they could help him get to America, which they did. So Thiero left Mali as a teenager and began his American life in Louisville, later graduating from Mount Zion Academy in Durham, N.C. At first, he didn't speak any English, so he had to speak French with a bilingual Belgian classmate who would translate for him. Over time, Thiero picked up English, and like Njoya now speaks the language well, albeit with a French accent. Thiero, who also speaks a local dialect from Mali, was recruited to Memphis by former assistant coach Steve Roccaforte, with some help from Diarra, who also is from Segou.

"I had a lot of options, but to have somebody close to me, from the same country, same town, was a big deal," Thiero says. "So I chose to come to Memphis."

Life in Memphis for Thiero isn't bad, but it's not great either. Not when his wife - who plays college basketball in Oklahoma - and child are far away. Thiero has a family plan on his cell phone, allowing him to spend his free time conversing with loved ones, but he often gets homesick when he glances toward all those pictures.

"I have a lot of pictures," he says. "A picture can't replace the real feeling."

He knows there is no substitute for flesh and blood, but he also knows what a great opportunity he has here. He knows he can make great strides and do great things with his French degree from the U of M. He knows America is where dreams are made.

"It was a good choice," he says.

Common bond

Njoya and Thiero share more than a parallel journey from Africa to Memphis. This school year they share a living space, a tiny dormitory

apartment made tinier when both of their gigantic bodies are inside.

They also share a common African predecessor at Memphis in Diarra, and they share a respect for the NBA's African pioneers, like Hakeem Olajuwon and Dikembe Mutombo.

They share a passion for basketball, the sport they've come to love, as well as similar athletic roots, since each of them grew up playing Africa 's favorite pastime, soccer, before converting to hoops.

They share the dream of a prosperous future, in which they'll use their U of M degrees to make life better for themselves and their families.

Mostly, though, Simplicie Njoya and Almamy Thiero share a link to the place they each call home - the African continent - without regard to the political borders that separate their nations.

"It doesn't matter where you are in Africa, somehow we got something in common," Njoya says. "Almamy's from the western part of Africa, and I'm from the central part of Africa, and when we finally started living together it was nice. We just bond and understand each other. It's just from being from the same place."

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