

Trading Diamonds for Blue Chips

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By Eli Saslow

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PHILADELPHIA -- For more than 25 years, Joe Smith traveled across Africa in search of lucrative goods. He found diamonds in Liberia and Sierra Leone, so he learned how to export them to the United States. He discovered gold in Mali, so he lived there in a village for more than a year, he said, and sometimes mined for it himself.

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Not until recently, though, did Smith stumble upon what he called "the best product over there," one he believes will make him more money than diamonds or gold ever could.

Now, as his full-time job, he imports African basketball players.

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During the last three years, Smith scouted players, secured visas and arranged college scholarships in the United States for eight African players, mostly Nigerians. He plans to bring in 18 more players over the next two years. In exchange, Smith expects those players to repay him with 20 to 25 percent of their earnings if they make the NBA.

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"This is a business plan that is going to make millions," Smith said. "When one of my guys makes the NBA and he's getting ready to sign his contract or whatever, I'll start a U.S. corporation in the player's name. The player owns 80, 75 percent. Joe Smith owns the other percent of the company and runs the operation, investing funds in the right way."

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Smith, 64, hardly is alone in his pursuit of Nigerian teenagers as a valuable commodities. High school and college coaches, NBA scouts, would-be agents and representatives of basketball recruiting services regularly travel to Nigeria in hopes of discovering a unique talent that could transform their careers, make them rich, or both. The industry is fueled by Nigerian players desperate to escape a country where basketball stars make less than \$50 a month. They post classified ads on Internet basketball sites, accompanied by pictures meant to highlight their height. They e-mail middlemen such as Smith and beg, essentially, to be taken advantage of.

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"We're still trying to get a handle on all of the people we should be wary of," said Kim Bohuny, NBA vice president in charge of international operations. "We want to make sure these players are surrounded by people looking out for their well-being and education, not money. We're trying to get control of it, but it's always a struggle."

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Typical of a start-up company, Smith's operation has overtaken the two-story apartment where he lives with his wife and grandson in the Philadelphia suburb of Clifton Heights, Pa. About 20 meticulously kept file folders -- one for every Nigerian player Smith hopes to bring over -- are stacked on a table in the living room. Copies of dozens of e-mails from players seeking Smith's help clutter a desk in the basement. When Smith walks outside to the mailbox, a self-made basketball highlight tape featuring a Nigerian player often waits there for him.

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In their e-mails and letters, Nigerian players call Smith "coach," and they generally regard him as a basketball savant. He has yet to place a player at a top-level Division I college, but that's hardly important to Nigerians who lack a firm understanding of the American college basketball hierarchy.

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Smith has mastered a complicated visa process and built connections at schools such as Northeastern University, Tennessee Tech and the University of Bridgeport. He spends money to bring players to the United States and finds them full college scholarships. He also has arranged for a few NBA tryouts.

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"If you want to get to America, you have to talk to him," Cyril Awere, a 6-foot-11 Nigerian center whom Smith hopes to place in college, said at a basketball recruiting \ camp in Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, last October.

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"If he can get me to the U.S., I don't care if he makes money on me. He's the most powerful basketball person."

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Heavily Invested

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When he first brought African players to the United States in 2002, Smith bombarded NBA teams with scouting videos and informational packets.

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Even though he has yet to place a player in the NBA, Smith said he maintains regular contact with at least 15 professional scouts and general managers. Milwaukee Bucks Director of Player Personnel Dave Babcock recently wrote to Smith offering a private workout for two 7-foot centers Smith hopes to bring to the United States in the next few months.

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Smith's connections even helped him earn the stamp of an ultimate basketball insider: a relationship with a shoe company. Adidas allows Smith to order 60 or 70 pairs of shoes from the company catalogue for free every year, Smith said. He gives the shoes to his players in the United States and brings extras to distribute in Nigeria. In return, he plans to steer his players toward endorsement deals with Adidas.

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So far, Smith's business is a long lesson in promise unfulfilled: an NBA tryout for a player who instead signed a long-term deal in Europe; two players sidetracked at junior and community colleges; four more players -- Alassane Savadogo (Harding University), Augustine Okosun (Georgetown College), Aristide Sawadogo (Clayton College) and Ikyator Msoo (Bridgeport) -- with faint NBA potential only time and development could realize.

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For every player he brings over, Smith estimates he invests more than a month of work. More draining, he said, he has already sunk thousands of dollars into two trips to Nigeria, visa and embassy fees and four-figure phone bills.

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When a player finally makes it to the United States, Smith said, expenses only mount.

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Smith becomes the legal guardian for all of his players so he can buy them clothes, food and plane tickets without violating NCAA rules.

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His expenses surpass \$600,000 total, he said, essentially draining his diamond and gold savings.

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In 2004-05, the average NBA player made \$4.9 million.

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"Eventually, I'm going to have the total cycle going, and I'm talking about having kids in here all the way from NBA down to maybe eighth grade," Smith said. "I'll bring kids in on visas early, let them learn to play here and they'll filter up through the system. I will have way more than 10 kids in the NBA. I'm going to build a dynasty for my kids to follow through on."

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Smith's plan, however intricate, could be undermined by one colossal problem: His players aren't required to give him anything. Because NCAA rules prevent amateur athletes from signing contracts, Smith's payback is far from certain. His players understand his financial motives and their roles in it, Smith said, but none has signed or verbally agreed to specific contracts. His millions, essentially, are contingent on gratitude.

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"I can't have security. I can't," Smith said. "I've racked my brain how to do it. One thing I'm looking at now is having some sort of declaration between us stating: 'Look, I'm going to bring you in. Here's the ground rules: You're going to come in, you'll have all kinds of attention, the girls will adore you, agents will be coming around, other colleges are going to come and recruit you -- it's all well and good. But, for me to bring you in, you do not make any decisions in that regard. Everything, and I mean everything, must go through me.' "

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Visa Difficulties

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In an effort to control and profit from Nigerian players, dozens of other coaches and scouts have made similarly bold proclamations: I can get you to the U.S. if you listen to - and pay -- only me.

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It is an intriguing offer for players who have learned that making it from Nigeria to the United States is almost impossible without significant help.

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A visa appointment at the U.S. Embassy in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, costs \$100, about one-fourth of the average annual income in the country. Such appointments usually end in bitter disappointment, anyway.

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The embassy requires student visa applicants to prove they will return to Nigeria after their education. According to a statement on the embassy Web site, "Applicants usually demonstrate their intent to depart the United States by proving that they have a stable family and economic situation to which they must return."

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In Nigeria, though, few people enjoy stable finances, which makes proving anything remarkably difficult.

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In September, Awere -- the Nigerian center -- walked confidently into his second visa appointment in six months. He had been denied before, but this time he had everything: a passport; an I-20 scholarship form from a junior college in Texas; a signed, personal letter from the school's president; transcripts from a secondary school in Nigeria; a letter from the Nigerian national team that said Awere would come back to the country to play.

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None of it mattered.

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"After five minutes, they said I was denied," Awere said. "They said I needed to show property and bank accounts. That's the only way."

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Middlemen such as Smith provide another way, if only slightly more successful. Smith said he pays for each player to visit the embassy as many as five times, hoping one visit will be successful. Before Smith sends any of his players to the embassy, he pays \$210 for a course that prepares them for the visa interview. Then, for each player, he compiles a file of official papers and photos that sometimes grows to an inch thick. "They have papers showing me as their guardian, my bank account information, everything you could think of," Smith said.

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Still, players Smith sends to the embassy leave with visas less than 20 percent of the time, he said.

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"So much talent just sits over there and rots because of the visa situation," said Julius Nwosu, a Nigerian who played briefly with the San Antonio Spurs in the mid-'90s. "You can have all the talent in the world, and it will never mean anything if you don't get out of there. It's sad, man. These kids have no chance if nobody helps them."

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So they reach out for help. On a branch of the Web site InternationalBasketball.com, Nigerian players post résumés under grainy pictures meant to highlight their height. Canadian basketball fan Garo Salibian started the site as a hobby, and within weeks, Nigerian players began posting on it. On an even more obscure site, Nigerian players introduce themselves through bare-bones ads that only give the information necessary for a basketball future in the United States: height, basketball experience, birth date and telephone number. Names are not included.

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The luckiest Nigerian players are listed on expensive scouting reports read by U.S. coaches. Radar Hoops wants to become the primary resource for coaches interested in Nigerian talent. Run by former Georgetown star Godwin Owinje and Denver Nuggets international scout Masai Ujiri, the company charges an annual subscription fee for high school (\$250), college (\$400) and NBA teams (\$3,000).

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For that price, RadarHoops.com provides extensive biographies and scouting reports on about 150 international players. It also provides contact information for each one, usually an e-mail address and a phone number.

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Owinje estimated the service has already helped place as many as 30 players in the United States.

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Gone in a Snap

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To Scott Nnaji, that is 30 players stolen from Nigeria. Nnaji's career aspiration is to field and coach a competitive Nigerian junior national team, but lately he has decided that might be impossible. In 2004, Nnaji spent about 10 months selecting and grooming a team of players scheduled to compete in the junior world championships. "My best 12 guys ever," Nnaji said.

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Two months before the tournament, his roster had whittled to six.

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"My players disappeared like that," Nnaji said, snapping his fingers in a Lagos gym. "One by one, they left for America. Is that fair? You put in such an investment and then the kid is gone. I worked so hard to make these kids better players, and now somebody can take them and make money from my hard work?"

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Prompted by allegations that some Nigerian coaches are profiting by demanding money from local players and accepting bribes from American college coaches, some have decided to minimize their involvement in the country.

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Nwosu, the Nigerian who played briefly in the NBA, said he will not help Nigerian players because of rampant corruption. Olumide Oyedeji, a 24-year old Nigerian who has been in and out of the NBA, paid for about five Nigerian players to come to the United States during the last two years. He might not do it again.

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"When I help, I make enemies because people think I'm costing them money," Oyedeji said. "It's all business now. Nigerians, Americans, they all want to make money off the players. It's like a slave trade. They're not thinking about the best interests of the kid. They're looking for the best interests for themselves."

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Smith estimates that he has received e-mails from about 100 Nigerian basketball players during the last three years. He saves some of the most memorable. They provide validation, he said, that his business takes advantage of no one. In November, a basketball player named Idiakhwa. Emmanuel wrote:

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"Hi Coach. we are all praying over here for a positive answer from the embassy. Thanks for the last mail it was very encouraging. coach please, I love hearing from u becous u are the only coach that really encourages me. please sir i need some words of encouragement from u and i want u to be my godfather. coach since i lost my dad i have never seen a

man as kind as u, so please accept me as your godson. i will be grateful if my request it granted. please."

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Said Smith, standing in his basement after rereading the e-mail: "These kids just want to get over here, but it's not that simple. Everybody wants something."

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