

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

How a race scare left South Sudanese star basketballers with nowhere to play

December 5, 2018 2.37pm AEDT



Author



Keith Rathbone

Lecturer, Modern European History and Sports History, Macquarie University

Players from all over the world, including Australia's star forward Thon Maker - originally from South Sudan - play in the National Basketball Association in the United States. Tannen Maury/EPA

One of Australia's most successful youth basketball organisations, the South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association, was forced to cancel their 16th annual Summer Slam tournament last week after being unable to find a venue in Melbourne willing to host them.

Players were distraught when the association called off the event. This is the second cancellation of one of the association's basketball tournaments in Victoria over the past two years.

Read more: Sudanese heritage youth in Australia are frequently maligned by fear-mongering and racism

The Association issued a statement in response:

We have struggled to get stadiums to host the tournaments. When we got a stadium, unrealistic barriers were put in the way so that the event was not held. Stadium managers are afraid to host our event because of the African gang stories they see in the news. Some of our partner organisations have also had concerns towards our event because of the fear that has been created. The actions of a few teenagers in the community are being unfairly used to stereotype the vast majority that are doing the right thing.





Australia's Thon Maker, playing for the Milwaukee Bucks, is at full reach in a National Basketball Association (NBA) match in the United States. Tannen Maury/EPA

The cancellation of the tournament has national implications. Last year, the Victorian Basketball Association called the South Sudanese Summer Slam “a boon for hoops”.

Australia's national team, the Boomers, frequently calls up naturalised immigrants, especially those from South Sudan, who have had notable successes in the NBA and in universities across the US.

Current national level players of South Sudanese descent include Thon Maker, power forward for the Milwaukee Bucks; Deng Adel, who plays in the NBA's development league; Mangok Mathiang; Ater Majok; and Mathiang Muo.

Many of these players competed in the South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association's Summer Slam tournament. The cancellation has been reported in the New York Times under the headline “In Australia, a Sudanese basketball league finds itself sidelined by racist fears”.

National political implications

The South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association blamed the media for their coverage of “African youth issues”. Over the past year, liberal politicians in Victoria and nationally have used the threat of gang violence in Melbourne to stoke support before last month's election in Victoria.

In July, liberal politicians faced criticism for a poster that promised “only the liberals will stop gangs hunting in packs”. From Canberra, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton echoed this extreme rhetoric when he claimed in January that Melburnians were afraid to eat out because “they're being followed home by these gangs”.

Read more: Dutton's demonisation of refugees is the latest play in a zero-sum game

Past South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association tournaments have been linked to property destruction and violence. A group of teenage girls trashed an Airbnb apartment and bombarded responding police with projectiles. In 2015, a fan was stabbed in the car park of the Warrabee Stadium.

However, there is no evidence that South Sudanese sporting events are more violent than similar competitions and the Victoria Police have had to correct false claims made by politicians about Sudanese immigrant criminality.

Moreover, unlike recent AFL and NRL scandals, there are no allegations that the Sudanese basketball players have engaged in anti-social or violent behaviour, although South Sudanese sporting associations are frequently mistaken for gangs both in Melbourne and in Sydney.

Sports as crime prevention

Ironically, sports have been successful anti-crime and anti-gang deterrents. The cancellation of the South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association's tournament might drive vulnerable young men into the arms of the very gangs that the councils want to combat.

In 2007, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth published a study on Anti-Gang Strategies and Interventions. They concluded that community-based programs, including sports, helped to drive community attachment and improve economic deprivation. Both factors are linked to crime and gangs.

Read more: Three charts on: representation of Australian, New Zealand and Sudan born people in Victorian crime statistics

In 2015, the British Home Office largely concurred, recognising that sports help young people:

engage in supervised prosocial activities, learn new skills, build their self-esteem, and develop trust between youth, schools, police, and communities.

In Chicago, a city familiar with gang violence, organisations such as the YMCA, the Peace Games, and the Resurrection project use sports to draw vulnerable young men away from street violence. The Chicago Police coach potential gang members as part of the Englewood Police/Youth Baseball league. Englewood is one of the most crime-ridden neighbourhoods in the city, but instead of donning gang colours, hundreds of young men will wear the baseball uniforms.

Under the aegis of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, similar programs are finding success in community across globe, but especially in the favelas of Brazil.

Financial consequences

Following the South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association's statement, a number of Australian sporting institutions have reached out to offer to help, including Basketball Geelong and Bendigo Stadium.

The association still needs to secure a space for the Summer Slam and it is unclear whether the Sudanese association will have the time to organise a tournament before the end of the year.

Read more: Why the media are to blame for racialising Melbourne's 'African gang' problem

A Victoria Basketball official noted that the requirements imposed on the Sudanese association are:

scarcely demanded for other Victorian basketball tournaments and rarely required throughout the entirety of the sporting community.

For the past few years, Eagle Stadium in Wyndham welcomed the Summer Slam, but this year the council declined the association's business because of capacity issues.





Australia's Thon Maker, originally from South Sudan, shakes hands with NBA Commissioner Adam Silver after the Milwaukee Bucks selected him as the number ten pick in the first round of the 2016 NBA draft. Jason Szenes/EPA

Without a stadium to compete in, the South Sudanese Australian Basketball Association faces the loss of revenue, which could potentially harm the long-term feasibility of the group.

The cancellation of the Summer Slam raises questions about who has the right to use public accommodations and also about how committed Victorians are to using sports as an avenue for social integration.

Sudanese stars are Australian enough when they play for the Boomers, but perhaps not enough when they play in the public parks and council stadiums of Victoria.

📍 Page Racism Sport Liberal Party Peter Dutton Basketball **You might also like**

revolving prime ministership **Liberals adopt new rule to stop the**

View from The Hill: Craig Kelly triumphs in the 'outwit, outplay, outlast' game of Survivor

Turnbull versus Morrison in Liberal crisis over Craig Kelly

VIDEO: Michelle Grattan on the government's week from hell