

# Play:

## Savannah Pride, Shalvey



Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Mayor Chagai

**Boys are running in rows of three down the court. Legs, shouts, the smack of bouncing balls. As one boy passes to another, the third fans out to take the next pass, then he leaps and dunks. Some boys are already in flight and soaring towards the basket when they take the ball, almost delicately, then slam it through the hoop.**

On the side a man in a blue tracksuit watches intently, but not so much that he fails to see a boy trying to slip unnoticed into the gym, a hard thing to do when you are 200 centimetres tall.

“Akuei!” Mayor Chagai calls out. “Why are you late?”

The boy, hands in the pockets of his black tracksuit pants, looks uneasy and mumbles. He missed a train connection at Granville; the floods...

“You’re coming from Campbelltown? What time did you leave?”

“Ten thirty,” says the boy. That is four and a half hours ago. To be fair, Campbelltown is almost 50 kilometres from here, but Chagai is not satisfied: “Why didn’t you leave at 8?”

Akuei shrugs, looks down, and says quietly: “Mum was at work.”

“And you had to look after the kids, right?” Chagai’s tone softens. “Alright.” But then: “Why didn’t you text me? You text next time you’re going to be late. OK, jump in.” Akuei enters the

line, waiting to join the boys flowing in waves down the court.

“I wanted him to explain to me what was going on,” Chagai says. “If he gets a job and turns up late, then doesn’t communicate to the boss why he’s late, then he won’t have that job.”

It is a Saturday afternoon at the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) in Shalvey, a suburb of Mount Druitt, and the under-18 squad of the Savannah Pride basketball club has been training for 15 minutes. But Chagai – or “Coach,” as players call him – has been taking training sessions since five in the morning. All Saturday and on weeknights, he trains groups from under-12 to open age – about 250 players in all, including 20 girls.

The players are mostly from South Sudanese families, but others have Islander, Lebanese, Chinese, Serbian, Italian, and Anglo backgrounds. One white boy from the Central Coast played one game against Savannah Pride and was so impressed that he

left his old club and now makes the two-hour journey to Shalvey every weekend. Two days after this training run he would be playing in a grand final of the local competition, along with seven of Savannah Pride's 10 teams.

The club, now 14 years old, has caught the eye of the basketball world. American scouts have swooped on Savannah Pride, recruiting more than 20 of its players to play college basketball in the United States. The club and Chagai have featured in The New York Times and on the ABC's Australian Story, and are the subject of a planned movie.

What draws people to the club is not just its success, or the story of its founder, who left his village in South Sudan at the age of seven and wandered across three countries, nearly dying several times, before arriving in Sydney in 2006 as a 22-year old refugee. What draws people is that Chagai wants to teach his players not only how to dribble and dunk a ball but how to study and work and take their place in the community. Here in one of the most disadvantaged urban areas of Australia, where one in three young people are unemployed, Chagai is trying to develop not just good basketballers but fine human beings.

He keeps all his players' numbers in his phone, and often those of their parents, too. Savannah Pride runs a homework club (suspended during the pandemic) and Chagai gets parents to send him school reports. A student that is suspended from school is temporarily banned from playing

domestic games. But if a player overdoses and ends up in hospital, or does something that lands him in a police cell, Chagai will turn up to take him home.

"Mayor is a beautiful, beautiful man," says Kasia Rettig, a Polish immigrant whose 15-year old son, William, plays with Savannah Pride and coaches younger boys. "My boy doesn't see his father. Mayor has been like a father to him." She adds: "He is driving me bonkers at home with all the bouncing, but Coach says you have to have a ball in your hand."

"Coach is really tough, but it's to get the best out of us," says Isaac Chol, an 18-year old player whose uncle is Deng Adut, the Sudanese-born criminal lawyer from Blacktown, author of *Songs of a War Boy* and the 2017 NSW Australian of the Year. Chol says that Chagai "doesn't sing out, but he tells us straight up when we're being lazy, and if you don't like it, tough." One punishment for laziness, Chol says, is "the monkey," a painful run around the gym in the squat position.

This year Chol got into Macquarie University but not to study law, as he had hoped. Instead, he enrolled in a course in business administration. He was disappointed, but Chagai told him not to lose heart; he could transfer later. "He's definitely made me more resilient," Chol says.

Missing this Saturday afternoon are two vital figures in the story of the club. The first is its co-founder, Emmanuel Acouth, Chagai's long-time

friend and fellow player. The second is the former commander of Blacktown police, and now chair of the Savannah Pride board, Mark Wright. The partnership and friendship between Chagai and Wright has been central to the club's survival and success. "What started out as a mentor relationship has become much more than that," says filmmaker Brendan Fletcher. "Mayor has no family here, and very few elders in Sydney who can play that role for him. Mark is one."

Over two Saturdays at the Shalvey PCYC, Chagai told me a little of his story. As he spoke, he kept half an eye on his players and occasionally interjected: "Micky, you guys should not be shooting while the kids are playing. Sumogo – out!"

When Chagai told the story of his long journey, the disappointment of his basketball career, the friends he lost, he seemed to be carrying sorrow. But when he talked about basketball, his face would light up, almost grow mischievous. They seemed to be two opposing sides of him, but in fact, they come from the same place.

Sport, he says, must start with having fun, or young people will not play. But fun matters, because players who enjoy the game can learn to take risks, make bold decisions, believe in themselves and, above all, overcome fear. The best players are great, Chagai says, not primarily because they have skills or fitness, but because they make good decisions. And they make good decisions because they are not afraid.



Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Mayor Chagai and Mark Wright



Photo by Savannah Pride

Many coaches focus on skills and drills, and accordingly produce players who are always afraid of making mistakes. Chagai does not want his players to be reckless, but he wants them to play instinctively, take risks, trust themselves and their team mates. Confidence in the game can lead to confidence in work and in life. He learnt all this, he says, as a refugee.

He was born a cattle herder's son, in Yirol, South Sudan. When he was seven, an older cousin said that if they left the village, they might be able to get educated, or at least save their lives. The civil war with the north of Sudan was in full flight and government soldiers were bombarding South Sudanese villages. The boys walked with others to Ethiopia, a journey of two months. Many died of

illness or hunger or drowned along the way. Bombs fell, battles exploded all around them. "No food, no sleep, hide in the swamp, dig the roots of plants to eat," he remembers. "No day, no night, all time was the same. Someone can be walking around and in the next few minutes, dead. As long as you breathe, that's all you know."

After a year to 18 months in a camp in Ethiopia, that country's regime fell, and they were uprooted again. They crossed the Gilo River again, more people drowned. Others wandered into the bush, got lost. Some were eaten by hyenas and lions. Some went mad, or killed themselves. "I lost so many friends. Eighty to 90 per cent of the people I grew up with have died."

At about the age of nine, Chagai reached Kakuma in Kenya, the world's biggest refugee camp. In this dangerous place, full of violence, Chagai discovered he had a rare gift for basketball. He played first on dirt, and played all day. He made friends, brothers. His journey had taught him the most important thing he needed to know about the game. He had seen fear kill people, seen them give up and drown, or die of thirst, because of fear. But he knew that in the savannah, with wild animals all around, he had overcome his fear. What, then, did he ever need to fear on a basketball court?

After five years in Kakuma, he joined the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, became a child soldier, so that he could return to his village in South Sudan and his mother. Coming home also enabled him to play basketball. He played at high levels in Kenya, Uganda, Egypt. He was offered scholarships to the US, Spain and France. Life was opening up at last.

Then Chagai fell during a basketball tournament and badly broke an arm. His dream of a basketball career in the US died with that fall. He accepted a refugee visa for Australia, and arrived in Blacktown in 2006.

As Chagai speaks, a small boy waits patiently at a distance: could he go home? "Have you called your Mum?" Chagai asks. The boy shakes his head. "Here" – Chagai hands the boy his phone.

"He's new, very shy," Chagai says. "A lot of kids have no parents, or no dads, a lot of single mums. I see myself in them."

Chagai, returning to his story, says that he was lost in Blacktown. Australian English was hard to understand, and many Australians were no less daunting. He enrolled in an agriculture course at Richmond TAFE, and formed a basketball group with 10 or 12 other South Sudanese, most of them teenage boys. But whenever they tried to play a scrimmage game at the PCYC in Blacktown, one particular police officer would kick them out. A stadium in Parramatta kicked them out. The Philippines Basketball Association in Rooty Hill let them play in their games, but only two a side. Then they reduced it to one. "We were tall -- I think they felt intimidated by us," Chagai says. He has no doubt why they were expelled from other courts: "We were different, and black."

Chagai's group began looking as far away as Merrylands and Granville for outdoor courts on which to play. Whenever they found a court, groups of boys, strangers, would appear and challenge them to a game. Often the boys were Islanders but some were Lebanese, Aboriginal, Caucasian. The Sudanese always won, which caused unhappiness, and fights. Sometimes the boys would leave and return with baseball bats, even knives. Chagai was spending all his time pulling away his boys, who wanted to fight back. He was in despair, on the verge of giving up.



SCANLON FOUNDATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER

Photo by Adam Holmgren / Hired Gun

One day in 2007, a Sudanese community leader, Ajang Deng Biar, called him. Blacktown police had hired a Multicultural Liaison Officer, Assefa Bekele, who wanted to meet the basketballers. The Sudanese had no interest: how could anyone help them? But Chagai and seven others agreed to attend a meeting at Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre (now SydWest Multicultural Services). A lot of people came to the meeting. One was the new Blacktown police commander, Mark Wright.

Wright, who at the time was starting the initiative that would become Com4Unity, got straight to the point: what did the players need? Chagai said that all they needed was one evening on a basketball court, but at the PCYC in Blacktown the same officer always kicked them out. They also needed basketballs, as they had no money.

Wright said he would arrange a month's trial at the PCYC, for no charge. If there were fights or other troubles, they were out. But if the trial went well, police would extend it. When is this going to start, Chagai asked. "Right now," said Wright. And he, Biar, another Sudanese leader Mary Mamur, and the players left the meeting and walked through the streets of Blacktown to the PCYC, where Wright booked them in. Bekele then took them to Rebel Sport at Westpoint and bought them two basketballs.

The trial was a success. Wright and the Migrant Resource Centre helped the group secure a three-year grant from the Department of Immigration to pay four part-time salaries. Funding was found to feed children after they arrived from school, and a minibus to drive them to games. The club that would become Savannah Pride was born.

Ten years later, 23 Savannah Pride players have gone to play and study at high schools and universities in the United States. They include Chagai's nephew, Makur Jongkuch, who went this year to Navarro College in Texas. Another former player, Duop Reath, played in the Australian side at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Joe Mantegna, head coach of Blair Academy, a basketball boarding school in New Jersey, has said that Savannah Pride is "impacting more people than most of us ever do in a lifetime."

Yet after all this achievement, Savannah Pride's future is not secure. Since the federal funding ended, the club has relied on donations from supporters, subscriptions from the minority of parents who can afford them, sporadic government grants, the support of the PCYC, and the work of volunteers. Chagai worked as volunteer for many years until PCYC funded his salary. He still spends a lot of time trying to raise money. If this club were in eastern Sydney there is no doubt it would be flush with cash. But this is Blacktown.



Another problem is Chagai himself. He is too central to the fate of the club. “It’s never good to have a single point of failure,” Wright says. This year he persuaded Chagai to delay a return to Sudan until the club created a coaching schedule in his absence. Chagai wants to spend time with his wife, Adol Aluker Achiek, whom he married five years ago, and their two boys, Thon and Chagai. Their father is working on visa papers to bring them all to Australia.

Chagai says Australia remains a “very tough” environment for South Sudanese people. “My culture is about community, about village life. In Australia, the material support is there but the moral support is not. You have got to figure things out for yourself, but it is very hard for people who have gone through big problems to do that on their own. Once they fall off that cliff, a lot of young men are committing suicide, or have mental health problems.”

Lorraine Landon, a sports manager and former NSW basketballer, has joined Wright on the board. The club has been invited by Basketball NSW and the Women’s World Cup to run a trial “dads and daughters” program focussing on South Sudanese families. Involving girls is a challenge, Chagai says.

“We are trying to build up, but Sudanese parents do not like their daughters playing sport, or being too long out of the house.” Chagai says Sudanese boys receive more public attention because their struggles have been more visible, but “a lot of girls are suffering mentally – they just hide it.”

It is nearly 5pm; most players have left. “Did you lock up?” Chagai asks one stayer. “Did you clean the equipment?” He hauls his bags to the car, and loads the boot. He has been here for 12 hours, and looks both exhausted and unbeaten.

Six years ago, he gave his club, then called Star Basketball, a new name. He wanted to honour the friends he had lost. He was the lucky one. He had survived the savannah. He wanted others to survive it, too.

“We share some fates with the wild animals,” he says. He still remembers watching the animals in Africa gather under the trees. “They just sit there together. We, too, are a group of people getting together -- as a group, as a family, as a pride.”



NARRATIVE #7

Photo by James Button | Makur Jongkuch and James Oeser