

The journey from Kenya to Kirkwood

Written by Sher Jasperse

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With a slender 6-foot-2 frame and a regal bearing, Kirkwood sophomore Friday Chuol may not look the part of fierce guardian of the basket – at least at first glance.

She's plenty tough, says women's basketball coach Kim Muhl. "She's a survivor."

Compared to most of her teammates and opponents, Chuol's basketball resume is short – but her life experience is long and arduous.

The daughter of Sudanese refugees, she was born and lived her early life in Nairobi, Kenya. Better off than some, she says, her family did not live in a refugee camp, but she saw privation and illness that made a deep impression on her.

Her father died of an infection when she was nine – an event that is still difficult for her to talk about – and two years later her mother moved with Chuol and her two younger siblings to Des Moines, where an uncle lived.

Life in the Midwest posed a host of challenges, she recalls. "It was difficult. We came in November, we had never seen snow, and my mom couldn't drive."

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Chuol spoke Swahili, Nuer (the language of her family's Sudanese tribe) and limited schoolbook English – with a British accent. “I grew out of my accent into American English pretty quickly,” she says.

And then there's her first name. In African cultures, it's not unusual to name a child after the day of her birth. For an 11-year-old in Des Moines, Iowa, it was another story.

“I got teased so much in middle school,” she says. “Kids would say things like, ‘Do you have a sister named Saturday?’ After a while it's not funny anymore. I've heard it all.” But “Friday” was simpler than her formal name – Nyariak – a complicated word that refers to the struggle her family was undergoing when she was born.

At Des Moines' East High School, she found a diverse community and “more mature” friends. Her natural athleticism was a big help.

As a little girl, she had played soccer and volleyball – the two most popular sports in Kenya. “I loved soccer,” she says.

Encouraged to try basketball in the eighth grade, she eventually gave up soccer to concentrate on hoops, especially after a growth spurt between her freshman and sophomore years. She played varsity basketball and volleyball throughout high school and also participated in track.

“I'm not a very outgoing person, and I tend to keep to myself,” she says. “My teammates became my friends, and I started coming more out of myself.”

At Kirkwood, under Muhl's tutelage, she has grown into a team leader with a vital responsibility on the Eagles' roster.

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“Her role is predominantly to defend and rebound,” he explains. “We’re not looking for her to score a lot. She’s the putback kid. If she can do that, it makes us a whole lot better. She has come a long ways in a year.”

Chuol agrees. “Last year I didn’t feel as if I contributed much, playing behind more experienced post players,” she says. “This year I had to take a lead role. I’m a runner. I’m the girl who is running up and down the court – the putback girl. Kiki [Kianna Jacobs] is the more stylish player,” she laughs. “I do a lot of the little things which in turn make the bigger things happen.

“I love this team,” she adds. “We have more depth and are a whole lot more athletic than last year.”

After crushing their first four opponents, the Eagles dropped both games at a weekend tournament in Missouri – a reflection of a team that is still finding its rhythm, says Muhl. “We had a chance to win both games. When we don’t have good chemistry, it gets hard. Kids are still trying to figure out where they fit in.”

With a seasoned perspective on life’s highs and lows, Chuol was unperturbed by the setback and remains confident about her team’s prospects. “We just crumbled apart,” she says. “But it’s good to have that happen now instead of later. We just have to focus on the task at hand and play together as one and not as individuals. We know what we did wrong and how to get out of it.” As if to prove her point, the Eagles bounced back with a convincing win over a team from Australia on Tuesday night.

Gracious and well-spoken, Chuol plans to continue playing basketball at a four-year college where she’ll pursue a pre-med degree with the aim of becoming a doctor.

“I just love helping people,” she explains. “Living in Africa gives you an urge to help people in need. My father died of a bug that they didn’t know how to cure, and I want to be able to help people like him.” She also enjoys photography and spends as much time as possible with her extended family in Des Moines.

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With inquiries drifting in from Division I and II programs, Chuol hasn't made up her mind about where she'll be next year. For now, she's focused on bringing another National Championship banner to a gymnasium that already has eight of them.

"I set my expectations high for my teammates and myself – get to regionals and then nationals, one game at a time," she says. "For me that means getting rebounds and making sure no one gets into my house – making it tough for them to get those points."

She's faced sterner tests and passed them all. You can be sure she's tough enough for this one.