

COVER STORY

NIGERIANS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TENNIS OPPORTUNITY AT BARBER-SCOTIA COLLEGE

Most of them have not been home in several years. In fact, most of them will not go home until they've finished school at Barber-Scotia.

OK, so it seems a little odd that a school with financial troubles like Barber-Scotia, one that almost had to close its doors this year, would ever have tennis team full of players from Nigeria.

But college is about opportunities.

And for the players on coach William Madre's team, playing tennis is a very big opportunity.

And they're having fun.

And to show that they have truly been Americanized, the Nigerians have even learned a little slang. Let's ask sophomore Emeka Elichu how he's doing.

"I'm just chillin'", he says. "But you know what, I'm just having a good time. It's wild. I'm listening to this rap music now and that's wild, too."

So life is fun for the team. The players are getting, free education, free visit to a very new place, much different from their homeland, and they're playing an awful lot of tennis.

The team won its first 45 matches.

They are together partially because of a problem their coach, William Madre, says he has.

"You have to understand that the (American) black tennis player won't come to Barber-Scotia," Madre says. "You won't have the exposure or facilities to keep them here. The best will go to the big white schools, just like basketball and football players. You know that the deal is."

Madre has been at Barber-Scotia for three years, playing with his African players, all coming to him, indirectly or directly, from the Nigerian Lawn Tennis Association.

In 1991-92, when he started the team, the Sabers finished 14-3 as a club team. In '92-93, Barber-Scotia finished 19-1, and was ranked No. 23 in the nation.

This season, the Sabers have been looking to play more.

The problem, Madre says, is finding opponents.

Madre says several schools have refused to play a return match with Barber-Scotia after an initial match with the Sabers.

"They're very, very good," Queens tennis coach Charles Gordon says. "(Madre's) done a really good job, and he's got some really good players." But for the Saber, this is much more than about simply hitting balls with racquets. This is



Barber-Scotia tennis coach William Madre (left) has a relationship with the Nigerian Lawn Tennis Association on that led to this year's all-Nigerian team. Pictured (front to back), Murtala, Habu, Richard Osaugwu, David Matthew, Kyrian Nwokedi and Ganiya Ibrahim.

an experience. This is America.

Madre got hooked up with the Nigerian Lawn Tennis Association when he was coaching at Raleigh's St. Augustine's College in the '70's. Madre was in San Diego for the NCAA Division II nationals and saw a player who caught his eye, Texas Southern's Gabriel Odudo.

He asked Texas Southern's coach where Odudo came from. He was told that Odudo was from Nigeria.

It wasn't long before Madre wrote the Nigerian Lawn Tennis people and began a dialogue. Later, he went to Nigeria to do some tennis clinics.

As it turned out, the chairman of the Nigerian association, while in the United States on business, visited St. Augustine's and Madre. The two struck up a friendship. Soon, Madre was getting recommendations on potential players.

And throughout this career a with stops at St. Augustine's, J.C. Smith, Wilson Junior High in Charlotte and now Barber-Scotia, Madre, who has a 244-38 coaching record, has never lost touch with the association. When he came to Barber-Scotia three years ago, he began to try to

lure a few players to come with him.

They came and they're doing well.

The players all speak English, it's their native tongue, but there are some adjustments.

"It took me a while to get used to the food here," said Elichu, who is from Lagos, one of the larger cities in Nigeria. "There were some things I missed, like fu-fu," which is similar to mashed potatoes.

Last year, when the team was in Atlanta for a match, Richard Osaugwu saw a younger child yelling at a much older adult. "Richard was in shocked" Madre says. "He said, in Africa, they will flog you for this."

"Back home," says freshman Kyrian Nwokedi, the team's No. 1 player, "we live with morals. Over here, they don't care about your age or anything. A little boy can insult a senior. That's no good."

Not that Nwokedi and his mates aren't having a good time living in a less-structured environment. They live in an apartment building, in a special arrangement worked out by the school.

Because most of them don't get to go

home during their four-year stay in the United States, they cannot stay in normal dormitories, which close for the summer and holidays.

Elichu, for example, hasn't been home in three years.

"I'm a little homesick," he says. "I'm planning to go in December to visit with the family and friends."

To help with expenses, Madre says, his players work for a minimum wage, around the school. They do mostly maintenance work, such as painting and grass cutting. And away from work and tennis, the players say they are fitting in well.

Elichu is a political science major. He wants to return home one day and help run his country. He likes the educational opportunities here. He also likes the other things college can offer.

"We hang out together as a team a lot," Elichu says. "But I also hangout with my friends outside the team. I'm sociable, you know."

Or, as Nwokedi put it, "I'm getting an education, we're winning all our matches. I'm having fun."

— Langston Wertz Jr.