*Citizen Akoy: Basketball and the Making of a South Sudanese American*, by Steve Marantz

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In his book *Citizen Akoy: Basketball and the Making of a South Sudanese American*, author Steve Marantz presents the intricate story of the south Sudanese Agau family, and its quest for inclusion into the ever-evolving American experience.

While it uses the basketball journey of Akoy Agau as its primary vehicle, *Citizen Akoy* is much more than a typical basketball book for hoop heads. It is equal parts sports book, current-events primer, and modern political commentary—and it checks each of these boxes with aplomb.

As an author, Marantz’s resume and life experience place him in a unique position to collect and compose Akoy’s tale. An accomplished journalist, he has covered sports, politics, and government for the *Kansas City Star*, *Boston Globe*, and *Boston Herald*.  In addition, he is, himself, a graduate of Omaha (Neb.) Central High School, the book’s primary epicenter.

Indeed, the book’s title hints at the true work in its pages. That is, the author’s exploration of the ways in which sport can be used by immigrants and refugees to mend their own complex fractures, as well as to construct new identities for themselves and their communities. On the value of competitive athletics, Marantz writes “the closest thing to a common language is sport. When nations convene at the Olympics, or World Cup for soccer, or World Baseball Classic, they get along in the language of sweat and competition, which is, in principle, democratic” (171).

Marantz dives deep into Akoy Agau’s personal files to bring his character off the page. In addition to primary interviews, and considerable time together with Agau, the author fills in the blanks with the words of Akoy’s closest family, coaches, and friends, as well as the media who covered his rise to regional prep stardom. It doesn’t just stop there, though, as the author also draws heavily from Akoy’s now-defunct Twitter account. And, while its verbatim inclusion might seem to interrupt the flow of the author’s own rhythm, the @ZeroTheHeroAkoy Tweets add a depth to the character that would be otherwise unattainable.

What makes *Citizen Akoy* a particularly interesting and engaging read, though, is the way it seems to straddle so many genres.

As a straight sports book, written by an accomplished journalist, it is reported thoroughly, with occasional game recaps and tense oral histories to build the suspense of the quest for athletic glory. The use of cameos by some of Agau’s more-high-profile hoop contemporaries gives the sports-enthusiast readers a clearer understanding of the landscape on which Akoy’s tableau is set.

As a commentary on the modern state of NCAA “amateurism,” Marantz uses the Central players, coaches, and administration, as a way to dissect the Hydra of blue chip recruitment. From Rick Pitino’s courtship to get Agau to come to Louisville, to John Thompson III’s willingness to take a chance on a slightly-older version of Akoy, Marantz is skillful in his reconstruction of a sloppy process.

As an artifact of the modern political moment, *Citizen Akoy* accomplishes many impressive feats. Perhaps most impressive is the way Marantz provides ample background regarding the generations of strife and violence in Sudan and the surrounding regions. And he does so without bogging down in details that could derail the book’s overall mission.

Additionally, the book’s timeline navigates through pieces of three disparate political environments. It begins in the post-9/11 George W. Bush administration, wends through the “Hope and Change” of the Barrack Obama years, and concludes in the xenophobic toxicity of Donald Trump’s American vision. Without crowbarring a timestamp onto the page, Marantz peppers quotes from world leaders, often using World Refugee Day as its anchor, to set the tone with regard to global and domestic political climate.

Overall, *Citizen Akoy* is an enjoyable read. It is, however, most definitely *not* the basketball success stories of Sudanese-born NBA stars like Luol Deng or Manute Bol. Heck, it’s not even the story of NBA journeyman and fellow Sudanese refugee Thon Maker. (In fairness, though, all three of these figures are woven throughout the fabric of the 194 pages.) Marantz’s book is more nuanced and layered than those basketball success stories. This is a refugee story, a historical narrative, a coming-of-age book, a teenage ethnography, a commentary on modern sport culture, and a Midwestern cultural study—and basketball just happens to be the scene on which it plays out.

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