

Kayaker may be a team of one for Senegal in Beijing

by Mark Zeigler

If Amadou Fall had not been a champion African swimmer for Senegal in the 1970s, his son probably would not have taken up the sport. And if Assane Fall had not taken up competitive swimming, he probably wouldn't have heard from his coach about the lifeguard job on Yoff Beach outside the capital of Dakar.

THE ACCIDENTAL KAYAKER - Kayaker Assane Fall of Senegal, who has been training at the Olympic Training Center in California since January, paddles daily on Lower Otay Reservoir. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. And if he hadn't been working at Yoff Beach on that day six years ago, he probably wouldn't have met the German man strolling along the sand.

And he certainly wouldn't be here, sitting in a kayak on Lower Otay Reservoir at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, slicing his paddle into the glassy water, parting the morning fog with his hull, squinting into the horizon and seeing the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing.

"I would have never," Fall says, "imagined anything like this."

Each month the Olympic Training Center issues a list of ongoing programs and events. There is the residency program for 17 archers, the 21 track and field athletes, the softball selection camp for the Pan American Games, the warm-weather training for the bobsled and skeleton teams, the junior men's field hockey tournament.

Then there is this entry: Senegal Kayak Program (one participant).

Fall's journey to America began at age 17 on Yoff Beach, where he regularly plucked tourists out of the Atlantic. He remembers that the man's name was Christoph and that he was German, and he remembers what the man asked him. How couldn't you?

"Have you ever heard of kayaking?"

It is an odd question anywhere in the world, and an even odder one in a place such as Senegal, which is roughly the size of South Dakota and has an average household income of \$700 per year. Number of racing kayaks in Senegal in 2001: two.

Christoph was in Senegal to promote competitive kayaking in the region, and he was scouting for athletes with that rare combination of endurance and power, for athletes who are light but powerful. He saw the 5-foot-8 Fall running in the deep sand like a gazelle, and swimming in the violent surf like a dolphin. And so he asked him: "Have you ever heard of kayaking?"

Soon, Fall was paddling on a nearby river, or at least trying to in boats that tip at the slightest jiggle. At the Chula Vista training center, the kayakers have a standing offer to any other athlete: \$100 if you last a minute without getting wet. No one has reached 10 seconds.

"I fell out a lot," says Fall, speaking in French. "But I kept coming back and learning how to keep my balance. Right away, I really knew I liked it. It was almost addictive."

Last year, the International Canoe Federation identified him as a candidate to Olympic Solidarity, a division of the International Olympic Committee that supports Third World athletes. Olympic Solidarity partnered with the U.S. Olympic Committee to bring Fall to Chula Vista in January. He lives in the training center's dormitories, eats in the cafeteria, practices with the U.S. team and is coached by U.S. national team staff.

Which raises the obvious question: Why spend U.S. dollars and resources training kayakers from

Senegal?

"We're part of a bigger world than the United States," says Carolina Bayon, the USOC's director of international cooperation and policy. "It's not just in sport but all areas of society. The world has changed so much. We need to make a better effort so that we're not perceived as a wealthy nation that is isolated from the rest of the world. We need to share what we have."

Fall's stay in Chula Vista lasts at least through the African Championships in Kenya in November, which double as a 2008 Olympic qualifier, and through next summer if he makes it to Beijing. Fall probably needs to finish in the top two at the African Championships; his best event is the K-1 1,000, or a single kayak at 1,000 meters.

U.S. national sprint coach Nathan Luce, who also serves as Fall's de facto translator because they both speak French, only wishes he had started coaching him sooner. Fall is 23, and most top kayakers begin learning the nuances of paddling in a boat barely wider than your hips before they are teenagers.

"If I had him when he was 15," Luce says, "it would be game over."

If Fall does make it to Beijing, his medal chances are probably remote. No matter, though. He already is a celebrity in Senegal.

"It's a pretty big deal," Fall says. "Because it's not a very big country, everybody knows there is this kayaker who has been able to travel and now trains in the United States."

Or as one newspaper put it, "in the country of Uncle Sam."

But it is not quite as glamorous as it sounds. Fall spoke no English when he arrived. He stopped attending school at age 13, and his native language, Wolof, is mainly spoken and not written. He works two days a week with a tutor at Southwestern College, essentially learning how to read and write in English, let alone in any language.

He also is Muslim, as most Senegalese are, and prays five times a day. One of his roommates at the training center is Jewish, something he admits people back home might not understand, and he thinks he might have mistakenly eaten pork - a no-no for devout Muslims - since he's been here.

Fall diffuses any awkwardness with an infectious smile and an unwavering work ethic.

And there always are the hours he spends on Lower Otay Reservoir, slicing his paddle into the glassy water, parting the morning fog with his hull, squinting into a horizon that suddenly is filled with endless possibility. The food, the language, the culture, the religion, even the showers may be different. But a boat is a boat, and 1,000 meters is 1,000 meters.

"You can just tell, he's a natural on the water," Luce says. "He's in his element when he's out there. You can tell he's more at ease because it's something he's familiar with. He's a happy guy out there."

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