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NEWS

From Sioux Falls to the WNBA, Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda never left home behind

The former Washington High School star's rookie season took her from San Francisco to Savannah to Los Angeles. Through it all, the foundation she built in Sioux Falls has remained.



Sioux Falls native Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda's basketball journey started at Washington High School and has landed with the Los Angeles Sparks of the WNBA. Contributed photo / Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda

By Rhea Patney / For Sioux Falls Live

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Growing up in Sioux Falls, Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda had a huge Candace Parker sticker on her bedroom wall and Los Angeles Sparks stickers in her bathroom.

Parker, a three-time WNBA champion and Hall of Famer, was and still is her idol. From 1,000 miles away, Mwenentanda watched Parker and her running mate, Nneka Ogwumike, win the 2016 title and imagined what it might be like to play at the highest level.

Years later, Mwenentanda stepped on the court at Crypto.com Arena wearing a Los Angeles Sparks uniform herself, the same purple and yellow worn by her favorite player of all time. Getting there took four cities, two cuts, a startup league across the country, a month of job applications and a phone call she almost missed.

The wind sprints

To understand how Mwenentanda handled it, her high school coach says, start with the gym at Washington High.

Jamie Parish first met her at the end of her freshman year, when she open-enrolled and began attending summer workouts. He had seen her play against his team: a 6-foot-2-inch pure athlete who could run, jump and handle the ball on the perimeter. What stood out most, though, was her engine.

"She was driven, sometimes to the point where we would have to tell her, 'Hey, you can't go shoot baskets at five in the morning, and then play a game, and then go do another workout,'" Parish said. "She wasn't a talker. She was a doer."

After every high school practice, Mwenentanda ran wind sprints by herself. They weren't assigned. At first, teammates glanced over their shoulders and watched.

"Pretty soon there were three kids running, and the next day there were seven or eight," Parish said. "She didn't say a word. She just was doing it, and the other kids kind of followed. We still have kids who do that today, kids who never played with her, but it has become an expectation."



In a 2022 file photo, Sioux Falls Washington's Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda comes down with a rebound in front of Mitchell's Maddie Kempf during a game at the Corn Palace. Mitchell Republic file photo

Parish also remembers how she pulled people in and uplifted the community. She was an all-conference volleyball player two years in a row. She was involved with the Black Student Union. She was a goofy, down-to-earth teenager who could push herself relentlessly on the court and still make the people around her laugh.

Parish's staff filmed practices, and one day the tape caught Mwenentanda and a teammate sprinting full speed into the thick pad on the gym's back wall, over and over, just for the fun of it.

“Like Wile E. Coyote from the old Road Runner cartoons,” Parish said.

Outside school, she was building the rest of her network. At Forge Strength, owner Matt Dolan taught her the value of strength training, a lesson she says carried through college and into the pros. At Network Elite Basketball, she met Kasib Powell, who years later would become an assistant coach with the Valkyries, and Carl Teer, the founder and president of the CYAL Rebels, whom she first

knew from elementary-school track meets and stayed in touch with over the years.

"While I was in Sioux Falls, I built a great foundation that I return to every time I go back," Mwenentanda said.

A chance in the W

The foundation she built in Sioux Falls remained as she transitioned to Texas and then to her graduate year at Vanderbilt. From there, she hoped to hear her name called at the 2026 WNBA Draft.

But after the Commodores lost to Notre Dame in the Sweet Sixteen, her expectations dropped. By then, she was hoping simply for a training-camp invitation. She was behind on preparation, having gone through the agent process late, but she watched fellow draft hopefuls and Vanderbilt teammates Sacha Washington and Justine Pissott and followed their lead.

She got a training-camp contract from the Golden State Valkyries. When camp ended, she was cut from the team, or, in WNBA speak, waived.



Sioux Falls Washington grad Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda played at Texas and Vanderbilt. UT athletics

“I didn't know until the end of training camp, but the Valkyries had an idea of who they were bringing onto the roster,” Mwenentanda said. “So when I was waived, I was a little disappointed because I was like, ‘Did I make the wrong decision by going to the Valkyries' training camp?’ I learned a lot, but would I have had a better shot if I had gone to a different training camp?”

After a WNBA player is waived, they have to clear waivers — teams have 48 hours to claim them. During those 48 hours, the Valkyries learned one of their centers, Iliana Rupert, was pregnant. Mwenentanda, still in the area and available, was signed back to the team on a replacement contract.

Mwenentanda was brought in to fill Rupert’s position at the center, a position she had never played. To adapt, she leaned on the same habits she formed at Washington High.

“I was willing to work hard and do whatever they needed,” Mwenentanda said. “I was always staying after practice or going earlier just to watch film and ask a lot more questions. The team is very experienced, so I had a lot of smart basketball athletes around me, so I was always picking their brains.”



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In her third year in Austin, the Sioux Falls product is taking on a larger role after committing herself to making an impact

Apr 3, 2025 • *By Eden Laase*

And she fell hard for the home crowd. The Valkyries had quickly developed a reputation for one of the WNBA's most passionate home crowds. Fans packed the arena, brought an energy Mwenentanda compared to March Madness and turned game days into something that felt bigger than basketball.

“The fan interactions, the gear, the merch, the community engagement, all of it tied together is the reason why Ballhalla is so amazing,” Mwenentanda said. “I really do hope other professional teams are taking notes.”

Then came a loss to the Aces on June 6, and a call to her apartment: “I'm sorry, but we have to let you go.”

“It was a shocker to me,” Mwenentanda said. “I just wasn't ready to leave. It was so awesome, even though I wasn't really playing. I was still learning a lot, and the fan experience, the fan engagement, we were doing a lot for the community. And San Francisco is amazing in general.”

In control of her own career

The days that followed were a blur. Mwenentanda had 48 hours to be claimed by another WNBA team. She debated going home, but realized it was still early in the season. If she wanted another opportunity, she needed to keep playing, keep improving and keep putting herself in position to be seen.

After about a week of thinking and praying on it, she said yes to the Upshot League, a startup in its first summer. It was, in her words, “a little bit of a 180” from the Valkyries, the WNBA's most valuable franchise.

There was no travel fund, so Mwenentanda drove herself to Savannah, Georgia, keeping her car because the city wasn't walkable. Games were played in a hockey arena. The weight room

did not compare with the facilities she had just left. Players arranged their own treatment and managed their own schedules.

“You still had to be a pro athlete,” Mwenentanda said. “But the resources are not as top-tier, especially coming from Ballhalla, where everything is provided. I did learn a lot about independence and working through my own problems, because overseas it's kind of similar, where you don't know the resources you're gonna have, or who your staff will be. You just have to be able to show up every night and win.”

Savannah Steels head coach Takara Ross had Mwenentanda playing on the perimeter, more in her natural position compared to the Valkyries. She worked on reading and coming off screens, making quick decisions and defending one-on-one. While the league was not where Mwenentanda had expected to be a few weeks earlier, it gave her a place to keep playing while she waited for another opportunity.

"It's a middle ground for waived professional athletes to build their game, and that's what we need," Mwenentanda said. “The women in this league are pioneers, and I'm rooting for everybody.”

The month at home

Eventually, with the WNBA trade window closed and no word yet on overseas offers, Mwenentanda stepped away from the Upshot League to reset. She went home to Sioux Falls for about a month. It was the hardest stretch of her year.

"I was starting to look for LinkedIn jobs. I was applying on LinkedIn, Craigslist, Indeed," Mwenentanda said. "I was really lost, because I didn't know when my next opportunity would be. That's the unfortunate part of the instability when you first get in the league.”

She even asked Coach Carl, her longtime connection from Network Elite Basketball, for a job.

“I was like, ‘If you need some kind of desk assistant, or if you need a social media manager,’ please reach out. Here's my resume," Mwenentanda said. “I was exploring every option I could.”



Sioux Falls native Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda's basketball journey started at Washington High School and has landed with the Los Angeles Sparks of the WNBA. Contributed photo / Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda

Friends from college were signing overseas contracts, while people kept asking Mwenentanda what she planned to do next. She also no longer had access to the same level of professional mental health support she had with the Valkyries after being waived.

"I had no purpose other than playing basketball, and now basketball was also kind of unstable," Mwenentanda said. “It was really hard.”

She kept praying, and she kept working. Parish, who had driven his kids to Minneapolis to watch her play with the Valkyries in June, met her for lunch and helped her find gym space. She trained, lifted and shot in Sioux Falls, even as the overseas options she had originally passed up for her Valkyries contract faded.

"It would have been really easy to just pack it in and quit when that first contract didn't work out," Parish said. "The perseverance she's shown through the ups and downs is what makes her so special."

The call she almost missed

By the time Mwenentanda got the call, she had stopped expecting it to come from the WNBA.

She had just come back from a workout in Sioux Falls and was anxiously waiting to hear whether her agent had found an overseas opportunity. She had spent weeks trying to figure out what came next, and overseas basketball seemed like the most likely answer.

Then her phone rang. She almost missed it.

“I answered the phone and was like, ‘So what about the overseas opportunity?’ And he was like, ‘I'm still working on it, but the Sparks said they wanted you,’” Mwenentanda said. “Making sure I heard him. I was like, ‘The Sparks? Like the WNBA? Okay, okay, yeah, hell yeah.’”

The team she had watched from her bedroom in Sioux Falls was suddenly calling.

Mwenentanda signed with Los Angeles as a developmental player, a role with a lower salary and restrictions on game appearances but access to the same training and team resources as the rest of the roster. With the Sparks already out of playoff contention, she viewed the late-season opportunity as a tryout — a short window to

show what she could do and put herself in position for the following season.

She appeared in just two games. But on Sept. 20 against the Portland Fire, she got one of the things she had been chasing all year: her first WNBA points, on a rebound and putback.

“You take advantage of your opportunity, however that comes," Mwenentanda said.

The moments she remembers most happened away from the box score. She leaned on veterans Emma Cannon, Erica Wheeler and Dearica Hamby as she learned the Sparks’ systems.



Sioux Falls native Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda (left) playing with Nneka Ogwumike during a Los Angeles Sparks game. Contributed photo / Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda

And then there was playing alongside Ogwumike. Mwenentanda got to know her personally, play alongside her and celebrate her

final season in the WNBA. When the team celebrated Ogwumike, they went to Disneyland.

“Being able to meet Nneka before she retired, I think that was amazing,” Mwenentanda said. “I was a fan of both Candace and Nneka. The fact that they got to play together as a duo, and I played with Nneka towards the end of her career in the WNBA, that's a bucket-list type of thing. The child version of me was happy again.”

For all the uncertainty that had defined her first professional season, Mwenentanda had somehow landed exactly where she had once imagined herself: in a Sparks uniform, on the same team she had followed from Sioux Falls, alongside one half of the duo she had watched win a championship from her bedroom.

“God places you in places where you don't expect, but you really need, and that was one thing I'm really grateful for,” Mwenentanda said.

Carrying home

The next chapter is uncertain. She hopes to sign a training-camp contract with the Sparks next season, and play overseas this offseason. She has not finalized her overseas destination.

"I'm taking it day by day," Mwenentanda said. "Who knows where I'll be next, but I had a lot of great memories this year."

What she does know is where she'll keep returning: the lifting gym, the basketball gym, to lunch with Coach Parish, to whom she still sends a birthday and father’s day text every year.

"I always have a place in my heart for Sioux Falls," Mwenentanda said.

And she will return back to the house where the Candace Parker sticker used to hang, too. Her brother has since taken over her

room and taken it down. But it was there, in the same childhood home, that she heard the Sparks wanted her.

For the kids now at Washington High, Parish reminds them that she's proof. "Hey, you can get [to the WNBA] from here," he said. "If you want to put the time in, if you want to get better, there are opportunities out there."

And maybe someday, one of them will have a sticker of Ndjakalenga on their wall too.

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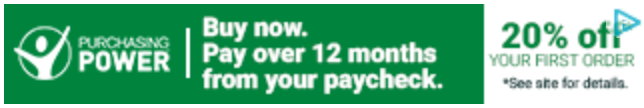
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