

## **Dr. Abu Yilla**

# **Paralympic Medalist, Former Movin' Mav, & Assistant Clinical Professor of Kinesiology at the University of Texas at Arlington**

*Interview conducted by  
Allison Olivarez  
in 2014 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor  
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## **Biography**

Abu Yilla was born in Sierra Leone in 1956 as the youngest of six children; he contracted polio in 1959 at the age of three. His father then moved with him to the United Kingdom where he could receive treatment and attend a school for crippled children, something unavailable in Sierra Leone. In the United Kingdom, Yilla attended the Chailey Heritage Craft School for Crippled Children and then the University of Nottingham, where he developed an interest in wheelchair basketball after watching it on television. He joined a local wheelchair basketball league and found success on the court. His success in this sport brought him to Texas as a visiting player, where he found major differences in both the treatment and opportunities for players. He earned a bachelor's degree in Physical Education from the University of Arlington and a master's degree and doctorate, both in Physical Education, from Texas Women's University. He has been working for UTA since 1996. He is a Paralympic medalist and has won 16 National Championships in Wheelchair Basketball. He served as both an administrator and player for the UTA Movin' Mavs. He currently works for the University as a professor and program advisor. He remains involved in wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, a number of national review boards and advisory councils, and grant committees.

## **Topics discussed**

- reasons for move from United Kingdom to Texas
- opportunities in wheelchair basketball in Europe vs. the United States
- comparative disability rights laws and attitudes towards disability
- role in development of wheelchair rugby in United States and Poland

- tension between disability rights activists and medical profession
  - role on federal disability grant committees
  - building the Dallas Mavericks Wheelchair Basketball team
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[This is Allison Olivarez, interviewing Abu Yilla for the UT Arlington Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is March 20, 2014 and the time is approximately 3:00 PM. I am at Mr. Yilla's office on the campus of UT Arlington in the Physical Education Building room 304. I am here today to speak with Mr. Yilla about his life and experience with disabilities and his involvement with disability sports. ]

[Author's note: the recording was accidentally paused at the beginning, will return to re-interview the subject about the first topics discussed at a later date.

**Yilla**

Well maybe it's flashing red because it's recording.

**Olivarez**

We may have lost the first half of the interview.

**Yilla**

Oh.

**Olivarez**

I apologize. Keep going! [laughs]

**Yilla**

Am I going to keep going?

**Olivarez**

Yes, keep going.

**Yilla**

Even though it's not flashing now?

**Olivarez**

The...time is moving on it, and it's red—solid. So...

**Yilla**

Some of it may have gotten lost in the middle?

**Olivarez**

Yeah, possibly.

**Yilla**

Alright, well. I'm going to keep going then. We can do it again if we have too.

**Olivarez**

It happens.

**Yilla**

Um, so they had a disability sports color magazine, it's called *Sports and Spokes*. It's kinda like *Sports Illustrated* for wheelchair sports. I had never seen anything like that before.

**Olivarez**

So that was a new experience as well?

**Yilla**

<topic>reasons for move from United Kingdom to Texas</topic>That was a new experience, to see all of that. So, I just wanted to come over to the U.S. to experience better sport. And then when I realized, you know, you can get a degree in it and maybe even a profession in it, and it was like "This is where I need to go." And I've got to pay my bills when I finish playing. So I came over here to experience the best wheelchair basketball. In the thirty years in between, Europe—Europe's advanced past the U.S.

**Olivarez**

Really?

**Yilla**

<topic>opportunities in wheelchair basketball in Europe vs. The United States</topic>And so... yeah, they've jumped many stages. And now, for a variety of reasons, um, you know one of those reasons being government funding, they now have professional wheelchair basketball leagues in Europe. And so our UTA Movin' Mav players, the best of those, are now going to Europe to play professionally and get paid.

**Olivarez**

So it switched on around?

**Yilla**

It switched around, indeed. Go figure. That's how life goes sometimes.

**Olivarez**

Eh. Well, Europe's better than us in some ways. I agree there.

**Yilla**

Yeah. Well social consciousness—all of that. I tell my students I'm a bleeding heart Liberal and I am. And I'm proud of it.

**Olivarez**

(laughs) So would you ever consider going back? Or have you made this your home now?

**Yilla**

[sighs] Yeah, it's home now. I've got my house, and I live with someone, and you know what I mean? And all of that stuff. And I do think fondly back of England, but I think the biggest thing that'll stop me from going back is that the England I remember isn't the England that exists now. And so, you don't want to go back and try to capture something that doesn't exist. But...you know the old...well the movie title this is *No Country for Old Men* and that's for sure. It's not a happy prospect growing old in the U.S. Sorry, but that's just the reality.

**Olivarez**

Well, there are some things I'm sure, it's different for everybody of course.

**Yilla**

Yeah.

**Olivarez**

<topic>comparative disability rights laws and attitudes towards disability</topic>Um, so with, you mentioned how, um, Europe has far surpassed the U.S. in terms of disability. Have you become involved in anything, to try to, you know, push legislation, or a movement to make you know the Movin' Mavs more widespread?

**Yilla**

Uh, interestingly enough, I've had a number of different political connections. Um, but they were all kind of...you can almost call them "nearly moments." Um, one of the ones that really surprised me, I was involved in the sport of developing wheelchair rugby, which you may have heard of the *Rollerball* [*Murderball*] movie or whatever?

**Olivarez**

Uh huh.

**Yilla**

<topic>role in development of wheelchair rugby in United States and Poland</topic>Well, twenty years ago, I was a part of the first United States modern rugby association. And I was, and in that process I was trying to develop that down here. And I had friends that I had gone with during undergraduate, that I had gone to UTA with, and I told my best friend, I said, who-who had quadriplegia, you've got to have some sort of disability with your upper arm as well as your lower limbs to play wheelchair rugby, I said "It's wheelchair basketball for quads." That's what I meant, quads. And he said to me, he said "Abu, there ain't no such sport." But now we see what wheelchair rugby is.

Well, um, I was so involved with that, that my Master's thesis was developing a skills test: a set of skills tests for wheelchair rugby. Um, it turns out that someone in Poland bumped into my published article, and Poland [they] were applying to enter into the European Union and it was identified that they didn't do enough for people with disabilities. And so the government of Poland put money into funding research into disability into the universities. And this student, who was a graduate student at the time, wanted to use my, uh, my skills test to help develop wheelchair rugby in Poland. And I said "Sure. And I'll help you do this and that." And they put together a study, and in fact then they put together this international conference, and flew me over to Poland...

**Olivarez**

Oh, how awesome!

**Yilla**

It was, it was pretty cool, yeah. And, you know, and set up some other research for them. And Poland got into the European Union. So maybe a little bits, bit of that helped...and we've published since then for quite a number of years, doing different things with them.

And then as far as advocacy, I think the largest change agent that I'm part of is the, uh, federal grant review process over here. And so the Office of Special Education and the National Institute for Disability Rehabilitation and Research [NIDRR], they allocate much of the govern...the government's funds with regard to things like developing adaptive PE teachers, um wheelchair technology, recreational technology. So for example, how can someone who's a wheelchair user get access to Xbox full body control?

**Olivarez**

Oh, yeah.

**Yilla**

Do you see what I mean? So, it may be that some university has got a research project up to try and do computer analysis to transfer that to someone in a wheelchair to use full body on the Xbox along with the...so we can get exercise. But...all of those different types of research initiatives, well...to support the legislation, federal money's allocated based on grant competition and um, and since the early nineties or so, might even in the mid-eighties, I've been part of peer review panels in the federal government because, remember how I told you how medically driven the sport was in the early days?

**Olivarez**

Yes.

**Yilla**

Well, still, do you see what I mean, work with people with disabilities tends to be medically driven.

**Olivarez**

Still today even?

**Yilla**

<topic>tension between disability rights activists and medical profession</topic>Even today. And there's this real barrier between disability rights advocates and the medical profession because they feel that we are there for them to do something to, rather than be a part of. And so I feel that acutely, so uh, when we're reading these federal grants and we're deciding, you know, if there's going to be a rehabilitation rehab center which is going to get five million dollars a year, or whatever, well, they'd better have people with disabilities, do you see what I mean, meaningfully included as part of the process. And I've always been a strong advocate for that. I'm doing a lot of persuading in the peer review panels, um, and I hear of either projects that are condescending or sometimes completely misguided, and I'm trying to do my best to put in my input so that some things aren't just funded because they're funded.

**Olivarez**

And are people usually in agreement with you? Or do they fight you on that?

**Yilla**

<topic>role on federal disability grant committees</topic>Um, we...we can get into some interesting dialogues, but I'm pretty pleased to say that generally, because what I say makes sense, um, it does tend to carry the day. And even, I don't want to brag about myself too much, because even one dissenting voice can upset the funding mechanism, because the competitions can be that fine. Um, but for example, during the Clinton Administration these grants are awarded over 100 points, and there's a lot of strict regulation on how the points are allocated and what qualifies and so on. So, you may end up giving high value points to a program you don't agree with. Yeah? Because they've got very skilled grant writers. Yeah?

**Olivarez**

And it's a checkmark on a lot of ideas?

**Yilla**

Yeah, yeah they check everything just right. People can get millions of dollars based on one or two points. Clinton put in a disability rights advocate as head of the National...as the National Director for NIDRR, and she said...added ten points to the competition. So instead of being a 100-point competition it was going to be a 110-point competition with the ten points being writing to how they're going to advance people with disabilities within the project. These people who could fine tune a thing to get an extra one or two points, some refused to complete it. Some labeled it "extra credit." And some people just put a generic affirmative action statement. To me, that shows their attitude towards us people with disabilities.

**Olivarez**

So would you automatically sort of [makes wiping away motion]?

**Yilla**

Absolutely. Well, they, because they lost those ten points, they were almost writing themselves out of the competition anyway. You know, but some of them were, you know, they're smart enough to try and spin it, but I'm like "You know this guy shows up here, and then never anywhere else." Do you see what I mean?

**Olivarez**

Yeah.

**Yilla**

This isn't really...they've just got a name in here and so on. And it gave us a nice forum to evaluate, and it upset a lot of people. So that, the Bush Administration came in and there the ten points went out.

**Olivarez**

Really?

**Yilla**

Yes, because the Bush [Administration] didn't agree on a preference for people with disabilities.

**Olivarez**

So, has it changed since then, or?

**Yilla**

Um, yeah, (laughs) I got fewer calls actually during the Bush Administration. But I'm doing more now, and again, I got invited to apply to be director.

**Olivarez**

Oh really?

**Yilla**

Yeah, by the Obama Administration. It was a call from the White House. And I said no.

**Olivarez**

When was that?

**Yilla**

A couple of years ago.

**Olivarez**

Why did you say no?

**Yilla**

Because Washington is not a place I would be comfortable in. But I said "if there's anything else I can do, then please give me a call." But it was a blast, getting a call from the White House. I still have it on my... It was, it came up on my answer phone. So I come in, you know, one day, and there it is!

**Olivarez**

So you sort of keep that when you're having a bad day as well?

**Yilla**

Exactly! As well! I play it. And so I taped it onto my iPhone, and I've got it now and I've got it at home, um, there is like...the best call I've ever had. But I tell you another time, when I was first teaching here and I was teaching Adaptive class and it was like eight o'clock in the morning. If you're a first time teacher you get the really bad times, and I'm a terrible morning person, I really am. It's like "Don't speak to me before noon." [put his hand out]. I'm really bad. And I was getting ready for something, and I was copying some papers downstairs, about 7:30, I look over and there was this fax and it was a fax to "Abu Yilla, President, Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks, come and play in the World Cup championships in Spain, we will pay everything."

**Olivarez**

Wow!

**Yilla**

That perked me up that day.

**Olivarez**

Did you go?

**Yilla**

We went! We went and won. We won. 1997 we won the World Cup champions[hip]. It was a very cool experience.

**Olivarez**

Spain, I bet.

**Yilla**

Uh hm. Yeah in Madrid.

**Olivarez**

Um so what's the difference—you do coach basketball or you did?

**Yilla**

Not anymore.

**Olivarez**

But you also played?

**Yilla**

I played and I ran the organization. I don't think I was ever officially a coach. But, I kind of sort of coached.

**Olivarez**

What was the big difference?

**Yilla**

In what, playing and...

**Olivarez**

Administration.

**Yilla**

Administration? Well, one bled into the other. And so for a long time I was running the thing and playing at the same time until you just get too old. Unfortunately at a certain point. Playing is a million times better, you can't beat playing.

**Olivarez**

Do you remember your favorite game?

**Yilla**

I had a number of them. I think one of them...I'd come over here [to UTA] and my team in England had been the perennial champions for like the previous seven years. I came over here and then they took a big dip. And they flew me back, so this was the summer after I had come over and I went back after the end of the semester here. And it was like May, and the season was just wrapping up and we just got eliminated from Europe, but we had a national cup tournament in the summer. So we kind of had two titles that you played for. One was the league that you played for through the year, and then the national week-long championship. It was like a tournament experience. And we had always won both. There was only one year we hadn't won the tournament. But we had won the league for the previous, like eight years, and we'd won the tournament for seven. But they had already lost the league, and I went back over, and then I trained them for three months. Then the team that won the league, we were beating them 42-17 at the half. So that was a great experience. So I think that game was a real achievement,

because it wasn't just playing, it was organizing, it was making other people around me better.

## Olivarez

So you had more involvement?

## Yilla

<topic>building the Dallas Mavericks Wheelchair Basketball team</topic>Yeah. And then the first time we [the Dallas Mavericks Wheelchair Basketball team] won the national championship over here, because we'd been miserably frustrated for nearly a decade. It was a decade... it was '96. I had finally put together enough good players, I was tired of losing. And we...in fact there was another time, back in the day, when the Buffalo Bills lost four straight...they lost three national championships, in the NFL. Three straight titles? They're in that fourth title game, in that fourth title game against the Cowboys for the fourth time, and at the same time we had done exactly the same thing. We had been interviewed by the *Dallas Morning News* or something, and I said "If we don't do something this year then we'll be known as the Buffalo Bills of wheelchair basketball." Well, what *USA Today* did is that they fished around all of these publications to see who had made comparisons to the Buffalo Bills, it was "And here, this person said this..." And I was quoted in *USA Today* as not wanting to be known as the Buffalo Bills of wheelchair basketball. And we lost then. We lost, I think, we went to eight national tournaments, final fours, without winning.

There was one time we lost, and I didn't even stay for anything. I packed my bags, I didn't even have a ticket, got down to the airport and said "Get me back to Dallas. Just figure out a way." I couldn't face it again.

So as the saying goes, you know, bit by bit, I picked up this good player and this good player. And they were good players that other people didn't want. I mean, we were recruiting them. One player was playing for Australia in the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta, he had been playing up in Wisconsin, and he had a really bad reputation and we were trying to get him. He was this-in' and that-in' and then he called me from the Paralympic camp, the players camp at the...the players' dorm. He said, "Okay, I'm coming." So I did my little dance around the apartment, he then destroyed the U.S. in the semifinals and took his team to win the gold medal at the Paralympics. So by the time he did come to us he's like this big (gasps) "You've got Troy Saks! [?]" "Well, why didn't you want him?" So that was the first year in 96-97 when we won our first championship.

We're now the winningest ever team. We've now won eleven. And the only times we haven't won, they've had to change the rules to try and stop us...literally.

**Olivarez**

Really?

**Yilla**

Yes, literally. We won four in a row and then, what they had done was they created this open division. So no "local rules." You could fly people in from anywhere you wanted to, you couldn't pay them, but you could fly them in from anywhere. So we flew a guy in from Mexico City (Laughter)...

**Olivarez**

They get mad if you do that in Little League.

**Yilla**

Yeah! Exactly right. So we put together this team, and so after four years of us dominating then they said "Well they've got to be local players." So we just brought everyone to Dallas!

**Olivarez**

Does everyone live here now?

**Yilla**

No, we've lost two or three players because we weren't hiding where they were living. So we lost that first year and then we just brought everyone back together, or brought in replacements, and then we won it for like the next four years. Then they changed the rules again...and by that time I'd stopped playing. So they just kept trying to change the rules to stop us winning and we've always bounced back and won.

**Olivarez**

That's good. Resilient.

**Yilla**

It's kind of nice. It's kind of nice.

**Olivarez**

Well, I'll let you get to your student.

**Yilla**

Sure.

**Olivarez**

I don't want to take up too much of your time.

**Yilla**

If anything didn't take, just click and make another appointment. I'd be more than happy to chat with you again.