



Citizen Akoy

Marantz, Steve

Nebraska History

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Media Mention

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Citizen Akoy: Basketball and the Making of a South Sudanese American

Steve Marantz

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

Photographs, index, 224 pp., \$26.95 hardcover.

From 2010 to 2013, Omaha Central big man Akoy Agau was the talk of Nebraska's boys high school basketball scene. As a three-time All-State selection and winner of four straight state championships, Agau's stellar on-court performance was enough to garner attention on its own. But it was his backstory and magnetic personality that truly made him compelling. Born in Sudan in the midst of a civil war, Agau and his family fled the country when he was four. They made their way to the United States and in 2003 ended up in Omaha, an increasingly popular destination for Sudanese refugees. From war-torn Sudan to prep basketball glory in Nebraska, it is easy to see why Omaha-born journalist Steve Marantz felt *Citizen Akoy* was a story worth telling.

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into the teenage mind. In *Rhythm Boys* he did this with extensive excerpts from a student's diary; in *Citizen Akoy* he does this with extensive quotations from Agau's social media accounts. Indeed, one chapter is made up almost entirely of posts that Agau made to his Twitter account in the summer between his sophomore and junior years. While Marantz's work is more descriptive than analytical, he does take care to situate *Citizen Akoy* within its local historical context. He devotes one chapter to the history of Omaha Central, for example, and also links the growing South Sudanese community in Omaha—and the difficulties they face—with previous migrant groups that have made their way to the Gate City. Marantz is also interested in the global context, and rightly so. Throughout the book he includes frequent asides that link Agau's story with those of fellow refugees. At times, these comparisons enhance Marantz's narrative. Other times, however, Marantz's digressions seem unnecessary and detract from the cohesion of the book. When he devotes a few paragraphs to actress Angelina Jolie's activism, it comes across more like a game of "Six Degrees of Omaha" than an illustration that illuminates our understanding of Agau's experience. In part because of these superfluous asides and in part because of the tendency to move too quickly from detail to detail, *Citizen Akoy* does not quite match the depth of understanding that *The Rhythm Boys* achieved. It reflects instead that maxim about journalism: it comes across as a first rough draft of history. But if *Citizen Akoy* leaves room for development, it is nevertheless an important and timely book, not least for the ways in which it resonates with the anxieties and uncertainties of our present moment. In an age of heightened nativism, with immigrant and refugee restrictions on the rise in the United States, Marantz's book is a subtle plea for another path, a path of openness and inclusion that recognizes a common humanity across cultural divides. For basketball fans and readers interested and invested in Omaha's past, present, and future, *Citizen Akoy* should be of great interest.