

EUROPEAN HEROES

36 AMAZING PEOPLE

Whether famous or unsung, they inspire, provoke and make a difference

European heroes
J.K. Rowling, right,
Iris Berben and Bono;
African hero
Dikembe Mutombo, top



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On the Shoulders Of a Giant

LITTLE BOYS DREAM BIG. BY THE TIME Dikembe Mutombo turned 9, he knew he wanted to be a doctor. He would work hard, study abroad and return to Congo to help his countrymen. Then the son of a schoolmaster grew up. And up. And up, to 2.2 m. Mutombo naturally spent plenty of time on the basketball court as a youth, but he arrived at Georgetown University on an academic scholarship and with instructions from his

father to return home with an education. He disobeyed. During Mutombo's second year at college, legendary coach John Thompson asked him to play basketball—and launched the career of the big man described by National Basketball Association coaches and teammates as a "relentless" player with an "excellent touch" who "works his tail off every time he steps onto the floor."

For all those qualities, Mutombo, 36, the star center for the New Jersey Nets and four-time NBA Defensive Player of the Year, now needs just six-and-a-half seconds on court to earn the \$450 his father used to make in a year. And he is using his four-year, \$68 million contract to do what what his inner doctor would do: he is helping to heal his war-torn homeland.

The aid Mutombo doles out comes in all different forms. To two nieces and two nephews, Mutombo offered a home and the opportunity to be educated in the U.S.,

DIKEMBE
MUTOMBO
CONGO

adopting them as his own children. (He and his wife, Rose, also have another son and daughter.) For Congo's national women's basketball team, he provided equipment and funding for their trip to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. To Special Olympians, he has donated his time and energy for clinics and workshops. In support of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, Mutombo, who speaks nine languages, including English, French, Spanish and his native Lingala, has given his voice for a series of public-service announcements, encouraging millions of Central African parents to immunize their children against the disease. And in his hometown, the Congolese capital of Kinshasa, he is building a \$14.5 million hospital, which, when it opens next year, will be the nation's first new fully equipped medical facility in nearly 30 years. "Mutombo believes that God has given him this opportunity to do great things for his country, especially in health care," says Tom Keefe, president of the International Medical Equipment Collaborative, a charity that will help to kit out the hospital once it is built. "This facility will create the most dramatic change in health-care delivery, not just in the capital, but in the country and the whole region."

Mutombo, whom his Georgetown teammate Alonzo Mourning has described as "full of the joy of life," is eager to share that spirit with a country desperately in need. At one fundraiser for the hospital, Mutombo quoted a modern African proverb to explain why he has committed so much of his life and his wealth to the welfare of others. "When you take the elevator up to reach the top, please don't forget to send the elevator back down, so that someone else can take it to the top," he said. "This is my way of sending the elevator down." —By Jeff Chu

NOREN TROTTER—NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

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