



Kondeh Mansaray

FOUNDER & SPORTING DIRECTOR OF BTB ACADEMY

Can you tell us about your background and connection to Edmonton?

I was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1990. At age 10, I moved to Canada with my brother, first settling in Toronto, then briefly in the U.S., before spending my teenage years in Halifax.

When my dad decided to move back to Sierra Leone, he gave me a choice—stay or go with him. At the time, my team in Halifax had just qualified for Nationals and I couldn't miss it, so I decided to stay in Canada. I moved to Edmonton to stay with my best friend's family, played Nationals with Halifax in October, and later pursued my education at Grand Prairie College, Grant MacEwan, and the University of Alberta.

How did sports shape your life growing up?

Soccer was always my first love, but in Halifax—a basketball city—I started playing basketball more. Everyone in my neighborhood played, and we'd be on the courts for hours. In junior high and high school, I played everything—volleyball, handball, soccer, basketball—whatever I could. Sports weren't just about competition; they were a way to connect, stay engaged, and find structure.



What challenges did you face moving from Sierra Leone to Canada?

The cold was the first shock! Then there was the language barrier—even though I spoke English, Krio was my first language, and my accent was different, so I felt like an outsider. I was placed in ESL classes and had to catch up quickly to a completely different curriculum.

At recess in Toronto, I remember, I was picked last for the teams at recess. But once I played, people started noticing me—"Oh, this kid is actually good! Where's he from?"—and friendships started forming. Sports helped me integrate.

There were challenges at home, too. My dad, a Canadian citizen, was supposed to pick us up in Toronto, but he got stopped at the U.S. border. We ended up staying with a family friend for what was supposed to be a few days but turned into six months. Eventually, we reunited in Maryland, and soon after, my dad decided to move back to Halifax where he finished his PhD at Dalhousie, as he felt he would have a greater opportunity to find work.

How did BTB Academy start and grow into what it is today?

BTB started informally at my aunt's house in Edmonton. During summer breaks, parents in our community would drop their kids off there while they worked. I'd be sleeping in the living room, and the kids would wake me up, but they'd just sit around watching TV. One day, I decided to take them outside for soccer and to be active.



What challenges did you face building BTB?

From the beginning, we faced barriers. Alberta Soccer required district support for sanctioning, however, both EIYSA and EMSA denied us. Eventually, Storm Soccer supported us in exchange for running their technical sessions, which allowed us initial sanctioning when we were only focusing on camps.

In 2020, when we went full-time, we lost support from EMSA, and Alberta Soccer revoked our sanctioning and suspended our leadership team - myself, Pius, Mike who are all Black guys, and Talal who is Arab. They even sent emails across Alberta and BC warning clubs about us.

When I went back to Grand Prairie, I realized there was a need and the next summer, I registered BTB (Born to Be), because I believed everyone is "Born to Be" something—whether a soccer player or something else. Our first sessions at Queen Elizabeth High School started with 8-10 kids and grew every week.

We expanded into indoor training at the Africa Centre, running soccer programs for kids to just play and have fun. The following summer, we launched daily camps, knowing kids needed something productive to do during school breaks. Many families couldn't afford fees, but we never turned anyone away.



This was something I've never seen happen before, even in serious disciplinary cases. The experience was mentally draining, and crushing to take. We took the issue to Canada Soccer, raising concerns about racism and exclusion in the soccer community. We eventually won the ordeal, and BTB became a sanctioned club in Alberta.

I saw emails, "Kondeh is this, Kondeh is that" but these people didn't know me, they never spoke to me, they just saw a name and a photo. They didn't know my character, where my heart was. It hurt mentally.

In 2020, we went full-time—not just to develop players but to teach life skills. We emphasized academics and character. One of my proudest moments was enforcing academic standards—any player with a C or D missed a game. Some people questioned it, but I knew it was about more than soccer. That season, we went undefeated. It showed that discipline and life lessons translate into success.



Over time, people got to know us, and perceptions changed. Now, we have good relationships with those same organizations and people, but it took a lot to get here.

Even after winning Nationals in 2019, people dismissed us as "lucky." After nine National Championship appearances, we believe we've proven ourselves, but there are still those that say we're lucky when we achieve these milestones, not that we've earned it. BTB is proudly Black-led, and we take pride in breaking barriers in Alberta's soccer landscape.

There are a lot of people who believe in what you're doing, from your founding members to Bayern Munich and Canada National Team star Alphonso Davies. What is it like to have someone like him support BTB?

A few years ago, Alphonso got Nike to gift us a bunch of balls and training tops. He's a really humble guy—if you didn't know he played for Bayern, you'd just think he was another guy on the street. He's always looking for ways to give back, and he recognizes what we're trying to do by providing a platform for young players to perform at a high level.



How has your work impacted Edmonton's Black community?

I think we've help create a platform where young Black athletes see leaders who look like them. Representation matters. Many Black kids feel pressured to fit stereotypes, but we teach them they can be whoever they want—they can be hardworking, kind, successful.

We feel like the Northside community is benefitting, there's a lot of kids that I feel we're mentors for. We talk to them daily, they come to us when they need things, and we're always there for them - as soccer players and as people in the community.

We just hope to have an impact on them like they have impacted us.



It means the world to us to have his support. This past summer, he came to one of our camps—the BMO Top 60 Camp—where he played with the kids, ran a session, and took photos with everyone. He's a role model, and we love him.

He truly cares about helping young players from Edmonton succeed. He's mentored former BTB player Dieu-Merci (Deuce) Michel, who is now signed with Vitória in the Portuguese first division. When Deuce was on trial in Germany, Alphonso hosted him, gave him guidance, and acted as a big brother. He's an icon, and for a lot of kids in our academy, he's proof that big dreams are possible.

How do you see sports as a tool for empowerment, especially in marginalized communities?

Sports give people purpose. When you have a goal—whether it's becoming a pro athlete, earning a scholarship, or just improving—it gives you a reason to stay focused.

I grew up in what people consider the "hood." Many kids around me didn't have structure or support. I had to hustle to make things happen—biking an hour to practice because my dad was working long hours and couldn't drive me.

Many kids today face the same struggles, but sports can provide an outlet. When you have purpose, you're less likely to fall into negative influences.

What does Black History Month mean to you?

It's about celebrating and embracing our differences. These are not bad things. We all have different realities, and acknowledging those realities, celebrating these differences and understanding them makes us stronger. Showcasing that we're good leaders, good people, and people that work to make things better, to make society better. We all have a part to make this world a better place. Celebrating and appreciating the communities, the people that just make this country great, make this world great, that's what it's about.

What are your goals for BTB Academy?

We want to continue to provide the resources to develop not just players, but referees, coaches, and administrators. Hopefully one day we have our own North Side facility, a space for the entire community. It's not just about BTB; it's about creating something bigger for everyone. Definitely, our biggest goal is to just keep developing people, people around the game.



Any final thoughts?

BTB's success comes from the people behind it—the players, coaches, families, and of course my wife, Nyange, who was our first assistant coach.

The leadership group that help bring me bring BTB's vision to life- Pius, Mike, Talal, Andreas without the support of these four, BTB wouldn't be where it is today.

We have had some parents that have been crucial to the development of BTB. We are so grateful to them and thank them for all their support and belief!

Without these people, we're not going to be where we are. Our club, and our community is something special.

"I HAD A VISION FOR BTB, AND A VISION IS ALWAYS GREAT IF YOU BELIEVE IN IT, BUT IT'S EVEN GREATER WHEN OTHER PEOPLE BELIEVE IN IT TOO!" - KONDEH MANSARAY