

Royalty in the making

A closer look at what defines Prince Aligbe

BY OWEN HOFFNER
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Prince Aligbe. The name has been familiar to Minnehaha students and sports fans since he arrived at the school in 7th grade.

Now a senior, Aligbe is an amazingly talented basketball player who has drawn the attention of scouts and fans across the nation. His dominant frame and technical skill have made him a top target for some of the best basketball schools in the country.

However, lying beneath the surface, there's so much more to Prince Aligbe.

"He's not just a basketball kid," said Lance Johnson, head coach of the Minnehaha Academy boys' basketball team. "He's a singer. He's a kid that does very well academically. He's a reader. He's a piano player. He does everything really well, and he enjoys doing a lot of different things."

A positive presence

Aligbe's positive presence is felt in whichever setting he's in. He's intentional with his words and doesn't shy away from speaking about his Christian faith to others.

Johnson mentioned a time when Aligbe got up and spoke to the crowd at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes gathering in Waseca, Minn.

"He had no notes," Johnson said. "He didn't get a lot of preparation time, but he was so eloquent in expressing his Christian faith."

Johnson noted another time when Prince delivered the prayer for the team and alumni, who were gathered for a big meal before the Redhawks' January 2020 game against California powerhouse Sierra Canyon.

"It was just extraordinary," Johnson said. "Everybody afterwards was blown away. They thought he was a preacher."

In fact, Aligbe regularly serves on the worship team at The Ark of Covenant church in Brooklyn Park, where his mom Loveth Aligbe preaches every Sunday.

"I play piano for the first 30 minutes as people are coming in, to help get them in a worship mood," said Aligbe. "I'm in the worship choir, so they'll send me songs and I'll just learn it by practicing at home in a quiet room."

Aligbe's drive to learn and better himself is extremely evident in the classroom, as well as on the court.

"Prince is a curious person. He's very inquisitive and wants to

know how things work, whether that's pulling Billy Steele aside and asking him about some chord progressions of a song he's working on, or coming and doing lessons with me," said Karen Lutgen, Upper School choir teacher.

Aligbe has also been shaped by Rich Pluntz, his math teacher and advisor throughout his career at M.A.

"He's seen me grow up from a little freshman to a senior," said Aligbe. "I might have a rough first-period class, and I'll just come to my advisory and get to cool down. He's a funny guy, and I never knew how much you actually needed that during high school up until now."

"Prince is someone that can look past the present situation and see some of the bigger picture," said Pluntz. "He's able to realize that there's more to life than basketball. He's willing to push himself and wants to learn math, even though he doesn't see how that will fit into his immediate future."

Pluntz also noted that Aligbe is "not just trying to quickly get his homework done and pass the class just to get the grade, but he actually wants to understand calculus."

Aligbe also expressed appreciation for Senora Calvin, a widely admired Spanish teacher at the Upper School.

"Spanish has always been a class that's super fun," said Aligbe. "I just get to sit back and learn, and if I don't know something, I can easily come to her and she'll help me."

An example of the lighthearted, easygoing environment that Señora Calvin creates in the Spanish classroom, is reflected in an activity called a consecuencia, which means consequence in English. A student is forced to do a consecuencia when he or she accidentally speaks English in the classroom. They are then required to partake in a funny or embarrassing activity. Recently, Aligbe did a consecuencia that involved reading a student's name on the loudspeaker and stating that he had a crush on them.

"That's what I mean," said Aligbe, "it's a class where I don't need to be awkward or silent the whole time. I'm open enough to do stuff like that because it's a fun class."

Aligbe mentioned Kris Sauer, 12th grade English teacher, as another major influence in his life, saying, "I always used to think of him as a guy that was kind of hard and scary, but so far

English has been a class that has pushed me. He wants what's best for me, but at the same time, he wants what's best for me outside of English. He knows basketball. He's been watching me for years because he's our announcer. He's definitely someone I could see myself growing with and learning a lot from."

On the court

However, while academics are definitely an important part of Aligbe's life, basketball is at the heart of it all. According to ESPN, Aligbe is the 28th best power forward in the nation and sits at the number three position for the state of Minnesota. Aligbe has won four state basketball championships during his time at Minnehaha and has the opportunity to

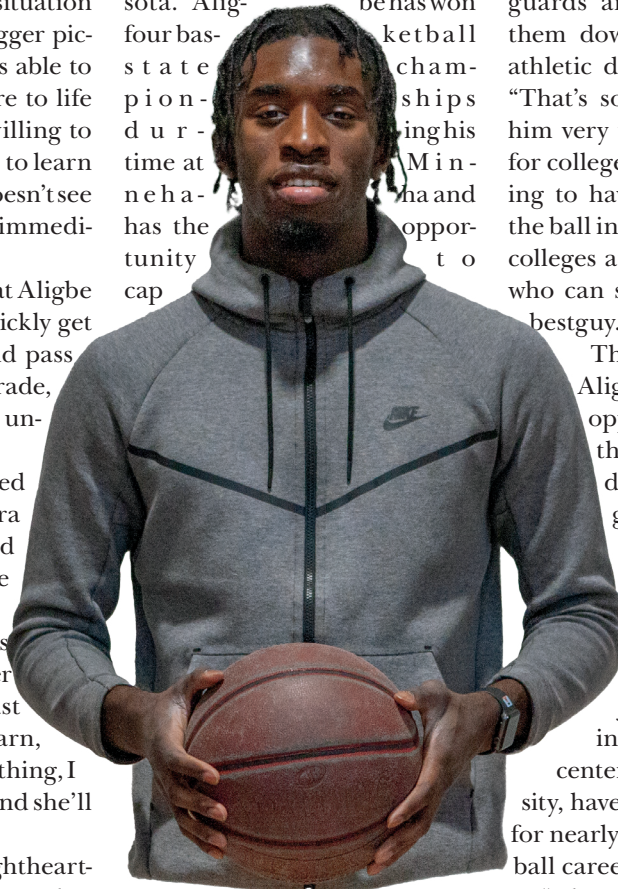


Photo by Owen Hoffner off his high school career with another this winter.

"Winning a state championship with these younger guys would mean a lot," said Aligbe. "I wouldn't say it's a young team, it's more a team that has just never experienced the varsity level. The same way I've grown through the system, these same guys are growing up right behind me."

Aligbe's growth

Player growth is a vital part of the Minnehaha Academy basketball culture. Aligbe joined the team in 7th grade and has steadily improved throughout his time in the program. In the 2016-2017 season, his first with the Redhawks, Aligbe averaged 4.6 points per game, alongside 2.0 rebounds. These numbers slightly increased to 5.7 and 2.2 during 2017-2018, but ex-

perienced a major jump in the 2018-2019 season, rising to 10.5 points and 6.5 rebounds per contest. However, in 2019-2020 these numbers remained fairly stagnant, inching up to 10.6 and 7.0. Finally, Aligbe's scoring statistics jumped to 11.2 points per game, while the rebounds stayed at 7.0 in the 2020-2021 season. All of this information is according to the Star Tribune's MN Boys' Basketball Hub, and while it indicates a general plateau statistically from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021, it doesn't encapsulate Aligbe's unique skill as a basketball player.

"In my opinion, Prince is the prototypical college basketball size to be a great defender on guards and forwards to slow them down," said Minnehaha athletic director Josh Thurow. "That's something that makes him very unique and desirable for colleges. All colleges are going to have guys who can put the ball in the basket, but not all colleges are going to have guys who can stop the other team's best guy."

Thurow also noted that Aligbe has "never had the opportunity here to be the number one guy," due to Minnehaha's gold rush of basketball talent in recent years.

Jalen Suggs, now a guard for the Orlando Magic, and Chet Holmgren, the projected number 1 pick in the NBA draft and center at Gonzaga University, have been in the spotlight for nearly all of Aligbe's basketball career at Minnehaha.

"That opportunity is this year," Thurow said. "I think we'll see his numbers grow greatly because he's going to be the go-to player. He's just so dynamic with his explosiveness and ability to finish in transition. If his shot continues to improve, I anticipate him being one of the state's best players."

Boston College

Aligbe committed to Boston College on October 1 and is excited to grow more as both a student and basketball player.

"Boston College gave me the sense that they only wanted me. Obviously, I'm coming in with other high character guys, respectively, but they [Boston College] gave me the sense that they really need me. It's somewhere I could be for one year or four years. I want it to be a second home, but I also want to be with people that I know have my back

and want me for me, and I can do the same and have their back."

What's next?

Aligbe hopes to play basketball professionally one day but intends to pursue other interests as well.

When asked where he sees himself in 5 years Aligbe responded, "I do see myself in the NBA, but the question I would ask myself is, 'What else comes with Prince Aligbe? Is he a person that went to college to play basketball and then went to the NBA, or is he a person that went to college to learn as much as he could? Is he finishing up his degree while making connections at Boston College to help build his own business?' These are things I ask myself because I have people in my life that did that."

Aligbe went on to mention the influence that his parents' work ethic has had on his life, noting his mother's role as a pastor and his father's homecare business as prime examples of their hard work and diligence. Aligbe has high expectations for his basketball career but is also interested in learning piano fully and even taking up his father, Dickinson Aligbe's entertainment business, Empire Entertainment, which is based in Nigeria and Brooklyn Center, MN.

"They [the business] provide a space for artists to come into a booth and record music," said Aligbe. "They also go to events and record and conduct interviews, but on top of that they make their own movies and TV shows."

Aligbe has a deep appreciation for his family's Nigerian roots and hopes to play under Nigeria for the Nike Hoops Summit at the end of the season.

"The Nike Hoops Summit is where the top high school seniors in America, representing the USA team, face the top high school seniors in the world, representing the World team. Since I'm a dual citizen, I would play for the World team under the nation of Nigeria. If I play well and do the things I'm supposed to do I know I'll have a chance at that."

On the outside looking in, Prince Aligbe seems like a generational athlete who's gifted to play basketball at a high level. However, when you dig a little deeper and get to know Aligbe, there are so many more aspects to his character. The amount of people he's impacted at Minnehaha is astounding, and as he continues his journey at Boston College one can only imagine the great stories of Prince Aligbe's continued ascent to the throne.