A remarkable first-half comeback saw Rwanda’s RSSB Tigers crowned the 2026 Basketball Africa League (BAL) champions on Sunday, edging out Angolan heavyweights Petro de Luanda 90-88 in a tense, breathless final at a packed BK Arena.

Watched by a passionate home crowd that included Rwandan President Paul Kagame, the Tigers became the first team from Rwanda to lift the continental trophy. The victory also marked their second win over the 2024 champions this season, solidifying a shifting of the guard in African club basketball.

“There is nothing that tops it. This means everything to us,” an emotional RSSB Tigers guard/forward, Ntore Habimana, said after the game. “We worked hard; personally, I worked five years specifically for this moment. This means everything to me, to Kigali, to Rwanda.”

The historic triumph seemed a distant prospect in the opening minutes of the contest. Petro de Luanda stormed out of the blocks with an aggressive 7-0 run; forcing Tigers coach Henry Mwinuka into a frantic timeout just over two minutes into the game.

The tactical pause did little to halt the Angolan momentum initially. Spearheaded by center Aboubacar Pedro Gakou, Petro racked up 20 unanswered points before the hosts could even register on the scoreboard. Gakou went on to dominate the opening period, scoring 15 of his team-high 28 points to hand Petro a commanding 27-16 lead by the end of the first quarter.

But basketball is a game of shifting momentum, and the Tigers relied on patience rather than panic.

“We didn’t really have any specific conversation after that moment,” Habimana reflected on the early 20-point deficit. “We just stayed true to what we do, because this is a game of runs.”



The catalyst for the turnaround was American shooting guard Craig Randall II. After missing his first four attempts, Randall broke the drought with a driving lay-up. By the second quarter, he found his rhythm from distance, burying back-to-back three-pointers that cut the deficit to 28-22 and sent the BK Arena crowd into frenzy.

When Randall drained his third consecutive shot from beyond the arc to give the Tigers their first lead of the night at 37-35, the arena erupted. Petro's head coach, Sergio Valdeomillos, called an immediate timeout to stem the tide, but the damage was done.

Compounding Petro's troubles, Gakou picked up his third personal foul shortly after reaching the 20-point mark, forcing him to the bench to avoid an early disqualification. Capitalising on the Angolans' sudden defensive instability, the Tigers closed out the half strongly to lead 42-37 at the break.

Petro de Luanda's undoing ultimately came from self-inflicted errors, racking up 13

turnovers in the first half alone and finishing the game with 17. Though their rotating defensive schemes had anchored their run to the final, it faltered under the relentless pressure applied by the hosts.



The fourth quarter provided high drama when Gakou eventually fouled out of the game late in the period. Despite the setback, Petro fought back tenaciously, but the Tigers held their nerve at the free-throw line to secure the two-point victory.

“We lost the game because we couldn’t protect our 20-point lead,” Gakou admitted afterwards. “Credit to the other team for staying composed and fighting back. The BAL is becoming more competitive every season… other teams continue to build really competitive squads.”

With this continental crown, the RSSB Tigers have earned the right to represent Africa at the upcoming FIBA InterContinental Cup in Singapore this September.

To cap off an extraordinary campaign, Craig Randall II was named the 2026 BAL

Most Valuable Player. The 30-year-old American guard played all 40 minutes of the final, finishing with a game-high 33 points. The accolade follows a record-breaking season in which Randall etched his name into the league's history books with a historic 54-point performance—the highest individual scoring game in BAL history.

All-BAL First Team:

- Craig Randall II (RSSB Tigers)
- Mangok Mathiang (RSSB Tigers)
- Childe Dundao (Petro de Luanda)
- Donovan Williams (Al Ahly Ly)
- Majok Deng (Al Ahly Ly)

All-BAL Second Team:

Omar Abada (Club Africain), Zack Lofton (Al Ahly SC), Kevin Murphy (Al Ahly SC), Aboubacar Gakou (Petro de Luanda), and Jo Lual Acuil (Al Ahly Ly).

Defensive honors and sportsmanship

The tournament also celebrated individual defensive excellence and court integrity:

Defensive Player of the Year: Mangok Mathiang (RSSB Tigers) took home the top defensive prize after anchoring the champions' backcourt throughout the campaign.

All-BAL Defensive First Team: Petro de Luanda's Childe Dundao headlined the defensive lineup, marking his third selection to the team since the award's inception in 2022. He was joined by Mohamed Sadi (Al Ahly Libya), Aminu Mohamed (Club Africain), Mouhamadou Diagne (FUS Rabat), and Mangok Mathiang (RSSB Tigers).

Manute Bol Sportsmanship Award: Libyan international Mohamed Sadi of Al Ahly Libya was honored for exemplifying fair play, integrity, and ethical behavior on the court. Sadi averaged eight points, eight rebounds, and four assists per game, leading his side to a third-place finish this season.


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