



KHOZA: I WON'T LET ANYONE MESS UP THE PSL



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PIRATES PART WAYS WITH BALONI

Orlando Pirates have parted ways with midfielder Siphelo Baloni after his recent loan at Chippa United. The 25-year-old only spent one season at the club after his arrival from All Stars FC and featured 14 times before his loan to the Eastern Cape. At Chippa, he managed 19 games, with one goal and one assist before returning to Pirates, where competition is currently rife in central midfield. Sources have confirmed Baloni received his clearance and is currently on the lookout for a new club.



RAPOO ADMIRERS CONTINUE TO GROW

Siwelele and Amajita left-back Neo Rapoo has continued to attract interest this window as one of the most promising talents in the country. Rapoo was the subject of interest from Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates amidst the status sale talk of SuperSport United, but with the entire contracted squad remaining, the potential deal slowly faded. However, there have been notable calls to the club from Qatar and one of the giants of North Africa for the talented defender, who was one of the stars of the triumphant U20 Africa Cup of Nations campaign.



SINGO DEAL HITS SNAG?

Golden Arrows' expected transfer of Malawi international midfielder Yankho Singo has been delayed with reported paperwork issues. The towering midfielder agreed to join Arrows in a transfer from Big Bullets, agreeing to terms for a two-year deal. However, the 25-year-old has been spotted back in his homeland after registration complications. It now remains to be seen whether Arrows are able to conclude the deal or call things off completely in the coming weeks.



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THE CURIOUS CASE OF KARIM KIMVUIDI AT PIRATES

Orlando Pirates completed the signing of DR Congo winger Karim Kimvuidi as a surprise addition to their squad with minimal speculation around him, silently arriving at the club, and he’s seemingly departed in the same manner this past week.

On Tuesday, the 23-year-old is said to have packed his bags and left for Israel, where he’s already made an appearance in the Toto Cup for Ashdod this past weekend after a couple of days of training, while Mali midfielder Abdoulaye Mariko is preparing to move into the apartment Kimvuidi used in Johannesburg, clearly indicating the player is not set to return for this current season – or at all.

iDiski Times sought to find out more about the mysterious appearance in the pre-season competition in Israel before their official league starts, which Kwame Peprah was once also seen playing in for a month, before joining an Indian Super League club shortly after officially parting ways with Pirates.

Sources confirmed the player was on an ‘assessment’ like many others who try their

luck at the various professional clubs in Israel before the season begins but he made a real impression and has reportedly signed for Ashdod on loan with an option to purchase, after an impressive 90 minute showing against Hapoel Tel Aviv, featuring as an inverted winger and in the 10 role.

“I watched the game, he showed so much talent, I’m sure bigger clubs will offer him a contract, there’s a real hype about him now. But this is the crazy thing about the Toto Cup, the clubs who shine here usually don’t do well in the season, so it’s not always taken seriously, and many trialists are allowed to be registered during this period,” the source confirmed.

After the appearance in the Toto Cup, head coach Haim Silvas said to the media that Kimvuidi ‘impressed him’ and is one for ‘this level of football’, which is not always the case with players who arrive at this stage of the season.

Kimvuidi featured 37 times for the club, with three goals and one assist since his arrival in 2023.

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LINDO PEP: ORLANDO PIRATES NEED PERCY TAU

The Betway Premiership 2025/26 campaign kicked off with a few surprise results as Chippa United held Mamelodi Sundowns, Sekhukhune United won away at Orlando Pirates, while Kaizer Chiefs won down in Cape Town against Stellenbosch.

Don't forget to catch match reaction moments after the final whistle, and more from Junior Khanye, Tso Vilakazi, Machaka, Lindo Pep, Nkululeko Nkewu and others on iDiskiTV.

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‘He Knows How To Play For Big Clubs’

“Well done to coach Eric Tinkler for beating Orlando Pirates.

“I think the coach loves big games.

When he was at Cape Town City, he used to be a problem for the big clubs. Congratulations to Sekhukhune United for their opening day victory.

“The captain, Linda Mntambo, made sure that he would mark Sipho Mbule out of the game, and that’s why Pirates were not effective from the middle of the park. Good contribution all round from Sekhukhune players.

“I think Orlando Pirates need to solve their puzzle upfront. Radiopane is not scoring goals, and the club doesn’t trust Tshegofatso Mabasa.

“I think Pirates must sign Percy Tau right now! He is a free agent.

“He knows how to play for big clubs like Al Ahly & Mamelodi Sundowns. He would fit like a glove at Orlando Pirates.

“I don’t think you win a league with a strike force which doesn’t score goals.”

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‘WE’VE WORKED TOO HARD TO LET ANYONE MESS UP THE PSL’

By Matshelane Mambolo

In South African football, there are few voices that command a room quite like Dr Irvin Khoza’s – even though lately that voice comes out muffled through the face mask he now wears permanently.

“I’VE BUILT THIS WITH OTHERS OVER MANY YEARS. I WILL NOT LET ANYONE – ANYONE – MESS IT UP.”



When the Premier Soccer League (PSL) chairman leans forward, fixes his gaze, and begins to speak, you don’t just hear him – you feel the weight of decades of experience pressing against every word.

Known as ‘The Iron Duke’, Khoza has built a reputation as the man who never flinches, never blinks, and never apologises for being uncompromising when it comes to the league’s integrity.

And in a recent conversation with iDiski Times senior writer Matshelane Mamabolo, he made it clear that the PSL, Africa’s most commercially successful football league, has been built on too much sweat and sacrifice to let anyone – player, club owner, or opportunist – mess it up.

“I am a builder, not a destroyer,” he says, his tone calm but laced with resolve. “I love the soccer industry. I respect it. And that’s why I take care of it.”

From Survival to Supremacy

The PSL which fans enjoy today – the prime-time television matches, the multimillion-rand sponsorships, the packed stadiums on derby days – did not simply materialise out of thin air. Khoza remembers the early days, when professional football in South Africa was still fighting for legitimacy, when clubs battled to stay afloat, and when sponsorships were not guaranteed but fought for, Rand by Rand.

Through those lean years, he became part of a generation of administrators who believed football could be more than just a game played on a Saturday afternoon – it could be an industry, a brand, a national treasure.

And now, having shepherded the PSL into a place of stability and global respect, Khoza is fiercely protective of it.

“We’ve worked too hard for this brand,” he says. “There are 32 clubs, a board – it’s not a one-man show. But I will protect it with everything I have.”

The Business of Football – And the Myths That Surround It

Running a football club in South Africa, Khoza insists, is no glamorous money-printing exercise.

“People want to be like Khoza and [Kaizer] Motaung, but they are not aware of the hardships we’ve had to endure,” he says. “If you were to open us up you will see the internal bleedings that we’ve endured over the years. When you run football it is a calling.”





What about gate takings? A drop in the ocean: “You sell tickets at R40, but that’s not enough to sustain the club. You’re paying for stadiums you don’t own. And the stadium takes away all the rights. And then you must spend money to comply with the SASREA ACT. Suddenly, you the media people call it the game of the people, but who are the people? Where must I get the money to run the club?”

The comparison to Europe, where club-owned stadiums double as revenue-generating venues, only deepens his frustration.

“That’s what stops South African clubs from making money.”

Still, the PSL has survived and thrived because of careful management, strong sponsorship partnerships – most notably with SuperSport and recently with Betway – and a relentless focus on credibility. It is the reason Khoza gets visibly agitated when he hears some of us saying the league is chaotic.

Protecting the Badge

Ownership changes, unregistered players, clubs getting entangled in SARS disputes – all of these have threatened to tarnish the league’s image. And while some view them as signs of instability, Khoza sees them as challenges to be tackled head-on.

And perhaps rightly so, for it does the PSL no good that season after season, clubs sell their statuses as owners struggle to keep them afloat. What’s been particularly disheartening for Khoza is seeing clubs with a long history disappearing.

In recent years, institutions of South African football such as Moroka Swallows, Wits University, Highlands Park and Bloemfontein Celtic have ceased to exist because the owners were unable to keep them afloat. And Khoza

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and the PSL were left with no option but to have moneyed businessmen to take them over and change their names. Still, he is particularly concerned about the selling of clubs.

“It’s stressful for me, for us as the PSL,” he says. “But what can we do? Whenever there’s a need to sell, the first thing we do is that where the club belongs, we ask if there are any takers. But a lot of times, there are no takers. We can’t just sit; we have to go out there into the open market where there’s a willing buyer and a willing seller. Our national constitution says economic activity is allowed for everybody.”

He recalls the fate of clubs such as Moroka Swallows FC, whose demise began way back when the late owner David Pine Chabeli sold his shares, when there were no safeguards and the stability needed to ensure its survival.

As if the ownership changes were not headache enough for the man in charge, season after season the league’s DC has had to deal with protest cases of clubs often looking to either save their statuses through the backdoor, claiming improperly registered players.





That the new season has resumed was somewhat of a miracle after a case involving Marumo Gallants threatened to throw a spanner in the works, the Bloemfontein-based side having fielded an improperly registered player in Monde Mphambaniso. The PSL Disciplinary Committee fined the club R20 000 though many had expected the verdict to see the club being docked points from all the matches Mphambaniso had participated in. Such a decision would probably have had far-reaching consequences that might have affected the promotional play-offs, and this would have hindered the new season from beginning.

“People want shortcuts, and that’s dangerous,” he warns. “It’s sickening that every time the season ends, there are some skeletons coming out of the closet. But it will always happen because there are people who are creative. Look at how many appeals are done on the same matter. It starts with one club, Leruma, and then the same documents are used by Cape Town Spurs and then, Cape Town City. So we need to really check what is really happening there. The sad thing is that it is people who are new in the game. It’s heartbreaking,” he says quietly, before his tone hardens again. “That’s why we have inductions. We have a 610-page induction document that everyone gets. That’s why we put measures in place.

“Football is a calling. You get money if there’s money being injected from sponsorships. But people come in thinking they’ll make money without understanding the sacrifices involved. We are all fans, and sometimes people buy in as fans without really understanding the industry.”

The Iron Duke Label

Of course, Khoza is used to criticism.

“WE ARE GOING TO HAVE COMPLAINTS FROM EVERYONE, EVEN THOUGH THEY CAN SEE WHAT THE PROBLEM IS. BUT THAT’S HOW IT IS.”

Over the years, he’s been called a dictator, accused of “owning” South African football, and labelled a one-man power centre. He shrugs it off.

“How do they arrive at that?” he asks. “What informs that? Just because they are supporters and their team is not doing well, they think it is Irvin Khoza. But how do I do that when there’s an executive committee of 10 people? There’s a board of governors made up of the representatives of the 32 clubs, and we have meetings, but there’s never a motion of no confidence. So where does it come from? Someone is unhappy and trying to spread lies or diminish my name.”

He points out that he never campaigned to be chairman – he was put there because of his knowledge, his experience, and his track record and more so because the other club owners have faith in his leadership.

And sponsors?
“Ask them why they invest. It’s because they trust the PSL.”

Navigating Uncertain Waters

The future of the PSL’s broadcast deal with SuperSport is currently up in the air, as MultiChoice’s ownership changes





hands. Khoza will not speculate until meetings are held and approvals secured. “We are in transition, they [the company buying Multichoice] are still going through the processes of being approved. So, they can’t meet with anybody until it has been approved. Only in September will we know. The new company coming in is a multinational, so we don’t know yet what they will expect of us. We’ve been partners with SuperSport since 2007, so we need to make the league attractive to the new owners so they see that Multichoice did not make a mistake by partnering with us,” he says, displaying the measured patience that has kept the league steady through stormy times.

Scheduling will also be a headache in the season that’s just begun, with the Africa Cup of Nations [AFCON] finals and the FIFA World Cup qualifiers and the global tournament’s finals next year crowding the calendar.

“We are going to have a shortened season because of those tournaments. The season usually ends in June, but now we have to be completed come end of May. Then you have the continental club competitions in which we will have four teams [Mamelodi Sundowns, Orlando Pirates, Stellenbosch FC and Kaizer Chiefs], and you must complete the domestic competitions, which all have their own window. So, now the sponsors cannot activate the normal way because of the compressed program we are going to have this time around. We are going to have complaints from everyone, even though they can see what the problem is. But that’s how it is.”

Yet with decades of problem-solving behind him, he knows the value of preparation.

For all the complexities of running the PSL, Khoza is pleased that the vision they had when they switched to the PSL model is being realised.

“FOOTBALL IS A CALLING. YOU GET MONEY IF THERE’S MONEY BEING INJECTED FROM SPONSORSHIPS. BUT PEOPLE COME IN THINKING THEY’LL MAKE MONEY WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING THE SACRIFICES INVOLVED.”

“When we started repositioning the PSL, it was about it being unpredictable – it is not just one match that matters. Towards the end of the season, everyone is on tenterhooks. It is not just one game that matters anymore. Now the supporters want to know about every team, they just don’t focus on the club they support,” he says.

And so, as another season gets underway, Irvin Khoza’s mission remains unchanged: protect the PSL, grow the brand, and ensure that the league’s hard-won reputation stays intact.

“I’ve built this with others over many years. I will not let anyone – anyone – mess it up,” he says, the Iron Duke in full.

Love him or loathe him, that’s the kind of resolve that has kept the PSL standing tall while others around it have fallen. And as long as Khoza sits in that chairman’s seat, you can be sure of one thing – the league’s badge will be guarded like a fortress.





‘WE CAN’T COMPETE WITH DOWNS, BUT WE WANT A TROPHY’

ERIC TINKLER has led Sekhukhune United through to the semi-final of the MTN8 following a brilliant come-from-behind 3-2 victory over TS Galaxy. He followed that up with a confidence-boosting 1-0 victory over Orlando Pirates in the league, and that has given rise to expectations that Babina Noko are going to have a brilliant season. Many are already suggesting they could be challenging for the runner-up berth, having previously ended in fourth the previous two seasons. Senior Soccer Writer MATSHELANE MAMABOLO spoke to Tinkler to look ahead to their semi-final clash against a Stellenbosch side he generally struggled against, as well as his outlook on the upcoming season.

MATSHELANE MAMABOLO: Thank you for your time. I just want us to look ahead to the new season. At the post-match conference of your MTN8 win over TS Galaxy, you spoke about how much you’d want to win the trophy. How does having taken Sekhukhune FC past the quarter-final for the first time in their history help towards that goal? What does it do to the psyche of the team going into the season?

ERIC TINKLER: Positive, very positive to obviously have won that game the way we won it. Being 2-0 down and to be able to come back and win showed that we have great character. I think one thing that we will look to try and do this season is to ensure that we have a lot more depth in our squad, and everybody needs to contribute. And I think all the subs that we brought on all contributed to us getting the results that we got.

MM: Yeah, they did. Speaking of depth, too often when people think depth, they think numbers, but you explained that it is not always that way. So what would be ideal for you this season? In terms of your squad, how big or how small are you looking for it to be?



“BEING 2-0 DOWN AND TO BE ABLE TO COME BACK AND WIN SHOWED THAT WE HAVE GREAT CHARACTER.”

ET: I think the size of the squad is extremely important. To work with a squad of 28 would be the ideal number. When you start going into 30, 31, 32, it just creates problems. We are sitting on 33 at the moment.

MM: Okay, so you’ll be doing a bit of trimming?

ET: Correct.

MM: So this season, like you are saying, the goal is to win the top



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eight competition, and you are now in the semis, down to play against Stellenbosch FC. What's your outlook on that match?

ET: Yeah, difficult team. They've always been a difficult team for me as a coach. My record against them is not great, especially from my time at Cape Town City when we used to play a lot of friendlies against them. They were one team I always struggled to play against, and even in the league, we struggled to get a win against them. So I'm hoping that things will be different this time around. So, let's hope my fortunes change now that I'm with Sekhukhune.

MM: Coach, from your playing days, you were a driven player who always wanted to win, and you've brought that into coaching. But now you are at a club that has never won anything. Surely, it can be a bit difficult to convince the players that it is doable. In a way though, you are helped by the fact that there are a few players who have won trophies in the past. But do you feel the rest of the players are buying into your objective, that the club can win something? Does the club itself believe it can be done?

ET: Yes, as you mentioned, we have players who have won things, the likes of [Thabang] Monare and the likes of Bradley Grobler and Miguel Timm. These guys have won leagues, won cup competitions, and hopefully, the knowledge and experience that they've had from their previous clubs, having won those trophies, will entice the other players to want to achieve what they've achieved. So, bringing that experience was very, very important, yeah. And the club is ambitious because they want to win trophies, so we are on the same page.

MM: The MTN8 is, of course, the main target starting now. But surely, you are dreaming of winning the other ones too?

ET: Yeah, obviously. But my mandate is to try and finish in the top three, to try and compete in the CAF competitions. We'd like to achieve that. The club has, over the past two seasons, finished fourth in the league, which is really fantastic for newcomers like Sekhukhune in such a short space of time in the PSL. To achieve that, to become more competitive, and obviously also give the club the opportunity of winning trophies, is our aim this campaign.

MM: What then will it take to be competitive?

ET: I think the right mindset, the right level of professionalism, a lot of sacrifice and a lot of discipline, especially when it comes to the league, because that's a long road. Yeah, the league is very difficult, but you need to remain positive. You've got to be



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capable of sacrificing a lot, especially this season, with a type of league that we're going to have with the congestion of the fixtures. Everybody needs to contribute, and everybody is going to get an opportunity to play. And when they get those opportunities, they need to grab it with both hands and obviously ensure that they help the club achieve those objectives.

MM: You do know that we go into every season with the main question being 'who can stop Sundowns?' You've been in the game for a long time. You've watched them dominate. What will it take to topple them?

ET: I think Sundowns are just on another level, to be brutally honest. Just look at the quality of the footballers they have and the financial power that they have. They can sign whomever they want. It's very difficult for us as a club to really compete at that level. We try our best to bring in the best possible players that we as a club can afford, and then we look to try and compete as best as we can against the likes of Sundowns. It's just the hard fact of football today. Even in England nowadays, you look at what clubs are paying for players, and – our club – we simply don't have that ability to be buying the best players in the country or the best players on the continent.



And obviously, that makes it a lot harder to compete against a club like Sundowns.

MM: But you give it a go, of course?

ET: Exactly, you try and give it as much as you can. I think the levels, the distances are not huge. There's always the possibility of getting a positive result against Sundowns.

MM: And there's that good old saying that you beat the rest that you can and that gets you closer to the likes of Sundowns...

ET: Exactly. A lot of times, people focus on what you do against Sundowns, but it's not beating Sundowns that's going to win you the league. You've got to be winning all your other games, and then you will be up there, competing for the league with Sundowns. So, I look back at [Orlando] Pirates last season, and in the beginning Pirates really did well. They went on a very positive run, and then they slipped up at a crucial stage against smaller teams.

MM: Coach, tell me, how hard is it to coach in South Africa? It looks like you guys essentially live out of suitcases. It always looks like the club bosses are way too impatient. They drop you guys just like that. How hard is it to be a coach in South Africa?

ET: I think it's probably one of the hardest countries to be a coach in currently. Yes, a lot of club owners are all ambitious, and they all want to win things and achieve things. It's a process, but sometimes clubs are not patient enough for that process to run its course; to know that you're going to get better and better season after season. In fact, if we go back to Pitso Mosimane in the beginning, it took him a couple of seasons for his Sundowns to start dominating the league. But the club's being impatient? That's the harsh reality. And as coaches, we've just accepted that. There's not much else we can do. All we can really do is to try and do the best that we possibly can, to try and achieve the objectives that the clubs have. But it can be frustrating, yeah.

MM: No doubt, because as a coach, you have your objectives. You're at a club looking at building long-term, and then boom, it ends because certain results didn't go well. Of course, you have ambitions, but how difficult then is it for a guy like you to be able to plan and say, 'you know, in five years' time, I would like to achieve this', because at clubs, that is not something you can really be sure of? You know, as a coach, you can't really plan long term.

ET: You're 100 percent correct. As a coach, you can't really plan long-term. Everything is about the next game and the next game. Can I get a positive



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result? The next game, the next win is the most important one. And at the beginning of my career as a coach, I struggled with that. I struggled with that pressure you obviously have week after week. But through the years and the experience that I've gained as a coach now, I just take it game by game, just go and try and win that next game. That's the most important thing, yeah. But it can be hard.

MM: It's tantamount to you living for the next day as it is. You've been a head coach for almost 12 years, but you've been in the industry for much longer because you've been an assistant coach prior to that. Are you still enjoying it?

ET: I am still enjoying it. You know, it's like my wife says when I am unemployed, I become 'a very grumpy man'. I enjoy the coaching. I enjoy training sessions. I enjoy seeing young players getting their opportunities and making their debuts, and moving on to better things. Those are the things that also make me happy. Sometimes it's not just about winning trophies, it's about changing someone's life. So, I still have that enjoyment, and I think I still can contribute a lot to the local brand of football.

MM: Many would say you are already successful because we judge



coaches by the trophies you've won, and you've already won two. But clearly you don't see it that way yet. How do you look at your career so far?

ET: I've done fairly well in the league, finishing third with Cape Town City in the first season, winning the Telkom Knockout and then finishing second. Worst position was finishing fifth at City. Winning the [MTN8] trophy at SuperSport, giving the likes of Sipho Mbule his debut, and giving those younger players like Teboho [Mokoena] opportunities as well. I also have fond memories of Orlando Pirates – Confed Cup final, Champions League final, and Nedbank [Cup] final. There were quite a lot of success stories, if you like. And that's always been my ambition, to produce quality young players and give them an opportunity in life, and obviously also to try and win competitions and trophies. And I've experienced the highs and the lows with Maritzburg United, saving them from relegation and then reaching Telkom [Knockout] final the following year against Mamelodi Sundowns, and we finished seventh in the league, so that was changing the fortunes of the club. So, I have a certain amount of pride in what I've achieved. But do I think I could achieve a lot more? Yes.

MM: And you still have that opportunity because, as you say, the passion is still there, the hunger is still there. But Sekhukhune United are known to pull the trigger very quickly. How is your relationship with the management, and are you getting comfort that they're the kind of people who are going to allow you to do your thing and be patient with you?

ET: Correct. I think, obviously, when the results are positive, relationships are good. If results are not coming, then those relationships get strained. But I've just got to worry about, like I said to you, winning my next game. Whatever happens will happen. That's just a harsh reality, but it is not gonna change me as a coach. Every day I come in, I plan. I work really,



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really hard as a coach. I try to be as professional as I possibly can in the environment that I'm working in. And one thing I've always pride(d) myself in is that no one could ever point a finger at me for lack of work, or lack of intent. As I said, in the beginning of my career, did I take these things personally? Yes, I did. I used to take it very personally. But I don't take things personally anymore. I understand the reasoning behind it, and I move on.

MM: And you seem to have now moved on to a place where you can achieve something special. Good luck for the season, coach.

ET: Thank you, sir.



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Wafa season**



‘SIWELELE IS A CULTURE & A WAY OF LIFE’

There is certainly a nostalgic energy when LEHLOHONOLO SEEMA speaks about his new club Siwelele FC, its roots, and the supporters. Siwelele are the ‘new’ side in the Betway Premiership this coming season after buying the top-flight status of the now-defunct SuperSport United. Matsatsantsa a Pitori endured a tough campaign last time out, saving their status on the very last day of a dramatic 2024/25 season. Siwelele, though, is not the defunct Bloemfontein Celtic. It certainly has attachments and even the colours and the home stadium, which is where the 45-year-old coach started his PSL career in 1998, spending eight years there before leaving for Orlando Pirates in 2006. He then started his coaching career at Celtic in 2016. Celtic’s status was sold to Royal AM in 2021, and it rebranded and relocated to KwaZulu-Natal. The emergence of Siwelele has been seen as a revival of Celtic but it’s a Celtic 2.0 and not the original. Seema speaks to iDiski Times writer LETHABO KGANYAGO in this edition with an almost tangible warmth about the resurrection of the brand, what it means to him to see Free State province getting a topflight-side again, how he’d like his players to connect with the fan base – who have already showed the team love as they beat Golden Arrows on the opening weekend – and his biggest mandate being to make the fans happy by matching their energy on the field.

Lethabo Kganyago: Coach, we thank you so much for your time. How’s pre-season been at the new club, and how are you doing?

Lehlohonolo Seema: It’s nice, and I wish I could say I had pre-season, but I did not have. I had a few weeks to work with the players. The first day I had with the players, I would say ‘Hey player’ (chuckles) – I didn’t know their names. However, it’s nice to be back, especially to something that I like, something that I’m passionate about. And also to be working with the team that at least gave me a breakthrough for me to be a professional player, and also to be a professional coach. It all started there.

So this, it’s a good thing that’s happening at the moment. I can only say, I thank God, and yeah, I’m looking forward to it. We are already at work, and things are starting to move. We can’t wait for the games.

LK: To reconnect with a club that’s important to you, what does this mean for you, and what does Free State mean to you as well?

LS: I think Free State is my home. You know from Lesotho, you can take a horse, and then you ride the horse, you’ll get to Bloem [Bloemfontein]. That’s how close you are to Bloem. It’s close to my heart. There are a lot of people that I first saw in 1998 when I first stepped into a professional setup, and those people, they were young kids. During the unveiling of the coach there, I said a lot of people in that hall, when I played, they were in the kids’ corner. But now, today, when we meet again, they’re old people now. I’m going to ask them to create another kids’ corner, because Siwelele is a culture, Siwelele is a way of life, and may it forever evolve and forever continue. The faces that I saw there when they were young, they saw me when I was young, and up until now, we are meeting again. So really, it was a good feeling and a huge responsibility that has been put over my shoulders. And I really want to thank my chairman, Mr Calvin Le’John, for trusting me with this big project, because you can understand how hungry the people of the Free State were. And now to see the green and white team playing there and calling it in their own, and I want to say, Chairman, I thank him. I know that it’s God. It’s not even about being better than whoever, but I want to say that it’s mercy and grace. So forever I’ll be grateful to my God, I’ll forever pray to him. The chairman we met, we sat and we are looking forward to keeping this team for long in this league and try to make it big and one of the teams that in future can be counted amongst the best in the country.



LK: And Coach, in your conversations, what does he want from the first season?

LS: Make the supporters happy by keeping the team in the Betway Premiership, the rest will follow because, as you know, we are still in Johannesburg. So people can't wait to see the team, to point at their clubhouse and see players each and every morning, going to training, coming back from training, meeting with them in the streets and the malls. That is my mandate to make sure that this team next season, it goes back to Bloemfontein and in a PSL status.

LK: Coach, in terms of what you inherited, with the squad, are you happy with the players that you have found?

LS: I'm happy. I mean, look at my track record wherever I have gone, I always work with the players that I have, and I always get the best out of the players. And if you check the last three teams that I worked with, some of the players, they were very unknown players and look at them, some of them, they are even in the national team. I will always take pride that, at least as a coach, you know that you have contributed if you can change a player from where he was and become a better player. That is coaching. Coaching is not about tactics, but making players better, and I'm very, very happy. Of course, there will be some beef-ups that we need to do, because this is a big league. But I'm happy with the youngsters that I found there, and I call them experienced players, because they have one season, some of them behind them, some have got two-and-a-half or something. So it's okay, we're going to continue, we're going to fight, we're going to see how it goes. To answer your question, I'm happy with the squad that I have, and I'm happy with the guys that will come and add value. I'm sure in due time, the club will make those announcements, like who is there and who is not there. As you know that SuperSport lost a lot of good players, also we had to make sure that we try and make sure that we replace, and make sure that we are competitive come the beginning of the season.

LK: Coach, you talked about young players, and we know how SuperSport was big on youth development and structures. That culture, is that

“MY MANDATE IS TO MAKE SURE THAT THIS TEAM NEXT SEASON, IT GOES BACK TO BLOEMFONTEIN AND IN A PSL STATUS.”

something you want to maintain?

LS: Of course, it's all the clubs I have worked with. That is why I said, as a coach, if you can improve a player from point A to B or C or D, you're happy, and it has never been a problem for me to work with youngsters. I'm just happy that the supporters will see the team at home, and they will support the team. I just said to the players, please, let's respect the supporters, the passion that they have on the stands, can we also match it in the field of play? We will lose games, we'll draw games, but when we lose or draw, they must see that we were fighting or the other team was really better than us. So really it's a good feeling. My hair is still standing when I talk about those supporters because of the love, the welcome they showed me when we went there. It's something that I'm looking forward to, to work with the young players that I found there.

LK: When you look at the strength of your squad, I want to ask if you were surprised with what happened with SuperSport last season, where they finished and what will make Siwelele better than that?

LS: Look, this is a new team. You are calling it Siwelele because it's really Siwelele, it's not SuperSport, of course, because the players are from SuperSport, but they have changed, even our colours have changed. So definitely, the only thing that we can do is to make sure that we improve the position that we were last season, which is position 14. So we need to do better than that. And I think that is not a difficult mandate, and we'll push forward and make sure that we get it.

LK: You have Andre Arendse there and Grant Johnson as well. How is it working with them?

LS: It made things better and easier for

me to get to know the players and get to know them better, and work because I did not have enough time. I had only a weekend and some few days, or maybe you can call it two weeks. And yeah, we are working nicely and they are keeping me up to speed with certain players so that I can understand them and they get to understand me. So yeah, I'm happy that I've got a lot of experience next to me, and we are looking forward to work, to have a good relationship, and we are looking forward to a very good season.

LK: You said your mandate is to make the fans happy, but I listened to your Chairman on the radio the other day, and he spoke about the top eight, because that's something that has not been difficult for you at previous clubs. Is that too far ahead to think about?

LS: Can we be position 13, then when we are position 13, let's see how far we can go. But of course, the Chairman, like you heard, is an ambitious person and the Chairman and the supporters, they will be very happy if we can, in our first season, finish in the top eight bracket. But we don't want to put a lot of pressure on our players. We really, really need to make sure that we do better than what we did last season. So we'll take one step at a time, but I can tell you that if anything is there, any game that is there in front of us, we are going to try and compete and make sure that we challenge for anything that will be in the league.

LK: You spent some time in Lesotho recently, how did that time revive you in terms of wanting more or just calming you and recentering yourself?

LS: There I wasn't... There is still a head coach there, maybe it came out that I'm coaching in Lesotho. I wasn't coaching. That team is the team that I played for, Bantu Football Club. Celtic got me from that team. So it's something that is a norm that I've been doing since I was still in Bloemfontein. Whenever I have time, I always go there, and then we share ideas as coaches. They still had their technical team, it's just that maybe people were just excited and they took it in a wrong way, and the way it came out, it's like I was coaching in Lesotho. I was just helping there because I had time to go home and then see other things at home. And I've also visited my parents' [graves]. It was nice touching base because you know my parents are no more in this world but I had to go there and see them and try and talk to them, tell them I'm still alright. So when I'm there, the team asked me if I could help the boys and the technical team while I was there. So I said, 'Why not, no problem'. So it was a good thing because I really never been out that much and they helped me, the players and the management, and the technical team. We shared ideas, and it was nice to be home because I'm not always at home. It was a really nice thing to do.

LK: Coach, will you also be exploring talents from Bloemfontein? I mean, we know for the better part of this first season, you are Jo'burg-based. But is there a part of you that also wants to



“LOOK AT MY TRACK RECORD, WHEREVER I HAVE GONE, I ALWAYS WORK WITH THE PLAYERS THAT I HAVE AND I ALWAYS GET THE BEST OUT OF THE PLAYERS.”

tap into the talent in Bloemfontein?

LS: Let me put it straight to you, the talent will be tapped on in the Free State. Let us not say Bloemfontein, let's say in the Free State. Of course, whenever I have time, whenever we are off, there are a lot of competitions that are happening, and my chairman and the board have agreed that you and your scouting team, wherever you want to go and check the talent and Free State is big. Definitely not Bloemfontein only, but the whole Free State, we will try and get to check the talent because for sure from next season, there will be a lot of movement, and we'll go to Bloemfontein, then the Diski team will be there. Then they will start, maybe there are other projects that will come, but definitely in the Free State, you'll see a lot of talent being scouted. And it will be nice to have the DDC team with most of the players from the Free State because it gives other kids hope, and that is all what we want, so that we revive football in the Free State.

LK: Coach, thank you so much, and all the best for the season.



SAPULA PREPARES FOR SUNDOWNS LADIES’ REDEMPTION

Record Hollywoodbets Super League champions Mamelodi Sundowns Ladies look slightly different heading into the 2025 CAF Women’s Champions League – COSAFA qualifiers. The regional qualifiers are scheduled for 22-31 August at the University of Johannesburg’s AW Muller Stadium. The two-time African champions will open their 2025 account in Group A against Ntopwa FC of Malawi on the opening day of the tournament, then they will meet debutants Zesco Ndola Girls two days later and conclude the group stage campaign against another newcomer in Beauties FC of Namibia on 26 August.

Last year, Sundowns got a bye from the regional qualifiers by virtue of being defending CAF Women’s Champions League champions at the time – a move that opened space for the University of Western Cape (UWC), who had finished behind Sundowns in the league that season. Banyana ba style’s current head coach, Godfrey Sapula, was part of the advisory team for the side at the continental finals in Morocco, and he says in hindsight that not playing the qualifiers hurt Sundowns eventually at the finals, where they didn’t get out of the group.

“Getting a bye in the COSAFA qualifiers last season looked like a good move because the team qualified straight to go into the CAF Champions League as defending champions,” said Sapula to iDiski Times.

“But looking at it in hindsight, you get a feeling that the team missed a very important step in terms of better preparation for the CAF Champions League [finals]. And I hope that this season we’ll be able to do well in the COSAFA, which will prepare the team even better for the CAF Champions League.”

This year’s qualifiers have also had a record entry with 10 clubs. Seven sides, Gaborone United, Ntopwa, Herentals Queens, Young Buffaloes, Costa do Sol, Olympic De Moroni and Sapula’s team are making a return, while it will be a maiden event for the other three – Zesco, Kick4Life Women and Beauties. The group winners at the qualifiers, along with the best second-placed side, will qualify for the semi-finals. Group A has four teams, and the results for the side that finishes bottom of this pool will not be considered in terms of qualification for the knockout phase.

For the former Sundowns midfielder, the increased number of clubs is testament to the growth of the women’s game in the Southern region. However, he wants his charges to dominate and win to book a ticket to the continental finals later this year.

“With new teams that have qualified for the COSAFA from other countries, I think for me, it’s a display of the level of growth in the COSAFA region,” added the 51-year-old mentor.

“For me, it’s a sign of an improved level of competitiveness in the COSAFA region, and we should not underestimate any opponent. We should give them respect so that we are able to profile these teams and make sure that we can prepare the best way possible and make sure that we come up with a decent level to compete and try to dominate and win this COSAFA.”

The club has lost some of their experienced players like Andisiwe Mgcoyi and Miche Minnies, which has made way for promotions of youngsters from the development ranks like Munashe Mugwara and Jabulile Mbatha, while they have also gone into the market, acquiring the

services of Banyana Banyana stars Noxolo Cesane and Ronnel Donnelly.

The coach expressed that it’s a club policy to invest in the youth, and he will be trying ways to give youngsters a taste of continental football. He believes the qualifiers are a great opportunity to accelerate development.

“With the young players that we have in our squad and the players that we recently promoted from our academy structures, I think it’s going to be very important that we find a way to give them the minutes in this COSAFA,” continued the former Orlando Pirates man.

“To give them the experience, I think it will actually help to accelerate their growth and development because we hold that responsibility to make sure that we invest, you know, in our youth. And these are the players that are obviously the future of this team moving forward. So it would be nice that we are able to find a way to make sure that they do play and get minutes so that they can get this valuable experience moving forward.”

Sapula has overseen 16 league matches, won 12, drew two and lost two, though the side is at the top of the Hollywoodbets Super League log with 38 points. As much as the team is in transition, the coach says the style of play hasn’t changed, and he has allowed players to show their versatility.

“The playing style hasn’t changed that much from last season. We just tried to adjust the formation a bit, because at Sundowns, you’ve got to stick with the philosophy and the culture,” said Sapula.

“You’ve got to play with total control and dominance, however, we wanted to create utility players because players have shown us that they are so versatile. And we thought it’s important to unlock that capacity from the players, though, we know that it will come with a little bit of challenges at some stage in terms of team cohesion and all that. But we know that we got to



“THE PLAYING STYLE HASN’T CHANGED THAT MUCH FROM LAST SEASON. WE JUST TRIED TO ADJUST THE FORMATION A BIT, BECAUSE AT SUNDOWNS, YOU’VE GOT TO STICK WITH THE PHILOSOPHY AND THE CULTURE.”

trust the process, because we believe that it will make sure that in the near future the expected outcome will be a very positive one for the players and for the team.”

For Sundowns, it will be important to win the qualifiers to go and rectify last year’s showing at the finals after not being able to get out of their group for the first time since the inception of the CAF Women’s Champions League.



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10 PROMISING PLAYERS WHO COULD STEAL THE SHOW

With the 2025/26 season officially underway, ROB DELPORT takes a closer look at 10 exciting players who could make noise in South African football this campaign. While all of these talents have already had a taste of professional action, they're still on the rise — and this could be the season they truly announce themselves. What they all have in common is undeniable potential and glimpses of brilliance that suggest this could be their time to shine and could be the names you'll want to remember as the season unfolds.



Mbekezeli Mbokazi - Orlando Pirates
19 September 2005 - 1 Bafana cap
All senior club career stats: 21 games, 1 goal, 1 assist

Mbokazi, 19, is rapidly emerging as one of the most promising central defenders in South African football, and his rise through the ranks has drawn inevitable comparisons to the legendary Mbulelo Mabizela. Like Mabizela, Mbokazi is a Zulu-speaking talent who exudes confidence, composure, and leadership well beyond his years. Still in the early stages of his professional career, the young centre-back has already begun to turn heads with his commanding presence at the back and an uncanny ability to read the game. Mbokazi was a key member of Raymond Mdaka's U20 team, but missed out on the AFCON earlier this year because he was already a key player in the Pirates' first team. What sets Mbokazi apart is not just his physical attributes or defensive awareness, but his maturity. Coaches within the Pirates set-up have praised his natural leadership qualities, and it's no surprise that he's already worn the captain's armband at junior levels. While the comparisons to Mabizela are flattering, Mbokazi appears determined to carve out his own path. In a team as ambitious and high-profile as Pirates, having a composed figure at the heart of defence is invaluable. Mbokazi's rise suggests that he could one day become a long-term leader at the club, perhaps even emulating and surpassing the legacy of the man he's so often compared to. For now, though, he continues to grow with every appearance, showing that the Buccaneers may have unearthed not only a future star but a central pillar around which a winning team can be built.



Siyabonga Mabena - Mamelodi Sundowns
18 February 2007 - U20 international
All senior club career stats: 21 games, 2 goals

Mabena's return to action for Mamelodi Sundowns couldn't have come at a better time. The gifted 18-year-old teenager marked his comeback from injury in emphatic fashion, scoring in the opening match of the 2025/26 season and reminding everyone why he's considered one of South Africa's brightest young talents. Calm on the ball, clever in his movement, and fearless in front of goal, Mabena's performance was a glimpse of the talent Sundowns have been nurturing carefully over the past few seasons. His recent injury set-back had come at a frustrating moment in his career, ruling him out of South Africa's U20 Africa Cup of Nations campaign – a tournament the national team went on to win. Though he watched from the sidelines, there's no doubt the former School of Excellence star was proud of the achievement, and now, all eyes are on his likely inclusion in the squad for the FIFA U20 World Cup. His creativity and attacking flair could offer the team another dimension on the global stage, and after recovering fully, he's eager to make up for lost time. Still just a teenager, Mabena already carries himself with remarkable composure and a growing sense of purpose. At a club like Sundowns, where competition is fierce and expectations high, he's shown that he belongs. With the right development and continued focus, this could be the season where Mabena shifts from promising prospect to key contributor – not just for Sundowns, but potentially for South African football at large.



Kutlwano Letlhaku - Mamelodi Sundowns
25 March 2006 - U20 international
All senior club career stats: 20 games, 3 goals, 6 assists

Letlhaku, 19, is quickly emerging as one of the most exciting wide players in South African football. The Mamelodi Sundowns winger, fresh off a triumphant U20 AFCON campaign and playing at the FIFA Club World Cup, has returned for the new season with confidence and momentum. Known for his pace, flair, and ability to beat defenders in one-on-one situations, Letlhaku brings a different kind of threat to the pitch – dynamic, direct, and fearless in possession. He now looks every bit like a player ready to challenge for more minutes at one of the most competitive clubs in the league. While Siyabonga Mabena often dazzles with his creativity in central areas, Letlhaku offers width, balance, and cutting edge from the flanks. The two youngsters represent different but

equally promising aspects of Sundowns' next generation, and Letlhaku's recent performances suggest he's ready to carve out his own spotlight. With his confidence soaring and his skill set evolving, the 2025/26 season could be the one where he steps firmly into the limelight, but whether it will be at Chloorkop remains a question, with European clubs believed to be circling and ready to swoop.



Vuyo Letlapa - Sekhukhune United
8 August 2003 - 5 Bafana Bafana caps
All senior club career stats: 29 games, 5 assists

Letlapa, 22, has quietly become one of the standout young full-backs in South African football, and his performances for Sekhukhune United have not gone unnoticed. The 22-year-old left-back combines defensive discipline with a natural attacking instinct, making him a constant presence up and down the flank. His consistency in the Betway Premiership last season has sparked interest from European clubs, with scouts reportedly keeping a close eye on his progress. What makes Letlapa particularly appealing is his versatility and game intelligence. He's not just a defender who overlaps – he reads the game well, picks his moments to push forward, and delivers with accuracy in the final third. Defensively, he rarely gets caught out of position and that balance between risk and responsibility has made him one of Sekhukhune's most trusted players in big matches. If the move abroad materialises, Letlapa could become the next South African export to test himself on a larger stage. But for now, his focus remains on helping Sekhukhune build on their strong domestic campaign and possibly mount a continental push. Whether in the PSL or Europe, Letlapa's ceiling is high – and he's proving with each game that he has both the skill and mentality to reach it.



Siviwe Nkwali - Stellenbosch
15 June 2005 - U20 international
All senior club career stats: 25 games, 1 assist

Nkwali's journey over the past year has been anything but smooth, yet the young right-back has come through it with his reputation firmly intact. After choosing

not to renew his contract with Cape Town Spurs in late 2024, the 20-year-old found himself iced out by his childhood club for the remainder of the season – six long months without a first-team appearance. For many players, that could have been a setback too far. But Nkwali kept his head down, kept working, and when the call came for the U20 Africa Cup of Nations, he didn't just show up – he excelled. In a show of versatility and maturity, Nkwali was deployed at centre-back throughout South Africa's victorious U20 AFCON campaign, playing a key role in a defence that stood firm on the way to lifting the trophy in May. His performances earned praise for both his composure under pressure and his reading of the game – traits that have long made him one of the standout defenders in his age group. It was a clear message to clubs and critics alike: freezing him out hadn't dulled his talent. Now signed by Stellenbosch, Nkwali has a fresh opportunity to reignite his career at a club known for nurturing young talent and Stellies look to have pulled off a smart bit of business, considering the departures of Olivier Toure and U20 AFCON Player of the Tournament, Tylon Smith. With his hunger to prove himself and a full pre-season under his belt, Nkwali is poised to make an impact. If he can find rhythm and consistency, this move could be the launchpad for the next big leap in his career – perhaps even to Europe in the near future.



Tebogo Mashigo - AmaZulu
1 December 2002
All senior club career stats: 11 games, 2 goals

Tebogo Mashigo, 22, is quickly becoming a name to watch at AmaZulu. The centre forward offers a spark in the final third that's hard to come by. Since being promoted by Usuthu, he's brought energy and flair to the side, showing flashes of the playmaker he could become. His ability to glide past defenders, pick out passes, and link up with others makes him a valuable asset in a squad looking to establish a more dynamic attacking identity. What sets Mashigo apart is not just his technical ability, but his confidence and composure under pressure. Whether it's threading a pass through a crowded midfield or taking on defenders one-on-one, he doesn't shy away from responsibility. That mentality is starting to win over fans and coaches alike, especially in a team where consistent creative output has often been lacking. At 22, he still has room to grow – but the early signs are promising. If he continues on this trajectory, Mashigo could become a central figure in AmaZulu's rebuild under their new leadership. With more minutes and trust from the technical team, he has the tools to become one of the standout attackers in the league. For now, though,

it's about building momentum, staying consistent, and proving he can deliver week in and week out. AmaZulu may have unearthed a gem, and the best may still be to come.



Siviwe Magidigidi - Siwelele FC
1 July 2005
All senior club career stats: 27 games, 2 goals, 2 assists

Siviwe Magidigidi, 20, couldn't have asked for a better start to the new era of Siwelele FC. The 20-year-old striker, a product of the renowned Ubuntu Academy, marked the first day of the season in Bloemfontein with a clinical brace, immediately endearing himself to the local supporters. His sharp movement and composed finishing were a reminder that he's not just a prospect anymore – he could be ready to be a consistent match-winner in the Premiership. Now in his third season of professional football, Magidigidi has already experienced the demands of the top flight during two campaigns with SuperSport United. The club's transformation into Siwelele may have changed the badge on his shirt, but his role as a focal point in attack looks set to grow. He has shown the ability to stretch defences, press with energy, and find pockets of space where others can't, giving Siwelele a dynamic threat up front. If he can build on his flying start and stay consistent, this could be the season where the young forward not only cements his place as Siwelele's main striker but also begins to attract attention beyond South Africa's borders.



Langelihle Phili - Stellenbosch
21 January 2005 - U20 international
All senior club career stats: 34 games, 3 goals, 1 assist

Langelihle 'Major' Phili, 20, has hit the ground running in the 2025/26 season, continuing his upward trajectory after helping South Africa win the U20 AFCON earlier this year. The Stellenbosch winger opened his account in style, scoring against AmaZulu – the very club where he spent part of his youth career. Phili has long been tipped as one of the most exciting young talents in South African football, and he's now starting to deliver on that promise. Known for his pace, close control, and direct approach, the winger brings a fearless attitude every time he steps on the pitch. Phili finds himself in the perfect environment to grow. He's already forming a strong connection with the club's attacking unit and looks increasingly comfortable in senior football. If he maintains this form,

'Major' could play a major role – literally and figuratively – in Stellies' ambitions this season, and perhaps even earn a look-in at the next level.



Neo Rapoo - Siwelele FC
12 August 2005 - U20 international
All senior club career stats: 23 games, 2 assists

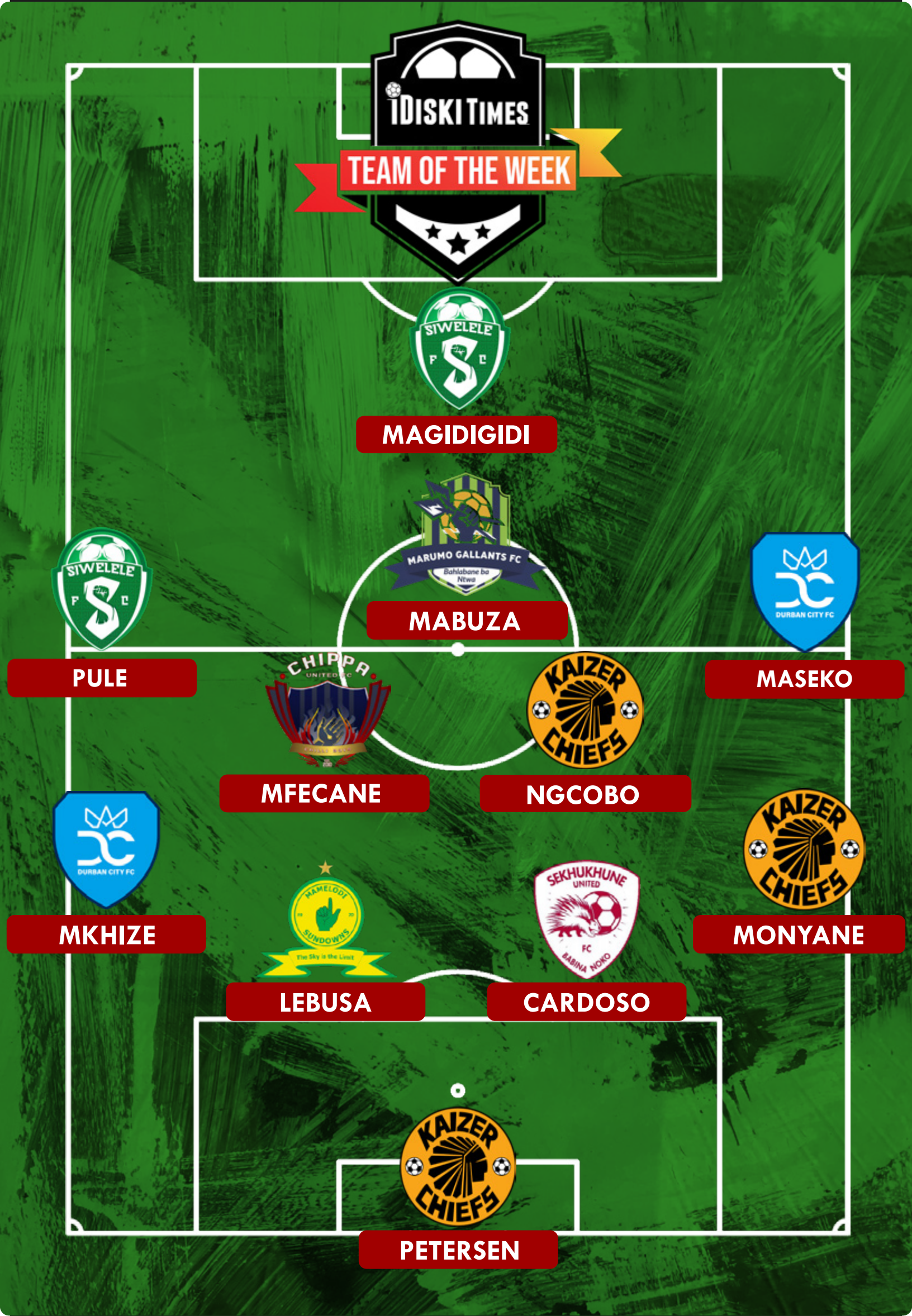
Neo Rapoo, 20, fresh off captaining South Africa to glory at the U20 AFCON, is ready to take his chances at Siwelele this season, and already has his first assist of the campaign. The left-back wore the armband for much of the AFCON tournament, leading by example with his composure, tactical awareness, and relentless work ethic. Having come through the ranks at SuperSport, Rapoo now finds himself at the heart of a new project with Siwelele – a club attempting to merge heritage and ambition in its new identity. His move feels symbolic: a young leader guiding a club also in transition. With so much flux around him, Rapoo's calm head and natural leadership could prove crucial as Siwelele look to build a new legacy in the Premiership while honouring the past. Technically sound and tactically disciplined, Rapoo is the kind of full-back modern football demands. He's equally comfortable joining the attack and even played as an attacking winger for AmaZulu. Siwelele may have more than just a future star – they may have their leader for seasons to come.



Ntlonelo Bomelo - Richards Bay
28 September 2005 - U20 international
All senior club career stats: 17 games, 2 goals

At just 20 years old, Ntlonelo Bomelo is one of the bright young sparks in the modest Richards Bay set-up, a player tipped to lead the next generation of local striking talent. With sharp instincts and an eye for goal, the lanky striker has steadily climbed the ranks, having impressed for the club's development side before earning his shot in the senior team. Bomelo brings energy, hunger, and a sense of unpredictability up front. While he's still learning the rigours of top-flight football, his movement off the ball and willingness to press defenders have already caught the attention of coaches and scouts alike. He's showing glimpses of the type of striker who thrives with confidence and rhythm – something Richards Bay will be hoping to nurture further this season, especially after Yanela Mbuthuma's departure to Orlando Pirates. If given the platform and patience, Ntlonelo Bomelo could well become the club's next success story.

PREMIERSHIP TEAM OF THE WEEK (9-10 AUGUST 2025)



* BASED ON SOFAScore RATINGS



ACE OF THE WEEK: GIFT LINKS

For the second time in less than a month, this week's iDiski Times Ace of the Week goes to AGF's South African Gift Links. The Bafana Bafana international continued his fine start to the 2025/26 campaign as he got on the scoresheet in Aarhus' 3-2 victory over FC Copenhagen last Friday. The 26-year-old, who recently signed a long-term extension with the Danish SuperLiga outfit, was on target from a set-piece and helped set up a big away win for his team over the early log leaders. AGF moved up to sixth on the table with the victory.



The Drawing Board with Moritz Kossmann

This week, we continue The Drawing Board series with iDiski Times' coaching guru MORITZ KOSSMANN.

Born in Germany, but having spent most of his life in South Africa, he came to the fore while working at the Ubuntu Football Academy. Moritz was then the head coach of Cape Town City's DStv

Diski Challenge team for the 2023/24 campaign and also in charge of the club youth's department. In June 2024, Kossmann became part of the technical team at the Austrian club SV Ried.

His columns have proved increasingly popular, and have been republished (and translated) worldwide. He has also provided content for one of the world-leading tactics blogs - spielverlagerung.com.

Freedom vs Structure

After looking in detail at a training practice last week including several considerations around that practice with some possible variations, we will look at a more general topic this week, which is that of freedom vs structure in general in football coaching. This is something that we have looked at from several angles on this platform, and as several readers will know will always encourage a strong degree of freedom and decision making powers towards the players themselves. We will look at this through several different lenses in this week's column.

A very hot topic currently in the coaching world is that of freedom vs structure. Some coaches give their players a lot of very detailed instructions of what to do in each moment of the game, while others (perhaps most famously Carlo Ancelotti) give their players something which perhaps seems like complete freedom in each moment of the game. What is perhaps the golden middle on this particular consideration?

The debate between freedom and structure in many ways reflects where the game is going next. After 2 decades where coaches like Mourinho or Guardiola led a more 'tactical', coach-driven era, many are now questioning whether the game should be put (back) in the hands of the players. A version of this discussion is often framed as "Positional vs. Relational, but the bigger question is about control vs. autonomy. It is about who really shapes what happens on the pitch. A simple guideline on this is the following: the only thing that exists on the football pitch are the decisions of the players. The game has always been in their hands – we just reached a point where we convinced ourselves that it was a coach's game. Rene Maric once said, "Tactics do not exist." Historically, football, up until about 2010, was more chaotic. As Martin Rafelt pointed out in his highly recommended seminar 'The Future of Football', the game was often driven by long balls and speculative balls into the box. Build-ups happened mainly from 2nd balls, and the game had loose positional elements (the formation) and spontaneous relational elements (improvised movement and actions around the ball). Perhaps this was closer to 'complete freedom' in each moment of the game. This provided an opportunity for coaches to bring order and dominance through clear models. When Mourinho introduced Tactical Periodisation to the mainstream, or Guardiola brought in Positional Play, they added clear 'game models' that shaped everything the team should do in every moment of the game. Their teams could dominate with clear positions, patterns, and plans...in other words: the coach's system. These ideas were incredibly effective, and rightly celebrated. But they also elevated the coach to the spotlight – as if matches were played by a grandmaster and their chess pieces, rather than good players making sense of the moment. There's no doubt that this kind of coaching can improve players and teams. Better ideas for how the team should play football matter – otherwise, we wouldn't have a role. But perhaps we went too far toward control. At some point, the coach's ego became too central. We began preparing players with pre-set answers about where to be and what to do, when the game is truly about new and unique questions emerging every second. Think of the best moments you've seen in football – the most brilliant dribbles,

the most unexpected passes, the defensive interventions that saved a match. How many of those were exactly planned? Most of the time, players are solving unpredictable situations based on what they perceive in front of them. They are not recalling Slide #7 from the pre-match presentation. They are reading situations and adapting. That's why the answer isn't total structure or complete freedom – it's something more: guidance. We shouldn't be giving players rigid scripts, nor should we abandon them to chaos. Our job is to guide their perception of the game. To help them see the game better. Because what they see shapes what they decide – and what they decide shapes what we see as coaches. Our plans don't exist on the pitch. Our plan is often met with opponents who make their own decisions and don't want to follow what we planned for them to do. Our players must perceive every new moment and execute what is available to them – we just influence what they are looking for. In practical terms, that means coaching through guiding principles, not plans. Our coaching should serve the perception of the players, not replace it. Their freedom should be intentional, not random. We should focus on how we influence what the players are paying attention to. The best teams we know are not the most rehearsed – they are the most attuned to new situations. They perceive, adapt, and respond faster and better than the opponent. That is what wins games. Thus, coaching today must be about creating the conditions for intelligent, perceptive, and adaptable footballers within a team that has effective guiding principles.

The next question we have to ask ourselves is how we transfer the above elaborated perspective into the theory session/analysis setting, both with the team and with individual players, and how can we shape our approach in this traditionally more coach-centric setting to help develop our players' responsiveness and ability to make decisions.

Just as in training, video meetings are not about the coach transferring their 'tactical knowledge' into the player. They're about discussing together to shape what the player sees – so they can recognise situations and respond intelligently in the moment. In other words: the goal is not to dictate their decisions, but to improve the knowledge that is already within them. We do not coach their actions; we coach their attention. In team settings, especially, video should create a shared understanding. If multiple players can recognise the same situation and arrive at similar solutions quickly, they can solve problems collectively – which is very difficult to defend. Take a wide player and



striker, for example: if the winger receives a pass behind the fullback and both players perceive that the centre-backs are high, they may both see the opportunity for a quick low cross between the defenders and the goalkeeper. If the striker understands this at the same time the winger does, they will make the sprint – not because of a pre-planned pattern, but because they both read the game in the same way in the same moment and want to score a goal. That is the real value of group analysis meetings: not memorising patterns but aligning perceptions. That is why it can be a great idea that all meetings have discussion and not lectures. The players should contribute, ask questions, and share what they see and feel on the pitch in the moment. Especially in group settings, the goal is not to point out mistakes and retroactively provide correct solutions – it is about understanding what each player is thinking and why. From there, we can guide attention toward cues, discuss principles, and more. That is what builds collective intelligence for future problems, not just obedience. Ultimately, video meetings are a tool to help players see better, not remember more. It’s about improving the ability to read situations, understand each other, and act in our shared principles – not rehearsed patterns. This way, they can act with intelligence in real time.

Finally, we will finish off by playing devil’s advocate on our own ideas. It is all well and good to attempt to develop the above in the long term, but we also face a tough reality. The tough reality is that football is an extremely results-driven industry, and that in order to keep our jobs, we need said results quickly. Most coaches believe that the best way to do that is by very quickly introducing a rigid structure that aligns everyone, then later on, perhaps opening this up. How might the more open approach fit in with this is perhaps the most critical question of all.

The reality of football, especially at the highest levels, is that results are demanded immediately. If you are stepping into a team that has been struggling, the instinct is often to grab tight control over every aspect of how the team functions. This can provide short-term clarity and intensity, and it often stabilises things quickly. Many coaches have found success this way, especially when the team was previously disorganised or lacking intensity. So, any coaching idea must hold

up under pressure and be effective not only in theory but in high-stakes and urgent situations. Alignment is most likely the fastest path to results, but clarity is not the same as rigidity. You can achieve alignment through clear principles and shared attention without immediately resorting to a rigid system. Rigidity may create order, but it often kills adaptability. Experience shows that it is the ability to build clarity around what matters most – quickly – that gives you a stable starting point. In fact, the fastest way most managers improve their team isn’t by structure alone – it is by selecting a few new players who make better decisions on the pitch. Better decisions in unpredictable situations always have the most immediate impact on the team. To generate early stability, one can begin from core principles – ideas that prepare the players for the kinds of situations they will face again and again. If you bring structure to a struggling team and they begin following rigid instructions, they may look more organised at first. But since no script fits every situation, these teams still arrive in key moments underprepared. On the other hand, if you anchor the team in simple, transferrable principles, and guide the individual player’s attention, they’ll start solving more situations more intelligently – not because they memorised something, but because they understood something. So, no, walking into a struggling team and simply letting them play is not the best idea. On the contrary, however, strict control is not the best way to get them solving the game. The golden middle-ground might very well be the following: Early alignment through clarity in core principles, built from the best players and refined through meetings, training, and matches. The work begins immediately, but it doesn’t need to be “opened up” later. Start with clarity and grow through precision and shared understanding. In the short term, focus should be on identifying the most critical information. That starts with a clear evaluation of the team, selecting the right players in the right roles, and introducing key reference points – like the overall approach with and without the ball. Guidance toward good ideas are crucial – especially individually for our actions. These early principles bring initial stability. Players begin to understand not only how we want to play, but how to see situations and respond to them together. In the mid-term, the shared awareness should grow. Players should begin to understand each other’s decisions more clearly. Their actions become more relational, more adaptive. They develop a shared language for solving problems in real time – and grow alignment through video meetings, matches, and training design. Matches always provide clear problems that the team need to work together to solve. And in the long term, there is fine-tuning. By that point, the system has emerged – not through imposed patterns, but through shared understanding of the game. The team is flexible, intelligent, and connected. Final details are refined and the team continues to adapt and evolve as the demands of the game change. Ultimately, results don’t come from memorisation. They come from players reading the game better than the opponent, and acting together in ways that match the moment. That kind of football doesn’t start with automation – it starts with perception.





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