



DOWNSTAYS LEFT TO CARRY PSL IN AFRICA, WAS LAST YEAR A FLUKE?



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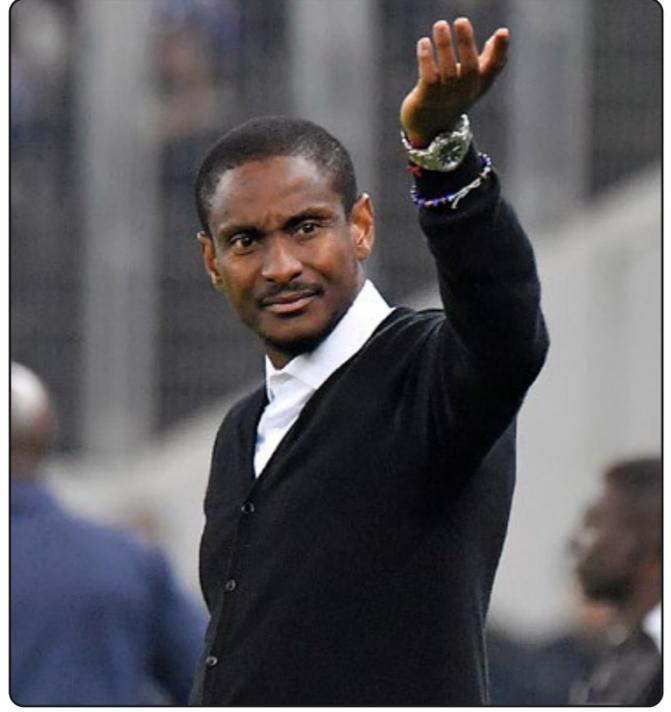
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MOKWENA TO BE APPROACHED BY AL ITTIHAD

Libyan giants Al Ittihad Tripoli are believed to be making an audacious approach to lure Rulani Mokwena away from MC Alger. The club, who recently acquired Thembinkosi Lorch and Stephane Aziz Ki, are now looking towards the coach who initially took those players to Morocco with Wydad Athletic Club. Sources have confirmed that Khaled Ben Yahia is set to leave the club, and management have identified Mokwena as their primary target to lead their new ambitious project.



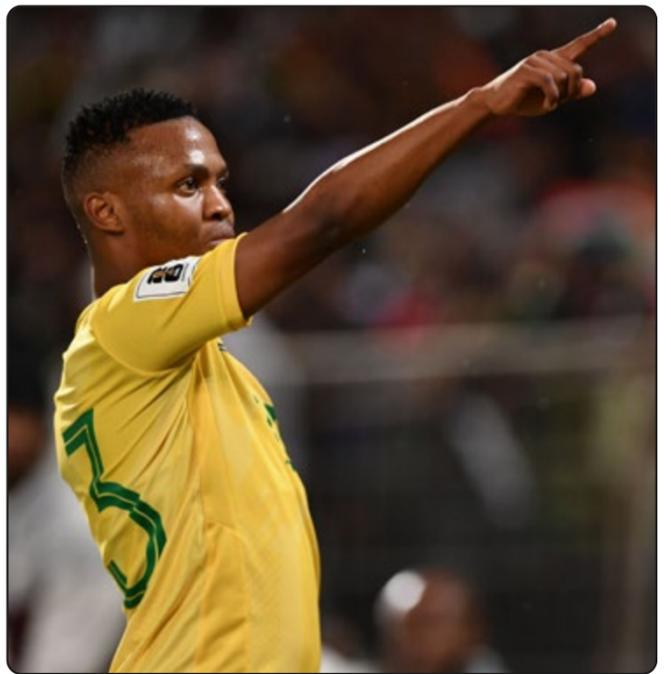
DURBAN CITY KEEN TO SECURE GCABA ON PERMANENT DEAL

Durban City are understood to be in talks with Richards Bay over the permanent transfer of defender Fezile Gcaba, who has emerged as one of the standout performers for the Durban-based outfit this season. The former Orlando Pirates defender joined the club at the start of the campaign on a season-long loan deal from the Natal Rich Boyz, and he has quickly established himself as a key figure in the team's defensive structure. Gcaba's impressive performances have earned him a couple of preliminary squad call-ups to Bafana Bafana. The defender has already made 15 appearances in all competitions, netting three goals for the Citizens.



AL-ETTIFAQ OPEN TO NKOTA EXIT?

Saudi Pro League side Al-Ettifaq is said to have slapped a three-million-euro price tag on winger Mohau Nkota. Nkota, 21, only joined the club at the start of the 2025/26 season from Orlando Pirates and has had a mixed debut campaign thus far in an unfamiliar system at times, being played in a wing-back role. In his 16 league appearances, he's netted two goals with three assists, but sources have claimed they are open to offers, should they be forthcoming in the next transfer window. Nkota is expected to form part of the Bafana Bafana squad for the upcoming 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will undoubtedly be a major shop window for the rising talent.



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BROOS TO NAME BAFANA SQUAD - NEW FACES, RETURNEES EXPECTED BEFORE WC?

Bafana Bafana head coach Hugo Broos is expected to name his preliminary squad to face Panama in back-to-back friendlies this month, with several new names and returnees to be considered in the build-up to the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Broos seemed confident going into the Africa Cup of Nations that there would not be much tinkering, with his core secured and a place in the final the target for South Africa heading to Morocco.

But after a Last-16 exit, there could be a shift in his mindset, and there are several players in recent months raising their hands for consideration in all positions for the Belgian, who is set to retire after the global event in North America.

Goalkeepers:

Ronwen Williams, Siphon Chaine and Ricardo Goss have been the trusted trio for over a year now - but there have been several standout stoppers this campaign who have notably performed and stated their intent to break into the team.

Kaizer Chiefs' Brandon Petersen would have been a standout, but his untimely injury before the Soweto Derby now casts doubt over any sort of inclusion. His former teammates and products of iKamva, Darren Johnson and Renaldo Leaner of AmaZulu and Sekhukhune United, respectively, have also been in supreme form, but provisional call-ups are only expected, barring any injuries to the top three selected.

Defenders:

With the full-backs of Khuliso Mudau, Thabang Matuludi, Aubrey Modiba and Samukele Kabini seemingly settled, centre-back is likely where there will be some selection headaches, given his first choice pairing that qualified Bafana for AFCON and the World Cup, Rushwin Dortley and Siyabonga Ngezana are serious doubts. As of now, Khulumani Ndamane and Mbekezeli Mbokazi are the ones likely to have their tickets booked. Nkosinathi Sibisi, the Orlando Pirates captain, has been an ever-present in his squad too. Should Ngezana not be fully fit, it leaves the door open... Olwethu Makhanya, starring in Major League Soccer with Philadelphia Union, Malibongwe Khoza, Grant Kekana, Keanu Cupido, Lebone Seema, Sandile Mthethwa, and Keegan Allan are now on the radar for consideration due to their form in the domestic league. Tylon Smith was part of the AFCON squad, but has yet to make his league debut for Queens Park Rangers since. Rushine de Reuck could be considered due to his recent form at Simba SC, where he earned the captain's armband, after being a crucial part of Broos' squad before falling out of favour at Sundowns.

Midfielders:

Possibly the position where it's hardest to break into, with Broos notably naming only four - Teboho Mokoena, Sphephelo Sithole, Thabang Matuludi and Bathusi Aubaas got the nod for AFCON. But with Aubaas struggling for minutes at Sundowns and Mbatha in and out of the Pirates squad, there could be an opening. Lebogang Maboe and Jayden Adams of Kaizer Chiefs and Mamelodi Sundowns have been in imperious form of late. Siphesihle Mkhize at Sekhukhune United and Polokwane City's Rodney Maphangule have continued their consistency and have



been on the periphery of selections - both have the potential to break in should this continue.

Wingers:

Gift Links at AGF, one of the favourites of the Superliga Player of the Season as they chase the league title, doubles up as a wing-back. While Broos cast doubt over his future in the national team, his form could now be too hard to ignore. Another versatile call-up could be Golden Arrows star Siyanda Ndlovu, who is having an electric season for Manqoba Mngqithi's side. Mohau Nkota and Elias Mokwana, on the right side, have not been at their best in the Saudi Pro League in recent weeks for Al-Ettifaq and Al-Hazem, respectively. But on the left side, Relebohile Mofokeng and Oswin Appollis seem to have cemented their spots in the national team, and their Pirates' teammate Tshepang Moremi is also part of the equation. Kurt Abrahams at Beveren could be a shock inclusion, but highly unlikely given his lack of international experience or attention from Broos. Luther Singh and Thapelo Maseko have shown renewed form in Cyprus, where Mhlabi Mayambela has made his name, but all seem outsiders right now.

Number 10:

The return from injury of Themba Zwane is welcomed, in the role Siphon Mbule fulfilled at AFCON, and this is potentially where the biggest selection headache will arrive. Shandre Campbell, like Smith, was part of the AFCON squad in a proverbial tutoring role, could be considered. Mbule appears to be out of contention due to his lack of game-time at Pirates off late. So this is a role for players to put their hands up and be a crucial part of the national team in the next six months and beyond, given Zwane's fitness issues and age going beyond the World Cup. Mofokeng and Appollis have featured as 10s for Pirates recently, Mduduzi Shabalala made his debut for the national team but has recently been dropped by Kaizer Chiefs. Sinxolo Kwayiba is another who was on the fringes of Bafana, and his return to Chippa United will be a major factor, should he be considered.

Strikers:

Lyle Foster, Evidence Makgopa and Iqraam Rayners are the top three for Broos to select two positions from. Rayners missed out as a standby player, but his two goals this weekend against Sekhukhune United will no doubt give a reminder of his incredible ability. There could also be a return for Fagrie Lakay, who has been in superlative form for Ceramica Cleopatra in a second-striker role.

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TSO: MAKGOPA COMES ALIVE IN BIG MATCHES

Over 100,000 reportedly people packed into the FNB Stadium to watch the Soweto Derby on Saturday, and it was Orlando Pirates who walked away with bragging rights, as Kaizer Chiefs were unable to keep up with the log leaders, who ran out 3-0 victors.

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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Chiefs Were Lucky To Not Concede More Goals

"Well done to Orlando Pirates for winning the Soweto Derby.

"I predicted that Pirates would win 3-1

against Kaizer Chiefs. I predicted that Tshepang Moremi and Oswin Appollis would score, and they both did.

"Evidence Makgopa is special when it comes to big matches. I knew he would come and make an impact.

"He scored in the second half. He loves big matches against Mamelodi Sundowns and Chiefs. He is not special as a player, but he gives something on big occasions.

"Why is Glody Lilepo still playing? What did Pule Mmodi contribute? There are so many questions about Chiefs players and coaches.

"Chiefs did not look like they would get anything from this game. They were lucky to not concede more goals.

"Congratulations to Ezimnyama! Up the Bucs!"





DOWNSTAYS LEFT TO CARRY PSL IN AFRICA, WAS LAST YEAR A FLUKE?

By Matshelane Mamabolo

There is something wrong when the continent's third-best-ranked league produces just a single club for the knockout stages of the continent's two interclub competitions.

The 'mismatch' becomes all the more glaring when the two countries above them have all four of their representatives still standing. To add the proverbial salt to injury, there

"LOOK AT HOW THE BETWAY PREMIERSHIP IS ABLE TO ATTRACT PLAYERS FROM ALL CORNERS OF THE WORLD – WE HAVE PLAYERS FROM BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, NEW ZEALAND AND MOST PARTS OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT."



is even a country ranked below them that has more clubs in the quarter-finals of the continental tournament.

That's the sad story of South Africa as continental club football reaches the business end.

Mamelodi Sundowns are once again left to carry the Mzansi torch by their lonesome, the rest of the contenders having fallen by the wayside. Easy then, isn't it, to agree with those who say the claim that the Betway Premiership is among the best leagues on the continent and the world is unfounded?

The International Federation of Football History & Statistics (IFHHS) – a Zurich-based organisation that chronicles the history and records of association football – has ranked the South African league third in Africa behind Egypt and Morocco. Among others, their ranking takes into account the performances of the league's clubs in continental competitions in the season in review.

Unsurprisingly, South Africa owes its lofty ranking to our having had three teams in the semi-finals of both the CAF Champions League and the CAF Confederation Cup in 2025.

The above-mentioned North African countries have all their teams still in contention in both competitions, while Algeria's two representatives in the Confederation Cup have also made it to the Last 8.

Such was our showing last year that excitement abounded at the prospects of the final of the premier continental club competition being contested by our two teams – Mamelodi Sundowns and Orlando Pirates. But the Buccaneers fell at the penultimate stage of the Champions League to Egyptian side Pyramids FC, who went on to put the Brazilians to the sword in the final. Stellenbosch FC did remarkably well to reach the semi-final of the Confederation Cup, and this year, hope sprang eternal that South Africa would build on the 2025 boon and go on to dominate the continent.

But alas, Sundowns are the only ones still in contention – the perennial South African champions having yet again reached the Champions League knockout stage.

Pirates were unfortunately sent packing way before the round-robin phase despite their incredible comeback from a first-round 3-0 defeat at the hands of Democratic Republic of Congo's St Eloi Lupopo, who edged them via the shoot-out from the penalty spot.

Their bitter domestic rivals Kaizer Chiefs did better despite not making the knockouts, Amakhosi missing out on the quarter-finals via goal difference following a similar points and head-to-head finish with Al Masry. Chiefs know they have only themselves to



blame, their failure to score just one more goal in a 2-1 victory over the Egyptians in the home leg played at the Peter Mokaba Stadium eventually being the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Stellenbosch FC were pretty disappointing for a team that reached the semi-final last year, the Cape Winelands team failing to progress from a group most had forecasted them to do well in. Of course, the change of coaches – from Steve Barker to Gavin Hunt – mid-campaign did not help matters. But it was a poor outing overall.

Was last year's boon a fluke, or were our teams just unlucky this season? Is our league not as good as the rankings suggest?

iDiski Times sought the opinion of numerous football people, among them the experienced defender Ramahlwe Mphahlele, who played in the CAF Champions League final with Chiefs in 2021, having previously also traversed the lengths and breadths of the continent with Sundowns.

Mphahlele was not aware of the rankings but had this to say about it: "I am not very informed on what criteria they look at to rank the leagues, so it is hard for me to say if they are right or wrong. But when it comes to the standard of football and how the league is being run, as well as the popularity of it – I think we are up there with the best. Look at how the Betway Premiership is able to attract players from all corners of the world – we have players from Brazil, Colombia, New Zealand and most parts of the African continent."

He admits that the latest performance by South African teams was disappointing. "Yes, this year we did not do well because all of Pirates, Chiefs and Stellies have been eliminated, and that will give a negative impression to the claim our league is the best. But I still think we deserve to be among the top leagues on the continent, from my experience of having played all over Africa. I've seen the facilities, the stadiums, and the pitches we played on, and I always come back home and say

"LOCAL CLUBS HAVE A LOT TO PLAY FOR HERE IN TERMS OF THE COMPETITIONS WE HAVE. AND I THINK SOMETIMES THE CLUBS LOOKED AT IT AND FELT THEY ARE BETTER OFF CONTESTING THE DOMESTIC KNOCKOUTS THAN GOING INTO CAF."

South Africa is one of the best there is."

Why is it then that all that does not translate into continental domination or at least South African clubs being regularly competitive in African competitions?

"The CAF thing [participation], if you remember well, was not really taken seriously here in South Africa and for a number of reasons, some of them valid. Before the recent years of Patrice Motsepe's leadership of CAF, it was very expensive to participate in the CAF tournaments, and travelling was pretty demanding. I remember sometimes we had to go all the way to Turkey only to come down to Algeria or somewhere in North Africa because of direct flights. That was costly for the clubs financially and also in terms of how you performed in the domestic league."

Mphahlele argues that for the other clubs in Africa continental football is more lucrative, hence they would sometimes seem much more committed than our clubs here in South Africa.

"Local clubs have a lot to play for here in terms of the competitions we have. And I think sometimes the clubs looked at it and felt they are better off contesting the domestic knockouts than going into CAF. Those clubs from Mali, the Congos and Cameroon, for



example, how much are they playing for in their domestic leagues? It is not as much as what we have here, so they give it their all in CAF in the knowledge that they will be better off financially.”

Mphahlele remembers when they first ventured into the continent with Sundowns and how reluctant the players were about it all.

“When I was at Sundowns at the beginning of our CAF journey, coach Pitso [Mosimane] used to take us to camps on the continent – to places such as Ghana, Cameroon, Zambia and I remember asking him why. And he said to us ‘I am preparing you for the CAF hostilities’. We were angry at him because we wanted to go to Cape Town or some places nice for pre-season but he said ‘No, I want to prepare you mentally, so that when we play in CAF we are in a good position to win it’.”

And win it Sundowns did (in 2016) although Mphahlele left them for Chiefs mid-campaign.

He was to reach the final with Chiefs five years later, ironically losing to Mosimane’s Al Ahly in a final played in Morocco.

That season was an irony of sorts in coach Gavin Hunt’s continental experiences as he managed to take Chiefs to the semi-finals only to be fired before they could play the penultimate round and then the ultimate one.

Ironic in that Hunt has always come across as being anti-continental competition, his fielding of fringe players when he was at the now defunct Bidvest Wits a case in point. Just recently, as coach of Stellies, Hunt did say following their victory over Chiefs in the league, that continued continual participation would have been a ‘distraction’ to the club’s quest for domestic survival.

Mphahlele recalls a different Hunt from their time together at Chiefs.

“Gavin took that Champions League

“THIS YEAR WE DID NOT DO WELL BECAUSE ALL OF PIRATES, CHIEFS AND STELLIES HAVE BEEN ELIMINATED AND THAT WILL GIVE A NEGATIVE IMPRESSION.”

campaign very seriously. We really enjoyed it, and we were not doing well in the league here at home, but in CAF, we found ourselves playing better football and the coach enjoyed that journey with us. I remember us chilling by the pool after matches in different countries, and he would always encourage us, saying we can really go on to win this thing. I think there was a synergy then because the club also wanted to do well in the competition, there was that desire at Chiefs to join both Pirates and Sundowns and add the star on the badge.”

It is that kind of desire which was evident in all four of our clubs last season that helped see South Africa having three semi-finalists and Sundowns reaching the final, only to lose to Pyramids. And largely because of that feat, the International Federation of Football History & Statistics (IFHHS) ranked the Betway Premiership the third best on the continent.

Things went somewhat awry this time around, with Pirates’ exit prior to the group stages a huge disappointment. Yet, that failure should not be seen as an indictment on the local league for Pirates did show in the second leg just how strong a team they are – the loss in the shoot-out is something common in the game.

Even with Chiefs, they did very well in their campaign. When the draw for the group phase was done, the African football experts forecast that Amakhosi would finish third behind perennial champions Zamalek and their compatriots Al Masry – just on the strength of continental experience.



But Chiefs punched above their weight to the extent that they were top of the table going into the final Matchday which they lost 2-1 away to Zamalek. They then got undone by that earlier failure of theirs to beat Al Masry by two clear goals on home soil.

Stellenbosch were truly disappointing, especially given they were in a group that many expected them to progress from alongside Sead Ramovic's CR Belouizdad. And they had a fairly good start – topping the group on four points after two matches only to be undone by coach Steve Barker's departure for Tanzania's AS Simba mid-campaign. Back-to-back defeats to the Algerians came during Hunt's early efforts to stabilise the club in the domestic league, though most of us were not surprised, given the multiple championship-winning coach's past attitude towards continental competitions.

All things considered, it would perhaps be folly to judge the standard of the local league based solely on this year's showing in continental competition or by comparing it to just last year's stellar performances. Ours is arguably one of the best leagues on the continent, proven as it is by our clubs' ability to attract top talent not only from the continent but from South America and Oceania as well.

It is true, however, that our clubs need to be regular participants in the knockout stages of both the Champions League and the Confederation Cup. This year's failure to do so and end up with just one team in the quarter-final is sure to impact negatively on our ranking by CAF in particular, and could see the four spots we have, two in each competition, in danger of being whittled down.

That would then surely make a mockery of our billing as one of the continent's best – irrespective of who and what criteria is used to do the rankings.

Sundowns face Stade Malien in the CAF Champions League quarter-finals this month, with the first leg set to be hosted in Tshwane.



“WHEN IT COMES TO THE STANDARD OF FOOTBALL AND HOW THE LEAGUE IS BEING RUN AS WELL AS THE POPULARITY OF IT – I THINK WE ARE UP THERE WITH THE BEST.”

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AGE OF SAGE: STEPHENS SETS A NEW STELLENBOSCH BENCHMARK

By Rob Delpont

It's been a winding, often uncertain journey for Sage Stephens. A career that has taken him through rising hopes, harsh setbacks and long spells of waiting.

But in Stellenbosch, he finally found what every footballer craves: a true footballing home, a place where he is valued, trusted and woven into the fabric of the club.

Last month marked a defining chapter in that story. Wearing the captain's armband against Singida Black Stars, the 34-year-old became Stellenbosch's player with the most all-time appearances, surpassing the 162-match mark, a record previously held by Deano van Rooyen before his move to Orlando Pirates.

It was more than just a statistic; it was a symbol of belonging.

Fittingly, he has marked the occasion in style, producing a couple of sharp, reflex saves in recent games that have become his trademark. Calm under pressure, commanding in the air and increasingly vocal in organising those in front of him, Stephens has grown into one of the most reliable goalkeepers in South Africa.

"For me, it's something special," Stephens told me, reflecting on the record.

"And the reason being from Moroka Swallows days and a little bit at AmaZulu, I didn't find myself obviously playing as the number one, and that's something that I was always chasing throughout my career as a target, to be an outright number one.

"So this record is special for me because it started out as a small number. 'Okay, I've played 20 games consistently without being taken out to the team or being rotated', and then it hit 30 and 40. And eventually it got to a point where, 'okay, it was the 50th game against Chiefs'.

"And then after that, I actually forgot about the number. And like I said, it was a personal goal for me, because I was challenging myself to see how long I could stay on the pitch and not be rotated, and see how long I could keep that jersey.

"So it's special for me, because it was a big goal of mine, and the higher the number goes, then the more I know that, okay, wow, without losing your place. It's just very special in that sense."

That reliability and consistency did not go unnoticed.

In 2024, he earned call-ups from Bafana Bafana coach Hugo Broos, and claimed his first senior cap in a CAF Africa Cup of Nations qualifier against South Sudan, a proud moment for a player whose path has never been straightforward.

"My Bafana experience was remarkable," he recalls.

"The reason being, it was in Cape Town, obviously my second home. And not just that, it's the province where I actually played the most of my football. So just being able to share that with my family being in Cape Town, and the province.

"I could feel the support from the people and the fans. I mean, even when I came on for the few minutes that I did, the standing ovation, the crowd, everything just made it so worth it, having been my first cap and getting onto the field.

"The years of trial and error, always trying to get into the national teams, fights for jerseys at club level, I think all those hardships, that little moment, being 10 minutes — even if it was two minutes — it would have been worth it. It would have been worth all those years of sacrifice.

"So that is definitely one of the memories that made my football journey worth every hardship, I think."

Born and raised in the east of Johannesburg, Stephens came through the youth ranks at Moroka Swallows and broke into the Dube Birds first team as a teenager, serving as understudy to Greg Etafia.

"I think I'm very grateful for Swallows, to give me the opportunity at a young age to chase my dream," Stephens reminisced.

"And that was a special place for me,



because that's where it all started, and that's where the building blocks or the foundation was laid for me to be where I am today.

"So it was a special time, and I got to share it with a lot of special people, including Greg. I can say he helped me a lot in the younger days, which I think every goalkeeper needs at that time, just a bit of guidance, a good influence around them to steer them in the right direction. I think he did that. I learnt a lot from him. I think he was a very good goalkeeper, one of the best goalkeepers when it came to one-on-one situations against strikers. He did a lot and achieved a lot for Moroka Swallows at the time. So it was a good place to be, a good goalkeeper to learn from.

"I think a lot of foundation blocks were laid at that time. And I've carried on with a lot of things that I've learned with regard to how to train and what standards to set as a first choice."

But as the once-mighty Birds faltered and the club's fortunes declined, Stephens had to move on. He joined AmaZulu in the National First Division, who at the time were being coached by Steve Barker.

"And then getting the opportunity with Coach Steve at AmaZulu," Stephens.

"I think I got a lot of game-time under Coach Steve, and I got to compete against a good goalkeeper, who was Energy Murambadoro at the time. It was a great squad at AmaZulu with Robin Johannes, Marc van Heerden, Norman Smith, Siyabonga Nomvethé...

"It was a bit of a challenging step for me, because I had been at Swallows for so long, and then all of a sudden you go to a new place, new teammates. It was the first time for me, and I was still in my younger days, so it was my first experience. So it was a bit challenging, but in the sense that I think it put a lot of good pressure on me to perform because of the players I had around me.

"I mean, I still said that Robin is the best central defender I'd played with. Marc was world-class. Just the squad of players that they had at the team when they got

"I MEAN, JUST HAVING BENNI MCCARTHY AS YOUR HEAD COACH. I THINK I WAS STILL IN AWE, BECAUSE I GREW UP WATCHING BENNI, AND NOW HE'S YOUR HEAD COACH."

relegated, unfortunately, I don't think it would have happened often with that team.

"So it was a good challenge for me, and I got to see a different place, and people not knowing me at AmaZulu, it was a nice place for me to try and build my name, to try and get established out there.

"And I think I did a good enough job, because that led to the next club, which was joining Cape Town City."

Two years later, when Usuthu acquired Thanda Royal Zulu's Premiership status, Stephens' future became uncertain. Ironically, it seemed he might follow Barker, who was now at a second-tier upstart, Stellenbosch FC, but Benni McCarthy, recently appointed to his first head coach role, intervened, bringing him to City instead.

"Funny enough, you know, sharing a dressing room with Robin at AmaZulu led to the opportunity at City," Stephens recalls.

"And I think you won't even remember this, but the first interview I had was with you at Cape Town City, when we had got to the quarter-finals of the Nedbank, and we were playing Sundowns. We had beaten Orlando Pirates at Cape Town Stadium, when the fog was so bad you couldn't see. I don't know if you remember that game?

"But yeah, it was a good time in my career, and obviously, playing for City at that

time, the club had just started, two years in the PSL, and they were doing tremendous things, achieving big things. So it was a nice challenge. It felt like the timing was just perfect, because I was getting to a certain age where I was a little bit more mature.

“And I mean, just having Benni McCarthy as your head coach. I think I was still in awe, because I grew up watching Benni, and now he’s your head coach. It’s small, little milestones getting ticked, like meeting stars that you used to watch on TV, and now they’re your coaches.”

At City, Stephens initially won the battle for the gloves ahead of Shu-aib Walters, only to later find himself displaced again when Dutchman Peter Leeuwenburgh arrived in 2018 as a marquee signing. Another setback. Another bench. By the end of the 2019/20 season, Sage needed a fresh start.

“It was a good time, but I just think it didn’t have the best impact on my career,” he remembers.

“After playing that season with Benni, I think I really did well. I think my numbers were not too bad. We finished high enough in the league, we finished fifth, and I just think my performances showed for me to take the jersey from Shu-aib.

“And then we all know Peter Leeuwenburgh came, and I didn’t think I was afforded the same opportunity to try and defend or challenge for my jersey.

“I never played that next season, so it was a bit frustrating, a low point in my career, and at a time where I don’t think I was the happiest in my career, in playing football.

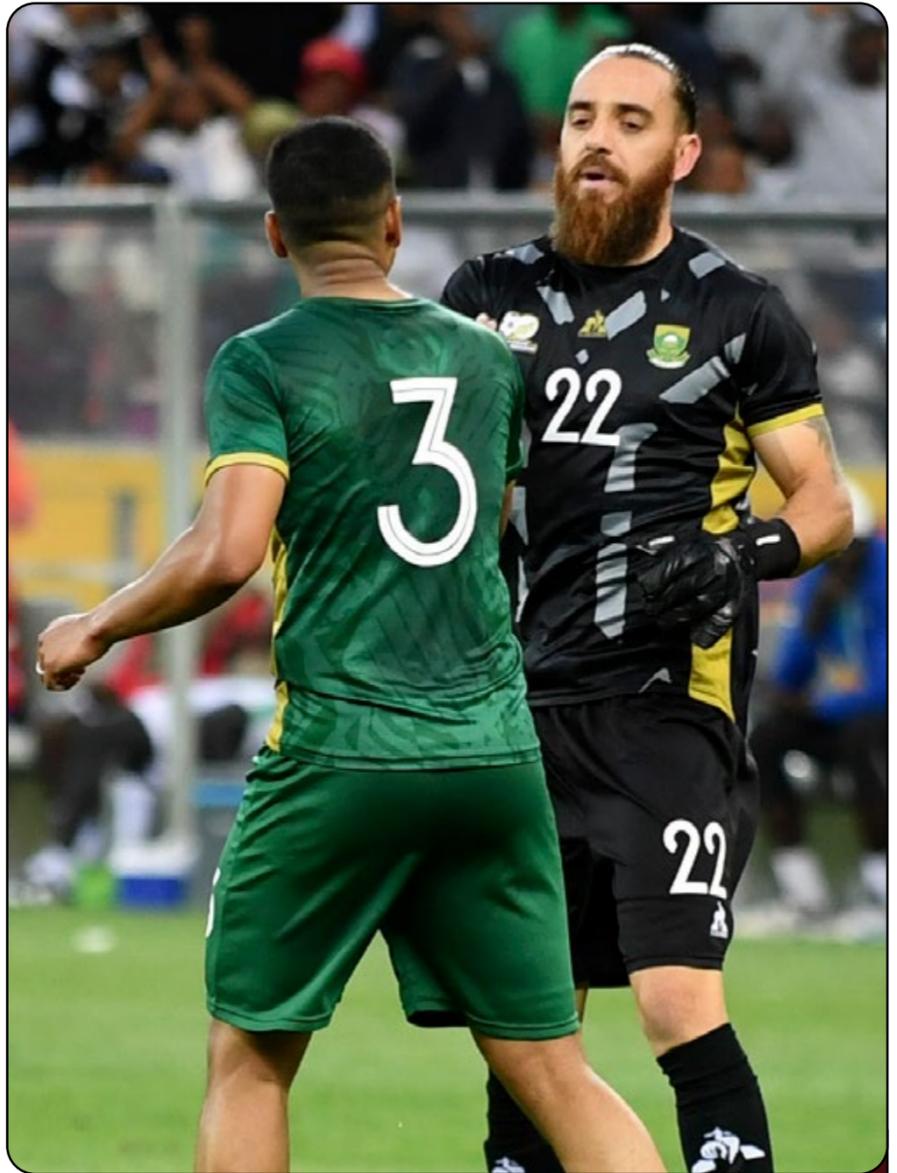
“A lot of the time, players look inside, or they look outward, and they blame this and blame that. That’s not a memory that I like to remember, but in the same breath, I can say that situation built a certain character in me, to prove people wrong and to show that I will be a good first choice.

“And I think I did that, and I think that happened at Stellies.”

This time, Barker finally secured his signature, bringing him to Stellenbosch, now a Premiership club. At first Stephens had to bide his time once more, with veteran Lee Langeveldt starting the 2020/21 campaign. But on 18 December 2020, against Maritzburg United, he made his debut, and a few months later, he was the undisputed number one. He has never looked back.

“I think that having Coach Steve again, as a head coach, was special, because he saw me at 23, 24, and then we were working together when I was now 28, 29, so I had matured at a certain level,” Stephens says.

“I didn’t play as many games as I wanted to, but then, having played for City, it sort



“I THINK ALL THOSE HARDSHIPS, THAT LITTLE MOMENT, BEING 10 MINUTES — EVEN IF IT WAS TWO MINUTES — IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WORTH IT. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WORTH ALL THOSE YEARS OF SACRIFICE.”

of gave me a certain level of respect in the league, because I was there for so long, and I just think that helped me get the opportunity at Stellenbosch, and I was looking forward to it.

“I was looking forward to establishing myself as one of the best goalkeepers in the league, and from the start to where I am now, I don’t think I could have scripted it any better myself.

“I came here to play football. All I wanted was to play. That’s why I made the decision to come here, especially with Coach Steve and I just won’t be able to thank him enough for giving me that platform at Stellies, and hopefully I repaid him with my performances on the field.

“But I couldn’t have scripted this journey any better. I would have never believed we would go on to achieve the things we have at Stellenbosch. I just came here to play, and that’s all I wanted to do, was to play football.

“But the success we’ve achieved is something special, and it’s difficult to explain; it’s just so much sweeter for the people who have been involved in the situation.”

Those people include the goalkeeping unit at Stellenbosch. Pernel McKop has been the guiding presence since promotion, while Langeveldt, Oscarine Masuluke and



young Dejean Ah Shene have all been part of a supportive, competitive environment. Within that circle, Stephens has flourished, not just as a shot-stopper but as a leader.

Off the pitch, Stephens' growth has been just as striking as his rise between the posts. Away from the roar of the crowd and the glare of floodlights, he is first and foremost a family man. His wife and children form his inner circle, his refuge from the relentless demands of professional football. It is there, in the quiet rhythm of home life, that the captain's armband is replaced by bedtime stories, laughter and the simple grounding rituals that keep him centred.

"Home life and family have just made me who I am. From childhood, the way I grew up, all of the things," Stephens adds.

"I'm lucky enough to be blessed with three beautiful kids, and luckily enough that they were able to share this journey with me at stadiums, games, finals, and that's all that I ever wanted was for them to be able to share this journey with me and to remember it.

"I've been blessed with a beautiful wife to carry the baggage when I'm not around, I mean knowing our schedule, how busy we are, how much we travel, especially now that we played CAF, a lot of the work and pressure fell on her shoulders, but just been so blessed that she's just taken all that pressure away from me, to allow me to do my part to the best of my ability, and just make as many good memories as I can along the way."

And in a way, even his appearance tells

"I HAVE MADE A JOKE IN THE DRESSING ROOM THAT IF WE EVER WIN THE LEAGUE, EVEN IF WE HAD WON THE MTN8, I WOULD CHOP IT ALL OFF, BEARD, HAIR, EVERYTHING."

the story of that evolution. The once clean-cut youngster has grown into his look: the thick beard, the flowing locks, the unmistakable presence. Much like his career at Stellenbosch, the transformation has been gradual, organic, and entirely his own.

"The only thing that has a story is the beard," he laughs.

"When I got married, I said to my wife, I don't think I'll ever shave my beard again. And that certainly happened. I've had my beard ever since I got married.

"The long hair. I don't think there was a specific reason why, but I have made a joke in the dressing room that if we ever win the league, even if we had won the MTN8, I would chop it all off, beard, hair, everything.

"But I think it has certainly become a thing, the ponytail and the beard. Maybe I can trademark it? Because when people see the long hair and the beard, straight away, they know it's the goalkeeper of Stellenbosch."



“I WANT TO WIN WITH OMONIA. I WANT TO WIN TITLES, AND WE ARE ON THE RIGHT TRACK AND ALSO WINNING AND IMPROVING MYSELF AND SEE ALSO IF WE CAN PUSH FOR CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FOOTBALL NEXT YEAR.”

MAYAMBELA ON CYPRUS MOVE, OFFERS FROM HOME & REGAINING BAFANA SPOT

Bafana Bafana winger MIHLALI MAYAMBELA was on the move earlier this year, after a surprise exit from Aris Limassol, the Cypriot club he had impressed at over the last several seasons. While the 29-year-old has serially been linked to Kaizer Chiefs, and there was talk of a potential return to South Africa, Mayambela ended up not moving very far, as he was unveiled by the current Cyprus First Division log leaders, Omonia Nicosia. *iDiski Times* journalist **SINETHEMBA MAKONCO** caught up with Mayambela to talk about the decision to join Omonia and much more.

Sinethemba Makonco: Firstly, congratulations on your move to Omonia Nicosia; how are you settling in?

Mhlabi Mayambela: No, thank you. Thank you, my friend. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, Omonia is a great club, one of the biggest, if not the biggest, in the country, and I'm happy that I went to join the team. I feel good with the players and everyone, the coach, the staff, I feel great. They've welcomed me so well. And yeah, we're doing our bits to continue and maintain the level. Being at the top now, we're eight points in front, and a few more games left, 14 games, if I'm not mistaken. So let's see if we can go over the line till the end. And it will be a great thing for me also again, to do it again.

SM: You've been in Cyprus for almost four years now, and you've won the league and played in the Europa League. What is there now that you want to achieve with Omonia?

MM: And yeah, of course, I want to win with Omonia. I want to win titles, and we are on the right track and also winning and improving myself and see also if we can push for Champions League football next year, you know. But we have to finish the business now this year, in order to be able to dream about that also. So step by step, the most important thing is to finish as high as possible and try to win the league.

SM: It might not be a surprise to you, but it came as a surprise in South Africa when Aris Limassol announced you as a free agent. Many expected you to come back home; were there any offers or talks?

MM: No, Aris is taking a different direction now. There were back-and-forth negotiations, and I was close to renew at some point. So it was just an agreement between me and the club. So I'm happy to be able to say that I was there and had a good time.

SM: Many expected you to come back home; were there any offers or talks?

MM: Of course, there were talks from South Africa, but nothing concrete, nothing concrete at all. So that was one of the reasons why I stayed here, because there was nothing concrete from back home. So, yeah, maybe in the future, I don't know.

SM: At one stage, would you consider coming back to play in South Africa, or would you love to retire in Europe?

MM: Of course, I'm from South Africa. I'm South African. You know, I would like to play at home, but everything has to make sense from both sides, from many ways, also. Not just coming back home, just to come back home. So I think maybe one day it will happen. Maybe yes, maybe not. I don't know what the future holds, but now what's most important for me is to focus here.

SM: How fulfilling is it to see more South African players joining you in Cyprus? If I count correctly, there's Luther Singh and Thapelo Maseko. Do you guys meet? I know you played against each other already; how was it?

MM: Ja, I played against them, actually, it was a good game. They have a good team now, with a good coach. I'm happy for them, especially for Maseko. He just came back to play football again, and he has big potential, you know. I was with him in the national team, happy to





“I’M STILL IN THE PICTURE, I BELIEVE IT’S JUST FOR ME NOW TO WORK HARD AND TRY TO PUT MYSELF BACK INTO THE TEAM AND TO SHOW TO THE COACH THAT I’M STILL AVAILABLE.”

see him playing football again, and so he can also be able to help, I think, in the national team again. Because I think we need those types of players like him, and he’s doing well, and both of them are doing well. They’re playing every game.

SM: You have been in Cyprus for quite some time now; what are the challenges that you face there?

MM: I wouldn’t tell you that I’m facing challenges. I feel home. I try to make myself comfortable in every place that I go to. So don’t think that the challenges that I face here are those I wouldn’t face somewhere else. So it’s life challenges. It’s normal challenges. So I wouldn’t be able to be specific, but I’m having a great time here, and it’s good. I love it here.

SM: With the FIFA World Cup fast approaching, and you missed the previous AFCON, have you maybe spoken with Bafana Bafana head coach Hugo Broos to find out where you should improve to make it to the World Cup squad? After playing so well in the AFCON in Ivory Coast, how disappointed were you not to make the squad for the AFCON in Morocco?

MM: No, I haven’t been in contact with the coach, unfortunately. But the last time, I was a bit unlucky, because I think two times I was in the final squad, and then I got injured before the camp. So, yeah, I’m still in the picture, I believe. It’s just for me now to work hard and try to put myself back into the team and to show to the coach that I’m still available. And it’s the most important thing. But also, you have to know that there are players who play there, and they do well, also when they get called. So it’s just about waiting for your chance. Of course, you are disappointed if you are not in the squad (laughs), just like any other football player, but I just have to continue working and try pushing, doing my best, and we’ll see how it will go, we’ll see.

SM: Do you think playing in the Betway Premiership gives players an advantage to play for Bafana Bafana? I can count players who are playing abroad and find it hard to make it in the Bafana squad: Olwethu Makhanya, Bongokuhle Hlongwane, Luther

Singh, Gift Links - there are a lot...

MM: Ah, I don’t know, actually, if it gives an advantage to play in the PSL, I don’t know. I think if your time comes, man, like what’s meant for you will always find you. So I don’t necessarily believe that playing back home would give you an advantage, no, because I played in the national team without playing at home. So I wouldn’t say I believe in that. I think it’s a myth for me. So I believe that the coaches have people who are following the players who are playing outside. Also, they follow that I know. So, yeah, I don’t think you necessarily need to play in South Africa. It’s just about getting the opportunity. That’s all.

SM: You’ve played most of your career abroad; what lessons have you learned there?

MM: Yeah, I’ve played abroad for a long time now. I think over 10 years or something. Look, it’s many things that I’ve learnt, you know, many things, many things, not just football, but also just life as a man, growing up. So growing up with a single parent and stuff like that. It has made me to have like so much resilience also, and to be able to get over things and to be able to get things done, most importantly. Because away from home and stuff like that, you always have to face the challenges and not run away. So yeah, it’s many lessons that I’ve learned, to be honest, if I would name them, I would take a day or two to explain it, you know. But there’s many things that I’ve learnt.

SM: What would you say to youngsters like Mbekezeli Mbokazi and Puso Dithejane who recently moved from the Betway Premiership to MLS?

MM: It’s actually good to see two guys went to the MLS, in my opinion, and happy for the country that we’re exporting many more players. And I think it’s really good that they go out there and then rub shoulders with the best players like Messi and them. So it’s good. Also, it’s a life-changing experience; the financial part also is important for them. So, yeah, I’m glad, but hopefully they will play and be able to even go to better levels.

SM: Thanks, Mihlali, and all the best.



THIRD TIME'S A CHARM FOR GABRIELA SALGADO

By Lethabo Kganyago

The 2025 COSAFA Women's Championship tournament held in Polokwane over the last two weeks will be remembered for several things. First, the unpredictable ride newly crowned champions Namibia had to the podium, with their veteran attacking midfielder Zenatha Coleman bowing out of the regional tournament with a gold medal. The Brave Gladiators were drawn in a three-team Group C with Mozambique and Madagascar at the tournament. They defeated Mozambique by two goals to nil, then they were stunned 1-0 by Madagascar in their second and last group match and qualified via goal difference after Mozambique defeated Madagascar 2-0 in the group decider. They dethroned defending champions Zambia with a late 1-0 win in the semi-final, then faced host nation South Africa in the final, coming from behind to drag the game to extra time, where they made history for themselves, beating Banyana Banyana 2-1 to secure their first title in only their second appearance in the final in 20 years.

The tournament will also be remembered for the return to competitive football by Banyana winger Gabriela Salgado. Salgado, 28, played her first competitive match in 211 days after her leg break in the semi-final of the Women's Africa Cup of Nations (WAFCON) against Nigeria in Casablanca, Morocco in July 2025. The tournament, which Banyana went into as defending champions, was Salgado's maiden WAFCON after missing the triumphant 2022 edition because of an injury sustained in the 11th hour prior to departure to the North. This time around in a match against her side's continental rival, who also dethroned Banyana in the process, she had her leg broken, had it operated on more than once. She oozes calmness, speaking to iDiski Times journalist Lethabo Kganyago at the team's camp base for the COSAFA tournament and alignment camp for the WAFCON at

"IT HASN'T BEEN AN EASY ONE. LEARNING TO REUSE MY LEG, YOU KNOW, LEARNING TO WALK AGAIN, LEARNING TO TRUST IT AGAIN. IT WAS BAD."

the lush Ranch Hotel outside Polokwane.

"Just being able to step back on the pitch again, a lot of emotions went through my body that day," Salgado reflected on her first game back, where she came on as a late substitute against Malawi.

"Knowing that there was a possibility I could come on, knowing that I was ready if they called on me, I was going to be ready to step on the pitch. And just getting that few minutes is like weight lifted off my shoulders. You know all my hard work, all my sacrifice, all my tears, everything I've gone through. I actually could step on the field and be like, 'Thank you, God, I've made it again'."

She went on to start in the team's second group match against Angola in Seshego and scored the opening goal in Banyana's 2-0 win.

"It was definitely a proud moment for me," she continued with a smile and a chuckle. It was a team goal, team effort. You know, I couldn't have done it without my teammates, but just being able to see the ball hit the back of the net was incredible. My heart was racing. I was just so happy. My teammates were so supportive as well. I mean, our celebration, everyone was on board, our pictures came out amazing."

To carry the tag of the 'comeback kid' when you have had to do it twice takes



a lot, as the JVW FC attacker explains. For Salgado, the return and playing a few minutes in the first game was a big moment as she opened up about just how bad the injury was.

“My second injury was definitely the most challenging for me. It hasn’t been an easy one. Learning to reuse my leg, you know, learning to walk again, learning to trust it again.”

“It was bad,” conceded Salgado when probed by Kganyago about the magnitude of the injury.

“And not being able to do things by myself, always relying on people. I mean, as sports people, you know we always do things on our own. We are independent. So now having to rely on someone obviously creates more patience, being patient with yourself, resilience, and just trusting the process, knowing that there’s a bigger plan for you.”

“Of course, it does take a lot for me mentally. That’s why, always, when people ask me, what did I learn from my injuries? Definitely being in touch with the emotions, you know, feel what you need to feel. There would be days where I just cry my eyes out for no reason, because of how I’m feeling. But I think it’s because of how I was in touch with my emotions of where I am today, like how I passed all of this. I didn’t tuck anything behind me like, no, I’ll deal with you later.”

One does get that sense that she is in touch with her emotions as we sat just a few steps from the swimming pool, and the manicured golf course on a table just under the shade of what her teammates in camp called ‘Gabby’s tree’ on a typically hot Limpopo morning. The spot with a round table and two chairs has a serene feel to it and a do not disturb feel where one can enjoy a good read over a beverage, hot or cold, just spending time alone.

It is almost a case of the worst thing that could have happened to her was also the best thing that could have happened because it has taught her how resilient she is and that she cannot do everything herself. Usually, there are TV replays showing how injuries happened, and even the internet has become a storage place where, when one types Salgado’s name among the top five suggested topics on Google, the said injury appears. The writer knows people, including herself, who still cannot watch the replay of the moment Salgado got injured. She’s comfortable talking about how it is still very vivid in her mind to this day, however, not as a heavy, sad memory.

“It was actually the 22nd of July, it’s a memory I’ll never forget,” she continued.

“A bad memory, a good memory, the WAFCON had a lot of ups and downs for me, but more ups. I had a lot to take from that tournament. I got a lot of experience getting the minutes. Obviously, my injury, one, I don’t want to remember, but it’s one that will be there, it’s part of football, and I’ve grown a lot from it. So it’s one that I don’t want to forget, because it taught me a lot, resilience, patience, hard work, dedication, and just relying sometimes



“JUST HAVING NIGERIA, GHANA, ALL THE OTHER TEAMS SEND THEIR LOVE, THE MESSAGES, THE SUPPORT BACK AT HOME, IT WAS INSANE. I WAS LIKE ‘THIS IS CRAZY, LIKE IT’S BIGGER THAN FOOTBALL.’”

[on others]. Sometimes you think you can do it all as a person. Just to know that there is your support system that’s there to help you if things get hard. But yeah, it’s a vivid memory in my brain, like if I can close my eyes, I relive it all over again. But I relive it being on top of it this time, not being under it.”

One of the things she got to experience during recovery was seeing herself through someone else’s eyes, teammates, football fans in South Africa and Africa



in general and even opposing players

“It was very heart-warming to see that outside of football, even if you don’t play for the same team, the sisterhood is there,” she said.

“Just having Nigeria, Ghana, all the other teams send their love, the messages, the support back at home, it was insane. I was like ‘this is crazy, like it’s bigger than football’. We are all human at the end of the day, and it’s just good to see that in our hearts we don’t want to see someone in pain and suffering, but we offer the helping hand. I’ve been in touch with a lot of the players still, and they’re still encouraging and supportive now. And it’s just good to see that no matter where you come from, what background you come from, you’re always going to be there for the next person. It’s definitely something that was crazy, I was like, ‘all of this for me’, type of thing. And then I was like, ‘I’m just happy that I can still give back’, like the influence I’ve had on youngsters, on players within the game.”

Being away from action also meant Salgado missed her club’s season in the Hollywoodbets Super League, their best campaign yet, finishing in second position with 69 points under the guidance of co-founder and former teammate and coach Janine Van Wyk. Salgado spoke about her pride in the Blue Diamonds, though she admitted that before the injury, she was in the best position to contribute to the club positively.

Meanwhile, Salgado’s return coincides with yet another WAFCON tournament, the 2026 edition, which is also a 2027 FIFA Women’s World Cup qualifier. There is uncertainty on whether the tournament will kick off on 17 March 2026 in Morocco as initially scheduled, with the host country allegedly pulling out. But no matter where the continental spectacle is held, Salgado hopes she can be third time lucky and be selected in the final Banyana squad, but she isn’t obsessing over it.

“It’s all up to the coaches, and you know, for me, it’ll be fantastic. It’ll be a great goal that I set for myself, but if I don’t get it, I’m happy to get the few minutes I do get now. And I have to also be realistic with myself. There’s still a lot to

“THE ONLY GOAL I’VE HAD ON MY MIND IS THE WAFCON. AND I’VE SAID IT TO MANY, BUT I’M ALSO GOING TO BE PATIENT WITH MYSELF.”

come. There’s the World Cup, there’s the Olympics. There’s so much ahead of us, you know, and I’m still young, not that young (laughs), but I do think I’m still young. And just the dedication and hard work I have under my belt now like nothing can stop me. Bad news, yes, I’ll get over it and move forward. I’ve gone through worse, so whatever happens, happens. But if I do get it, it’s an amazing achievement, and I couldn’t have done it without my teammates, support system, my family, and my wife.

“It’s something I have written down,” she added.

“So maybe it’s the third one lucky (chuckles). Personal goals, definitely. I want to be in the WAFCON squad. I’m working really hard to get there. I’ve been working really hard. It’s been a bumpy road. I’ve had, obviously, my main surgery. I had a second surgery that was a hiccup for my recovery, but I’ve put in the work, and the only goal I’ve had on my mind is the WAFCON. And I’ve said it to many, but I’m also going to be patient with myself. If it doesn’t happen now, it’s okay.”

Salgado believes that Banyana have what it takes to be African champions again, but also knows teams step up their game against her side. The football gods owe Salgado a healthy WAFCON tournament, whether she will get the chance to be on the plane to Morocco or not, it will be seen. Beating the odds and returning to health and competitiveness has Salgado seeing life and the game with a different, refreshed perspective.

She is doing and reacting to things differently because she has come to learn that things come and go, while health cannot be measured.





THE IDISKI TOP 10... RECORD TRANSFERS

This week, iDiski Times casts its eye over the ten biggest transfer deals in Betway Premiership history, a roll call of record-breaking moves that shifted headlines and reshaped squads.

Every transaction on the list crossed international borders, featuring both high-profile departures and statement-making arrivals.

The rankings are based on the reported values listed by Transfermarkt. As is often the case in football's murky marketplace, not every fee was officially disclosed, meaning some figures are informed estimates. All amounts have been converted into South African Rands from their original currencies to provide a clear, local comparison.

(*statistics as of 1 March 2025)

The Top 10:

10 Raphael Chukwu
Mamelodi Sundowns ~> SSC Bari
(1999/00)
± R40 million

At the turn of the millennium, Raphael Chukwu was a colossus in the PSL, all power, presence and predatory instinct. When Sundowns sold the Nigerian striker to Bari, it was one of the first eye-catching outbound deals in South African football. Serie A proved unforgiving, but the transfer itself was a landmark moment: proof that PSL talent could command serious money on Europe's grand stage.

9 Mbulelo Mabizela
Orlando Pirates ~> Tottenham
Hotspur (2003/04)
± R46 million

OJ Mabizela was a gifted modern centre-back before the term was fashionable. Composed in possession, dominant in the air and fearless in the tackle, his move to Spurs was a headline-grabbing statement, one of the biggest ever fees for a South African defender at the time. Yet while the talent was unquestioned, off-field issues curtailed his European dream. The fee, however, reflected just how



highly he was rated.

8 Matías Esquivel

Club Atlético Lanús ~> Mamelodi Sundowns (2023/24)
± R46 million

When Sundowns secured Esquivel from Lanús, it felt like another masterstroke in their South American recruitment drive. Technically refined and tactically sharp, the Argentine arrived with a pedigree. But football doesn't always follow the script. Struggling to adapt to the tempo and physicality of the local game, he spent much of his stint out on loan — a reminder that even well-scouted investments carry risk.

7 Mbekezeli Mbokazi

Orlando Pirates ~> Chicago Fire FC (2025/26)
± R50 million

The freshest sale on the list, and one that stirred debate. Mbokazi had barely nine months of senior football behind him when Chicago Fire came calling with a compelling offer for the generational talent. Even Bafana coach Hugo Broos questioned the move. Yet with the World Cup looming in the United States, the move could prove perfectly timed for the 20-year-old. A bold leap, and perhaps just the start of something much bigger.

6 Kobamelo Kodisang

Moreirense FC ~> Mamelodi Sundowns (2024/25)
± R50 million

Kodisang's return from Portugal felt like a homecoming rich with promise. Having progressed abroad and entering his prime, he seemed tailor-made for Sundowns' evolving project. But competition was fierce, minutes were scarce, and loan spells have followed, first back to Portugal and then to Stellenbosch. A move that hopefully still has chapters left to write, but right now the Sundowns hierarchy must be questioning the investment.

5 Thulani Serero

Ajax Cape Town ~> AFC Ajax (2011/12)
± R50 million

From the School of Excellence to Amsterdam's grand theatre, Serero's move felt almost preordained. After shining for Ajax Cape Town and being crowned PSL Player of the Season, the silky midfielder stepped seamlessly into the Ajax system. Six seasons in the Eredivisie and Europe followed, then two more at Vitesse, before a lucrative Middle Eastern stint. A transfer that showcased South African technical class at its highest level.

4 Brayan León

Independiente Medellín ~> Mamelodi Sundowns (2025/26)
± R54 million

León arrived with momentum and menace. The Colombian forward, sharp and mobile, epitomised Sundowns' growing authority in international markets. Early goals have already hinted at value for money, and if he continues on this trajectory, he could become one of the successful big-money acquisitions in PSL history.

3 Marcelo Allende

Montevideo City Torque ~> Mamelodi Sundowns (2022/23)
± R58 million

Allende's arrival from the City



Football Group network was a signal of intent. A former Chilean youth prodigy who spent several months with Arsenal as a teenager, he has become a central figure in Sundowns' midfield. Inventive, intelligent and relentlessly competitive, over four seasons, he has helped redefine expectations around foreign signings in the Premiership.

2 Percy Tau

Mamelodi Sundowns ~> Brighton & Hove Albion (2018/19)
± R64 million

The Lion of Judah was the poster boy of Sundowns' modern era.

After starring in domestic and CAF competitions, his move to the Premier League marked one of the most high-profile exports in PSL history. Though work permit issues initially shaped his European journey, the transfer fee reflected his explosive pace, fearless dribbling and continental pedigree. He was a star in Belgium on loan, but never quite got going in England. A reunion with Pitso Mosimane at Al Ahly reignited his spark before subsequent moves to Qatar and Vietnam cooled it slightly. Still, the transfer remains a benchmark deal.

1 Arthur Sales

Lommel SK ~> Mamelodi Sundowns (2024/25)
± R64 million

Matching Tau's record fee, Arthur Sales symbolises Sundowns' transformation from seller to buyer. Young, dynamic and technically refined, the Brazilian has already justified the investment with decisive performances. Should he power Downs to another CAF Champions League crown, the record price tag may soon prove worth its price.

What The List Tells Us:

If this ranking had been compiled in 2022, every entry would have been an outbound sale. But in the last four years, Mamelodi Sundowns have flipped the script. Half of this top 10 now consists of major incoming signings by the Tshwane giants.

Seven of the 10 record deals involve Sundowns — five purchases and two sales — underlining their financial muscle and strategic shift.

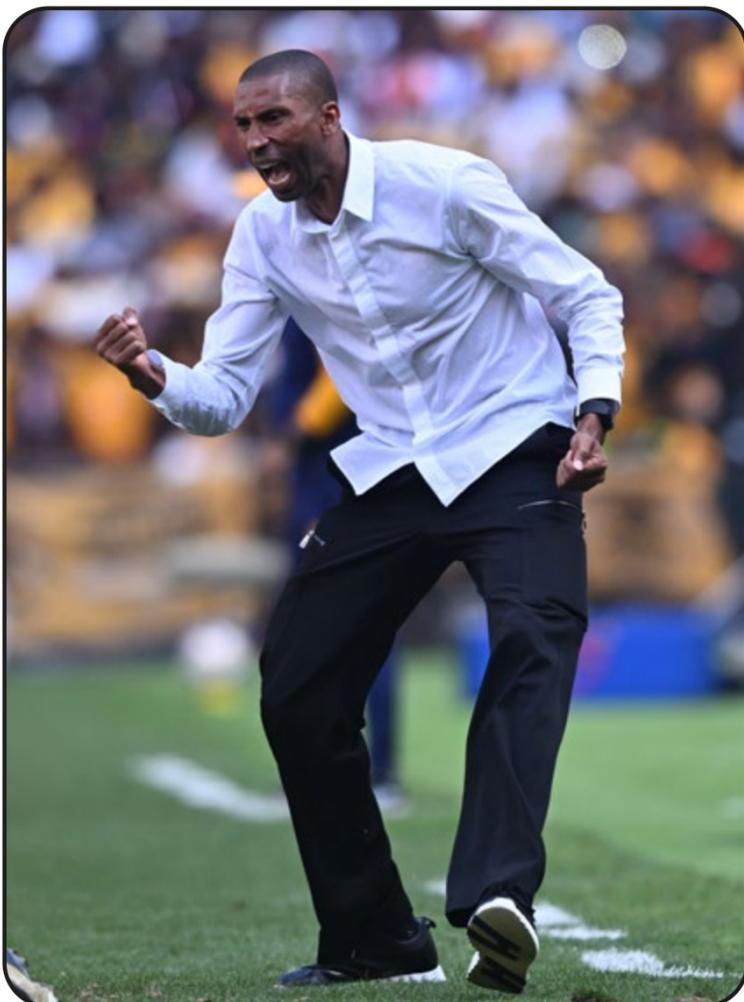
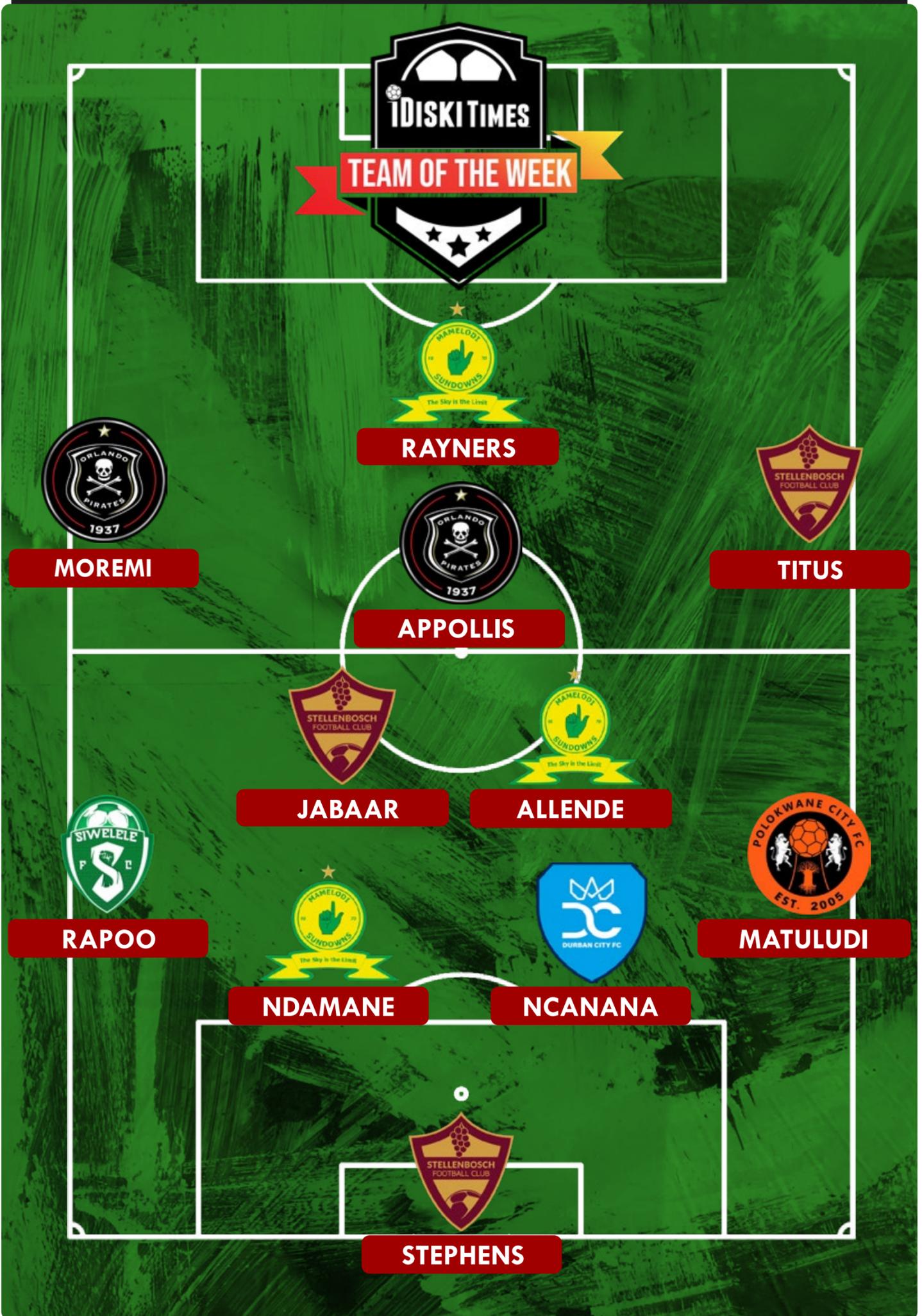
Remarkably, seven of their recent signings have surpassed what was once their record acquisition: Mbulelo Mabizela from Valerenga for R18 million 16 years ago. Nuno Santos (R20m) and Tashreeq Matthews (R30m) narrowly miss out on this list.

Perhaps most strikingly, seven of these 10 record transfers have occurred in just the last eight years. Serero's move was 15 years ago, Mabizela's 23 years ago, and Chukwu's 27 years ago.

The message is clear: the Betway Premiership's financial landscape has changed, and Sundowns are driving the evolution.



IDISKI'S PREMIERSHIP TEAM OF THE WEEK (24 FEB - 1 MAR 2026)



**ACE OF THE WEEK:
ABDESLAM OUADDU**

Our iDiski Times Ace of the Week is Orlando Pirates head coach Abdeslam Ouaddou, after guiding the Buccaneers to a commanding 3–0 victory over Kaizer Chiefs in Saturday’s Soweto Derby. The Moroccan tactician became the first Pirates coach since Brazilian Julio Leal in 2011 to win his maiden derby, and it was not merely the result, but the authority behind it that stood out. Pirates were organised, fearless and clinical, outplaying their fiercest rivals from start to finish. The emphatic triumph not only delivered bragging rights to the Ghost but also propelled Pirates back to the summit of the Betway Premiership, underlining Ouaddou’s growing influence.



The World & South Africa

Over the coming weeks, we'll be rolling out a series that dives deep into South African footballers and their often complicated relationship with playing abroad. It's a story that stretches back more than 126 years: rich, layered and shaped by far more than just football...

This is a history marked by politics, isolation, rebellion, opportunity, heartbreak and adventure. A history where careers were redirected by world events, borders, passports and perceptions as much as by talent. Where some doors opened

unexpectedly, others slammed shut, and a few were never meant to open at all.

There are stories many fans have never heard, and others that time, discomfort or convenience have quietly pushed aside. But they are football stories nonetheless, human stories, and they matter. Together, they help explain the often paradoxical relationship South African football has long shared with the outside world, and why going abroad has never been a simple journey from A to B, but a winding road shaped by who we were, who we became, and how the world chose to see us.

A Teen Called Tommy

Last week, we told the story of Kaizer Motaung chasing his dream to the United States, and of the unforgettable night in 1968 when he shared a pitch with Pelé as the Atlanta Chiefs faced Santos. This week, the spotlight shifts to a South African teenager whose brilliance was so blinding that at home, he was compared to Motaung. And abroad, they simply called him Pelé.

The Teenage Whizz Kid Who Left Them In a Daze

Many South African football journeys overseas end in triumph. Others, just as promising, dissolve into quiet “what-ifs,” undone by timing, circumstance, or cruel twists of fate. Few stories capture that fragile line between destiny and heartbreak more powerfully than that of Thomas “Chincha Guluva” Madigage, the fearless prodigy who came within touching distance of football immortality.

Older generations remember Madigage not only as the electric teenager who dazzled crowds, but also as the thoughtful mentor he later became, serving as assistant coach at SuperSport United FC and briefly with the South African national soccer team. He had begun shaping futures, passing on lessons carved from his own extraordinary rise.

Tragically, that next chapter was never fully written. In 2012, just one month before his 42nd birthday, Madigage was killed in a motor accident. South African football mourned not only a brilliant football mind but a living bridge between eras, a man whose journey, from teenage phenomenon to respected coach, inspired everyone who crossed his path.

Teen Dreams

South Africa in the 1980s was a different footballing world, isolated, uncertain, and cut off from global opportunity. But hope arrived in the form of Jomo Sono, freshly returned from the United States with bold ideas and boundless belief. He purchased Highlands Park’s status and

founded Jomo Cosmos FC, determined to build not just a team, but a symbol of possibility. Alongside respected coach Roy Matthews, he began assembling a side built on daring youth and fearless ambition.

Among them was a tiny teenager with lightning in his boots. Madigage did not dominate physically; he was slight, almost fragile, but the moment he touched the ball, the stadium seemed to tilt in his favour. He glided past defenders, accelerated into open grass, and finished with ice-cold precision. At just 16 years old, he became the youngest professional footballer in South African history. Those who watched him sensed immediately: this was no ordinary talent.

Playing alongside icons and future legends — Sono himself, his brother Julius Sono, Pitso Mosimane, Matthews Phiri, Edward Motale, Augustine Makalalane, Webster Lichaba, Brian Walters, Johnny Masegela, and others — Madigage thrived in an environment rich with confidence and flair.

In 1987, still only 17, he helped Cosmos lift the NSL title, an astonishing triumph for a club barely five years old. The boy from Soweto was no longer just a rising star. He was a national sensation.

Glasgow Calling

Sono recommended the teenage sensation to his former Toronto Blizzard teammate Jimmy Nichol, who was a coach at Rangers FC. In 1989, Madigage arrived in Europe and immediately made waves, starring in a youth tournament in Italy where he was voted the competition’s best attacking player. His brilliance translated instantly.

Soon, he was training at Ibrox, catching the attention of Rangers manager Graeme Souness and assistant Walter Smith. Senior professionals marvelled at his balance, his imagination, his fearless dribbling. They nicknamed him “Pelé,” not out of politeness, but out of genuine awe.

On a Highland tour, Madigage dazzled



crowds, and when he scored in a 4–2 friendly victory over Clydebank, more than 2,000 Rangers supporters rose to their feet in applause. Days later, he appeared again, this time replacing England legend Ray Wilkins in another pre-season victory. It felt inevitable. A contract seemed only a formality. South Africa was on the verge of producing another global pioneer.

But football dreams can be heartbreakingly fragile. Work permit complications, financial negotiations, and the political realities of the era intervened. The deal never materialised. Madigage moved on, eventually signing with FC Zürich. Another door, another chance to conquer Europe.

The Cruellest Blow

Then came the moment that changed everything. A devastating knee injury.

Madigage managed just one official appearance in Switzerland before the dream collapsed beneath him. The same career that had exploded into life with such speed was suddenly forced into retreat. The stage that had seemed destined to be his was gone.

He returned to South Africa carrying both disappointment and resilience. Though he was never quite the same explosive force, he adapted, endured,

and continued to shine. He would go on to earn four caps for Bafana Bafana, a testament to his enduring quality.

His playing career, in fact, stretched on for more than a decade, returning to Cosmos before joining SuperSport United, where he would later transition into coaching. On the sidelines, he worked alongside figures such as Mosimane, Gavin Hunt, and Gordon Igesund, evolving from prodigy to mentor, from star to guide.

The Legend That Almost Was

Perhaps that is why Madigage’s story resonates so deeply. Not only because of what he achieved, but because of what he stood on the verge of becoming. He was the teenager who lit up Ibrox. The South African who made European giants take notice. The fearless boy who made hardened professionals applaud.

He became a respected coach, a teacher, and an inspiration. But those who saw him in his youth never forgot the electricity, the sense that anything was possible when the ball was at his feet.

Football history celebrates its heroes, but it also remembers its near-myths. And Madigage remains one of South Africa’s most hauntingly beautiful ‘what-ifs’: a blazing talent who burned bright enough for the world to glimpse greatness, even if only for a moment.

SOWETO KID'S PLEA

'Let me play for Rangers'

Only Government red tape can stop Graeme Souness from pulling off one of British football's most sensational signing coups. For Rangers are ready to fly in black South African teenager Thomas Madigage in minutes they get clearance for the Soweto boy's work permit. And the Ibrox giants are in a sweat, for they fail to get that clearance then the 18-year-old wonder kid from the shanty town will be snapped up by Italian giants Juventus.

Madigage has no doubts where he'd prefer to be. In an urgent plea to Government Ministers, he says: "Please do everything you can to allow me to come to Britain. I dream of pulling on a Rangers jersey. I want to play for them and see my future as a footballer with them. Rangers are one of the best clubs in the world."

Madigage was discovered playing for Jomo Cosmos in South Africa two years ago by Scottish boss Roy Matthews, whose son Paul was playing in the same team. Matthews, a former Charlton player, was approached by South Africa's football supremo, Jomo Sono, and asked to run the Cosmos. And his first act on taking control was to promote boy wonder Madigage to his first team.

One of six children, Thomas honed his skills on dusty streets in the sprawling ghetto near Johannesburg. He could never afford a pair of boots but practised the skills of his heroes Pele, Maradona and Glenn Hoddle.

'Dreams'

Matthews says: "This boy is different class. He lives and dreams about football and is thrilled to be a Rangers player." The gifted winger, who used to play barefoot, has already played for Rangers in a youth tournament in Italy in May and was named the player of the competition. And that was where he caught the eye of Juventus boss Dino Zoff. Thomas trained at Ibrox for a

he jetted back to South Africa with Rangers' international star Richard Gough, who was brought up in the country. Since then, he

Nicknamed The Little Wonder, Thomas is hungry to swap the poverty of Soweto to rub shoulders with Souness' million pound stars in the Premier Division. Rangers have offered him a three-year contract and he is due to return to Ibrox for pre-season training next month. Matthews believes he can be a major hit with the Rangers fans because of his amazing dribbling skills and says: "He's such a nice kid. Nothing that has happened to him recently has gone to his

Souness - "wonderful"

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