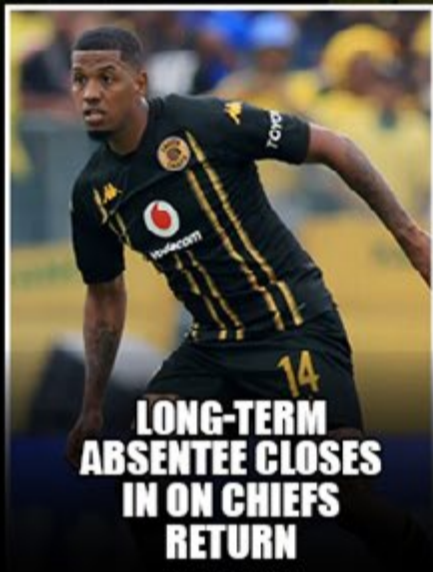




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**LONG-TERM
ABSENTEE CLOSES
IN ON CHIEFS
RETURN**



**MVALA FUTURE
AT SUNDOWNS
IN DOUBT?**



**ONE-CLUB MAN
MAREMA: WHY
I NEVER JOINED
CHIEFS**



**'CHIEFS LADIES TEAM
IS A BIG STEP FOR
WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
IN SA'**

SA& THE WORLD, IDISKI TOP 10, & ACE OF THE WEEK

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



ANDILE JALI
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TEAM OF THE WEEK
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MORE DEPARTURES EXPECTED FROM RICHARDS BAY BAY?

More departures are expected at Richards Bay FC at the conclusion of the current season, with the club preparing to implement further changes to its squad as part of a broader restructuring process. Knox Mutizwa has already become the first player to exit, having left the club two weeks ago after his contract was terminated just a few months into his stay, following his arrival at the start of the campaign. Meanwhile, players such as Gabadinho Mhango and Thabani Zuke are reportedly among those who could be heading for the exit once the curtain falls on the 2025/26 season. Richards Bay are no strangers to significant squad changes, having parted ways with several players in almost every season in recent years.



MVALA FUTURE AT SUNDOWNS IN DOUBT?

Mamelodi Sundowns defender Mothobi Mvala's injury-hit season has put his long-term future with the club in doubt. Mvala, 31, only featured 10 times last season, with 176 minutes in the league, but saw his option taken up as the club backed the player for his consistent displays prior to his injury troubles. However, this season he's racked up a mere 44 minutes of football, and despite returning to full training, game-time is not given, considering the form of Grant Kekana, Keanu Cupido and new signing Khulumani Ndamane – while Kegan Johannes has also come to the fore. Mvala's current deal expires in June, and there's been no indication of a renewal as of yet.



JURGENS SET FOR STELLIES RETURN?

Despite ongoing speculation that Durban City are eager to secure Kyle Jurgens on a permanent deal following his season-long loan spell, it is believed that Stellenbosch FC are keen to bring the midfielder back to the club. Head coach Gavin Hunt, who is leading the push behind the scenes, is said to be very interested in continuing to work with the 22-year-old, especially after their time together at Durban City during the first half of the season. The utility player has benefited from consistent game-time, making 24 appearances in all competitions and contributing one assist along the way. Before joining City, Jurgens was operating more at right-back, a role he frequently played during Steve Barker's tenure at Stellenbosch, showcasing his versatility on the pitch.



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DORTLEY CLOSING IN ON CHIEFS RETURN

Kaizer Chiefs and Bafana Bafana defender Rushwin Dortley appears closer to finally returning to full training after a long, frustrating injury lay-off.

The 23-year-old was a regular for club and country after securing a lucrative move from Cape Town Spurs, where he first broke into the national team, captaining the Cosafa Cup squad.

He started 19 of Chiefs' 20 league games in 2024/25, while also playing all six of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers, where South Africa went unbeaten, before knee surgery curtailed his incredible progress.

But there have been complications with his recovery since, with sources within the club suggesting that the pain and swelling persisted and he was forced to bide his time with further treatment in order not to suffer another long-term setback.

Dortley is said to be a week away from finally getting back into the set-up at Naturena and beginning to compete for a place in the starting line-up, where Aden McCarthy has since filled in during his absence alongside Zitha Kwinika and Inacio Miguel this past season.

Dortley last made a competitive appearance in March 2025, and it appears doubtful, even should he return, to make the 2026 FIFA World Cup squad due to the emergence of Khulumani Ndamane and Mbekezeli Mbokazi in the left centre-back position.

It comes at a time where Siyabonga Ngezana's inclusion is also in question, with the FSCB defender only returning this past weekend to the club's bench, having suffered a meniscus injury, which he refused to go under the knife for, in order to have a chance to be part of the global event in the United States of America.

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‘WHEN THEY GO TOP THEY NEVER LET GO’

With the Nedbank Cup semi-finals taking the spotlight as Durban City and TS Galaxy booked their places in the final, there was only one Betway Premiership fixture last week, and Mamelodi Sundowns returned to the summit of the table, beating Chippa United 4-1 in their rescheduled game.

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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‘Once They Get Top Position, They Never Let Go’

“Well done to Mamelodi Sundowns

for beating Chippa United 4-1 in the Betway Premiership.

“Chippa United coach Vusumuzi Vilakazi tried his best to stop Sundowns. His formation was defensive, but it was not enough to stop Sundowns.

“Masandawana find themselves at the top of the league, and you know, once they get top position, they never let go.

“Sundowns have dominated the league for such a long time. All their players are used to this journey.

“It is going to be difficult for Pirates to chase Sundowns.

“Nevertheless, there are eight matches left for both sides, and they are only separated by two points, so it's all to play for.”





A RIVALRY REKINDLED AS DOWNS CHASE CAFCL SUCCESS

A decade on since Pitso Mosimane and Hlompho Kekana led them to continental glory, Mamelodi Sundowns stand on the verge of becoming the first South African club to add a second star above their club badge.

CAF Champions League winners back in 2016, the Brazilians are just two matches away from being in the final of Africa's

premier club knockout competition yet again. The elimination of record champions Al Ahly and their Egyptian compatriots, as well as defending champions Pyramids FC in the previous round, has left the door wide open for Miguel Cardoso and the South African champions to potentially reign supreme in Africa.

But it is not that cut and dried, not with a perennial rival standing in their way to the final, where the opposition – either of Morocco's RS Berkane and AS FAR Rabat – is roundly considered the kind that Sundowns should overcome.

First up, though, is the small matter of the penultimate stage of the competition against a regular opponent. Sundowns have played against Tunisian outfit Esperance so many times that they must be tired of it. There have been 10 meetings between the two clubs, all of them tight affairs. So closely-contested were those ties that there have been just 12 goals in the 10 matches (Champions League matches are played on a home and away basis).

Things are not going to be any different this time around when the two continental bulls lock horns in this year's semi-final, starting on Sunday (April 12) in Tunis before the Blood and Gold make the trip to Loftus Versfeld for the second leg next Saturday (April 18).

iDiski senior soccer writer, MATSHELANE MAMABOLO, reflects on the previous clashes to look ahead to what this latest instalment could dish up.

THE BIRTH OF A RIVALRY

It all began at the turn of the century, in 2000, when Sundowns – champions of South Africa and making the group stage of the Champions League for the first time after being humiliated by the Reunion Islands' AS Saint Louisienne the year before. This time around, the late Ted Dumitru and his men made the round-robin phase – Group A, which included Esperance as well as the Ivory Coast's Africa Sports and Sable FC of Cameroon. Sundowns and Esperance progressed from the group – tied on 12 points each, with the Tunisians topping the group via a better goal difference. Their clashes were packed with action, each side winning the home tie – the Blood and Gold prevailing 3-2 in Tunis while the Brazilians were 2-0 winners in Pretoria. The two sides found themselves together in Group A yet again the following year, and the status quo remained as Esperance won the group via goal difference with Sundowns runners-up after both got nine points. Unlike the previous year, when just the group winners progressed to the final, in 2001, there was a semi-final contested by the top two teams from the two groups, and Sundowns went all the way to the final, which they lost 4-1 to Al Ahly.

NTHETHE: "I BELIEVE THAT THE CARDOSO FACTOR IS GOING TO BE VERY IMPORTANT IN THIS MATCH BECAUSE HE KNOWS ESPERANCE VERY WELL."





Matthew Booth played for Sundowns in both those years and has vivid memories of their encounters with Esperance.

Matthew Booth on Sundowns v Esperance

“Yeah, we played them two years in a row, and that’s really when a bitter rivalry was created. I remember it being very tough playing against them in their own backyard because those pre-match shenanigans of African football were worse back then, unlike now with the advent of technology and stricter rules on how visiting teams should be treated. But those experiences toughened us up and created a Sundowns team with a lot of character whenever we played away from home. I think that’s why we were able to go all the way to the final to play against Ahly in 2001; we had gained experience from the previous year’s campaign. I don’t think Esperance will change their usual approach of being cautious when they play away and try to catch Sundowns on the counter – so, Sundowns will have to be wary of their rest defence and careful of Esperance’s quick counter-attacking players. This episode with Cardoso’s involvement will make a hell of a clash. And with Al Ahly and Pyramids knocked out, this is the best time for Sundowns to get that second star. But they still have a lot of work to do, although I believe it is advantage Sundowns.”

For years since those initial clashes in 2000 and 2001, the two clubs avoided each other, with each winning the Champions League once – Esperance in 2011 and Sundowns in 2016 – before they could meet again. They found themselves in the same group in the 2017 campaign, and this time around, Esperance finished top with 12 points to Sundowns’ 9, although both were duly eliminated in the next round. Defender Thabo Nthethe recalls the clashes being tight yet unfair, though they were beaten 2-1 at home and drew goalless away.

BOOTH: “I DON’T THINK ESPERANCE WILL CHANGE THEIR USUAL APPROACH OF BEING CAUTIOUS WHEN THEY PLAY AWAY AND TRY TO CATCH SUNDOWNS ON THE COUNTER.”

THABO NTHETHE on clashes with Esperance

“They used to cheat, that’s what I remember. They made it hard for you, the bad treatment you’d get from their supporters and the club themselves. That’s how things were then, especially when we played away. It was not nice, you know. But it’s something that we expected because coach Pitso [Mosimane] knew and prepared us for what we were to be up against. On the pitch, Esperance played good football, and they gave us a great challenge – it was very hard playing them in their own backyard. And I think we are still going to see the same this time around.

“I believe that the Cardoso factor is going to be very important in this match because he knows Esperance very well. He’s got a good record in this match because, remember, he won when he was with Esperance and last year he knocked them out. He will believe that he can do it again and will pass that belief on to the players who really need that second star, like all of us in the country do.”

No Egyptian giants, but it will still be tough for Sundowns

“I won’t say it will be that easy, even after they beat Esperance, just because Al Ahly and Pyramids have been knocked out. They will still have it hard, because the teams [RS Berkane and AS FAR Rabat] that are there did not reach



the semi-final by fluke; they deserved to progress because they are very good teams. So, Sundowns can't take it that lightly. They need to do their best, and history would have taught them not to take anything for granted. Last year, I did not see them losing when we played the final [against Pyramids], a team that was in the final for the first time. So you can't take it lightly. I think each team that is there, they deserve to be there, because they've worked hard."

THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCED PLAYERS

"The good thing for Sundowns is that they have a good number of players who have lots of Champions League experience. All of Ronwen [Williams], Themba [Zwane], Aubrey [Modiba] and Thapelo [Morena] will be very important in this match. Their experience will have to carry the team through. But remember, Esperance also have experienced players too, so it won't be easy to be honest. I foresee yet another close encounter over the two legs. Sundowns are starting away, right? The first game is away, which I think is an advantage for Sundowns because most times when they play at home first, they win 1-0 and then go away to concede goals. But if they can avoid a defeat in the first leg, they will give themselves a good chance. Playing away in the Champions League is very difficult. So yeah, it won't be an easy one. But I'm just wishing for Sundowns to win it."

CARDOSO ON A RARE HAT-TRICK

Sundowns' Portuguese coach Miguel Cardoso is on the verge of adding his name to a list that has just two coaches. If he wins the semi-final tie against Esperance, Cardoso will become only the third coach, following our very own Pitso Mosimane, to have contested three successive CAF Champions League finals. Cardoso's Portuguese compatriot

NTHETHE: "I WON'T SAY IT WILL BE THAT EASY, EVEN AFTER THEY BEAT ESPERANCE, JUST BECAUSE AL AHLY AND PYRAMIDS HAVE BEEN KNOCKED OUT."

Manuel Jose reached four in a row. Unlike the other two, though, Cardoso is still searching for his maiden victory. Back in 2024, after beating Sundowns, the bald-headed coach fell short at the final with Esperance as they went down 1-0 to Al Ahly, courtesy of an own goal by Roger Aholou. Last year, having joined the South African champions mid-campaign, he took Sundowns all the way to the ultimate stage of the continent's premier knockout competition, where they were generally expected to be victorious against final rookies Pyramids. But again Cardoso came unstuck, the Egyptians stunning Sundowns 3-2 on aggregate courtesy of a 1-1 draw in Pretoria and a 2-1 victory in Cairo. Cardoso and his men go into the semi-final on the back of a good domestic showing, which has seen them go top of the table at the weekend, but their last continental match would not have sent Esperance shaking in their boots. Sundowns were beaten 2-0 by Stade Malien in the second leg of the quarter-final, but got through having won the first leg 3-0. It is the kind of result Esperance themselves would probably not have been surprised by given that they too lost 1-0 in Bamako, having been held goalless in their own backyard by the



Mali champions. Sundown can at least say they beat Malien and – on the strength of that - should thus be slight favourites to beat Esperance and see Cardoso reaching a third successive CAF Champions League final.

ONE TRACK MIGUEL

Any thoughts Cardoso could be carried away at yet another meeting with his former employers should be quickly discarded, the Portuguese having shown himself to be able to rise above any emotional elements of a tie and produce the goods. He was particularly ice-cold and has, however, proven himself to be able to get over any distractions with that 2-0 success over Rulani Mokwena’s MC Alger in the final group match. Amidst talks of ‘insider trading’ with a Sundowns analyst accused of feeding Mokwena information, Cardoso remained nonchalant while his opponent got distracted and forgot about the task at hand. The result was a clinical performance by Sundowns as they booked their spot in the last eight yet again. Trust the 53-year-old to once again remain fully-focused on getting Sundowns to perform at their best on the trip to a ground he used to call home as he seeks to edge ever so close to winning continental club football’s ultimate prize at the third attempt.

On the face of it, Sundowns can really only beat themselves – the exit of Al Ahly in particular has opened up the door wide open for the South African champions to win a second Champions League title.

Granted, we sang the same song last year after they were left to face newbies Pyramids, in the final, and we ended up with egg all over our faces. But surely this time it has to be. Sundowns need only get over the Esperance hurdle to put themselves in line for African glory, 10 years on since Hlompho Kekana lifted the trophy aloft in Cairo.



BOOTH: “WE PLAYED THEM TWO YEARS IN A ROW, AND THAT’S REALLY WHEN A BITTER RIVALRY WAS CREATED. I REMEMBER IT BEING VERY TOUGH PLAYING AGAINST THEM IN THEIR OWN BACKYARD BECAUSE OF THOSE PRE-MATCH SHENANIGANS.”

MAMELODI SUNDOWNS VS ESPERANCE DE TUNIS

2025 QUARTER-FINAL
Agg: Sundowns 1-0 Esperance

*Leg 1: April 1 in Pretoria
 Sundowns 1-0 Esperance
 Leg 2: April 8 in Pretoria
 Esperance 0-0 Sundowns*

2024 SEMI-FINAL
Agg: Sundowns 0-1 Esperance

*Leg 1 April 20 in Tunis
 Esperance 1 Sundowns 0
 Leg 2 April 26 in Pretoria
 Sundowns 0 Esperance 1*

2017 Group C
*Leg 1: June 2 in Pretoria
 Sundowns 1 Esperance 2
 Leg 2: June 21 in Tunis
 Esperance 0 Sundowns 0*

2001 Group A
*Leg 1 August 11 in Pretoria
 Sundowns 0 Esperance 0
 Leg 2 October 6 in Tunis
 Esperance 0 Sundowns 0*

2000 Group A
*Leg 1 August 19 in Tunis
 Esperance 3 Sundowns 2
 Leg 2 October 14 in Pretoria
 Sundowns 2 Esperance 0*



PULENG MAREMA, THE ONE-CLUB MAN - 35 & GOING STRONG

In March, PULENG MAREMA, formerly Tlolane, celebrated his 35th birthday on Human Rights Day. One of the few one-club players in the country, his longevity and loyalty are a rarity in a sport whose practitioners chase fame and the money often only to see their careers swiftly end. Ahead of his birthday, Marema allowed iDiski Times senior soccer writer MATSHELANE MAMABOLO into his home to reflect on a career that saw him spend three frustrating seasons in the first division despite offers from the country's big clubs. He also opens up on his relationship with City owner Johnny Mogaladi, who is often described as a difficult boss.

Matshelane Mamabolo: Puleng son, thanks for making time to speak to me. Goodness, you're getting old – 35 years now. You know how in the local game, once you are 35, people say the 'playing days are over, it's time for pension'. But I watched you the other day, and you played like a spring chicken. What's the secret to your longevity?

Puleng Marema: (Chuckles) Big man, thank you. Ja, I think maybe I can say one thing – the secret is discipline. So, it has to do with the way I trained from my early age until now and also I was taking care of my body – things like having enough rest and making sure I am well recovered. So, that's why I am still enjoying the game. Like, now at my age, I feel like I still want to play, you understand? That's why even when I get a chance to play, I want to enjoy it.

MM: But where does this discipline thing come from, because young players in this country often get carried away by seeing the lights of professionalism and then lose their way. What was it that ensured you did not become a typical South African player?

PM: I think the surroundings that I grew up in from an early age helped me. It started from my family, to the sports family and the friends that I kept. Obviously, at Polokwane City, it was the coaches that I worked with, and mostly they were European coaches. So they know how to discipline a player because I feel like the European coaches who coached me early on, they know how to manage players. And that's why in Europe they are called managers and not coaches. I learnt a lot from those coaches. Sure, the first coach I had was Boebie Solomons – a South African. But he was very good. The second one was Kosta Papic, and then it was Julio Leal, fourth was Luc Eymael, then Jozef Vukusic, and there was also this one called Zlatko Krmpotić. That's the last European coach who coached me.

MM: But what is it about these coaches that ensured you stayed on the straight and narrow?

PM: They were so strict, especially for us as young players. Because all these coaches, they coached me when I was still young. For example, when we were running as a team, they wanted the young players to always be in front, you understand? And



“THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I WAS ON TOP OF MY GAME. ALMOST ALL SOUTH AFRICAN TEAMS WANTED ME - THE BIG THREE AND THE SO-CALLED SMALL TEAMS. BUT I WAS STILL YOUNG THEN.”

they also expected us, the young ones to always be early. They were particular in the way we ate and the things that you do after training. Obviously, after training, you have a life, but you need to understand that your body is very important because that's what helps you make money. I learnt all that and kept with it. And again, when I started my career, I had lots of senior players that I used to watch on TV, the likes of Jabu Maluleke, Benson Mhlongo, Thabiso Semanya and Thapelo Tshilo. I grew up watching them on TV, so when I got a chance to play and to be around them, I learnt a lot from them.

MM: Let's go back a little. When you were young, was a professional football career something you dreamt of?

PM: I come from a football-playing family. I grew up watching football. Apparently, my father played, though I never got to watch him. But I heard he was a good player. I have four older brothers, and I am the youngest at home. They all played football, and people don't believe me, but they were all better footballers than I am. They just didn't get the chance to play pro. So, as a youngster, I used to carry their boots when they went to play, and I would watch them. They saw my interest and encouraged me to play, and growing up, I realised I was not really good in school, and I dropped out in Grade 11 and decided to pursue a career in



football. And the taste of that first salary made me know this is what I want to do.

MM: And you've played for one club all your life.

PM: Ja, I started in 2012, but I was in the development team, and that season was when I got promoted. The team was still in the NFD after they'd bought the status of Bay United. So I had to go to development, then I was promoted by coach Jacky Ledwaba.

MM: Were there the players you admired? Like the role models or players you would admire?

PM: Yeah. One was Hlompho Kekana because we are both from Zebediela. So, I was like, okay, one day maybe I will go on to be like him. I'm still inspired till today, because sometimes he would come to watch us playing in village tournaments. It was amazing, a guy we had seen on TV just the other day coming to our gravel grounds. I was close to his younger brother so that allowed me to get to him, and he was down to earth. So, I was like, okay, this guy is good and cool. I also loved Teko Modise, he was my role model. When I watched him, I enjoyed how he played.

MM: So, how was it the first time you played against them?

PM: The first time I played against them was here at the Peter Mokaba Stadium, against [Mamelodi] Sundowns. Obviously, I was still young and excited, and everyone at home in ZB was excited for me. I went to the game to enjoy myself playing against my idol and my inspiration, and it was an unforgettable match for me. We drew 1-1.

MM: You've grown from that starry-eyed boy to being a star yourself, a role model and an inspiration for others and someone known the country over. Was there ever a time when some of the big clubs called?

PM: Ja, there was a time when I was on top of my game. Almost all South African teams wanted me – the big three and the so-called small teams. But I was still young then. At the same time, I was excited because every time you get a message from someone with a screenshot of a headline – “Chiefs want Puleng” or “Pirates want Puleng” – you get excited because it is not everyone who gets wanted by those big clubs. But, at the same time, I needed to respect the contract that I had with Polokwane City and the person who gave me the opportunity, you understand? So, yeah, man, the teams came looking for my services.

MM: But did the chairman tell you about those offers?

PM: Yes, he did. We sat down, and I remember him asking me what I wanted. Again, eish big man, when you're young and playing football, there will be people – especially when you are playing regularly and in the spotlight – speaking about you and to you. You get that advice from different people, and that time I was young and took some of it, not knowing it might affect my relationship with the



“THERE WAS NO WAY FOR ME TO GO TO CHIEFS WHEN I WAS HAPPY HERE AT HOME IN POLOKWANE. THE MOVE TO ANOTHER CLUB WOULD HAVE BEEN ABOUT MONEY.”

owner, you understand? So, I ended up doing something that I regret even today. People were telling me, ‘No, man, you don't deserve to be in that team’, some saying, ‘You are wasting your time. Go to Chiefs’. Then I ended up sending a message to the chairman that I want to leave. The manner I did it in was not good, given the good relationship we have. He said, ‘Okay, I'll come, and we are going to have a meeting’. Then we had a meeting. He asked me, ‘What do you want?’ I said, ‘I want to go’. He said, ‘Where?’ I said, I want to play for one of the big teams. Then he said, ‘Okay, if that's what you want, I'll let you go’. I could see I disappointed him. And maybe I should have approached him in a different way. He used to tell me, ‘I don't have a problem if you want to leave, but I won't take you back if you go’.

MM: Then what happened? Because here you still are, you didn't go to one of the big clubs.

PM: Yeah, I think because he took me in as a young boy [about 20], so maybe he thought I might not make it outside of Polokwane, you understand? He came to my place and spoke to my parents, and then he assured them he is going to take care of me, you understand? Obviously, even my family wanted me to leave because some of my uncles tried to convince my parents that I should move.





I remember there was this time we went to the club office – it was me, my mum, my aunt, my uncle, my brother – just to ask him to let me go. But he said, ‘No, I can’t let him go, but I will take care of him’. He made that promise to my family. Unfortunately, my parents are no longer there, but obviously, wherever they are, they are proud that I’m still playing. He kept his promises, you understand? Here I am still playing for his team, and he is still taking care of me, my wife and kids. So yeah, he lived up to his promises – 100%, and I don’t regret having stayed because even when my parents died, he made sure they had two decent funerals.

MM: I know that one of those big clubs is Kaizer Chiefs? Are you saying you don’t kick yourself for not having joined the biggest club in the land?

PM: At first, yeah, I had a lot of regrets. The reality is if you want to go to another team, it is obviously because of money. Football is about money. But there was a point when the chairman gave me the biggest contract that I could never refuse. That contract, at that time, I can probably say I’m sure there were some players at big teams that I was earning more than they were. So, there was no way for me to go to Chiefs when I was happy here at home in Polokwane. The move to another club would have been about money.

MM: But then some people will say ambition; that going to play for Kaizer Chiefs, for example, would have seen you challenging to win the league. I mean, you have a good career, but you have not won any trophies. Don’t you feel you compromised on that?

PM: With that contract, I never thought about the trophies and stuff. I was thinking about what I was going to get from now until taking care of you and your family.

MM: But the trophies? Isn’t every player’s dream to win things?

PM: Yeah, obviously. We all want to show something after football. But at the same time, it doesn’t help if I won 10 league trophies and the top eight cup, but then after football, I don’t have money. So now I must show trophies while my kids are suffering? For me, it’s an achievement to win something, but I was thinking about the bigger picture. What will happen after? Because, say I went to Chiefs, and they offered me a three-year, anything could happen after that. It’s football; they could have said goodbye even before the end of the contract. And you know the kind of pressure at those big clubs. Would I still be around playing like I am now?

MM: When you look back at your career, are you content?

PM: Ja, personally I can say I’m happy. But my only regret is I didn’t get enough opportunities to play for Bafana Bafana. That’s the most disappointing part because I feel like ever since we won our first promotion, I was always on top of my game, and I felt like maybe I didn’t get that opportunity or maybe there were some players better than me, or that’s the only thing I didn’t get.

MM: Do you think it was because there



“IT DOESN’T HELP IF I WON 10 LEAGUE TROPHIES AND THE TOP EIGHT CUP, BUT THEN AFTER FOOTBALL, I DON’T HAVE MONEY. SO NOW I MUST SHOW TROPHIES WHILE MY KIDS ARE SUFFERING? FOR ME, IT’S AN ACHIEVEMENT TO WIN SOMETHING, BUT I WAS THINKING ABOUT THE BIGGER PICTURE.”

were other players better than you, or they just overlooked you? After all, back then, the first thing national team coaches did was look at Chiefs, Pirates and Sundowns for squad selection.

PM: Eish, I don’t know, hey. The call-up I got was under Coach Shakes [Mashaba], who believed in youngsters. But when he left Bafana Bafana, there was chopping and changing of coaches and that affected – not only me – but other players too. We did not get the opportunity to play more for the national team.

MM: What influence do you think you’ve had at City? Are you happy with the contribution you’ve made to get the club to now being a regular top-eight club instead of the perennial relegation candidates they used to be?

PM: Yeah, I’m happy. From the first promotion, I was excited, but it happened that at some point, we got relegated. At that time, I felt like it’s time for me to go to another club because almost everyone left. I felt like I was the only one who felt that pain. Remember it was that time of COVID, and we were in the Bio-bubble, and everyone was alone in their rooms. So after our last game, when we got relegated, you could see all the guys were disappointed, but not that much, because maybe most of them already had offers. So, that drained me to a point where I





really wanted to also leave because I was not ready to go to the lower division. I told the chairman, but he pleaded with me to stay and help the club back to the PSL. It took us three seasons to return. It was tough. I remember at one stage, when we went into the third season in the NFD, I said to the family, if we don't get promoted, I am quitting football.

MM: Clearly, you guys got promoted, because here you are still. How has it been to be the one carrying the team's hopes on your shoulders in recent years?

PM: It goes back to the coaches that coached me and the senior players I played with. I was the youngest at one stage, and I learnt a lot from them as to the responsibilities of being a senior player. I learnt how to treat new players and young players. That's why it is easy for me to be with these youngsters.

MM: You must be delighted to see some of them making it into the national team?

PM: Of course, it makes me proud because I saw them growing up in front of me, and they've all come into my hands when they joined and I oriented them. I am proud to say I groomed some of these youngsters, and to see them get to the national team is a huge pleasure. I still make them realise that they've not arrived by getting into the national team. Some of them say they want to stay like I did, but I tell them that we are not the same and that they should go [to other clubs] when the chance comes. Look at [Oswin] Appollis, I am very proud of him. I told him when he first arrived here that he is destined for great things. Before he joined, he sent me an Instagram message telling me how excited he is to be coming to play with me. And I saw the talent from the onset. From the first day I knew we had a diamond here, and I told him, 'Boy, you have a great future', and I am proud he is proving me right.

MM: A lot of clubs, when players turn 35, they start saying you are too old. Yet here you are still going on with no hint that the club will send you out to pasture. That must feel good.

PM: Eish, I look at my career from where I started, and I can only be proud of myself. I never set a target to say I want to finish at such an age, for me to be one of the players who played for one team and play for this long, even though I did not achieve lots of things, I feel like my career was very good. And to reach the age that I am still playing, is beautiful. Obviously, I still enjoy playing, and I feel like I am still young. I am that player who helps the youngsters, and I am inspiring them so that one day they can reach 300 games like I did recently. I really enjoy every moment. I enjoy waking up in the morning to go to training. I am at a stage where I feel like, when we don't train, I don't do extra training alone because I love being with my teammates. Maybe it is because I am heading towards the end (laughs).

MM: So, how many more seasons to go still?

PM: (Laughs) When I can't run anymore,



“MY ONLY REGRET IS I DIDN'T GET ENOUGH OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY FOR BAFANA BAFANA. THAT'S THE MOST DISAPPOINTING PART.”

or if I feel that when I pass the ball it does not go where I want it to, or I can't take those free kicks the way I do, then yes, I will stop. I have a two-year-old son now, and the moment he realises that daddy is a footballer, then maybe that will be time to stop. I feel I've played enough, so maybe one or two seasons to go. But as long as I can still run and play, I will keep at it. Now I am taking it day by day and game by game.

MM: What will you do when you hang those boots up?

PM: The Chairman and I will discuss that, but I know there is a position waiting for me at the club. I am 'Polokwane City for life' (chuckles).

MM: That's good to hear. Thank you for making time and all the best for the remainder of the season.

PM: Big man, I am the one who's thankful.



**ON PLAYING AGAIN:
"I'M NOT GOING
TO GO ANYWHERE.
I'M DONE. YEAH. I'M
DONE NOW."**



JALI ON CUP MINNOWS, BAFANA, PIRATES V SUNDOWNS & RELE GOING ABROAD

On Friday (10 April), ANDILE JALI celebrates his 36th birthday, a milestone that invites reflection on a career as decorated as it was enduring. Born in the Eastern Cape, Jali's journey was one of steady ascent and excellence. From lifting silverware at club level to wearing the colours of Bafana Bafana, he carved out a legacy defined by consistency, intelligence, and an unshakeable presence in midfield. His five seasons in Belgium with KV Oostende showcased his ability to adapt and compete in a demanding European environment. Yet, like all great stories, it began with a breakthrough moment. Jali first announced himself to the wider football public at the University of Pretoria, where, under the guidance of Steve Barker, he was part of a fearless side that captured the imagination by reaching the Nedbank Cup final. It was a run that signalled the arrival of a special talent, one who would soon step onto bigger stages and deliver. At Orlando Pirates, he tasted Nedbank Cup glory, and two more times with Mamelodi Sundowns, cementing his reputation as a player for the big occasion. Having lifted the Nedbank Cup three times, Jali returns to the competition not as a player chasing medals, but as an ambassador, and MATSHELANE MAMABOLO chatted with him. The conversation stretches beyond the present edition of the competition. It delves into his reflections on former clubs, the evolution of the game, and the experiences that have defined him.

Matshelane Mamabolo: Andile, good afternoon, brother. An ambassador of the Nedbank Cup, they could not have chosen a more worthy one, could they? Three-time winner, but also in a year where two NFD teams reached the semis, a reminder of when you went one step further, and made the final with Tuks. How does it feel to be in this role, given that you have special memories of this cup?

Andile Jali: Yeah, when it's like this, you know, it's entertaining to have the lower

division teams so far in the competition because even they want to make history, like everybody else. So, I'm happy that the teams from the lower division are doing well. And both of them reached the semis while still doing well in their own league.

MM: You guys surprised everyone with TUKS back in 2009, right? When you think of that year, the memories of going into that final and not winning, how did it feel back then?

AJ: Look, of course, it was bad not to win it. But overall it was a great experience, you know, for all of us. It was a great experience, and we were quite happy about what we did as a team. But about the result of the final, it honestly didn't come to our minds that we didn't win. For us, it was like we won it already when we went to the final. Even the coach said to us 'Ah, we won it, guys. Even if we can lose, it's still fine.'

MM: And for you and many others, that feat changed things for the better, because suddenly we got to know about you, and your career just blossomed from there on. You went on to win the cup more than once. It must be special for you to be an ambassador of the competition now. How does it feel to have Nedbank use you as one of the faces of their competition?

AJ: Yeah, you see, when it comes to this part, I always say to the people, you know, it's great to see them do something like this to me. It shows that even if you can start from the bottom, you can end up where I am now. So, I'm happy that Nedbank is doing things like this because it means there are going to be a lot of people who are going to be inspired.

MM: Andile, you've achieved much as a player. When you look back at your career, are you content? Do you feel

“YOU CAN SEE, SUNDOWNS ARE USED TO BEING IN THESE SITUATIONS, AND PIRATES ARE NOT. I’VE SAID IT BEFORE THAT THESE PIRATES PLAYERS NOW NEED TO SAY, ‘IT IS ABOUT WHAT WE WANT!’ IF THEY WANT IT MORE, THEN THEY CAN GET IT.”



you’ve done what you could have, or are there some regrets?

AJ: Me, I don’t have any regrets. Even two seasons back, when I went to Chippa [United], having said that, after Swallows, I was done with playing – there were no regrets. I was feeling that now it’s time to say goodbye to football, and then someone else called, and I continued.

MM: So, are you done now? Have you retired officially? If somebody calls and says we need help, would you go?

AJ: No, no, I’m not going. I’m not going to go anywhere. I’m done. Yeah. I’m done now.

MM: That’s good. Now, as a former Pirates star, you are aware of the young Relebohile Mofokeng. Calls for him to move to Europe are getting louder daily. You’ve walked the path he’s on. Should he go?

AJ: It all depends on him and his mentality at the moment. What’s his mood? How does he himself feel about going overseas? Because I suspect now, what he feels in South Africa is like people are pushing him, and they’re trying to push him harder to go overseas. Sometimes that could be stressful; that part might be stressing him. But as a person, he must first understand that if he’s taking that step, no one will know him in Europe. No one will be cheering for him in Europe until he makes his own name there. So, it’s something; it’s a process he needs to be ready for. He’s going to be alone at a new club and face new challenges; a new language, a new culture, a new lifestyle – those things are important for him to consider before he says ‘now I am ready to go to Europe’.

MM: I guess this is the kind of advice you would give to every youngster here in South Africa about taking that step, to say it’s not going to be the same as here at home where you are adored everywhere you go?

AJ: Yeah, yeah. The way they treat you here at home, it is not going to be the same as how they will treat you

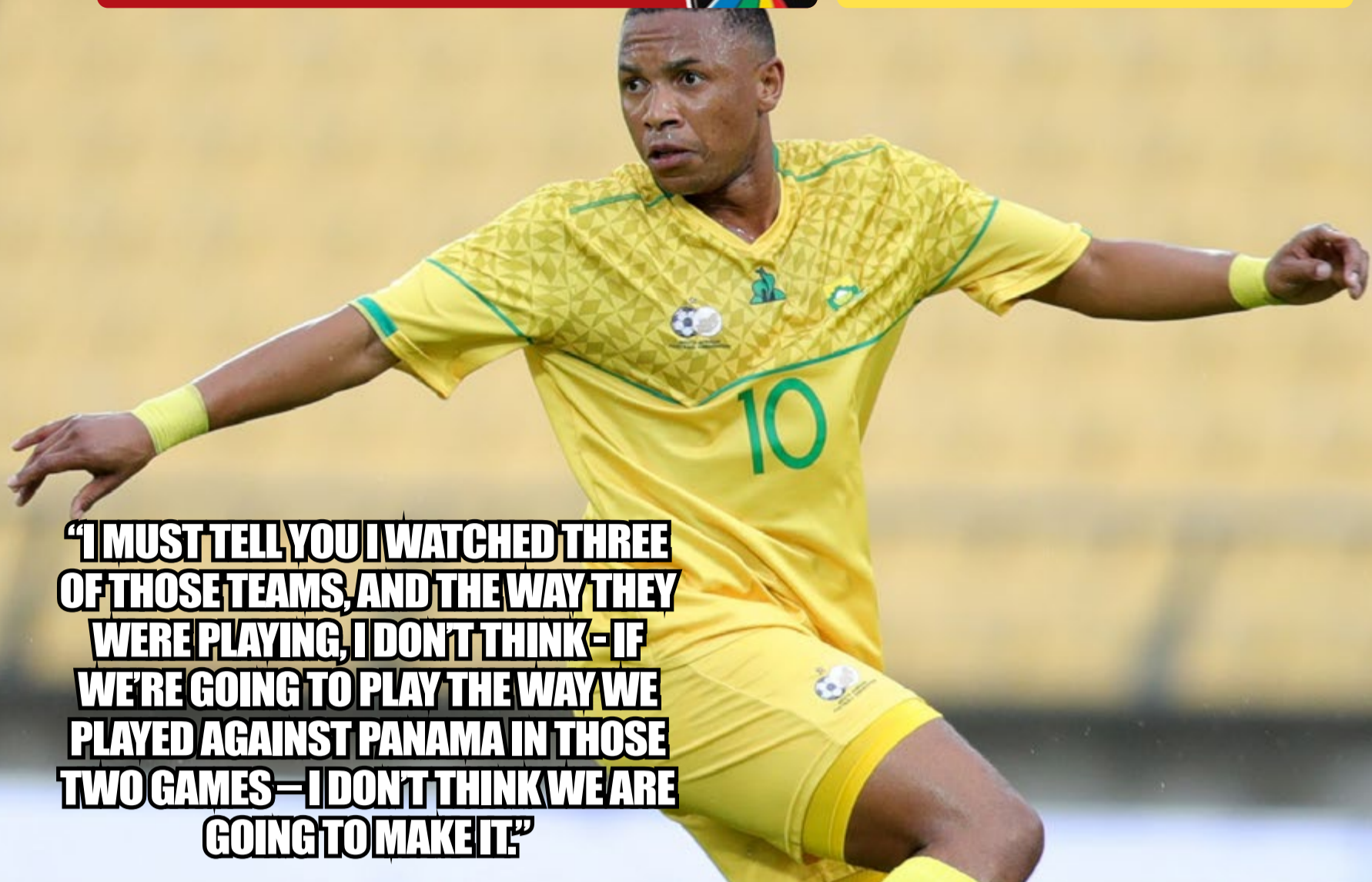
anywhere overseas, be it in Europe or other places. It is a tough environment out there, and you need to be prepared to work hard. Coming from where you are adored to a place where you are almost nobody can be hard, and if you are not strong, it can destroy your confidence.

MM: As a multiple championship winner, can you tell me what it takes to win the league? And when you look at the current situation between your two former teams, Sundowns and Pirates, how do you foresee this season going in terms of the league championship?

AJ: Already, you can see, Sundowns are used to being in these situations, and Pirates are not. I’ve said it before that these Pirates players now need to say, ‘It is about what we want!’ If they want it more, then they can get it. They should not be thinking now that the supporters are there for them and everyone is supporting them, then they are automatically going to win it. Yes, they are going to their home stadium, and they get the big numbers [of fans], but that’s not enough. They still have to work for it. No one is going to give it to you just like that. You have to fight. So, if they don’t fight, like what happened when they played Siwelele. They drew that match, and that draw made them stressed again because Sundowns beat Chippa and went up with two points ahead. So that thing is going to keep on stressing them. But if they say, we don’t care about what is happening at Sundowns, we are only worried about us, I then think they can push Sundowns until the end of the season.

MM: Andile, moving to the national team, we are all excited with the World Cup coming up soon. We’ve seen Bafana Bafana playing Panama recently. What’s your thinking? We now know who is in our group now, there’s Mexico, South Korea and the Czech Republic. Can Bafana go into the next round?

AJ: No, but for me, from what I saw in this past FIFA week, I must tell you I watched three of those teams, and the way they were playing, I don’t think – if we’re going to play the way we played



“I MUST TELL YOU I WATCHED THREE OF THOSE TEAMS, AND THE WAY THEY WERE PLAYING, I DON'T THINK - IF WE'RE GOING TO PLAY THE WAY WE PLAYED AGAINST PANAMA IN THOSE TWO GAMES - I DON'T THINK WE ARE GOING TO MAKE IT.”

against Panama in those two games – I don't think we are going to make it. Unless we change our mindset and put in more effort than what we did against Panama.

MM: So you saw those teams, our opposition looked strong to you?

AJ: Yeah, they looked to me to be much stronger than us. Unless we change, there's got to be some changes – the coach has to come up with something special and the players need to say we want it more than those other people, then maybe there can be some hope. But from what I saw, it is going to be tough if we don't change.

MM: You talk of changes. In terms of the team dynamic, you've been a midfield enforcer throughout your career. Now, when you look at the team we have, do we have a strong midfield? Because we are always told matches are won and lost in the midfield.

AJ: No, you see now, the way that they're playing in the midfield, I'm happy that [Jayden] Adams is back. I'm happy that Hugo Broos swallowed his pride and said 'My boy, come back'. See, that thing alone is saying, now I have two Sundowns players who understand each other because they play together every time, now and then. So now we know that in the midfield it's going to be Tebza [Teboho Mokoena] and this boy Adams. And then on the right, you know it's going to be [Khuliso] Mudau. The goalkeeper, you know it's [Ronwen] Williams. On the left, you know it's going to be Aubrey [Modiba]. So, already when you see that block, you know it's the Sundowns connection already, and then you have that trust. See, we have at least that trust in those five or six players.

MM: Speaking of Sundowns, we've seen Monnapule Saleng do what you once did – joining Sundowns after having played for Pirates. What kind of impact do you see him making at Sundowns?

AJ: I don't know. You see, because he came to Sundowns late [in the season],

and he came when he had an injury. He is only starting to play now, but you're not going to see much of him because at this time of the campaign, it's about the players the coach trusts more. So, I don't think we're going to see a lot of him starting the games – unless the coach has seen something from him or he has pulled up his socks and said to the coach, 'I'm raising my hand. I want to play'. I guess we'll see him next season, not now. So we can't judge now if he was a good signing or not for Sundowns.

MM: You've confirmed that you are retired. I look at some of your former teammates, such as Benni [McCarthy] and Daine [Klate], who are in coaching now, and I wonder. Is that a route Andile Jali is going to take in the future?

AJ: No, I don't think about that. No, no, no. I'm not thinking about that at this moment.

MM: So, it's not something you're going to go into?

AJ: No, no. Not at all.

MM: It just dawned on me that it has been 20 years now when a bright-eyed Andile Jali started playing at Matatiele Professionals, where he was spotted by the late Clive Barker and ensured you moved to the University of Pretoria. What do you say when you reflect on that journey – where it started and how it went until now?

AJ: No, it feels good to look at where I come from, you know, from what I was before to who I am now. It feels good. It feels like I've done more than what I was supposed to do. That's why I'm happy. I'm happy to say I'm retiring now. Before, people would say, 'You must retire' because you know South African people love to push players into retirement. For me, I like that no one is telling me, but I am doing it on my own time.

MM: Andile, thank you so much for making time.

AJ: Only a pleasure.



'KAIZER CHIEFS LADIES IS SO MASSIVE'

On the last day of the last month, Betway Premiership side Kaizer Chiefs launched and officially unveiled their women's team, which will compete in the second-tier division, the Sasol League in Gauteng. Chiefs join the likes of Mamelodi Sundowns, TS Galaxy and Stellenbosch FC as professional sides to have women's teams. The team also announced Brima Logistics as their sponsor at the event held in Daveyton. Chiefs Marketing and Commercial Director Jessica Motaung said the company's leap of faith into women's football is inspirational and that she hopes other corporates will follow in their footsteps to help grow women's football in the country and on the continent. The women's side is made up of 24 players, inclusive of Banyana Banyana centurion Mamello Makhabane and under the leadership of Unathi Mabena, who is equipped with a UEFA B and CAF A Licences and experience of coaching in the Hollywoodbets Super League. Amakhosi chairman Dr Kaizer Motaung Snr was quoted on the club's website saying the developments are a proud moment for a club that understands its responsibility in growing the women's game.

"This is a proud moment for Kaizer Chiefs. As a Club, we understand the responsibility we carry within South African football, and this step reflects our commitment to growing the game in a meaningful way. Women's football is an important part of the future, and we are committed to being part of that journey. When you build something of this nature, you must think beyond the present moment. You must consider the generations that will follow and the responsibility that comes with that. Kaizer Chiefs Ladies is part of a broader vision to ensure that the game continues to elevate, to include more people, and to stand stronger in the years ahead."

iDiski Times journalist LETHABO KGANYAGO reached out to one of the most prominent voices in women's football in South Africa and on the continent, FRAN HILTON-SMITH, in this edition, to speak about what Chiefs finally joining the competitive women's football space means. Hilton-Smith needs no introduction with her widely documented work in women's football, ranging from being a player, a coach, a national team coach, an analyst and work

done at CAF and FIFA.

Lethabo Kganyago: Fran, we appreciate you speaking to us. Firstly, when you heard the news even before it became official, what was your reaction?

Fran Hilton Smith: Well, fantastic, because that's always been the vision, for all the clubs to have a women's team, because it makes it so much easier for the girls, because there are facilities, etc. And to have one of the biggest clubs in Africa, Kaizer Chiefs, finally developing or launching a women's team, is so massive. The response, like on social media, has been huge because Kaizer Chiefs are recognised worldwide. And for them to have a women's team really makes women's football now so big and joins the likes of Sundowns and TS Galaxy to have a team. So the more big clubs that have women's teams, I think Stellenbosch too now has a team, is what makes everything so much better, and shows the huge growth of women's football.

LK: I saw you at the event. How was it being part of the event? Was it surreal to just realise that it's actually happening?

FHS: Yeah, it was a dream of mine. Of course, since I started with women's football back in the day, I always dreamt of having more women's teams and top-class women's teams, and of course, having sponsors. That's the biggest plus of this thing is having a sponsor coming in for women's football, because that's always been the setback that many women's clubs don't have sponsors, and it makes it very, very difficult to develop if you don't have a sponsor. That's why, as I said, Sundowns, TS Galaxy have got the funding to pay their players, making it worthwhile. And now for Chiefs, they've got Brima coming in as the sponsor, which means girls can make a living at football, and that's what we want. To professionalise women's football is the key factor in this country.

LK: I also want to touch on the club having this launch in the East Rand, where the Sweepers, the base of the Chiefs Ladies side, are based and the honour given to someone like Joseph Mkhonza.





FHS: I've said it there at the launch, it's quite amazing that Ekurhuleni, or the Eastern Transvaal, where I come from, I played my soccer there for 10 years in the provincial team. It's my region and Joseph's as well. And it's interesting that Joseph and me, back in the 80s, we started multi-racial women's football in that area where we had girls from East township teams coming to join girls from our teams. And that started the whole transition in women's football, and now that his club, Spring's Home Sweepers, has been amalgamated to form Kaizer Chiefs Ladies, it's just like a good wheel turning situation. And Joseph was also a Kaizer Chiefs player. And having this sponsor from there as well, I mean, that was their restaurant we had the launch in, African stalwarts from that region coming on board with the team.

LK: And the sponsor, is this the kind of influence you are hoping that a team like Chiefs can bring to the women's game, not just for them, obviously, I mean, the corporate eyes to be on women's football?

FHS: Absolutely. Women's football will not grow to its full potential without sponsors. So to get these sponsors on board, we hope that this now, with Brima coming on board, encourages other big corporates, big companies, to come and support women's football. If I think back, women's football would have been nowhere if it wasn't for like Sasol coming on board for what, now 15,16 years, sponsoring the Sasol League and Banyana Banyana. It made all the difference. It changed the landscape. So we hope this kick-starts other corporates to come in because in the Hollywoodbets, that's what makes it so difficult for teams to compete, there are very few sponsors. I mean, you take a team like JVW, they came second in the Hollywoodbets [last season], but they have no big sponsor. Now, imagine if they had a big sponsor, how much bigger they would be. Many of their players are in the national team, and then you've got smaller clubs, like in the Northern Cape or Free State, they don't have sponsors, they really struggle. Durban Ladies, they fell out this year, but it's because they don't have the sponsors to compete with, like players being paid like Sundowns can do. It just makes things difficult if you don't have a sponsor.

LK: Chiefs being in the competitive space in women's football, do you feel it can elevate the conversation on one, professionalisation of the women's game and two, rallying other teams like Orlando Pirates and the rest to get on with it?

FHS: Yeah, of course, we expect that now. I know Orlando Pirates has a relationship

“TO HAVE ONE OF THE BIGGEST CLUBS IN AFRICA, KAIZER CHIEFS, FINALLY DEVELOPING OR LAUNCHING A WOMEN'S TEAM IS SO MASSIVE.”

with UJ, the university, but we need them now to also come on board with their Orlando Pirates women's team and all the clubs, because then it's a major shift towards professionalising women's football. And that's the goal. The goal is that women can play professional football so that the game grows and becomes a career opportunity for girls. At the moment, our best players, the Thembis [Kgatlang], the Hildas [Magaia], Lindas [Mothalo], etc., are playing overseas professionally, and it's made a huge difference to their performances. When you are on a higher level, a higher status, you're not worrying about where your income is coming from every month, you know.

LK: Let's look at the makeup of the squad. Unathi Mabena at the helm. We know she holds a UEFA B Licence. She has experience with JVW and the junior national teams. Do you think she will give it a good go and start competing this season for promotion?

FHS: I think Unathi just got a CAF A Licence. So that's a huge step. When I was still at SAFA, I trained 25 CAF A Licence women coaches, former Banyana players, the Desirees [Ellis], Shilene [Booyesen] Maud [Khumalo], Simphiwe Dlodlu to have a CAF A. Now we have more women coming along, like Unathi. She came through the ranks, actually, at JVW. She was a player and coach there for some time, and she has the experience and the background to make the success of coaching at Kaizer Chiefs, because she's done her background work. So I'm confident she can make a big difference. And we must promote women in women's football, and that's why, of course, I'm sure you heard FIFA have now made a rule that national teams must have a woman as a coach or assistant. It's people like Unathi and many other women who now have the opportunity to coach at the highest level.

LK: Also a youthful team with some junior national team players but to have a figure like Mamello Makhabane as well, how big is this going to be for the club?





FHS: I think Chiefs have done very well here in that they've got a spread of players. They've done exceptionally well in their planning, because you've got players like Mamello Makhabane who's been a stalwart in Banyana for many years. You've got Nelly Mchunu there, who has a background in football from Durban for many years. And you've got Yolula Tsawe who was a national team goalkeeper, JVW goalkeeper. They have years of experience, so they bring all that experience to this team. I think there's another one who played for UJ. I just can't think of her name, and then you've got, which is the correct way to go about it, a lot of youth coming through from the U17. As was said there, they've got a very good balance. So you've got youngsters who can come in and learn from the senior players. You have talent that can be nurtured by senior players. So I think the way they've structured this team is very well thought out, and a big thanks to the Kaizer Chiefs people who are involved with this team in having the right planning.

LK: Chiefs are a big team, and they have the resources. The assumption that I want to make is that they possibly can afford a status in the Hollywoodbets Super League. What do you feel them going through the Sasol League first is about? Is it about them, not only just honouring Sweepers and the relationship they've had, or do you feel it's a learning process about the women's space before going to the highest level?

FHS: Yeah, agreed. I think the Sasol League has always been the nursery for teams, for players, and a growing phase before they get into the Hollywoodbets. So I think this was a good move for Chiefs to start at Sasol, which has always been the major league. To have the experiences of playing there against different teams, and then, I'm sure, graduating, hopefully next year, to Hollywoodbets, where they will have now the experience to help them succeed in Hollywoodbets.

LK: Away from Kaizer Chiefs, we're just speaking ahead of the new season. Shilene returning to South Africa as the head women's football at Stellies, how big is that to see some of our best minds coming back home to reinvest in the local game?

FHS: Absolutely fantastic. Shilene Booysen is one of the top, top coaches in the world, not Africa or South Africa, she's a FIFA instructor. You can't get higher than a FIFA instructor, which I was many years ago. But Shilene is top class. She's an expert analyst, an expert in everything she touches, has been coaching in Africa, and coached the FIFA refugee team. I'm not sure that's the exact name, but works for FIFA. So you couldn't find a more competent person than Shilene. Made a massive contribution to Banyana as their analyst, I think it's a great move for Stellenbosch to have someone of her high calibre coming to run their affairs there.

LK: And Fran, about the WAFCON, I never got to hear your thoughts on the moving of the dates and the manner in which it happened. Are we going to see the effects of this perhaps at the World Cup, or from the four teams that make it from the tournament? What do you think the effects are going to be of having moved it the way it was moved?



ON UNATHI MABENA:
"SHE HAS THE EXPERIENCE AND THE BACKGROUND TO MAKE THE SUCCESS OF COACHING AT KAIZER CHIEFS."

FHS: Well, of course, it was extremely disappointing. Extremely disappointing that a week before the teams were due to arrive in Morocco, in fact, like the Ivory Coast, were already there. And teams like Zambia and South Africa were preparing friendlies to be ready for the tournament. I mean, Banyana, for instance, were playing the COSAFA [Women's Championship], and Desiree used a lot of the new blood to test them at COSAFA, but brought all the overseas-based players back to be ready to leave for the WAFCON, the Lindas, Thembis, etc., they were all here. It cost us a tremendous amount of money to bring them all, and they had to go back because the thing was postponed. It's unacceptable, actually, and shows disrespect for women's football from the CAF side.

LK: And lastly, Fran, as we wrap up, the suggested new format for the Hollywoodbets Super League, what do you make of it? Is it a regression or a good move to manage the issue of the lack of resources?

FHS: Well, you can look at it two ways. Number one is that it will make it a bit easier, cost-wise, for the teams, because travel is incredibly expensive. And now with the price of fuel increasing, it's going to become far worse flying around. But the downside of it is that it then limits the competition from playing so many different teams. That experience is now going to be reduced.

LK: Thank you so much, Fran, for making time, especially on a holiday weekend.





THE IDISKI TOP 10... **YOUNG PLAYERS**

This week, iDiski Times turns its focus to the future, casting a spotlight on the top ten young players currently making their mark in the Betway Premiership during the 2025/26 season, a group not just knocking on the door, but beginning to push it open.

The rankings are shaped by overall performance, blending raw data with context, using statistics, ratings and trend analysis from leading football analytics platforms to separate fleeting promise

from sustained impact. To ensure a fair and meaningful comparison, players had to meet clear criteria: featuring in more than one-third of their club's fixtures, and born after 1 January 2005.

The result is a list that captures not just potential, but production, young footballers already influencing games, shifting momentum, and hinting at what the next era of South African football might look like.

(*statistics as of 5 April 2026)

The Top 10:

10 Lindokuhle Zikhali
Richards Bay
4 April 2005 (21)
6.80 average rating

Lindokuhle Zikhali has quietly put together one of the more complete midfield seasons among his peers. Featuring 21 times (18 starts), he has balanced defensive responsibility with composure in possession, winning 53% of his duels and averaging 1.3 interceptions per game. His single goal only tells part of the story, and Zikhali's real value lies in his ability to disrupt and recycle play efficiently. At 21, he profiles as a disciplined, hard-working midfielder, one who provides structure and stability rather than headline moments, but whose consistency makes him invaluable.

9 Lumphumlo Sifumba
Durban City
12 July 2005 (20)
6.84 average rating

Kaka is the kind of attacking midfielder who thrives in short bursts but hints at much more. With seven of his eight appearances coming off the bench, his numbers already tell a story, one goal and three big chances created point to a player who wastes little time trying to make an impression. He operates between the lines with intent, always looking to unlock defences rather than recycle possession. His 6.84 rating reflects limited minutes rather than limited ability; with more starts, the former Cape Town City prospect has the profile of a decisive final-third creator.



8 Kutlwano Letlhaku
Mamelodi Sundowns
25 March 2006 (20)
6.89 average rating

Kutlwano Letlhaku's impact has come in flashes, but those flashes have been bright. In just eight appearances (six starts), the winger has already contributed a goal and an assist, while creating two big chances and averaging 1.3 key passes per game. His numbers suggest a player eager to influence games whenever given the opportunity. Direct and inventive, Letlhaku looks to take risks in the final third, and while still raw, his ability to produce in limited minutes points to significant attacking upside if given a longer run.

7 Surprise Manthosi
Polokwane City
22 May 2005 (20)
6.90 average rating

Manthosi has emerged as a quietly efficient presence in defence, blending awareness with consistency. Starting seven of his eight appearances, the 20-year-old has posted steady numbers, 1.6 interceptions, 1.1 tackles, and 2.9 clearances per game, underlining a player who reads danger early and deals with it cleanly. His game is built on positioning and timing rather than flash, which is reflected in a solid 6.90 average rating. For a young defender, that reliability is gold, suggesting the Zebediela-born player is already laying the foundation for long-term stability at the back.

6 Siviwe Magidigidi
Siwelele FC
1 July 2005 (20)
6.93 average rating

Magidigidi's numbers point to a striker who lives in the right areas. With four goals and an assist in 12 appearances (10 starts), he has already shown a natural eye for goal, even if four big misses suggest there is still sharpening to be done. The key detail is volume. He consistently finds himself in scoring positions. That early-season form earned him a move to Belgium, underlining his upward trajectory. At 20, Magidigidi looks like a classic developing forward: instinctive, active, and one refinement away from becoming clinical.

5 Wandile Ngema
Richards Bay
25 March 2005 (21)
6.97 average rating

Wandile Ngema offers a dynamic, two-way presence from wide areas. In 16 appearances (nine starts), he has scored twice, created three big chances and averaged 1.3 key passes per game, while also contributing defensively with 1.2 tackles per match. His ability to impact both ends of the pitch adds real value, and winning a penalty highlights his directness in attack. Ngema is not just a wide outlet; he is involved, active and willing to engage physically. At 21, his versatility could become a key asset as his game matures.

4 Mfundo Vilakazi
Kaizer Chiefs
19 October 2005 (20)
7.02 average rating

Vilakazi plays with the confidence of a natural creator. In 13 appearances, despite only five starts, he has registered two goals and an assist, while averaging 1.1 key passes per game, a reflection of his intent to unlock defences. There is still refinement needed, highlighted by three big chances missed, but that also speaks to his ability to get into dangerous positions. Vilakazi is a high-risk, high-reward playmaker, willing to attempt the decisive action. At 20, his challenge will be turning promise into a consistent end product, but he has been starting to show that more regularly recently.

3 Langelihle Phili
Stellenbosch FC
21 January 2005 (21)
7.02 average rating

Phili has been one of the standout



attacking performers of the season. In 19 appearances (11 starts), he has scored seven goals, showing a rare two-footed threat, scoring four with his left, and three with his right. He has also made one assist. Despite his tender age, he has taken on the responsibility of being a primary attacking outlet, delivering consistently for his side. Phili combines directness with composure and flair in front of goal, and his output reflects a player growing into influence. At 21, he is already moving beyond potential and into genuine impact.

2 Neo Rapoo
Siwelele FC
12 August 2005 (20)
7.07 average rating

Rapoo's profile fits the modern full-back perfectly, active, balanced and productive. In 18 appearances (17 starts), he has contributed two assists while creating four big chances, averaging 1.3 key passes per game. Defensively, he remains involved, with 1.3 interceptions and 2.9 ball recoveries per game. These numbers reflect a player engaged in all phases, capable of supporting attacks without neglecting his defensive duties. At 20, Rapoo's all-round contribution makes him one of the more complete young prospects in his position.

1 Mbekezeli Mbokazi
Orlando Pirates
19 September 2005 (20)
7.21 average rating

TLB has set the benchmark among this group, combining strong metrics with tangible defensive impact. In 11 appearances, he has helped his side keep seven clean sheets, averaging 5.2 clearances and 1.3 tackles per game, while winning an impressive 77% of his ground duels. He was also wearing the captain's armband most of the time. Those numbers point to authority and consistency in defensive situations. His move to the MLS reflects that promise being recognised beyond South Africa.

What this list reveals:

While more than 30 players under the age of 21 have featured in this season's Betway Premiership, only a select group have managed to translate opportunity into sustained involvement. In fact, just 14 have crossed the threshold of more than seven appearances, a reminder that exposure at the highest level is one thing, but earning trust week after week is something else entirely.

Even more striking is the presence of players who are no longer in the league. Despite securing moves abroad during the January window, Mbokazi and Magidigidi still rank among the standout performers in this age bracket. Mbokazi, in particular, left a lasting impression, his 11 appearances for Orlando Pirates carrying the authority and composure of someone far beyond his years.

Dig a little deeper, and a clear pattern begins to emerge. The pathway from youth international football to the senior domestic league is not just visible, it's

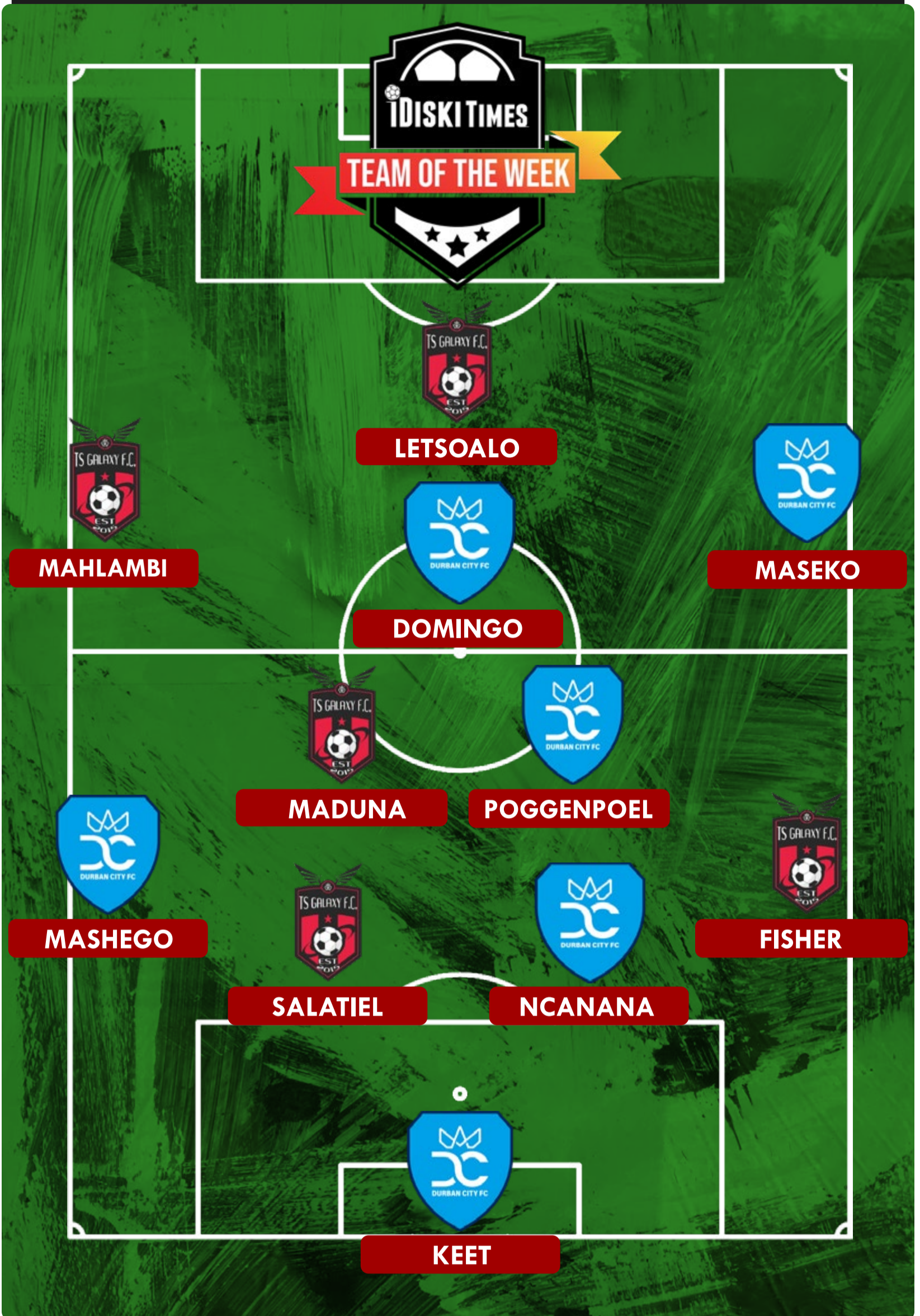
thriving. Six of the 10 players on this list were part of Raymond Mdaka's Amajita setups across 2024 and 2025, featuring in major tournaments such as the COSAFA U20 Championship, the U20 AFCON, and the FIFA U20 World Cup. Names like Mbokazi, Rapoo, Vilakazi, Phili, Magidigidi, and Letlhaku underline a generation that has grown together, tested itself on the continental and global stage, and is now beginning to assert itself domestically.

A further nine Amajita players have also tasted Betway Premiership action this season, though they fall just short of the appearance criteria for this particular list. Their presence, however, adds depth to an encouraging narrative: that South African football is not just producing talent, but gradually integrating it into the professional game.

The numbers may be selective, but the broader picture is expansive, a new wave is forming, and it is beginning to find its feet.



IDISKI'S NEDBANK CUP TEAM OF THE SEMI-FINALS



**ACE OF THE WEEK:
BRAYAN LEÓN**

Mamelodi Sundowns' Colombian forward Brayan León is our iDiski Times Ace of the Week, after producing a moment of sheer audacity in Downs' 4-1 Betway Premiership victory over Chippa United on Friday night. The South American attacker, coming off the bench, conjured up a goal that defied both logic and geometry, an "impossible" strike carved from a sliver of opportunity. After robbing Dumisani Msibi, he found himself near the touchline with the angle all but gone. Yet, with remarkable composure and imagination, he bent the ball back towards goal, watching it arc beautifully into the net to cap off Sundowns' dominant display. It was a goal that demanded replays, and it will be spoken about long after the final whistle. Already a leading contender for Goal of the Month (and perhaps even the Season), the strike underlined a scintillating start to life in South Africa, with five league goals in just nine appearances since his January arrival.



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.

POLLEN NDLANYA: THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Pollen Ndlanya arrived on the South African football landscape in the 1990s with something that simply can't be manufactured: instinct. Not just an eye for goal, but a hunger for it. He didn't score in moments; he feasted. And once he had a taste, he rarely stopped at one. There was a rhythm, almost a pulse to his game; when he was in tune, defenders knew they were in for a long afternoon.

It is telling, then, that he still holds the record for the most hat-tricks in the PSL era, six in total. Not just statistical feats, but declarations. Performances where he didn't merely influence proceedings; he bent them to his will.

In the afterglow of South Africa's triumph at the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations, the global football market began to look more closely at the country's talent. South African players suddenly carried weight, intrigue, and value. Even those orbiting the national team found themselves under new scrutiny, and Ndlanya, already carving out a reputation as a ruthless finisher, was firmly on that list.

After a good run with Manning Rangers, a goalscoring return to Kaizer Chiefs, where he had been as a teenager, only amplified that attention. The goals flowed, the reputation grew, and soon enough, the inevitable came calling. Europe beckoned. Like many of his contemporaries, Ndlanya answered, heading to Turkey, a destination that had become both an opportunity and a proving ground for South African players of that era.

His first stop was Bursaspor, where he spent a season and a half immersed in the demands of the Turkish top flight. There were glimpses, moments where his natural finishing surfaced, where the striker South Africans knew reappeared, but consistency proved harder to find. The margins were tighter, the expectations sharper.

A brief loan spell back at Chiefs followed, before he returned to Turkey with Göztepe SK. That chapter, too, was fleeting, and another loan move home – this time to AmaZulu FC – offered a reminder of where his game felt most natural.

It's important to understand that by the time he arrived in Turkey in 1997, Ndlanya was no apprentice. He was already established, having scored freely for both Rangers and Chiefs, and was regarded as one of the most dangerous forwards in the country. But Europe, and Turkey in particular, asked different questions.

At the time, the Turkish league was a demanding arena for South Africans. Players like John Moshoeu, Helman

Mkhalele and Steve Komphela had built strong reputations through consistency and adaptability. Flair would get you noticed, but reliability kept you there. For strikers, however, the rules were even harsher, goals were everything, and time was a luxury rarely afforded.

At Bursaspor, a club often navigating the middle ground rather than chasing titles, chances could be scarce and service unpredictable. At Göztepe, the context was even more unforgiving. Newly promoted and fighting to survive, they were eventually relegated—an environment where rhythm and confidence are often casualties.

Then there were the human factors. Ndlanya arrived at 27, expected to deliver immediately, yet without the developmental patience extended to younger players. Off the pitch, the adjustment was significant. The climate, the language, the culture, everything was unfamiliar.

“Look, it's not always nice to go to another country, more especially when you go to a country like Turkey, which is a Muslim country; you don't know what to expect,” Ndlanya reflected years later.

“At least when you go to England, you know that, okay, the language, it won't be a problem speaking English. But in Turkey, it's a problem that they're speaking Turkish. So it was not easy. I had to adapt to the environment, and also understanding the language, the lifestyle, everything.

“The lifestyle is so totally different, not like here in Joburg, whereby when you finish playing, you go to a club. Not to say there are no clubs [in Turkey]. There are clubs, but you must be very careful. Careful in the sense that the journalists, the paparazzi, they'll be looking at you. There is no problem when you go clubbing after winning, but you must remember that when you're not performing, that thing can catch up with you.”

There were small comforts. Fani Madida was at Bursaspor for a time, and communication with an English-speaking coach helped, but the broader reality remained: this was a world far removed from the one he knew.

After the loan spell at Chiefs, he moved to the newly promoted Göztepe, but while he was now more settled in the country, things didn't really improve.

“You know, it was not easy at first,” he said.

“When I started to understand the language, it was very important for me to understand the language, the lifestyle it will come after. The people there, they are so very humble and respectful. They always respect people.



“They respect the foreigners, although there’s a lot of pressure on the players when the team is not winning, but generally, the people around, when you go out in the mall, they’ll like to take pictures with you. So humble. Sometimes they’ll want you to come or invite you to their place for lunch or supper. The people are so humble. They will criticise, but not that much compared to South Africans.”

Across his time in Turkey, he recorded five goals and three assists in 25 league appearances for Bursaspor, along with one goal in four matches for Göztepe. Not quite reflective of the devastating finisher who had terrorised defences back home.

Ironically, it was during this very period that Ndlanya’s international career gathered momentum.

He became a regular for Bafana Bafana, earning 29 caps between 1997 and 2001 and scoring five goals. His first goal came on a big stage, the 1997 FIFA Confederations Cup, in a thrilling 4–3 encounter against Uruguay. And it’s worth noting the calibre of opposition he faced early on; in his first five appearances, he lined up against the Netherlands, Brazil, and Germany, footballing heavyweights that offered little margin for error. It was a golden period for South African strikers and Ndlanya competed and played alongside players like Benni McCarthy, Shaun Bartlett, Mark Williams, Phil Masinga and Siyabonga Nomvethe.

Meanwhile, as his time in Turkey unfolded, the pull of home grew stronger.

Like many South African footballers of his era, Ndlanya had spent the better part of his life grounded in the familiarity of home, where language, rhythm, humour, and even the pace of daily life were instinctive rather than learned. Football may be a universal language, but everything around it is not.

Stepping into Europe, then, is not just a professional move; it is a cultural upheaval.

For many South Africans of that era, the transition can feel overwhelming in ways that go far beyond the pitch. The language

shifts, often abruptly. The food is unfamiliar. The climate can be unforgiving. Even the smallest daily interactions, buying groceries, greeting teammates, understanding dressing-room banter, require adjustment. Religion, social norms, and lifestyle all form part of a broader landscape that must be navigated carefully and, often, alone.

And while younger players may arrive with time on their side, room to adapt, to grow into their surroundings, those making the move in their mid to late twenties face a different reality. They are expected to perform immediately, to deliver results while simultaneously finding their footing in a world that feels entirely foreign. There is little patience for transition when the pressure to produce is constant.

It is this unseen challenge, the one that doesn’t show up on match statistics, that has quietly shaped the journeys of many South African exports. For some, it becomes a stepping stone. For others, a stumbling block. But in every case, it is a test not just of footballing ability, but of resilience, identity, and the capacity to adapt when everything familiar is suddenly stripped away.

“You can ask anyone, there’s no place like home,” admits Ndlanya.

“Yeah, you can go to Miami, nice places like the USA, but there’s no place like home.

“You will miss a lot of things at home; you’ll miss eating pap. You know, there’s no pap in Turkey, you’ll miss a lot of things like the vibe.

“Sometimes you miss going out, maybe with friends, and you’ll miss speaking Zulu or maybe Sotho.”

Back in South Africa, the difference was immediate.

At AmaZulu on loan, Ndlanya rediscovered his rhythm, the movement sharper, the finishing instinctive once more. The goals returned, naturally, and with them came another hat-trick, a familiar reminder that true quality doesn’t disappear, it merely waits for the right environment.

As he approached 30, the crossroads became clear. Another attempt abroad was possible, but so too was a return to something more grounded, more certain.

In the end, he chose the latter.

Moroka Swallows were interested, but it was Orlando Pirates who secured his signature, bringing him back to the centre of the South African game.

It proved to be a fitting final chapter.

Over four seasons with Pirates, Ndlanya remained a potent presence, contributing to a side that would go on to lift two league titles. It was a return not just to form, but to belonging, a reminder that while football careers can take players across continents, sometimes their truest expression is found back where it all began.

And in the case of Pollen Ndlanya, that meant goals, plenty of them, and often, more than one at a time.



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