



# IT'S SQUEAKY BUM TIME IN TITLE RACE, BUT DOWNS' TO LOSE NOW



## MBANE: BANYANA ARE NOT SCARED OF ANYONE



**UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF PIRATES STAR MONITORED BY PSL RIVALS**



**FORMER CHIEFS COACH TO REPLACE TINKLER AT SEKHUKHUNE?**



**THE MOST EXCITING TITLE RACE IN SA TRANSPIRES IN THE MFC!**



**SUNDOWNS HAVE A BIG DECISION TO MAKE ABOUT IN-FORM WINGER'S FUTURE**

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

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**DLAMINI SITUATION BEING MONITORED?**

Kabelo Dlamini’s future at Orlando Pirates may be clouded in uncertainty, but should the curtain fall on his time in black and white at the end of the 2025/26 season, he won’t be short of admirers waiting in the wings. Dlamini, who turns 30 next month, has endured a frustrating campaign, making just five appearances in the Betway Premiership. It’s been a season of limited opportunities, one that has only fuelled speculation about what comes next. Behind the scenes, interest is quietly building. Several clubs are understood to be keeping a close eye on developments, ready to pounce should Dlamini become available. Among them, Sekhukhune United are believed to be particularly keen, as they continue to reshape and reinforce their squad with experienced, proven talent. That intent was underlined just last week with the arrival of Rivaldo Coetzee, the former Ajax Cape Town and Mamelodi Sundowns defender, who wasted little time in making his debut over the weekend.



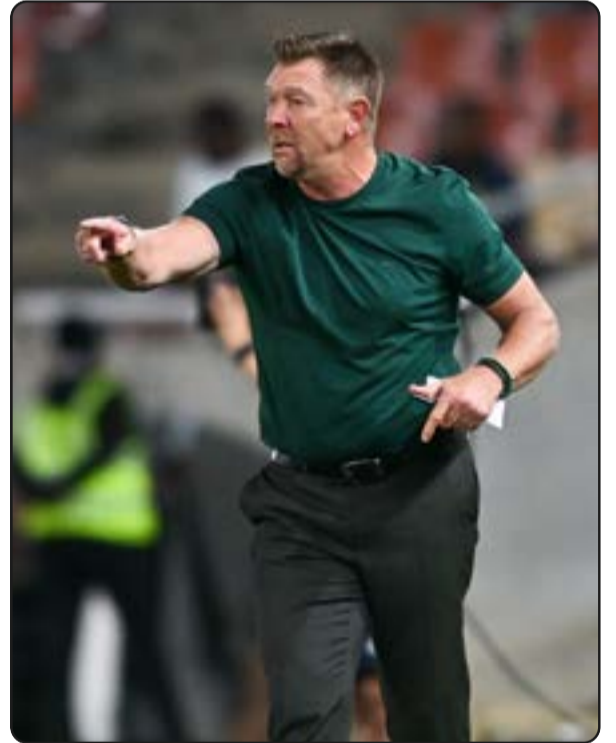
**BEGANOVIC TO LEAVE GALAXY WHEN SEASON ENDS?**

TS Galaxy and head coach Adnan Beganovic could part ways at the end of the season, even if they secure the Nedbank Cup title. Sources have confirmed that the coach and club could be looking at new opportunities come end of the season as their league form continues to concern. From the technical team side, the sale of star players and lack of reinforcements in the market has become frustrating, while the run of eight games without a win has shattered confidence in the current squad. Beganovic assumed the role as head coach upon the exit of Sead Ramovic, where he was part of his set-up as an assistant, but could now also look to move on for new challenges.



**TINKLER REPLACEMENT LINED UP AT SEKHUKHUNE?**

News emerging at Sekhukhune United is that the club could be lining up former Kaizer Chiefs assistant Fernando Da Cruz to replace Eric Tinkler as coach, though Paulus Masehe is likely to be caretaker coach for the remainder of the season. Da Cruz spent a short time at Chiefs as one of Nasreddine Nabi’s assistants before leaving to take up a position with the Moroccan FA. Da Cruz, who has also been linked with the Chiefs job after Nabi’s exit, is a UEFA Pro licence holder who began his career as a scout for Lille but came to the fore when he led AS FAR to the Moroccan title in 2023/24.



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## TSIKI FUTURE REMAINS UNCERTAIN AHEAD OF NEXT SEASON

*Katlego Ntsabeleng finds himself at a fascinating crossroads, with his loan from FC Dallas at Mamelodi Sundowns set to expire at the end of June, a situation that could open the door to a pivotal next chapter in his career.*

Affectionately known as “Tsiki”, the 28-year-old midfielder has quietly worked his way into the fold at Mamelodi Sundowns since arriving on loan at the start of the current campaign from the Major League Soccer side.

While not always a headline regular, his impact has been steady and increasingly noticeable, offering composure, intelligence and a touch of attacking spark whenever called upon.

In nine appearances for Masandawana, Ntsabeleng has chipped in with two goals and an assist, modest numbers on paper, but reflective of a player still carving out his space in a star-studded squad brimming with depth and competition.

More importantly, he has shown glimpses of the quality that once made him a standout prospect in the USA, where he spent seven years, first at college at the University of Coastal Carolina and Oregon State University, before being drafted by Dallas in 2022.

Now, however, the clock is ticking. With no agreement yet secured between player and club, the former Stars of Africa and Kaizer Chiefs youth player is edging closer to a Dallas return.

But Sundowns are believed to have an option to buy and it presents both an opportunity and a decision: move decisively to secure his services long-term, or risk losing a player who could yet grow into a valuable asset.

For Ntsabeleng himself, it’s a moment of leverage and possibility. Whether his future lies in Chloorkop, back in the United States, or elsewhere entirely.

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## NKEWU: IT FEELS LIKE THE END

***Orlando Pirates were held to a 2-2 draw by Richards Bay last Friday, handing a clear advantage in the Betway Premiership league race to defending champions and current leaders Mamelodi Sundowns, who were involved in CAF Champions League action.***

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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'It Will Take A Monumental Choke From Sundowns For Pirates To Win'

"Well done to Richards Bay for making their home stadium a difficult venue for big teams.

"A few weeks ago, they defeated Kaizer Chiefs, now they hold Orlando

Pirates to a draw.

"In fact, they were four minutes away from a deserved victory.

"For Orlando Pirates, this draw will feel like a loss. The task was simple: win all your remaining games in the title race and hope for a Sundowns mistake.

"This draw is more than a setback. It feels like the end of the title race for me. Based on this game, result and performance, I think Pirates will drop points again in their remaining matches. That's the point. More points will be dropped.

"Each country needs a solid competition for the league title.

"This was a good one, but I'm afraid it might have just ended.

"The consolation is that we can at least say we had a title race. It will take a monumental choke from Sundowns now for Pirates to win the league."





# IT'S SQUEAKY BUM TIME IN TITLE RACE, BUT DOWNS' TO LOSE NOW

*For once, Sir Alex Ferguson's famous phrase applies to the South African professional football set-up. For the first time in more than a handful of seasons, the outcome of our (Betway) Premiership is uncertain, every match is critical as perennial champions Mamelodi Sundowns endure unfamiliar competition from Orlando Pirates.*

With seven matches to go, the title

could still go either way - the Brazilians enjoying a one-point lead over the Buccaneers, who are left with six outings to conclude their campaign.

It is exciting times for the local game that has previously had to endure a snooze-fest as Sundowns won the title at a canter season after season, the championship often being decided long before we could get to this stage.

But can we have a nail-biting finish, the likes of which we have not seen in a long time? Remember those years of the league when we'd have a helicopter hovering in the air on the last day of the season, waiting to know where the trophy should be delivered to as the title race went down to the wire?

I vividly remember the 2011/2012 season when Pirates and Swallows went into the final day as potential champions, Benni McCarthy leading the Buccaneers to victory over Golden Arrows in Durban to deny Gordon Igesund yet another title in charge of Moroka Swallows at Maritzburg United.

Such has been Sundowns' dominance of the domestic league in recent years that any semblance of a challenge from anyone is celebrated. In the past seasons, though, many of those challenges fizzled out quickly. Not so this time around, with Pirates mounting a serious onslaught on the Brazilians' domination – the Buccaneers recently registering rugby-live scores as they seek to ensure they are better off should the race go to goal difference.

And with Sundowns continuing to be competitive on the continental stage – Miguel Cardoso and his men have one foot in the CAF Champions League final following Sunday's 1-0 victory away to Esperance of Tunisia – Pirates are seeing a chance at glory.

The Ghost (Pirates fans) have been hoping Sundowns get distracted from domestic matters as they chase that second star. But Bafana ba Style are way too strong and experienced a club to drop the ball, and they remain firmly on course for the double.

Here, iDiski Senior Writer MATSHELANE MAMABOLO takes a look at the championship run-in of both clubs and concludes that Sundowns will once again be crowned Betway Premiership champions – for a ninth season running.

## REMAINING MATCHES

### Mamelodi Sundowns (7 matches)

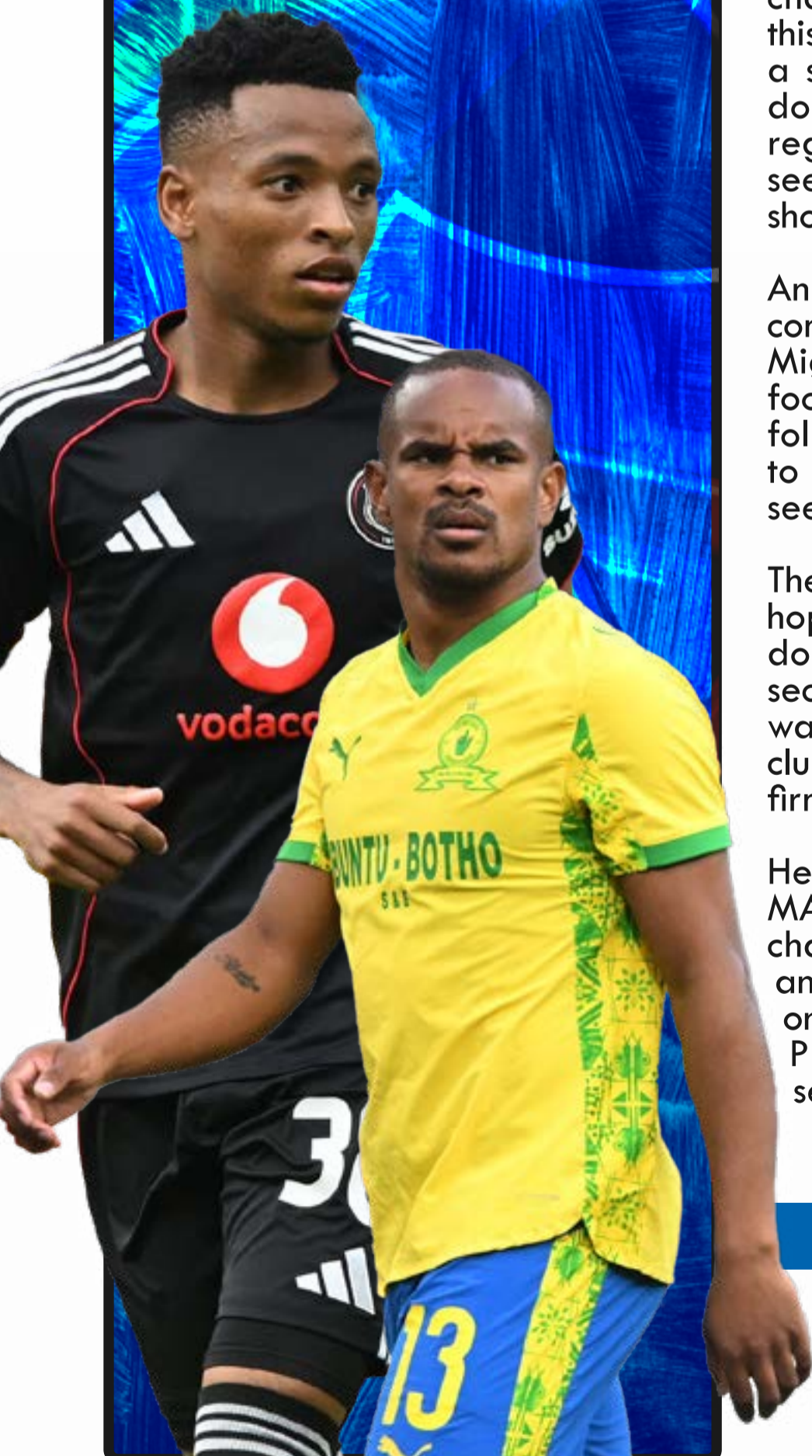
#### APRIL

22: Stellenbosch (H)

25: R Bay (A)

29: Polokwane (A)

**“SUCH HAS BEEN SUNDOWNS' DOMINANCE OF THE DOMESTIC LEAGUE IN RECENT YEARS THAT ANY SEMBLANCE OF A CHALLENGE FROM ANYONE IS CELEBRATED.”**



**MAY**

3: Polokwane (H)  
6: Chiefs (H)  
9: Siwelele (H)  
16: Galaxy (A)\*\*\*

**CHAMPIONS LEAGUE****APRIL**

18: Esperance (H)

**MAY**

Final:

15: 1st leg (clashes with Galaxy fixture)\*\*\*  
24: 2nd leg

**Orlando Pirates (6 matches)****APRIL**

18: AmaZulu (H)  
26: Chiefs (H)

**MAY**

5: Stellenbosch (A)  
9: Magesi (A)  
16: Durban (H)  
23: Orbit (A)

**GUTSY SUNDOWNS**

Simply on the strength of their gutsy performance at Esperance on Sunday, Sundowns have to be the favourites to retain the domestic title. Play anything like they did in Rades in their last seven Betway Premiership matches and they will sweep the opposition away.

In any case, on the face of it, both clubs have a fairly easy run-in and should get a good number of points to remain in the hunt. Yet, professional football is pretty fickle at the top and nothing can ever be taken for granted. Pirates' recent stumble at Richards Bay a case in point. Sundowns would have seen that result – Pirates coming from behind twice to snatch a 2-2 draw late in the match - and will now know just how tough their trip to uMhlathuze Stadium on the 25th will be. They

**“PERHAPS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE TO PIRATES’ TITLE ASPIRATIONS IS THE FACT THAT THEY WILL BE PLAYING AGAINST TWO RELEGATION-HAUNTED TEAMS.”**

would have played Stellenbosch at home three days prior and if history is anything to go by, Sundowns should get the better of the team from the Cape Winelands.

**A MATCH EVERY THREE DAYS**

Arguably the biggest threat to Sundowns retaining their title and extending the championship record to eight successive titles is the frequency at which they are going to play their matches. Next month, the Brazilians are going to be playing matches every third day – facing Polokwane City on the 3rd, Kaizer Chiefs on the 6th and Siwelele on the 9th. It is the kind of program Cardoso has lamented since he got to this country. But such is the prize of success, Sundowns' great run in the Champions League has ensured that they are a bit behind with their matches and with the season having to end on the 23rd to allow for Bafana Bafana's World Cup camp to begin on the 25th, the Brazilians have to play at that frequency. They have the squad depth to cope with such a demanding schedule, but with the title at stake Cardoso is sure to want to field his strongest squad for every match – but having a Khuliso Mudau for example play every three days could pose a challenge. Sundowns have already used 36 players in the league this season, a massive number. But all of them have made a telling contribution and the club will expect them to raise their hands and be counted in the final





straight.

Striker Iqraam Rayners is coming good at the business end of the campaign and he and Brayan Leon are going to have to find the opposition net on the regular during what is going to be a challenging period.

### THE TS GALAXY FIXTURE HEADACHE

Sundowns are pencilled in to play their final match of the season against TS Galaxy on May 16th, but that is likely to not be the case. Already 1-0 up, having scored away to Esperance on Sunday, Sundowns are likely to make it to the CAF Champions League final. And the first leg of the continental match is also scheduled for the 16th, leaving the league with a conundrum should Cardoso qualify for his third final in a row. The Portuguese has been crying about a lack of support for Sundowns' quest for continental glory, lamenting their playing domestic matches closer to the Champions League ties. The PSL has since moved their clash with Polokwane City – initially scheduled for this Wednesday to ensure Sundowns are not distracted from their second leg clash with Esperance. If they continue in that vein, it is going to be a serious challenge as to when they will then play Galaxy. Surely, Sundowns would not be eager to have that match played three days before the final. Should they be enjoying an unassailable lead in the domestic championship by then, they can play it and use a second-string team. The challenge with that, though, will be cries from the other teams who could see that as giving Galaxy, who are fast getting themselves into the relegation zone having secured a single point from a possible 27 in their last nine matches,

**“ARGUABLY THE BIGGEST THREAT TO SUNDOWNS RETAINING THEIR TITLE AND EXTENDING THE CHAMPIONSHIP RECORD TO NINTH SUCCESSIVE TITLES IS THE FREQUENCY AT WHICH THEY ARE GOING TO PLAY THEIR MATCHES.”**

an unfair advantage. That fixture headache is the league's to deal with, and Sundowns will just wait and see without stressing themselves about it. Theirs will be to just think about the matches.

### POTENTIAL BANANA SKINS

As strong as they are, Sundowns are not going to just rock up and win all their remaining matches. A few of those are sure to test them. They have back-to-back clashes with Phuti Mohafe's Polokwane City, just like they did in the previous campaign. In 2024, Sundowns beat Rise and Shine 2-0 at Loftus but then got beaten 1-0 at the compact old Peter Mokaba Stadium a few days thereafter. They are a stubborn team, Polokwane, particularly in their own backyard, and given they are chasing a top-eight finish, they are going to prove tricky opposition for the Brazilians. Another potential banana skin in Sundowns way to the title is Kaizer Chiefs. Amakhosi are on a resurgence of sorts, as they seek to qualify for continental football by at least finishing in third place to book a spot back into the CAF Confederation Cup. They visit Loftus on May 6th, and





while Sundowns would have played Polokwane days prior, Chiefs would have been idle for a full week and are sure to fancy their chances of putting a dent in Sundowns' championship aspirations. Intriguingly, Amakhosi have just one home game (against Chippa on the last day of the season) out of their eight remaining ones. Not to say that Sundowns' other matches are a foregone three points in the bag, but the clashes against Polokwane and Chiefs appear their trickiest ones.

### PIRATES' SMOOTH SAILING

The Buccaneers, without the distractions of continental football, would have expected to have been a much more serious challenger to Sundowns' title than they have been. Those dropped two points against each of Sivelele and Richards Bay have done their championship aspirations no good. They've played a match more and trail Sundowns by a point. Granted, matches in hand do not equate to points in the bag. But given Sundowns' experience of winning the championship, the pressure is surely on Pirates now. They get the chance to go top of the table this weekend when AmaZulu come to eSigodini – Orlando Amstel Arena – where the crowd's role as a 12th man can never be underestimated. But with the lure of qualifying for continental football a driving force behind Usuthu, Pirates must brace themselves for a moerse fight. They have shown they can turn it on in recent matches when they hammered both TS Galaxy and Golden Arrows by huge scores, with Rele Mofokeng turning on the magic. But Richards Bay showed last Friday that Pirates can be rendered ordinary, and you can bet Arthur Zwane would have taken a leaf out of Papi Zothwane's book. Eight days thereafter, it is the Soweto derby, and Pirates will definitely be confident they can repeat the first round dose and hammer Amakhosi, their rivalry's resurgence notwithstanding. Pirates are going to enjoy a less pressured run-in that will see them playing a match once a week, except for those two against Stellenbosch and Magesi FC four days apart at the beginning of May. Perhaps the biggest challenge to Pirates' title aspirations is the fact that they will be playing against two relegation-haunted teams in Magesi and Orbit College. On the face of it, they should beat those easily, but history suggests desperate teams can be pretty dangerous.












### AN EXCITING RUN-IN, BUT SUNDOWNS WILL PREVAIL

There can be no denying this is one of the most exciting seasons we have had in ages. And there are many who are hoping the excitement continues until the final day, with Sundowns' monopolisation of the title being brought to an end. Of course, it is possible and given the quality that Abdeslam Ouaddou has at his disposal and the shrewd way he has used it capable of pulling the rug from underneath

Sundowns' feet. As mentioned earlier, Mofokeng is proving to be a fantastic player match in and match out, the youngster clearly intent on securing that spot in the Bafana World Cup team. Oswin Appollis is definite for the trip to Mexico and America, such has been his superb showings that included him scoring crucial goals. Siphos Chaine will be eager to get Hugo Broos to change his mind about him, the Pirates keeper having been dropped for those friendlies against Panama, by dishing out stellar performances in the remaining six matches. A lot of the Pirates players are going to die with their boots on as they seek to take this one rare, great opportunity of winning the championship, for never have they been as close as they are to dethroning Sundowns.

Yet, when all is said and done, Sundowns' experience is going to prevail. The Brazilians have 'seen this movie before' – to use their former coach Pitso Mosimane's favourite phrase. Yes, it is SQUEAKY BUM TIME, but it is the Pirates fans I am imagining 'squirring in their seats, so tense that the chair squeaks'. After all, it is they, more than the Sundowns fans, who are more anxiously anticipating what will unfold in this run-in, right? The title will go to Chloorkop yet again, though.

### BETWAY PREMIERSHIP TABLE:

		PLAYED	WIN	POINTS
1	 Mamelodi Sundowns	23	17	56
2	 Orlando Pirates	24	17	55
3	 Kaizer Chiefs	22	12	42
4	 AmaZulu FC	24	11	39
5	 Sekhukhune United	24	10	38
6	 Durban City	24	10	35
7	 Polokwane City	23	8	33
8	 Golden Arrows	24	9	31
9	 Stellenbosch FC	23	7	28
10	 Sivelele	23	6	27
11	 Richards Bay	24	6	27
12	 TS Galaxy	24	7	25
13	 Chippa United	25	5	24
14	 Marumo Gallants	24	4	19
15	 Orbit College FC	24	5	19
16	 Magesi FC	23	3	17

# JUICE SET TO JOIN BANYANA'S CLUB 100

*Mamelodi Sundowns Ladies and Banyana Banyana defender BAMBANANI MBANE is on the verge of joining the elite club of players who have represented their country at the senior level 100 times. At least 11 Banyana players, past and present, have reached 100 or more caps. At 36 years old, she's been part of the Banyana set-up since 2016 and has accumulated 99 caps in this decade. She's currently with the Desiree Ellis side, as they finalise preparations for the upcoming Women's Africa Cup of Nations (WAFCON) tournament to be hosted by Morocco in June. They face Algeria in two international friendly matches, on Tuesday 14 April 2026, at the Princess Magogo Stadium and the second one on Friday, 17 April. The next set of confirmed friendlies are against Japan away in June. Mbane is likely to reach the milestone during one of these matches next to teammate Karabo Dhlamini, who's set to earn her 50th cap. In an interview set up with the help of PUMA South Africa, iDiski Times journalist LETHABO KGANYAGO caught up with Mbane in this edition to look ahead of this looming milestone, reflect on some of her key moments in a Banyana jersey and overall preparations for the WAFCON, amongst other matters.*

**Lethabo Kganyago:** Juice, we always appreciate your time. How's camp been?

**Bambanani Mbane:** The camp has gone well, I can't complain honestly. Everything has gone well, we even played a friendly with boys, and we drew 1-1. So the Algeria game will help us a lot in our preparations for the WAFCON and for us to see just how far we are as a team. But we are looking good.

**LK:** These are big nations you guys are playing before the WAFCON, first Algeria, then Japan. Are these the kind of opponents you are appreciating to face at this stage?

**BM:** Hundred percent. I mean Algeria plays similar to Morocco, and if you remember how we played against Morocco in December, we beat them 2-0. So this will be a big test because these two teams we are going to play against are going to be tough, honestly. We will definitely find out how far we are as a team. We don't want to risk thinking we've got this while we haven't reached that level. So these games are going to test us.

**LK:** Now, as senior players, you are in a competitive space with some of the girls who played at COSAFA earlier in the year. How's the team looking in terms of that?

**BM:** The thing I love a lot about youngsters is that they listen and they are willing to learn. If they don't understand something, they do come to senior players for assistance; you can see they are determined to be a part of the group.

**LK:** Obviously, one of the big topics this year has been the postponement of the WAFCON tournament. I want to ask how you felt about that decision, and in hindsight, can this be an advantage



**“WE HAD OUR OWN PROBLEMS AS A TEAM AT THE LAST WAFCON, BUT THIS TIME AROUND, WE DON'T HAVE ANY EXCUSE TO NOT GO THERE AND COMPETE.”**

**in terms of preparation for a team like Banyana, whose domestic league hasn't started yet?**

**BM:** To be honest, it has helped us a lot because some of us who play in the Hollywoodbets [Super League] are in pre-season, others haven't started pre-season. So it was going to be a challenge for us. We were sad, but at the same time we understood that as a team we weren't at a level to go and compete at a competition like the WAFCON.

**LK:** Now you've got a little bit more time to spend together as a team in competitive friendlies.

**BM:** Yes, because the level at COSAFA and the match we are going to play against Algeria are two different competitions, because Algeria is on another level. So the young players will also get to see how far they are at this international level because you can't compare the two. The intensity is not the same, so it will help both senior and young players.

**LK:** This WAFCON we are heading to is not just any; this time around, there's a World Cup spot on the line, and we know what happened with the team last year. Just how much do you guys want to redeem yourselves?

**BM:** Lee, I think everyone saw we didn't do well as a team last year, and that doesn't mean that when we go to WAFCON [this year] we won't do well. Yes, we had our own problems as a team at the last WAFCON, but this time around, we don't have any excuse to not go there and compete because this is an important WAFCON, a qualification for the World Cup, and we obviously want to go to the World Cup. So we need to qualify. We don't want any distractions; what we want is to focus, go to the WAFCON, do well and qualify for the World Cup.

**LK:** And what do you make of the teams in Banyana's group?

**BM:** Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso are physical sides; they won't be easy. Tanzania is also a tough one because we met them in the group stage in the last WAFCON, and we played to a 1-1 draw. So there aren't easy teams; we just have to prepare to go there to fight, no matter the circumstances. What we want is to win. We have to have the right mindset, and we can reach what we want because also one thing about Banyana Banyana is that we are not scared of anyone.

**LK:** How important is it to have that consistency of competing in the World Cup, and what does it do for the profile of the team?

**BM:** Let me take you back, Lee, to the 2019 World Cup. Everyone said South Africa is just adding numbers, and that was our first experience, and we didn't do well, honestly. And then 2023, you see there we left a mark (chuckles). If I remember well, our last group match was against Italy, so as we were packing, people said we'll be back home after the game. And as senior players, we sat down and said we are not going home because it's Italy that's going to get knocked out. The funny part was that the hotel we were staying at was saved and prepared for Italy because they thought Italy was going to the Last 16 round. After the game, the Italians were amazed at the fact that we don't have a professional league. They wondered what we could do if we had one based on how we were performing without one. Then Sweden scored in the last minutes, and against Netherlands we were unfortunate to have injuries to key players like myself and Jermaine [Seoposenwe]. But we left a mark at the 2023 World Cup that South Africa should not be undermined because we can play and compete with anyone. The world is aware that South Africa is a good team.

**LK:** And there is this huge milestone that's loading for you, your 100th cap. How are you feeling?

**BM:** (Sighs) Lee, it's the first time I have felt this nervous, honestly. I was telling Hildah [Magaia] that it's the first time since I have played for the national team that I'm feeling this nervous. Honestly, it's not every player that reaches this



**“WE LEFT A MARK AT THE 2023 WORLD CUP THAT SOUTH AFRICA SHOULD NOT BE UNDERMINED.”**

milestone I'm about to reach, and I have been through a lot in terms of injuries, in and out. I'm just grateful to God that he's gotten me this far, and I have endured a lot. There is an isiXhosa saying that goes 'Endurance breeds success'. Things may be difficult, but if you know what you want, you will get it and also the support that I'm getting from my family. My wife is just something else. I don't know if we'd be talking about me being on 99 caps if it wasn't for their support. I'm forever grateful.

**LK:** I remember those tough moments with injuries and how hard you worked, even when you came back from Europe, that's enough to demoralise anyone. Despite all these, you are still here. What have been some of the moments that have given joy to represent your country?

**BM:** Someone once sent me a message, a fan, they said Bambanani, your comeback is going to be strong. I realised there are people who see my hard work. It's those little things that make me work even



harder, plus the fact that my teammates were also supportive. Even Sundowns played a big role. Even Coach Desiree, she'd always check in on how I was doing because it was the Association that paid for everything, my rehab. That showed me I'm part of the team, even when I couldn't be there physically because of injury. Those are things that make me work hard for the team.

**LK: Getting to cap 100 is a big occasion. I want to ask if you'd rather get it now during these friendlies before the WAFCON, where a lot will be at stake, and so that you can also get to soak in the emotions of the moment?**

**BM:** The when doesn't really matter, whether at the WAFCON or now, anytime is fine for me. Any opportunity to get it, why not? I mean, life is too short, Lee, something might happen tomorrow and then what?

**LK: Touch wood...**

**BM:** (Chuckles) Yeah, but I'm just saying live in the moment, in the time you have now, don't think about tomorrow. Live today, now, then you'll see what happens later.

**LK: From the top of your head, your best moments in a Banyana jersey...**

**BM:** Honestly, winning WAFCON in 2022. I will never forget. Yes, I see what we did at the World Cup, getting to the Last 16, but winning WAFCON for the first time is something that I will never forget, even if I'm asked after retirement, 'Bambanani, what was your highlight?' I'll always say 2022, winning WAFCON. What else but a gold medal? I came back with one from Morocco. I can always touch it and say in the whole of South Africa, there's only 23 people who have it, and I'm one of them.

**LK: Any message you want to send to teammates, your club and coaches ahead of this milestone?**

**BM:** I'm grateful to Sundowns and my PUMA family; they have been there for me. And PUMA arrived when I was a bit older, a brand that takes a chance on you at that age and backs you, you cannot

**“EVEN IF I'M ASKED AFTER RETIREMENT, 'WHAT WAS YOUR HIGHLIGHT, BAMBANANI?' I'LL ALWAYS SAY 2022, WINNING WAFCON.”**

disappoint them. I'll forever be grateful to PUMA and Sundowns. The chairman checks on us every day when we are at the national team. Now he's aware that my 100th cap is looming, he said, 'Bamba, I'm so proud of you. You must keep working hard'. You sit and look at all these and say I can't disappoint such people who believe in me. Even coach [Godfrey] Sapula, a humble man who lives football. He'll say 'You are doing good, just keep working hard because you are one of the examples to your teammates'. I'm also grateful to my teammates for their support, especially when things were tough and all the coaches who have given me a chance.

**LK: Since you're talking about PUMA, which football boot do you play in, and why?**

**BM:** I play in the PUMA Ultra boots because they are lightweight and comfortable, which allows me to move freely and perform at my best on the pitch.

**LK: My last question...with this milestone coming, are you at any point thinking about retirement?**

**BM:** (Chuckles) About retirement, let's talk about it after the World Cup. For now, I'm still cruising nicely.

**LK: Thank you so much, Juice. Continue to cruise nicely, and congratulations on your impending 100th cap.**



**WHILE THIS IS NEW TERRITORY FOR KRUGER, FOUNDED ONLY IN 2023 AND PROMOTED TO PRO FOOTBALL A YEAR LATER, IT IS NOT NEW FOR THEIR COACH ABRAM MONGOYA, WHO WAS PART OF THE TECHNICAL TEAM AT SEKHUKHUNE UNITED WHEN THEY GOT PROMOTED**

## A ROYAL RUMBLE IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP

By Rob Delpont

*While the spotlight in South African football remains firmly fixed on the heavyweight title duel between Mamelodi Sundowns and Orlando Pirates in the top flight, ROB DELPORT reminds us that a different kind of chaos – raw, unpredictable, and utterly compelling – is unfolding just beneath them in the Motsepe Foundation Championship.*

Call it a promotion race. Call it a dogfight. Or better yet, call it what it truly is: a full-blown royal rumble.

With just six games left in the campaign, no fewer than six teams are still throwing punches in pursuit of the single automatic promotion spot, and the stakes could hardly be higher. For five of them, this is uncharted territory, a shot at top-flight football for the very first time. For the sixth, Cape Town City, it's a battle of restoration, a desperate bid to bounce straight back after the sting of relegation.

### A Title Race Without a Safety Net

Just this past weekend, we saw positions changing dramatically, with a few surprise results from the challengers. On Saturday, Casric Stars threw away a two-goal lead as they drew 3-3 against Midlands Wanderers, Gomora United came from behind to stun Milford 2-1, while Hungry Lions made a statement with a 3-1 win over Venda Football Club. On Sunday, both Kruger United and Cape Town City picked up important wins on the road, against Highbury and Upington City, respectively.

At the summit, Kruger United currently hold pole position with 46 points from 24 matches. But in a league this tight, that advantage feels anything but secure. While this is new territory for Kruger, founded only in 2023 and promoted to pro football a year later, it is not new for their coach Abram Mongoya,

back at the club after a few months at Upington City. Mongoya was part of the technical team at Sekhukhune United when they got promoted, and also had stints assisting at TS Sporting, Acornbush United and Chippa United.

Lurking behind them is Cape Town City, now on 43 points. Dutchman Jan Vreman is in his first season in South Africa, having spent almost his entire career at De Graafschap in the Ere Divisie, and after a slow start to the campaign, a revamped City have been one of the bright sparks in this race.

A good win for Hungry Lions saw them also climb to 43 points, but behind City on goal difference. Still coached by Henry Basie, who has been in charge since the Northern Cape-side was in the ABC Motsepe League, Lions have been consistently improving each season since they were promoted to the professional ranks five years ago.

Hot on their heels are Milford FC, fresh from a remarkable Nedbank Cup semi-final run, who are on 41 points. On the bench at Milford is the club's owner, Dr Xanti Pupuma. He took the reins again at the start of the campaign, when Mandla Qhogi joined Nsingizini Hotspurs in eSwatini. Milford have been in the second tier since 2023, after buying Uthongathi's status.

Then come the other Nedbank semi-finalists, Bucs Mthombeni's Casric Stars on 40 points, while Upington City, on 36, remain just within striking distance. Casric bought the Free State Stars franchise in 2022, while Upington, only founded in 2021, were promoted in 2023 from the ABC Motsepe Leagues.

Six teams. Six games. One guaranteed ticket to the promised land.

And just to add another layer of intrigue: only one of these contenders truly knows what awaits at the top. Cape Town

**FOR CAPE TOWN CITY, DUTCHMAN MICKEY VAN DER HART HAS PROVIDED STABILITY, CONCEDED 17 IN 22 MATCHES AND KEEPING TEN CLEAN SHEETS.**



City, seasoned by Premiership football, now find themselves navigating the unfamiliar grind of the second tier, while their rivals, all with a few years in this division, are chasing a dream they've yet to experience.

Beyond the automatic promotion spot lies the playoff route, a narrow, unforgiving path involving the teams finishing second and third, alongside the 15th-placed side from the top flight. But even that remains fiercely contested. The University of Pretoria and Highbury FC, both sitting on 30 points, appear to be fading from contention. While mathematically still alive, the gap and the sheer number of teams ahead of them make their climb feel increasingly improbable.

### A League of Fine Margins

Statistically, this season's Motsepe Foundation Championship has been defined by caution and competitiveness.

Home advantage has proven significant, with 47% of matches ending in home victories. Away wins have been far rarer at just 22%, while 31% of games have ended all square, further evidence of a league where margins are razor-thin.

Goals, too, have been in short supply. With only 297 goals scored so far, this season has been markedly more conservative compared to the three previous campaigns, which saw totals soar past the 500 mark. It's a league where defensive resilience has often trumped attacking flair, and where a single goal can define an entire season. 33 of the victories have been by 1-0 score lines.

### The Numbers Behind the Race

In front of goal, Kruger United lead the way with 36 strikes, closely followed by Cape Town City and Casric Stars on 35, a reflection of their attacking intent.

At the other end of the spectrum, Venda FC have struggled, managing just 17 goals, while Baroka have only slightly fared better with 19.

Individually, the golden boot race is just

as intriguing.

Ntuthuko Mlotshwa of Lerumo Lions leads the charts with 11 goals in 21 matches, a standout return in a low-scoring league. Close behind is Sicelo Masilela of The Bees FC on 10 goals. Cape Town City's Therlo Moosa has reached a tally of nine in just 17 appearances.

Two players sit one further behind on eight, Bethuel Muzeu of Black Leopards and Hungry Lions' Ronaldo Van Neel. Moosa's City teammate Jaedin Rhodes has seven, alongside Lions' Rian Petersen and Cheswyn Philander, currently at Milford on loan from Stellenbosch FC.

If goals have been scarce, defensive organisation has been everything. Cape Town City have conceded just 19 goals, the best defensive record in the league. At the other end, Lerumo Lions have shipped 34, as has bottom-placed Baroka, underlining their struggles.

Between the sticks, several goalkeepers have stood out.

Wensten Van Der Linde of Hungry Lions boasts an impressive record, conceding just 13 goals in 19 matches (0.68 per game), while keeping seven clean sheets. Malcolm Jacobs of Venda has been equally reliable, with 10 clean sheets and just 17 goals conceded in 20 outings.

For Cape Town City, Dutchman Mickey van der Hart has provided stability, conceding 17 in 22 matches and keeping 10 clean sheets, while former City goalkeeper Bongani Mpandle, now at Upington City, has quietly impressed with seven clean sheets and just 15 goals conceded in 17 games.

### Fighting For Survival

If the race at the top is gripping, then the struggle at the bottom is nothing short of nerve-shredding. A fight not for glory, but for survival. And at the heart of it lies a sobering reality for Limpopo football.

Two of the province's most recognisable names, Black Leopards and Baroka, find themselves staring into the abyss. Once proud standard-bearers of the

**FOR BAROKA, THE STORY IS EQUALLY PAINFUL. A CLUB THAT ONCE COMPETED IN CUP FINALS AND RUBBED SHOULDERS WITH THE ELITE NOW FINDS ITSELF BATTLING TO STAY AFLOAT IN THE SECOND TIER, SEARCHING DESPERATELY FOR A SPARK TO REIGNITE THEIR CAMPAIGN.**

region, both clubs are currently trapped in the relegation zone, their seasons unravelling at the worst possible time.

The numbers paint a bleak picture. With just four wins each across the entire campaign, consistency has been elusive, confidence fragile, and momentum almost non-existent.

Now, with the finish line fast approaching, Baroka sit seven points adrift of safety, and Leopards four, chasing down Midlands Wanderers, who occupy 14th place and the final position above the drop.

The gaps may not seem insurmountable on paper, but in a league defined by tight margins, low-scoring games, and few clear-cut chances, it might as well feel like a mountain.

For Leopards in particular, the situation carries an added layer of irony and heartbreak. This could mark their second relegation in just three years, a staggering fall for a club of their stature. Having purchased the status of All Stars FC in 2023 to secure their place in professional football, it seemed, at the time, like a lifeline. Now, it risks looking like a temporary reprieve rather than a long-term solution.

For Baroka, the story is equally painful. A club that once competed in cup finals and rubbed shoulders with the elite now finds itself battling to stay afloat in the second tier, searching desperately for a spark to reignite their campaign.

Time, however, is no longer a luxury. With only a handful of matches remaining, every fixture becomes a final, every mistake magnified, every missed opportunity potentially fatal. Survival will require more than just results; it will demand resilience, belief, and perhaps a touch of fortune.

Because if things continue on their current trajectory, Limpopo could be set to lose two of its footballing pillars in one devastating blow.

### A Race Worth Watching — If You Can

And yet, for all its drama, the biggest

challenge might be simply seeing it. The Motsepe Foundation Championship has long lived in the shadows when it comes to television coverage, and whispers suggest that even that limited exposure may now be gone entirely for the remainder of the season. If true, it leaves one of the most compelling title races in recent memory unfolding largely out of sight.

Which makes the role of on-the-ground reporting all the more vital. Because over the next two months, as this chaotic, tightly-packed race hurtles toward its conclusion, every goal, every save, every twist could prove decisive.

		PLAYED	WIN	POINTS
1	 Kruger United	24	13	46
2	 Cape Town City FC	24	12	43
3	 Hungry Lions FC	24	12	43
4	 Milford	24	12	41
5	 Casric Stars	24	10	40
6	 Upington City	24	10	36
7	 Pretoria University FC	24	7	30
8	 Highbury	24	8	30
9	 Leicesterford City FC	24	8	30
10	 The Bees	24	8	29
11	 Lerumo Lions	24	7	28
12	 Gomora United	23	5	27
13	 Venda FC	24	6	27
14	 Midlands Wanderers	23	6	25
15	 Black Leopards	24	4	21
16	 Baroka FC	24	4	18



## UBUNTU'S MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENT: THE NEXT STEP IN THE PREMIER ACADEMY'S RISE

*Last month, Ubuntu Football Academy marked 15 years of existence, a milestone that felt less like a celebration of longevity and more like a confirmation of impact. In just over a decade, they have carved out a reputation that many institutions spend generations chasing, emerging as arguably one of the finest independent football academies in South Africa.*

Now, as they step into their 16th year, there is a sense of momentum gathering behind them. The recent landmark purchase of a property in Somerset West, set to become their permanent home after years of rented facilities, is more than just a logistical upgrade. It is symbolic. A foundation, quite literally, for everything they have been building.

"While we are incredibly proud of what we've accomplished over the last 15 years, we are even more excited about this next season," Co-Founder and Director of Ubuntu Football Casey Prince said.

"Being in one location and having full control of our own program allows us to increase our daily input in the lives of our players. We expect this to significantly expand our impact."

My own relationship with Ubuntu did not begin at its inception, but it did not take long to recognise that this was something different. Having followed youth development structures across the country, you develop a feel for what works and what merely survives. Ubuntu stood out immediately, not just for what they were producing on the pitch, but for how they were doing it.

There was a clear philosophy, a holistic approach where football mattered deeply, but never in isolation.

Founded in 2011 by Prince and Mike Jenkins, the academy was born from something far simpler than a grand plan, a shared desire to make a difference. One from the United States, the other from Zimbabwe, their paths crossing in South Africa would quietly set in motion a project that would go on to reshape

countless young lives. Football was the hook, but education, structure and personal growth were always part of the design.

The early days now feel almost improbable. Sixteen 12 and 13-year-old boys formed that first intake. There were no sponsors, no infrastructure, just belief and commitment. Prince and Jenkins would personally collect players from their communities, drive them to training, and take them home again. It was grassroots in the purest sense.

By the end of that first year, momentum had begun to build. Sponsorship was secured, allowing those initial players access to quality schooling, and Ubuntu evolved into a full-time football and education programme. From there, growth came steadily, a new intake added each year, expanding into a structured academy that now accommodates around 90 boys between the ages of 12 and 18, supported by residential facilities and community-based Football Forward initiatives across Cape Town.

Education remained central. By 2016, Ubuntu had registered as an independent school, and by 2021, they were providing structured academic support across senior grades, reinforcing the idea that success would not be defined by football alone.

My first real encounter with Ubuntu came at an Engen tournament at Parow Park, then home to Vasco da Gama. It was impossible to ignore them. Prince, with his unmistakable American energy, stood out in a football culture not accustomed to that voice or presence.

But beyond any novelty, there was substance. The team, then operating under the Fish Hoek FC banner, played with a clarity and confidence that belied their age. Early glimpses of players like the late Luke Fleurs, Zimo Brenner and Jesse Donn suggested something was brewing.

That sense only grew stronger in the years that followed. Performances improved, players developed, and the academy's methods began to show tangible results.



Ambition soon followed. In 2017, Ubuntu took the bold step of purchasing FC Cape Town's professional status, giving their emerging talents a pathway into senior football.

It was, in many ways, a leap taken slightly ahead of its time. They survived their first season dramatically, preserving their status on the final day, but relegation followed in 2019. In hindsight, it felt like a chapter that might have unfolded differently had it come a few years later. Yet, what seemed like a setback would prove to be pivotal.

Freed from the immediate pressures of professional competition, the academy's core strength — development — came sharply into focus.

The early trailblazers had opened the door, but the generations that followed would walk through it with greater support, structure and refinement.

Success began to stack up. Ubuntu's youth sides competed, and won locally, nationally and internationally. Professional clubs took notice, circling more aggressively for talent. Their players filtered into Diski Challenge squads, and from there into senior teams. The pipeline was no longer theoretical; it was producing.

On the international stage, their footprint expanded, too. Both Fleurs and Donn made Bafana squads; representation in South Africa's U17 and U20 sides became regular, with Jody Ah Shene, Fletcher Smythe-Lowe and Lazola Maku featuring in the Amajita squad that lifted the U20 AFCON title. Individual milestones followed – Antonio Van Wyk breaking through to score at senior international level, Munashe Garananga establishing himself with Zimbabwe, and Losika Ratshukudu earning a senior Botswana cap while still at the academy.

Van Wyk, Garananga, Ratshukudu and Smythe-Lowe are all playing in Europe now, as is Siviwe Magidigidi and Prince Amponsah.

"I'm very grateful for Ubuntu," Van Wyk told iDiski Times last year.

"Living in Belhar was kind of tough. So just getting me out of Belhar was a stepping stone for me, also, to get out of that place of violence.

**PRINCE: "BEING IN ONE LOCATION AND HAVING FULL CONTROL OF OUR OWN PROGRAM ALLOWS US TO INCREASE OUR DAILY INPUT IN THE LIVES OF OUR PLAYERS."**

"Also, I would say, in football terms, Ubuntu polished me, I would say. Because I was a striker before, I was just running in behind. You know those coloured guys, typical coloured players, running, so I would say Ubuntu polished me into a technical player, where I was getting better on the ball.

"Ubuntu was really helpful in that way, and that also gave me the opportunity to explore outside of Ubuntu. So I went to SuperSport and Stellenbosch FC to train there. And after a few weeks, I decided to go to Stellenbosch, and I have to thank Ubuntu for that."

Their influence has also extended into coaching and development structures. Figures like Moritz Kossmann (SV Ried technical team, Austria), Kris Bergman (Simba SC assistant coach, Tanzania) and JP Faruggia (Stellenbosch Head of Youth) all passed through Ubuntu's ecosystem, carrying its principles into professional environments across South Africa and beyond.

Crucially, the success stories were not confined to professional football. Ubuntu's commitment to education ensured pathways beyond the pitch, with numerous graduates securing opportunities at universities both locally and in the United States. And in some cases, that education even led back to the professional football stage, the recent MLS draft selection of Calem Tommy stands as another marker of how far that pathway can stretch.

Fifteen years on, Ubuntu's story is no longer about potential or promise; it is about proof. And with a permanent home now secured, the next chapter feels less uncertain and more inevitable. The academy that once drove boys home after training is now firmly on the map, not just as a developer of footballers, but as a builder of futures.



## THE IDISKI TOP 10... OVER 35'S

*This week, iDiski Times turns the spotlight on the Betway Premiership's evergreen elite, the top 10 PSL veterans still rolling back the years with standout performances in the 2025/26 season.*

*They say age is just a number, but these 10 footballers are living proof that experience, when paired with quality and professionalism, can still dominate at the highest level. Far from merely making up the numbers, these seasoned campaigners have remained pillars for their respective clubs, delivering consistent, influential displays week in and week out.*

The rankings have been carefully compiled using a blend of performance data, advanced statistics, and player ratings sourced from football platforms, ensuring a balanced and objective assessment of their impact this season.

To be considered, players must be 36 or older and have featured in more than 10 matches for their club, a benchmark that underscores both their durability and importance to their teams.

(\*statistics as of 14 April 2026)

### The Top 10:

**10 Elvis Chipezeze - 11 March 1990**  
(36 years, 1 month, 4 days)  
Magesi  
6.67 average rating

At 36, Elvis Chipezeze remains a relentless last line of defence for Magesi FC, featuring in every single league match this season. It hasn't been a quiet campaign by any stretch, quite the opposite. Constantly called into action behind a defence that has often been under siege, Chipezeze has racked up an impressive 48 saves. While four clean sheets in 23 matches may not leap off the page, the Zimbabwean shot-stopper has been one of the busiest goalkeepers in the league, often standing tall under immense pressure and keeping his side competitive when it mattered most. The youngest player on this list and the only one not born in the nineteen-eighties.

**9 Themba Zwane - 3 August 1989**  
(36 years, 8 months, 12 days)  
Mamelodi Sundowns  
6.71 average rating

Even in a reduced role, Themba Zwane remains one of the most influential figures in South African football. The Mamelodi Sundowns talisman, affectionately known as 'Mshishi', has made just one start this season, supplemented by

10 appearances off the bench. Yet, numbers alone cannot capture his impact. Returning from injury, his mere presence has lifted both club and country, bringing calm, creativity and intelligence in tight moments. Turning 37 in August, Zwane may no longer dominate games for 90 minutes, but he continues to shape them in decisive bursts.



**8 Siyabonga Nhlapo - 23 December 1988 (37 years, 3 months, 23 days)**  
*Marumo Gallants*  
 6.72 average rating

Approaching 38, Siyabonga Nhlapo continues to grind it out in defence for Marumo Gallants with admirable consistency. Featuring in 23 matches (18 of them starts), Nhlapo has been a steadying presence in what has been a challenging season for Gallants. Averaging 1.1 tackles and 2.2 clearances per game, he has quietly gone about his business, providing structure, discipline and leadership at the back. It may not always grab headlines, but his contribution has been invaluable in holding things together.

**7 Makhelene Makhaula - 17 November 1989 (36 years, 4 months, 29 days)**  
*Orlando Pirates*  
 6.83 average rating

When Makhelene Makhaula arrived at Orlando Pirates, there were raised eyebrows. Fast forward three years, and the veteran midfielder has emphatically silenced any doubts. Turning 37 in November, Makhaula has embraced a vital squad role, featuring 12 times this season (nine starts). While not always in the spotlight, his work off the ball, tactical awareness and leadership have made him a trusted figure in the Buccaneers' setup, a player whose value extends far beyond the stat sheet.

**6 Thabang Monare - 16 September 1989 (36 years, 6 months, 30 days)**  
*Sekhukhune United*  
 6.83 average rating

Energy, reliability and consistency, Thabang Monare continues to embody all three for Sekhukhune United. With 22 appearances and two goals this season, Monare's influence in midfield remains immense. His engine shows no signs of wear, averaging 1.1 tackles and an impressive 4.5 ball recoveries per game. As he approaches 37, he still covers ground like a player a decade younger, acting as the heartbeat of his side. One of the trusted lieutenants under coach Eric Tinkler, Monare continues to set the standard.

**5 Atisang Batsi - 27 September 1982 (43 years, 6 months, 19 days)**  
*Orbit College*  
 6.85 average rating

The story of Atisang Batsi is nothing short of remarkable. At 44, the Orbit College FC captain is not only the oldest player on this list, he is also enjoying his first-ever season in the top flight. In a campaign that has tested Orbit, Batsi has stood tall, making 20 appearances and even finding the net once. That goal, notably, came from his only shot inside the box, a moment of clinical efficiency that perfectly sums up his game. He may not surge forward often, but when he does, it counts. His presence alone is an inspiration.

**4 Bradley Grobler - 25 January 1988 (38 years, 2 months, 21 days)**  
*Sekhukhune United*  
 6.92 average rating

Age has done little to dull the instincts of Bradley Grobler. Now 38, the striker has proven to be one of the Signings of the Season for Sekhukhune United after his move from SuperSport United. With eight goals and two assists in 20 appearances, Grobler has shown that a natural finisher never loses his touch. Managed carefully, he remains a constant threat in and around the box, a predator who still knows exactly where the goal is. Unfortunately, his season is likely up after being sidelined once again.

**3 Darren Keet - 5 August 1989 (36 years, 8 months, 10 days)**  
*Durban City*  
 7.10 average rating

Written off by some after Cape Town City FC's relegation, Darren Keet has responded in the best possible way, with performances. Turning 37 in August, he has been sensational for Durban City, producing one of the standout goalkeeping campaigns in the league. Twelve clean sheets in 24 matches, over 50 saves, and even an assist underline



his all-round impact. Calm, commanding and consistent, Keet has reminded everyone exactly why he has been such a respected figure in South African football.

**2 Daniel Cardoso - 16 February 1989 (37 years, 1 month, 30 days)**  
Sekhukhune United  
7.11 average rating

Few players have embodied consistency over the past decade quite like Daniel Cardoso. The Sekhukhune United defender has been a pillar at the back this season, leading by example with his defensive output. Averaging 4.8 clearances, 1.4 interceptions and 1.7 tackles per game, Cardoso continues to marshal the defence with authority. Approaching 37, there are no signs of decline, only a seasoned professional performing at the peak of his powers.

**1 Washington Arubi - 29 August 1985 (40 years, 7 months, 17 days)**  
Marumo Gallants  
7.24 average rating

Washington Arubi, a 40-year-old defying time with a truly heroic campaign. The Marumo Gallants goalkeeper has been nothing short of extraordinary, facing a barrage of shots week after week and responding with a staggering 73 saves, including a penalty stop. While clean sheets have eluded him in his 21 appearances, that statistic speaks more to Gallants' struggles than his own performances. Back in the national team setup and still hungry for more, Arubi is showing no signs of slowing down, with ambitions, remarkably, to keep playing until 45.

#### What this list tells us:

Just outside the top 10, a couple of seasoned professionals were unfortunate to miss the cut despite strong campaigns of their own. Mpho Mvelase of TS Galaxy and Ramahlwe Mphahlele of Orbit College FC both met the eligibility criteria and remain shining examples of longevity in the modern game. Their consistency and professionalism continue to set the standard, even if they fall just short of this particular ranking.

Beyond them, a further nine players aged 36 and above have also made appearances in the Betway Premiership this season, though limited game-time (fewer than 10 matches) ultimately ruled them out of contention. Still, their presence alone reinforces the quiet but enduring influence of experienced heads across the league.

Looking at squad composition, Sekhukhune United and Marumo Gallants stand out as sides that have leaned heavily on experience, each boasting four players over the age of 36 in their ranks.

Orbit College FC follows closely with three, while Mamelodi Sundowns and Golden Arrows each have two senior figures in their first-team squads, a blend of youth and experience that remains crucial in navigating a demanding campaign.

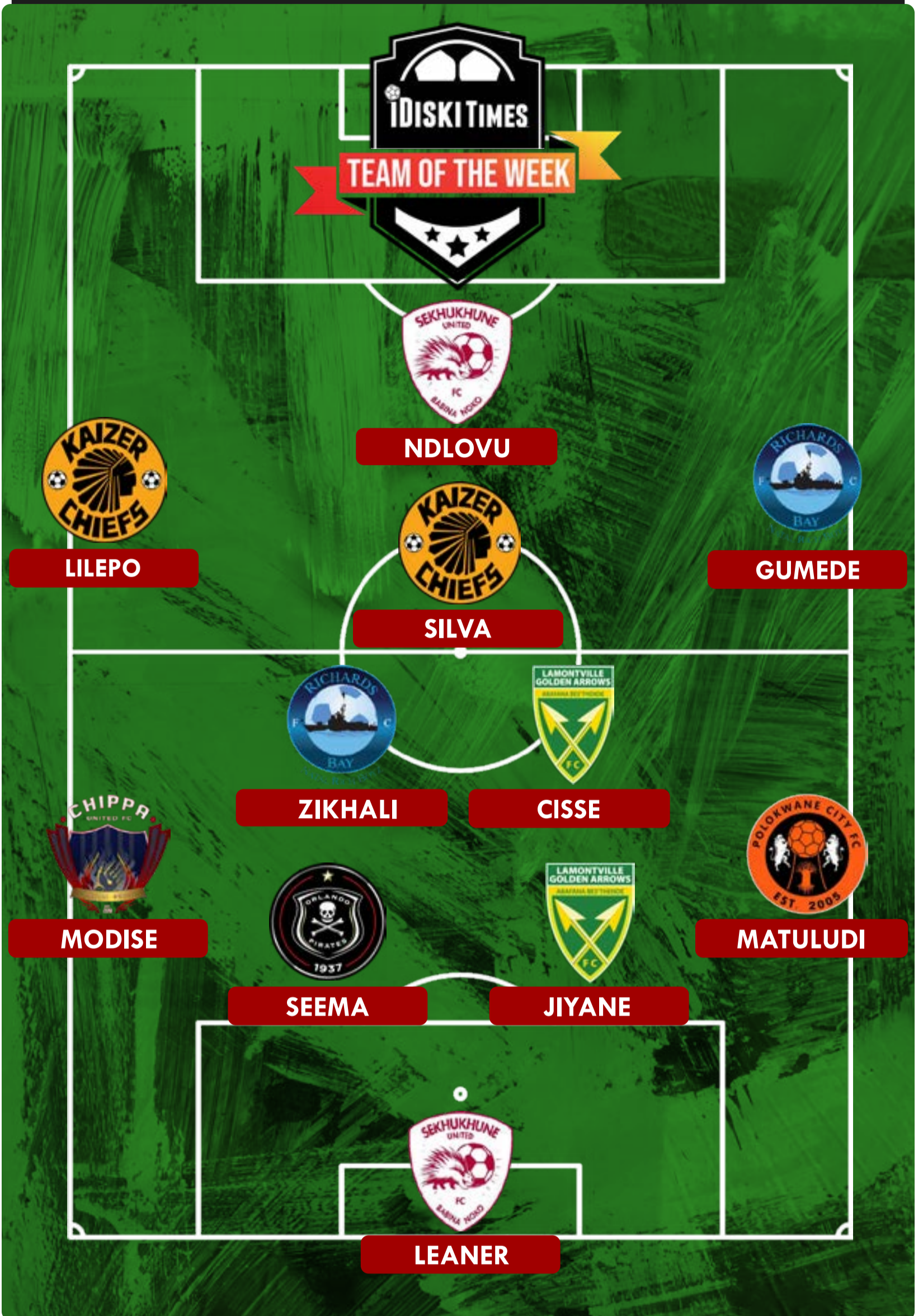
In the broader context, the numbers paint an even clearer picture. Of the more than 500 players to have featured in the Betway Premiership this season, those aged 36 and above account for just 4.12%. It's a small fraction, a reminder of how rare it is to not only endure but thrive at this level deep into one's thirties.

And while it is often assumed that goalkeepers dominate this age bracket, given the nature of their role and the longevity it typically allows, the data tells a more nuanced story. Only three of the top 10 players on this list are goalkeepers, and across the full group of 21, just five are shot-stoppers.

In other words, this is not merely a collection of ageing custodians holding on; it is a group of outfield players still competing, still contributing, and in many cases, still excelling against opponents a decade or more their junior. A testament, perhaps, to the idea that while time waits for no one, class and character can stretch their limit.

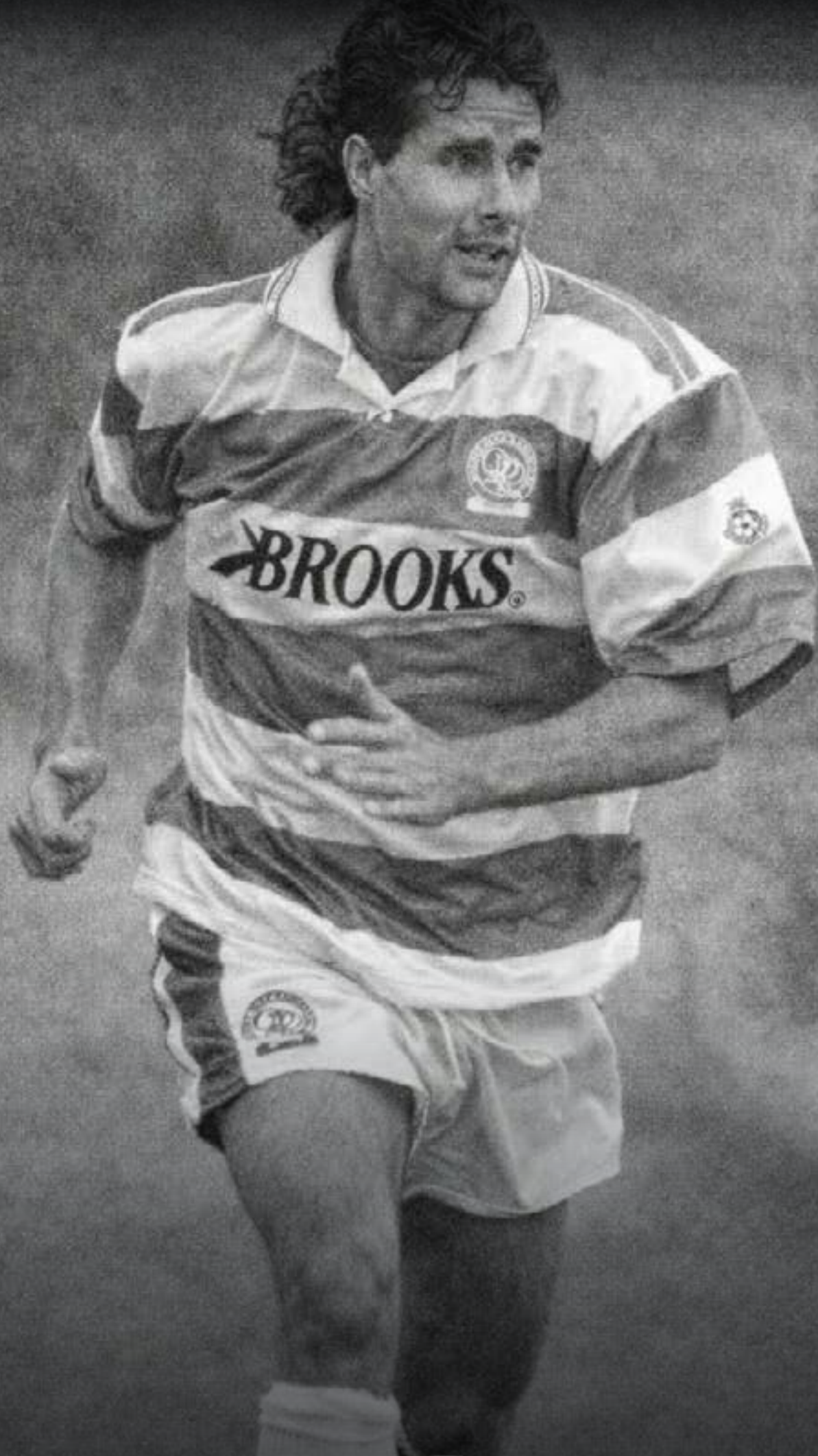


IDISKI'S PREMIERSHIP TEAM OF THE WEEK (10-12 APRIL 2026)



ACE OF THE WEEK:  
MAMELODI SUNDOWNS

Mamelodi Sundowns take collective honours as this week's iDiski Times Aces of the Week, following a courageous first-leg victory in their CAF Champions League semi-final clash against Espérance de Tunis in Tunisia on Sunday. In a contest defined by grit and moments of quality, it was Brayan León who proved the difference, his header handing Miguel Cardoso's side a precious 1-0 advantage to take back home, an invaluable away strike that could yet tilt the balance decisively as Sundowns set their sights on a place in the final. History, too, was made in the process. This marked Sundowns' first-ever victory over Esperance on Tunisian soil. And it did not come without adversity. Reduced to 10 men following Grant Kekana's red card, the Brazilians were forced to dig deep, showing resilience and tactical discipline to withstand late pressure and preserve their slender lead.



## 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.*

## AMERICA'S FIRST GREAT FOOTBALLER... AND PRETORIA'S FINEST

By Rob Delpont

*There is something quietly poetic about the idea that one of the United States' first truly great footballers was not shaped in Los Angeles or New York, but on the pitches of Pretoria.*

Before the bright lights of World Cups, before the roar of English terraces, before the tag of 'The First Great American Player' followed him across continents, Roy Wegerle was just another South African kid chasing a ball in a country that was, at the time, deeply divided, politically, socially, and even sporting-wise.

To understand Wegerle's journey is to understand a story that feels uniquely South African, even if much of it unfolded far from home.

### A Football Education in a Divided Country

Wegerle's footballing DNA was almost inevitable. Born in Pretoria to parents of Scottish and German descent, he followed in the footsteps of his two older brothers, Geoff and Steve, both professionals themselves. Football, in that sense, was less a choice and more a current he stepped into, and at Arcadia Shepherds, the Wegerle name was one of legend, teenage sensations who left their mark indelibly.

But the South Africa of his youth was no ordinary football environment. Under apartheid, the game, like everything else, was segregated. For much of Wegerle's early development, players of different races were kept apart, denied the chance to share ideas, styles, and cultures on the same pitch. It was only in his mid-teens that those barriers began to soften, and when they did, it opened his eyes.

What he encountered left a permanent imprint. He speaks of black players with a kind of reverence, their rhythm, their improvisation, their fearlessness on the ball. After his illustrious career, Wegerle still said that Jomo Sono was the best player he ever played against.

It was football played with expression rather than restriction, instinct rather than instruction. For a young player already inclined towards creativity, it was transformative.

In many ways, that brief window of integration helped shape the player Wegerle would become: unpredictable, expressive, and unafraid to play the game on his own terms. It is perhaps one of the great 'what ifs' of South African football, what a generation like his might have become had those influences been allowed to flourish earlier, and together.

### The Dream That Slipped and the One That Didn't

At just 17, Wegerle's talent carried him to the gates of one of football's grandest institutions: Manchester United.

A trial at United should have been the beginning of everything. Instead, it became one of the earliest setbacks in a career that would be defined as much by resilience as by flair.

An untimely injury cut his opportunity short. Where others might have seen a door closing, Wegerle simply adjusted his route. There is a telling honesty in how he reflects on that moment, acknowledging that with better guidance, perhaps he might have returned stronger, more prepared. But hindsight is a luxury footballers rarely get in real time.

Instead, his path veered west. With his brothers already in the United States, Wegerle followed, going into the American college system, joining the University of South Florida. It was a decision born partly of circumstance, partly of ambition, but always underpinned by a quiet certainty: he would find his way back to the highest level.

### America, Opportunity, and a Route Back to England

In the 1980s, the United States was hardly a global football powerhouse. But for Wegerle, it offered something equally valuable. Opportunity.

After a time at college, he cut his teeth with the Tampa Bay Rowdies, playing under the charismatic Rodney Marsh, a man who understood flair, who valued



entertainment, and who recognised something special in the young South African. Marsh didn't just give Wegerle a platform; he opened a door.

Within a year, that door led back to England, to Chelsea, and to the realisation of a childhood dream that had been shaped from afar in South Africa, watching grainy broadcasts of the English First Division.

The irony, of course, was that Wegerle's game was never entirely built for England.

English football in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a rugged, unforgiving place. It prized efficiency over elegance, structure over spontaneity. Wegerle was something else entirely.

Described by Marsh as a player who approached football like 'a painter,' he played with joy, with freedom, with a kind of improvisational spirit that felt closer to street football than the regimented systems of the time.

It didn't work out at Chelsea, so off he went to Luton Town, then Queens Park Rangers. His next stop was Blackburn Rovers, then Coventry City, at each stop carving out moments of brilliance, even if he never quite became the conventional English forward that managers wanted.

He admitted it himself: his style didn't align with the expectations of the league. Managers often demanded simplicity, one or two touches, quick movement into the box, efficiency above all else.

Wegerle, by contrast, wanted to create, to express, to take risks. In another era, perhaps this one, the modern Premier League that celebrates individuality, he might have been cherished differently.

Back then, he had to carve his own space.

### The Goal That Captured It All

If there is one moment that encapsulates Wegerle the player, it is a goal... ten seconds, six opponents, one unstoppable surge.

Scored for QPR at Elland Road, it has since taken on near-mythical status. The comparisons to modern greats are inevitable, but what stands out most is how instinctive it was.

He collected the ball out on the right, just inside the Leeds United half, and from there, the ordinary gave way to the extraordinary. What followed was less a run and more a piece of improvisational art, as he twisted and glided his way forward on a route that seemed to defy both logic and direction.

One by one, five Leeds defenders were left trailing in his wake, bypassed as if they were mere training cones rather than top-flight opponents. With the penalty area finally opening up before him, Wegerle shifted the ball onto his right foot with perfect timing and, almost as an afterthought, swept it beyond the helpless dive of John Lukic, a finish that crowned a goal as breathtaking as the journey that created it.

No calculation. No hesitation. Just movement, balance, and belief. And yet, in typical fashion, Wegerle shrugged it off. For him, football was always more about the feeling than the headlines.

### A South African Without a National Team

Perhaps the most poignant thread in Wegerle's story is the one that never quite belonged to him: representing his country of birth. Because of apartheid, South Africa was banned from international football during his prime years.

The World Cup, the ultimate stage, was never an option in green and gold. Instead, his international career would take an unexpected turn. Through his



American wife, and with the persuasion of coach Bora Milutinović, Wegerle committed to the United States. It was a pragmatic choice, but also a symbolic one, aligning his future with the country where he would eventually settle.

By the time he made his debut against Ireland in 1992, he was nearly 30, his body already worn from years of punishing football and a catalogue of knee injuries. And yet, he still reached the game's grandest stage.

In an ironic twist of fate, less than two months after Wegerle made his American debut, South Africa's return to international football was announced.

World Cups and What Might Have Been

Wegerle represented the USA at two World Cups, including the iconic 1994 tournament on home soil. There is a certain bittersweetness to his recollection.

Four months before the tournament, he tore his ACL, an injury that should have ruled him out entirely. Doctors said recovery in time was impossible. Wegerle refused to accept that. He fought his way back, not fully fit, not at his peak, but present.

On July 4th, 1994, in front of 100,000 fans in Palo Alto, he took the field against Brazil, the eventual champions. It was a moment heavy with symbolism: Independence Day, football gaining a foothold in America, and a South African-born player representing a nation still finding its place in the global game.

They lost 1-0. Wegerle, by his own admission, could not make the impact he wanted. But the moment mattered. For American soccer, it was a step forward. For Wegerle, it was a personal triumph against the odds.

A Career Fought Through Pain

If there is a quiet thread of defiance running through Wegerle's career, it is his relationship with injury. Twelve knee surgeries.

Each one taking something away, a fraction of pace, a degree of sharpness, a piece of the freedom that defined his game. And yet, he kept going.

Through England, through Major League Soccer with clubs like the Colorado Rapids and D.C. United, through international duty, always adapting, always finding a way.

Until, eventually, the joy began to fade. That, more than anything, is what brought his career to an end in 1998. Not the pain. Not the setbacks. But the simple realisation that the game no longer felt the way it once had.

Wegerle played almost 400 club games across the world, scoring 116 goals. He finished with 41 caps for the USA, scoring

seven times.

The Legacy of a Path Less Travelled

After football, Wegerle stepped away in a way that mirrored his career, unconventional, self-directed. He explored punditry before turning his focus to golf, even competing professionally. It is, in many ways, the perfect continuation of his story: a man never confined by a single identity, always willing to follow his own instincts.

And perhaps that is where his legacy truly lies. Not just as a player who represented the United States, or one who lit up English football in flashes, but as a South African who forged a path where none really existed.

At a time when South African sports figures were largely cut off from the world, Wegerle became a global figure. At a time when American soccer was still finding its feet, he became one of its defining players.

He belongs, in a sense, to multiple footballing identities. But from a South African perspective, his story carries a deeper resonance. It is the story of a talent shaped in isolation, influenced by cultures he only briefly touched, and ultimately realised far from home.

A player who might have worn the colours of Bafana Bafana in another life. A footballer who, despite everything, stayed true to one simple idea: Play the game your way and let the rest of the world catch up.



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