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IS DA CRUZ THE RIGHT MAN FOR CHIEFS?



**CITY REJECT
SUNDOWNS BID FOR
KEY PLAYER**



**TWO BIG NAMES
TIPPED FOR BAFANA
ROLE AFTER BROOS**



**PHILI ON HIS
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**ORBIT KEEPER: I'M
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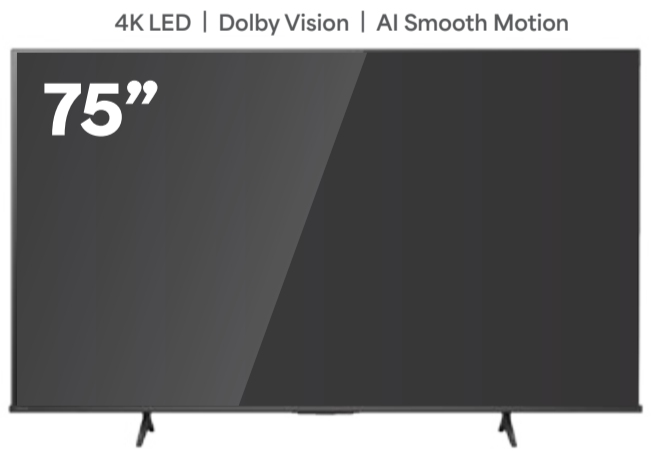
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TEAM OF THE WEEK
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MAKUA HEADED TO CITY?

Casric Stars playmaker Lifa Makua looks poised to make a move to the top-flight with Durban City in pole position for the rising talent. Makua was one of the standout players for the club in their run to the semi-finals of the Nedbank Cup and in their faltering race for promotion. Sources have confirmed City have acted swiftly to offer the player a contract, with his contract running out at the end of the month.



USUTHU CLOSE IN ON JABAAR

AmaZulu are believed to be trying to secure the services of Nigerian youth international Ibraheem Jabaar after his exit from Stellenbosch. The 23-year-old rejected a new deal at Stellies and has been linked with Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs, and also a possible reunion with former coach Steve Barker at Simba SC. However, Usuthu have stumped up a tempting offer to the player who has been sold into the project of the club, aiming to break into the top three next season under head coach Arthur Zwane.



CITY REJECTS SUNDOWNS BID FOR AMATO

Cape Town City have rejected an opening bid from Mamelodi Sundowns for midfielder Gabriel Amato. The Amajita midfielder has attracted serious interest from abroad and spent time in Belgium last season in an assessment with Westerlo. He returned to City and became a key figure in the club's midfield, featuring in every game for the Citizens in the 2025/26 campaign, and after their failure to secure promotion, offers were always going to be imminent. But the opening bid from Sundowns has now been rebuffed in what's set to be another key transfer saga to look out for in the off-season.



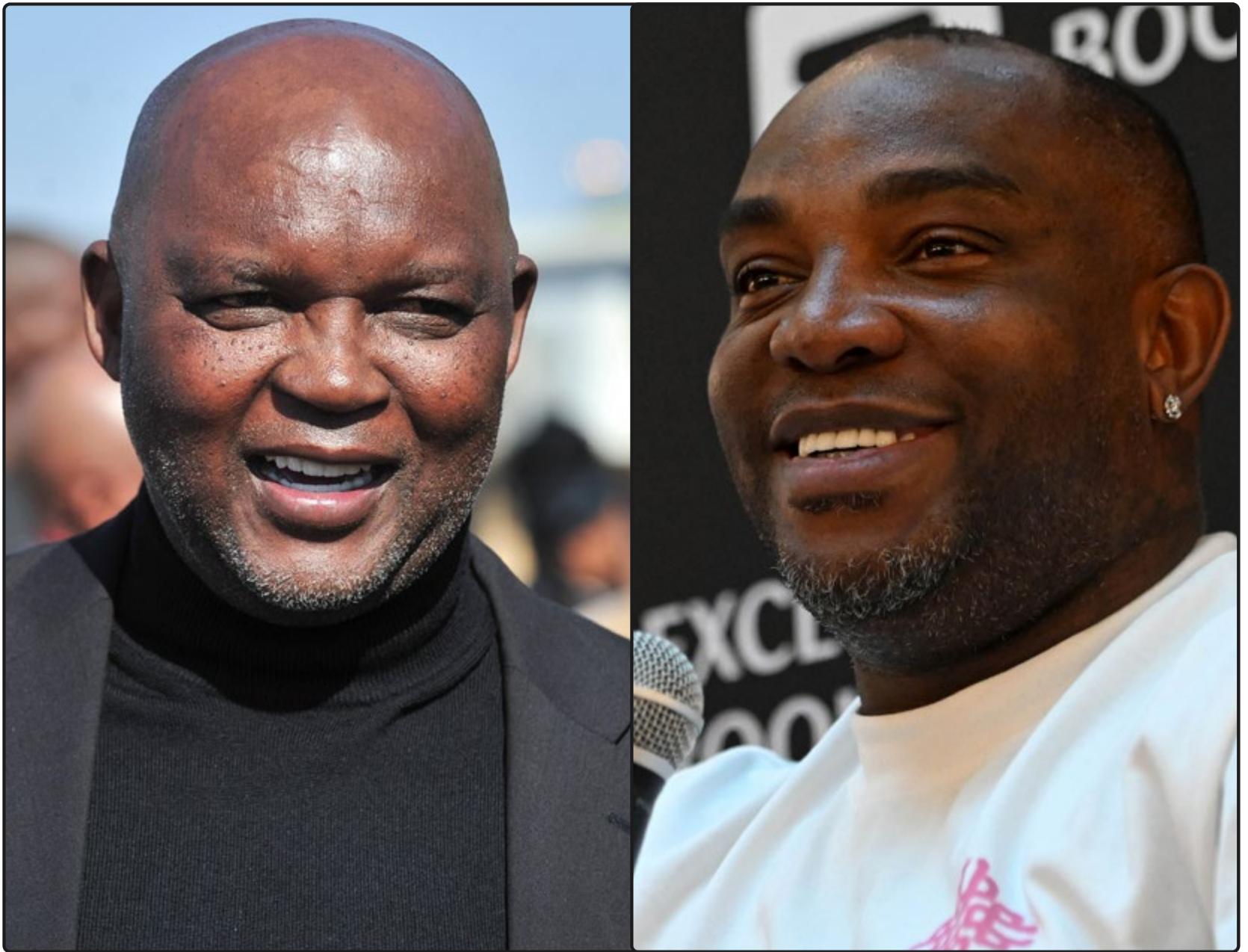
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MCCARTHY AND MOSIMANE TIPPED FOR BAFANA BAFANA HOT SEAT?

As Hugo Broos prepares to potentially bow out following South Africa's participation in the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the question gripping South African football is already being whispered in boardrooms and debated on street corners: who could come next?

Two names have begun circulating in speculation: Benni McCarthy and Pitso Mosimane - both carrying the enormous weight of expectation that comes with being the country's most celebrated football exports.

Broos, the veteran Belgian tactician who masterminded Bafana Bafana's remarkable and emotionally charged World Cup qualification, has hinted that the tournament on North American soil could mark the closing chapter of his tenure.

Should he step away, his exit would leave a considerable void, with passionate supporters already allowing themselves to dream of a homegrown successor finally taking the reins.

Benni McCarthy, South Africa's all-time

leading scorer and former Manchester United first-team coach, has been floated as the romantic, crowd-pleasing choice. His playing pedigree remains unmatched on home soil, and his immersion within elite European football structures under Erik ten Hag has arguably added real tactical depth to his coaching outlook. A return home to lead his beloved nation would be a narrative that South African football would eagerly and emotionally embrace.

Pitso Mosimane, meanwhile, is frequently mentioned in the same breath as Africa's finest ever coaches. Having orchestrated extraordinary success with Mamelodi Sundowns and Egyptian giants Al Ahly, the man affectionately known as 'Jingles' possesses a trophy-laden CV and a fierce winning mentality that few coaches on the continent can genuinely rival.

Should SAFA look inward, they would face a fascinating crossroads – McCarthy, the inspirational figurehead vs Mosimane, the battle-hardened serial winner. Either conversation is one South African football desperately needs.

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NKEWU: WE WILL MISS TEBZA

Bafana Bafana kept their FIFA World Cup hopes alive when they drew 1-1 against Czechia, but will need a victory over South Korea in their final game to ensure qualification for the knockout rounds.

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

Make sure you subscribe for free on YouTube, and click the bell icon to get notified as soon as new videos are released.

Our Only Threat Was Maseko - Nkululeko Nkewu

"We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Thapelo Maseko. He was our best creative outlet against Czechia on Thursday. He was willing to run at defenders. It was his shot that created the penalty! His contribution should not go unnoticed."

"My concern from that match was that we struggled to break down a seemingly mediocre European Team. Czechia were not an attacking threat. They scored early, and the game ended for them. Yet we could not break them down."

"This makes me question our standards as South Africa. Our development standards and our training standards. Czechia had nothing else to give other than organisation. We had no threat at all against them. This, long-term, is a question we need to answer."

"We need a win against South Korea. The equation is simple."

"Obviously, it is easier said than done. We have to win without Teboho Mokoena, too. We are going to miss him."

"I wish Bafana Bafana all the best. I hope we find something within ourselves which can help us beat South Korea on Thursday."



PROUD SUPPORTER OF SOUTH AFRICAN FOOTBALL

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IS DA CRUZ THE RIGHT MAN FOR CHIEFS?

By Matshelane Mamabolo

For a club intent on returning to the glory days, Kaizer Chiefs' choice of new coach would seem to suggest Amakhosi are not really serious about challenging for league honours. The club's decision to entrust their quest for domestic league glory to yet another Frenchman when they've previously had no luck when they went that route beggars belief.

Granted, it would be unfair to preempt how new coach Fernando da Cruz will fare on the basis of how his compatriots have previously performed. And the fairest thing would be to give the man

who was announced last week as having signed a two-year contract with Chiefs the benefit of the doubt. After all, the powers that be at Naturena would not have gone for him if they did not believe he has what it takes to lead them to their first championship glory since the 2014/15 campaign.

But can he? Can Da Cruz help Chiefs dethrone Orlando Pirates as Betway Premiership champions? Can the Frenchman with Portuguese roots get Amakhosi to finish above Mamelodi Sundowns on the table?

On the face of it, the answer to both questions should be an emphatic NO. For starters, no Frenchman has ever led Chiefs to the league title – with Philippe Troussier, Paul Dolezar and the French-speaking Tunisian Nasreddine Nabi having come a cropper in their attempt to deliver domestic football's ultimate prize for the Motaungs.

The fact that all those three men had a much more impressive coaching pedigree than Da Cruz, who arrives with no great record of note to write home about, explains just why most of the Amakhosi faithful are flabbergasted by their club's decision, with many shocked that Chiefs did not go for either Pitso Mosimane or Manqoba Mngqithi.

But why Da Cruz?

The discerning Chiefs follower will be well aware of the fact that Da Cruz had been with Chiefs two seasons ago for a short spell during pre-season prior to Nasreddine Nabi taking over – Da Cruz having arrived as a prospective assistant to Nabi. Chiefs clearly saw something in the Frenchman, who has spent a significant time in Morocco, where he had won the Botola Pro league title with AS FAR Rabat in the 2022/23 season.

But that's all to write, really, unless of course you include the fact that Da Cruz holds a UEFA PRO licence that's generally regarded as the highest coaching qualification in the world.

History has, however, proven that qualifications do not equate to success and with Da Cruz having mostly worked as a technical Director with the Royal Moroccan Football Federation in recent years, it is going to be interesting to see how he copes with the daily demands of club football.

In making the announcement, Chiefs highlighted Da Cruz's





PICTURE: [KAIZER CHIEFS](#)



three spells as a member of French Ligue 1 club Lille to illustrate the high-calibre coach they've appointed to lead their fortunes for the next two seasons. The reality of that, though, was that Da Cruz was a lieutenant – serving as assistant coach to the revered Marcelo Bielsa. He would no doubt have learnt a lot from the great Argentinian tactician, and that experience will come in handy as he seeks to usurp Abdeslam Ouaddou and Miguel Cardoso as the Betway Premiership's top coach.

Former Chiefs goalkeeper Brian Baloyi preached patience, saying the man should be given a chance. Yet, given his experience with French coaches, it is understandable that Spiderman has his reservations about his former club's choice.

LET'S GIVE HIM A CHANCE - BALOYI

"Let's give him a chance and see how he does. The club has appointed him after all," Baloyi told iDiski Times during the live watch of Bafana Bafana's 1-1 draw with Czechia, organised by SAFA sponsors Honor, where they also announced they had just signed a landmark deal with SABC to become the Official Technology Devices Sponsor of the public broadcaster.

NDLANYA: "CHIEFS HAD A GOOD CAMPAIGN IN THE PREVIOUS SEASON, AND THEY'VE GOT SOMETHING GOOD TO BUILD ON. I HOPE THIS IS THE RIGHT MAN TO TAKE THE CLUB FORWARD."

"You know, I never like to judge people based on their ethnicity, and I don't like to put people in a box and say French people are like this. I believe as human beings, we're all different. I'm hoping he has a different approach. But yes, you can't help but think about what happened before when Chiefs went with French coaches. I think what clubs sometimes ignore is that being a coach is not just about what you know technically. It's not just the tactics. It's about being a human being, the human side is very important and that particularly plays a very big part here in South Africa."

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Baloyi referred to the many different backgrounds that players come from and mentioned that historically black people are fearful of white men, and wondered whether a Frenchman would be able to get the best out of local players. He spoke of the Troussier experience at both Chiefs and the 1998 World Cup.

“We must always be cognisant of the fact that our clubs are made up of young players that come from townships; from rural communities; from humble backgrounds. These kids grow up in a community where, when they see a white man, they’re fearful. And those are some of the things that we always need to think about. I think those are some of the things that people that are in charge of football sometimes overlook.

“It’s extremely important that we think about all of this when we make decisions about the coaches we appoint. We must not only think about where we want to see this institution, but also about the kids and how we’re going to be able to bring the best out of them. So when we get a coach, we must think of that, that we’re bringing someone that’s going to bring the best out of our players.”

And from his experience with French coaches, Baloyi knows their methods are not designed for the South African player. Frenchmen, in particular, can be volatile, and Baloyi remembers the clashes they had with Troussier both at Chiefs and Bafana Bafana and how they could stand up to him.

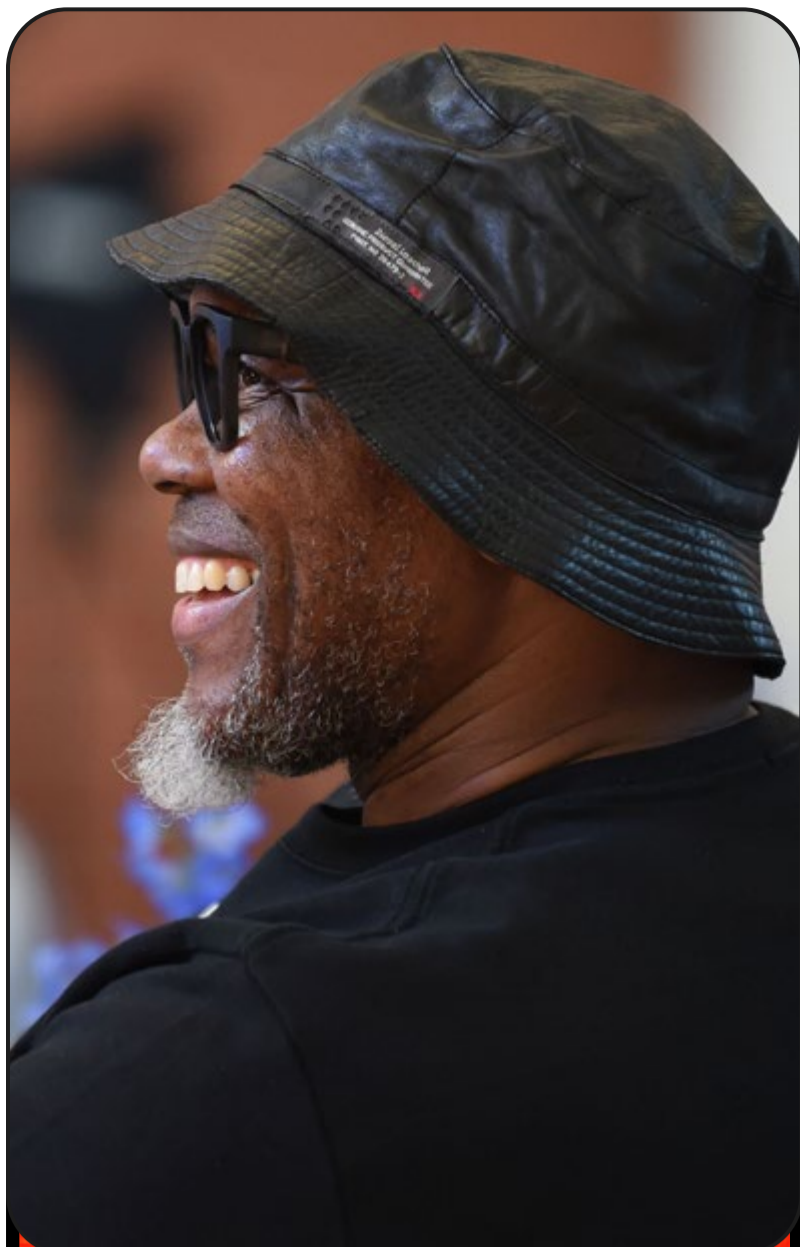
FRENCH COACHES ARE ALL ABOUT HARD WORK AND DISCIPLINE

Another former Chiefs player, Pollen Ndlanya, believes that even in their volatility, French coaches can be good when there is an understanding between them and the players. He played under both Troussier and Dolezar and learnt that all they needed was commitment and hard work from their players, and hopes that Da Cruz would be similar.

“Look, French coaches can be arrogant and sometimes because of that we tend to think they are racist. But no, they are just driven; they always want you to give 120%. You have to put in the effort as a player. Troussier was a very disciplined coach who wanted to win at all costs, and he always encouraged us that you must give 120% at training. You could never hide yourself from Philippe Troussier. So, if this new coach is anything like the other French coaches, the players must be prepared to work hard and know that he will be big on discipline.”

Ndlanya admits it might be difficult for the players to understand the new coach because if he is anything like Troussier, there could be a lot of swearing when things don’t go well, but that would only be during the course of work - training and match situations.

“After training and after the game, you’d be surprised and think, is this the same



BALOYI: “THESE KIDS GROW UP IN A COMMUNITY WHERE, WHEN THEY SEE A WHITE MAN, THEY’RE FEARFUL. AND THOSE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS THAT WE ALWAYS NEED TO THINK ABOUT.”

man who was swearing at me because he will treat you like a good friend. So, my advice to the players would be to not take it personally but understand that the man just wants to excel and he will push you to it, even if it means him using some unprintable words.”

Ndlanya played some of his best football under Dolezar, who referred to him as the ‘big animal’ and recalls the coach’s straightforwardness.

“Paul always wanted to win, and he would not hesitate to call out anyone who was letting the team down, saying, ‘This one is sabotaging us’. He hated laziness and always wanted everyone to put in great effort. I don’t know this new coach, but because he is French, I suspect he will also be big on hard work, and the players must just be prepared for that.

“Chiefs had a good campaign in the previous season, and they’ve got something good to build on. I hope this is the right man to take the club forward because Chiefs is a big club, not only in South Africa but in Africa as well, and they need to start delivering the results to show that.”

THE NEED FOR A LOCAL ASSISTANT COACH

Chiefs announced that Da Cruz will be





assisted by Egyptian Mahmoud Abbas, while Frenchman Julien Le Heran will head the sports science department. It is a stance Baloyi does not approve of. According to the legendary goalkeeper, local clubs employing foreign coaches need a South African assistant to help bridge the gap between the players and the coach.

“Our reality is that you always need someone local on that bench. Mandla Ncikazi is playing a very crucial role at [Orlando] Pirates, and people are not taking notice. I have noticed that in the last few years, and that man is doing a brilliant job there. Of course, it is natural that when the club wins and the club is doing well, the head coach is the one who gets all the flowers. He’s the head, it’s natural. But some of us see and notice the good work that Mandla’s doing. Also at Sundowns, there’s Steve Komphela. The work that he does there is very important. Because all of the stuff about the human side of coaching, when the head is someone that does not come here, someone who does not understand our culture and all of that, this is the role that these men I’m talking about are able to play. And until Chiefs realise just how very important that role is, we are still going to be struggling to get back to where we believe we belong.”

Intriguingly, though, in the past there have been suggestions of local assistant coaches sabotaging foreign coaches, and thus the decision to allow coaches to bring their own technical team and this has become a recent trend. Another failing previously has been that local assistant coaches are often reduced to mere ball boys for the foreign coaches. Dillon Sheppard was part of the Chiefs’ technical team working with both Ben Khalil Youssef and Cedric Kaze in the previous campaign, and it will be interesting to see whether he remains part of Da Cruz’s technical team in the upcoming two seasons.

NDLANYA: “FRENCH COACHES CAN BE ARROGANT, AND SOMETIMES BECAUSE OF THAT WE TEND TO THINK THEY ARE RACIST. BUT NO, THEY ARE JUST DRIVEN; THEY ALWAYS WANT YOU TO GIVE 120%.”

Yet given Baloyi’s explanation, it would appear that whoever Chiefs choose as a local assistant coach, if they do so, has to be someone strong enough to be a positive influence towards the club’s success.

There can be no denying that Chiefs’ appointment of Da Cruz has not been roundly welcomed by both the club’s fans and the soccer fraternity at large. Yet, his limited success cannot be seen as a surefire case that he will not take Chiefs back to the glory days.

Those long in the game will be well aware of Chiefs’ reputation for bringing unknown coaches into the country who went on to become household names sought by other clubs. Think Dolezar himself. Muhsin Ertugral and Stuart Baxter had not lit up the soccer world when Kaizer Motaung brought them over. And so it should be that the Amakhosi faithful should be patient with Da Cruz and support him in his quest to lead Chiefs to a league title that has been proving elusive for close on 12 years now. And they need not look too far, with neighbours and rivals having ended their 14-year championship drought with the help of a coach whose appointment the Buccaneers had questioned and doubted – Abdeslam Ouaddou, a Frenchman of Moroccan descent, having joined sans an impressive coaching pedigree.



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PHILI ON HIS BRILLIANT 25/26 SEASON & BIGGER TARGETS



While Stellenbosch may not have enjoyed one of their strongest campaigns in recent years, winger LANGELIHLEPHILI emerged as one of the club's standout performers. The 21-year-old played a pivotal role in a season that saw Stellies endure a difficult start to life in the Betway Premiership before eventually recovering to secure a ninth-place finish. Throughout the ups and downs, Phili remained a consistent bright spark, ending the 2025/26 season as the club's leading scorer with seven league goals and nine across all competitions. His impressive performances did not go unnoticed. At Stellenbosch's end-of-season awards ceremony last month, Phili was the big winner on the night, collecting four accolades: the Player's Player of the Season award, the Oshwin Andries Young Player of the Season award, the Golden Boot, and the Rama Fans' Player of the Season award. Having established himself as one of the most exciting young talents in South African football, Phili has every reason to look back on the season with pride. As the campaign drew to a close, iDiski Times journalist SINETHEMBA MAKONCO sat down with the talented winger to reflect on his breakthrough year and discuss what lies ahead.

Sinethemba Makonco: First of all, congratulations on all your wins at the Stellenbosch awards. What a night it must have been for you?

Langelihle Phili: Yeah, it was a great night. It's an absolute honour and

"I'D DEFINITELY SAY MY GOAL AGAINST KAIZER CHIEFS, SIMPLY BECAUSE I GREW UP IN A HOUSEHOLD WHERE EVERYONE SUPPORTED THEM."

a pleasure to be recognised by my teammates, the coaching staff, and everyone else at the club.

SM: You must have got a good workout from having to go up and down to collect all those trophies?

LP: I certainly improved my fitness, considering I had to get up every five seconds to collect an award!

SM: How do you reflect on your season personally, and of course, the club's?

LP: My season at the club has been a blessing. Although we didn't achieve all of our team goals, avoiding relegation ensures we can compete again next year. On a personal note, I'm pleased with my performance, as I was able to step up and support the team through both the good and the tough moments.

SM: It's been quite a year, I mean, a year ago you became an African U20

champion, and you're amongst the top young players this season.

LP: It's a massive honour for me and my family to represent South Africa at the U20 level. So many incredible things came from that journey – winning the AFCON title and playing in the World Cup! And being named one of the top young players this season is just the icing on the cake.

SM: Are you happy with the progress of the players from that Amajita squad? There are quite a few playing regularly or making big moves.

LP: I'm happy for each and every one of them. We truly treated each other like brothers and the memories we shared will always hold a special place in our hearts.

SM: Back to you. Nine goals in all competitions? Are you happy with your personal contribution there?

LP: I would have liked to score more goals and provide more assists, but I am happy with my overall contribution to the team. I want to thank my teammates and the coaching staff for making everything possible.

SM: You scored a few really good ones, too. Which of the goals is most memorable for you?

LP: I'd definitely say my goal against Kaizer Chiefs, simply because I grew up in a household where everyone supported them.

SM: Just a word about your coaches this season. Obviously, bittersweet when Steve Barker left, the coach who gave you a shot. But also a chance to work with Gavin Hunt this year...

LP: It has been an absolute honour to be coached by these two incredible people, and I'll always be grateful for their guidance on and off the pitch. A big shoutout as well to Coach Wesley, Coach Evangelos (DDC), Coach Jason, and Coach Jean-Pierre! You've all played a massive part in my journey so far.

SM: And how important has your off-the-field support been? Family, loved ones, friends?

LP: My family and loved ones are incredibly important to me because they always support me through the highs and lows, both on and off the pitch. My representatives are equally vital, as I trust them completely to guide and build my football career.

SM: You moved from the 'Kingdom of the Zulus' across to the Western Cape, but surely now you must be



ON POTS: "I'D HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN APPOLLIS AND MOFOKENG. THEIR CONSISTENCY IS IMPRESSIVE, AND IT DEFINITELY PUSHES ME TO DO BETTER."

thinking, when I do make my next move, it should be across the oceans somewhere?

LP: I trusted my representatives with my transfer from AmaZulu FC to Stellenbosch FC, and I continue to trust them with whatever comes next. The ultimate goal is to compete alongside the best players in the world.

SM: There's been a lot of debate about who should be the Player of the Season overall. What's your take? Do those guys inspire you to push harder?

LP: I'd have to choose between Appollis and Mofokeng. Their consistency is impressive, and it definitely pushes me to do better. They're great attacking players, and I love learning from the guys who are currently setting the standard.

SM: Finally, you had to take them on for most of the season, so who'd be your Defender of the Season?

LP: My vote for Defender of the Season goes to Khuliso Mudau. Week in and week out, he proves that he is truly one of the best in his position.

SM: Thanks, Major.



CAN BAFANA STUN SOUTH KOREA & THE WORLD?

By *Matshelane Mamabolo*

A country that is yet to win a match since the turn of the year has to register a victory to achieve a feat they have never accomplished before. It wouldn't be so bad if the opposition was not from a continent whose countries they have a scratchy history against.

But that's the unenviable situation Bafana Bafana find themselves in ahead of their final Group A match of the 2026 FIFA World Cup co-hosted by Canada, Mexico and the United States of America. South Africa's senior national team is yet again facing first round elimination from the global soccer showpiece unless they succeed where none of their predecessors have before.

Bottom of their group with just one point from two matches, Hugo Broos and his team need to beat South Korea at the Estadio Monterrey in Guadalupe, Mexico on Thursday to book their spot in the knockout stage for the first time in four appearances. It is a Herculean task, one made all the more difficult by the unavailability through suspension of midfield enforcer Teboho Mokoena.

Yet it is thanks to the Mamelodi Sundowns midfielder's goal from the penalty spot in the 1-1 draw with Czechia that South Africa are still in with a fighting chance going into the final group match. For a country making a return to the World Cup after missing the past three tournaments, that is something to be cheerful about and that come-from-behind point in Atlanta has not only kept hopes alive but has also imbued captain Ronwen Williams and Co with confidence that they can make history and become the first group of South

African players to progress past the round robin phase.

That confidence is shared by most in the country, among them men who have been to the sport's ultimate stage.

Former Bafana assistant coach Trott Moloto who sat on the bench at both the 1998 and 2002 tournaments says he saw a lot in the draw against Czechia to believe Bafana have the beating of South Korea – the fact that South Africa has previously only ever drawn with reputable opposition from the Far East notwithstanding. Only twice have Bafana played against renowned Asian countries and in both occasions – against Japan and North Korea – the matches ended goalless, a result that would do them no good on Thursday.

Moloto optimistically anticipates victory for South Africa: “We can beat Korea,” he said confidently “I watched their matches and there was nothing much about them that impressed me. What I saw is that they play as a group but there were no individuals that stood out for me. I believe we can use our pace to punish them.”

Like most, Trapattoni – as Moloto is affectionately referred to – felt Bafana were their usual self against Czechia and would love to see them continue in that vein on Thursday.

“In this group everyone has a chance to go through with Mexico. For me, all that is needed is for the boys to tighten their belts and anything is possible. We did way better in that second match than against Mexico in the opener. In the draw against Czechia we played from the back and knocked the ball about

MOLOTO: "WE CAN BEAT KOREA. I WATCHED THEIR MATCHES AND THERE WAS NOTHING MUCH ABOUT THEM THAT IMPRESSED ME."



the way we are used to doing. There was good running off the ball and they were very competitive, we showed that we are just not at the World Cup to add to the numbers."

That could well have been the case, yet hawk-eyed football followers would have also picked up that Bafana failed to punish a fairly average foe that was there for the taking.

Bafana were frustrated by Czechia's reinforced defence in the second half and while most were excited by the enterprising play of Relebohile Mofokeng upon his introduction at the break, the reality was that Bafana failed to get victory against arguably the weakest opposition in their group.

Lest it be forgotten, Czechia made it to the finals via the play-offs courtesy of victories attained through kicks from the penalty spot. Like Bafana they are winless this year, having played in competitive matches.

What the celebration of that draw spoke to is the fact South Africa has degenerated into a nation that focuses on the score and the widely-held belief that South Korea can be beaten stems from the fact they were beaten 1-0 by

Mexico. What most seem to ignore from that match though is that the Mexicans' victory was attained via a fortuitous goal against an opponent who played them off the field, dominated possession (57.5%), played more accurate passes (534 to 432); had more corners (2 to 0) and were even caught offside more (six to three).

Bafana are going to have their work cut out getting the better of South Korea and the fact they did not test themselves against Asian opposition in the build up to the showpiece could well come back to haunt them.

But former South African defensive stalwart Mark Fish anticipates only good things for Bafana, believing – as he does – that Bafana should have beaten Czechia.

"I think in the last 20 minutes of that match, we were the better team. We could have been more creative and that 1-1 could have been 2-1. But the point is, the players are growing in confidence and growing understanding of each other. And most importantly, the changes that were made, were the right ones. The performance was better than from the first game and that's something positive we should build on."

FISH: "I THINK THE PLAYERS NOW BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES MORE AND THEY REALISE WHAT THE WORLD CUP IS ALL ABOUT. NOW, LET'S GO PLAY AND SHOWCASE WHAT WE ARE GOOD AT."

And Fish is hopeful that Bafana will build on that for their must-win final group match against a Korea that could progress with just a draw.

"I've always said I'm very confident that this team will progress out of the group stages. Of course, the last match against Korea is going to be very challenging because we need a win to go through. And we know that Korea has very fit players who are going to work until the last minute. But I'm excited to see what Bafana can do. The improvement in the match against Czechia from that first one against Mexico gives me confidence for the final one.

"I think the players now believe in themselves more and they realise what the World Cup is all about. Now, let's go play and showcase what we are good at and get the result that we need to get so that we can get out of the group stage."

Fish's belief in Bafana stems from what he has seen of coach Hugo Broos even in the midst of the negativity that surrounded the opening match defeat by Mexico.

"Hugo Broos has been very good, always talking positively and boosting the players' confidence. He is very considerate and you can see that he cares about the team. And that's why you can see how players are playing for

the coach and the technical team. I do think that they realise and understand that they have a great opportunity to go to the next stage, which I believe they can."

Easier said than done, with South Korea also looking to qualify and boasting a team that has already tasted success at the current World Cup. Bafana will be the fifth time the Asians face African opposition at the World Cup. They have won just one of those – a 2-1 over Togo at Germany 2006 – drawn 2-2 with Nigeria in 2010 before suffering 4-2 and 3-2 losses to Algeria and Ghana in 2014 and 2022, respectively. It is the kind of results that should give Bafana some hope ahead of Thursday's clash.

The lure of making positive history should provide enough motivation for Williams and his teammates. Beat Korea and they will be the first South African men's squad to reach the World Cup knockout phase. This following those failures from back in 1998 when Philippe Troussier's group bombed out in the first round; Jomo Sono and his Class of 2002 came a-cropper similarly and World Cup-winning coach Carlos Alberto Parreira failed to work his magic as Bafana suffered the ignominy of being the first host nation to be knocked out in the first round in 2010.

But to do that they have to win for the first time this year. Can it be done?



MOERANE ON ORBIT COLLEGE RELEGATION: 'I'M NOT OKAY'



Orbit College goalkeeper **SEKHOANE MOERANE** found himself watching on the sidelines for most of his side's Betway Premiership campaign, having helped them gain promotion at the playoffs a season ago. The Lesotho national team captain managed just 13 appearances in the league this recently concluded term, with just two clean sheets as his side were automatically relegated to the Motsepe Foundation Championship. Sekhoane shared goal-minding duties with Sabelo Nkomo and Cyril Chibwe last season, and between them, they conceded 47 goals in 30 encounters. Moerane speaks to *iDiski Times* journalist **LETHABO KGANYAGO** in this edition about the heartbreak of seeing his side go down after just a season in the top flight, what he felt went wrong and the factors that contributed to getting the chop as well as his future.

Lethabo Kganyago: Sekhoane, we appreciate your time. You were inconsolable after relegation was confirmed. Are you feeling any better now?

Sekhoane Moerane: I'm not okay, but it happened, and I have to let it go – the sooner the better, so that I can regroup and focus. Try to get myself a new team or proceed with Orbit. It's too much on my plate, I just need to be okay. As I've said, I'm not okay. Being in the top flight for only one season, it's not a good thing. We hoped that we would take more years. That didn't happen, and we are not okay. I'm not okay.

LK: Where do you think the team could have done better, seeing that you also had more wins than your closest competitors in Magesi FC and Marumo Gallants?

SM: Firstly, I'd like to start with my department, the goalkeeping department. We conceded too many goals, and this happened in our first time, even in the NFD. So I think we, as the goalkeeping department,

“PLAYING WITH SOMEONE LIKE SALENG IS A BLESSING, KNOWING WHAT HE'S CAPABLE OF.”

could have done better, but also the team didn't perform well. They didn't do well. We created many chances in every game, well, maybe not against Sundowns because they always had possession. Our problem was finishing. So I believe that the coach needs to go back, together with us and try to prepare ourselves even better. I believe that when we come back, we will be a different team because we learned our lesson.

LK: What were your targets? At some points, it looked like you were handling yourselves well in the league, almost better than Magesi, who spent the majority of the season in bottom place.

SM: I can say it's because we had hopes that we were going to win games. Even when we saw how much we were conceding, we had hope we would win games. And I can say one thing that the difference with teams like Magesi and Marumo Gallants is that even when they could not win, they'd at least get a draw. I can say that's what got us relegated.

LK: Your coaches tried to bring in some experienced players. Is it an issue of you just never clicking, or some of those signings were a little late?

SM: Bringing experience late cost us, I can say that. If you look, we were in the playoffs, and then after the playoffs, we didn't sign any player to



help us. Okay, let me not say any, but we brought in [only] a few, and it cost us because most of us were tired from the playoffs. We didn't have time for pre-season because we had only two weeks, and we were back [in action]. So we can say the other factor was fatigue. There was no rest, and we had to push more. I can say bringing experience late, and fatigue, is what cost us.

LK: And how was that period you spent with Monnapule Saleng before he left for Sundowns?

SM: You know, playing with someone like Saleng is a blessing, knowing what he's capable of. I liked him because he motivated some of us. A player as recognised as him, a player that's capable of bringing quality in a team, is what motivated some of us. On the other side, I wish there was another chance to play with him again because he was not 100%. You saw that he played with an injury. When he arrived at Sundowns, they took care of that first before he could play. He didn't give our team the kind of performances we were looking for from him in that regard.

LK: I want to ask about you personally, that after helping the team gain promotion, you didn't play much. How did you handle that period?

SM: I have this thing that motivates me now and then that I'm not playing, but the chance that I will get someday, I play again. And that thing sometimes had me questioning where I am lacking, because remember when the season started, I was conceding week in, week out. I only kept one clean sheet in seven matches.

LK: So you understood why the coaches couldn't continue with you?

SM: I felt like I was okay when the season started and that I was ready to play, but after five, six games, that's when I saw that I was tired. Some of the goals I was conceding aren't

“MY PHONE WAS BUSY TOWARDS THE END OF THE SEASON, BUT NOW IT'S GONE QUIET. I AM STILL WITH ORBIT.”

goals I should have been conceding. But after the coach pulled me to the side and told me that they wanted to replace me with Nkomo and see if he may make a difference. And the same thing happened with Nkomo, and the coach said he needs to bring in someone to help us because he could see we were tired. Personally, it didn't sit well with me that I promoted the team, and then I was conceding so much when I also went through the playoffs without conceding. I felt I was better after the coach rested me.

LK: Being part of your national team, did that also help with your confidence?

SM: The national team helped me a lot, even when I was playing domestic football in Lesotho. It helped me because I was considered to be one of the best to play against other big players from other countries. And most of the time, if I was going to the national team while not playing at Orbit, my coaches would tell me what to work on because they need me, and that also gave me confidence to say there's someone who recognises me even when it's tough.

LK: As you said, you guys still need a sit-down with your coaches at the club, but do you think it could be possible that you spend just one season in the first division and return?

SM: If the coach or the management of the team can manage to contain all of us, meet our needs in the NFD, I think we will return quickly. I do believe we will be there for a short time and return because, looking at





the squad that was there, no team in that division can stand in Orbit's way.

LK: What does this mean for your future with Orbit when you talk about the club containing all its players? Are you staying?

SM: I'm not sure, but for now, I'm an Orbit player, I'm an Orbit goalkeeper. But I'm not sure if there will be some offers if Orbit doesn't agree with my needs. Maybe only then will I say Orbit, I have an offer, because also if I get offers in Betway or even outside South Africa, I think I will not [stay with Orbit].

LK: But what does your heart want, and has there been any offer?

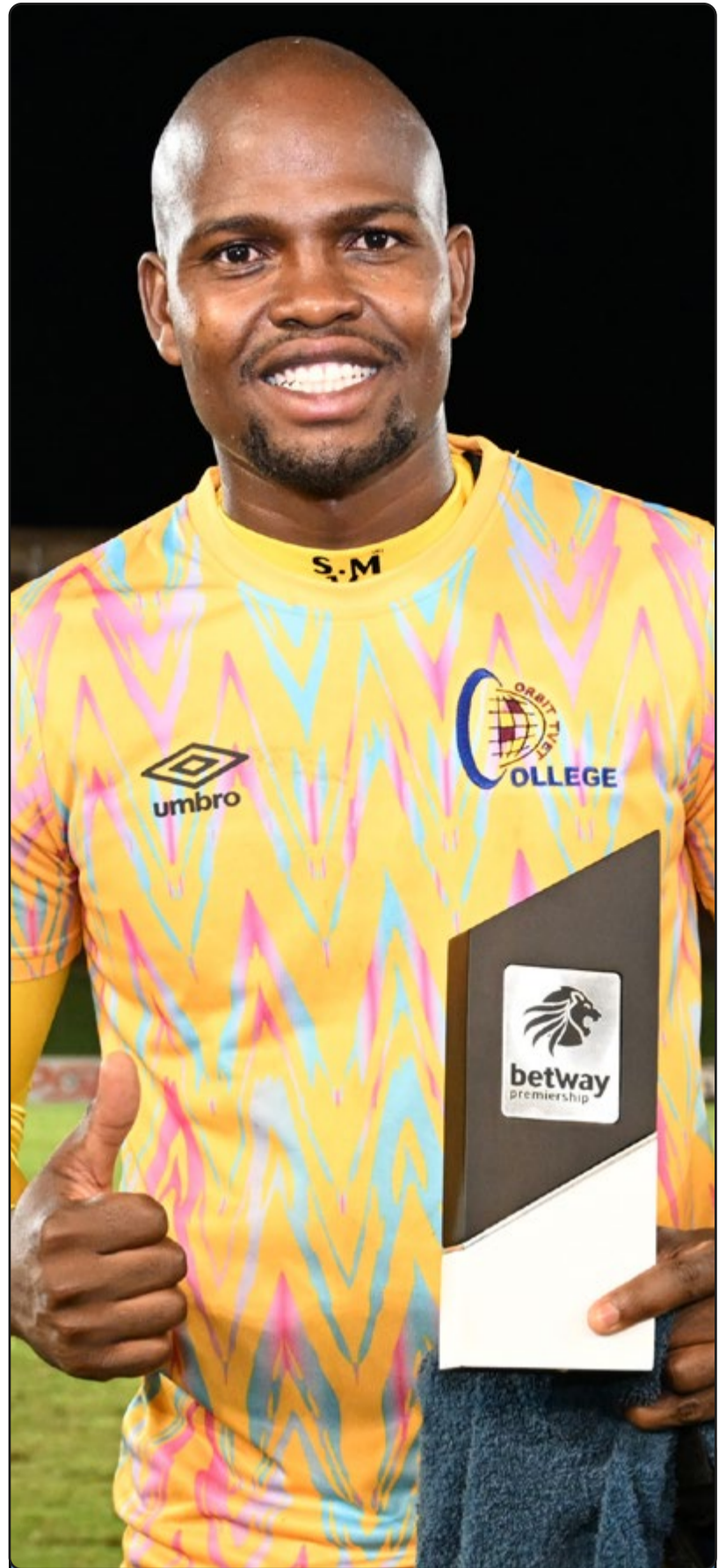
SM: My phone was busy towards the end of the season, but now it's gone quiet. I am still with Orbit, but me as a human being, I think I can go try somewhere else and get opportunities.

LK: Earlier, you mentioned how you are not well. How have the rest of the teammates and coach handled this, especially after that last game in Mbombela, how you lost?

SM: Coaches play such a big role in our lives. He wasn't okay, but he had to console us as players because each and every one of us was not okay. That situation is something else. Coach reminded us that last season, this time we were happy having qualified for the playoffs, and we made it to the Betway Premiership. He encouraged us that it's not the end of the world, and we should be proud that we did promote the team. I think what's more painful about this situation is that the DDC team was doing well; they finished their season in sixth position. We do feel we let the young boys down because if we are not in the league, they can't be there.

LK: For your fellow keeper, Nkomo, to have conceded that way in that game, how does one recover from that? Have you spoken to him?

SM: Nkomo is my brother. I can say he's the one player I have known longer at Orbit. All the players who were at Orbit when I arrived left, and it was just the two of us. We



"I'M NOT OKAY. BEING IN THE TOP FLIGHT FOR ONLY ONE SEASON, IT'S NOT A GOOD THING."

talk about everything, even now, I haven't deserted him, we are still talking. Football fans love you when you are doing well, but there will be others who criticise you, and I know the position he's in. I have been there a lot of times, so we talk, and I do console him. I told him everything is going to be well, we should just keep on fighting.

LK: Thank you so much, and again, commiserations.





THE IDISKI TOP 10... CENTRE MIDFIELDERS

This week, iDiski Times turns its attention to the engine rooms of the Betway Premiership, ranking the 10 best central midfielders of the 2025/26 season.

Often described as the heartbeat of a team, central midfielders are tasked with doing a little bit of everything: winning possession, dictating tempo, launching attacks, providing defensive cover and, increasingly, contributing goals and assists. While strikers may grab the headlines and defenders earn the plaudits for heroic last-ditch interventions, it is often the players in the middle of the park who determine how matches are won and lost.

Our rankings are based on overall performance throughout the campaign, drawing on a combination of statistical

analysis and performance ratings from several leading football analytics providers. We have considered both attacking and defensive contributions, consistency, influence on team performances and overall effectiveness in the role.

To qualify for consideration, players must have featured in more than 55% of their club's league fixtures and played the majority of their matches in the central midfield position.

(*statistics as of 1 June 2026, ratings as per SOFASCORE)

The Top 10:

10 Lindokuhle Zikhali
Richards Bay
6.88 average rating (29 games)

In a Richards Bay side that spent much of the season fighting for every point, Lindokuhle Zikhali became one of the team's quiet constants. He is not the type of midfielder who dominates headlines or fills highlight reels, but football teams are built on players like him. Industrious, disciplined and relentlessly committed to the cause, Zikhali spent the campaign doing much of the unseen work that allows others to shine. His two assists were modest attacking returns, but his value lay elsewhere. Averaging 4.8 ball recoveries and 2.1 tackles per game, he operated as Richards Bay's first line of resistance, repeatedly breaking up opposition attacks before they could gather momentum. There was a rugged honesty to his football throughout the season. Every tackle, interception and recovery carried the urgency of a player determined to keep his team competitive. In a campaign where Richards Bay often had little margin for error, Zikhali's consistency became one of their most dependable assets, and he is an exciting prospect for the future.

9 Jayden Adams
Mamelodi Sundowns
6.88 average rating (23 games)

There is a sense that Jayden Adams is still only scratching the surface of what he can become. The Mamelodi



Sundowns midfielder featured 23 times and grew increasingly influential as the season progressed, forcing his way into prominence during the second half of the campaign with a series of energetic and mature displays. The statistics tell the story of a midfielder constantly involved in the game's key battles. He recovered possession more than three times per game, won nearly half of his duels and showed a willingness to contribute defensively while still looking to move his team forward. His one goal and absence of assists may seem underwhelming at first glance, but numbers rarely capture the confidence with which he carried responsibility in midfield. The blemish was discipline. Two red cards and three yellow cards revealed a player whose competitive fire occasionally burned too hot. Yet that edge is also part of what makes Adams such a fascinating prospect. He plays with conviction, intensity and ambition. Harness those qualities more effectively, and there is every chance he climbs much higher on this list in the seasons ahead.

8 Sphehile Maduna TS Galaxy

6.89 average rating (29 appearances)

Few midfielders in the league balanced defensive responsibility and creative influence quite as effectively as Sphehile Maduna. At TS Galaxy, he became one of the side's most important connectors, linking defence and attack with a maturity that often went unnoticed outside Mpumalanga. Maduna's four assists and 10 big chances created underline his ability to unlock stubborn defences, while his defensive numbers reveal a player equally comfortable rolling up his sleeves when possession was lost. Averaging 4.6 ball recoveries alongside more than a tackle and interception per match, he was constantly involved at both ends of the pitch. What stands out most is his versatility. He could slow the tempo when Galaxy needed control, accelerate attacks when space appeared, or engage in the midfield trenches when matches became physical. His season was not flawless, with disciplinary issues occasionally interrupting his rhythm, but his influence on Galaxy's campaign was undeniable. Maduna quietly established himself as one of the division's most complete central midfielders.

7 Sibongiseni Mthethwa Kaizer Chiefs

6.90 average rating (16 appearances)

Sibongiseni Mthethwa's season was one of perseverance as much as performance. Opportunities were limited at Kaizer Chiefs, with injuries and selection battles restricting him to just 16 appearances, but when called upon, he brought a level of steel and

reliability that few midfielders in the league could match. Nicknamed "Ox" for good reason, Mthethwa remains one of the most physically imposing figures in South African football. He relishes confrontation, thrives in duels and takes pride in doing the difficult work others often avoid. His average of 5.1 duels won per game, combined with strong tackling and ball recovery numbers, illustrates just how disruptive he can be to opposing midfields. There were no spectacular attacking returns to speak of, but that was never his primary function. Mthethwa's role was to protect, compete and provide balance. In a turbulent Chiefs season, his presence often brought a measure of stability whenever he stepped onto the pitch.

6 Grant Margeman Sivelele Football Club

6.93 average rating (24 appearances)

If football matches were won purely through intelligence and positioning, Grant Margeman would be among the league's most valuable players. The Sivelele midfielder enjoyed another quietly effective campaign, using his reading of the game and technical quality to dictate proceedings from deeper areas. Margeman is not a



midfielder who relies on explosive athleticism. Instead, he controls matches through anticipation, awareness and composure. He sees danger early, positions himself cleverly and frequently arrives in the right place before opponents realise where the space is opening. His statistics may not jump off the page, but they reveal a player performing countless small actions that help teams function. Recovering possession, intercepting attacks and winning an impressive 60% of his duels, Margeman provided structure and rhythm in equal measure. He remains one of those midfielders whose influence becomes most obvious when he is absent. For Siwelele, he was the metronome that kept everything ticking over.

5 Lebohang Maboe
Kaizer Chiefs
 6.94 average rating (19 appearances)

There was a time when Lebohang Maboe's career appeared to be drifting into uncertainty, his brightest years seemingly behind him after a cruel run of injuries. This season, however, the midfielder reminded South African football exactly why he was once regarded as one of the country's most complete

operators. Kaizer Chiefs spent much of the campaign searching for the perfect midfield blend. Different combinations were tested, systems evolved and personnel changed, yet the puzzle never seemed entirely solved. Through that uncertainty, Maboe often provided something priceless: reliability. While others rotated around him, the experienced midfielder brought composure, intelligence and balance whenever called upon. His reading of the game remained exceptional, allowing him to anticipate danger, recover possession and knit passages of play together with minimal fuss. He rarely looked rushed and almost never looked overwhelmed. His numbers paint the picture of a midfielder involved in every phase of the game. Averaging 6.2 ball recoveries, 1.9 tackles and 1.5 interceptions per match, while also contributing 1.3 key passes, Maboe blended defensive diligence with attacking awareness. Few players in the league offered such a complete package. Most importantly, he looked like a footballer enjoying himself again. In a season where Chiefs often struggled to establish continuity in midfield, Maboe's experience and consistency became invaluable, serving as a calming presence amid the constant search for answers.

4 Marcelo Allende
Mamelodi Sundowns
 7.04 average rating (29 appearances)

At times, Marcelo Allende seems to play football to a different rhythm from everyone else. The diminutive Chilean is one of those rare midfielders capable of slowing the game down and speeding it up simultaneously, creating order amid chaos with a single touch or turn.

Operating in the star-studded Mamelodi Sundowns midfield, Allende once again showcased the qualities that have made him such an important figure for the Brazilians. His five goals and two assists only scratch the surface of his influence. What truly sets him apart is his ability to manipulate space. He drifts between lines, escapes pressure with deceptive ease and constantly offers teammates passing angles that others simply do not see. The statistics suggest efficiency rather than domination, but football is rarely just about numbers. Allende's greatest gift is his ability to control the emotional temperature of a match. When Sundowns needed patience, he provided it. When they needed incision, he supplied that too. There are more physically imposing midfielders in the league and there are more destructive ones. There may not be a more elegant one. Allende remains the conductor of one of South Africa's most sophisticated footballing orchestras.

3 Thabo Cele
Kaizer Chiefs
 7.07 average rating (17 appearances)



appearances)

Having arrived at Kaizer Chiefs last campaign with a strong pedigree built abroad, this was the year he tried to establish himself. Chiefs spent large parts of the campaign searching for balance in the middle of the park, experimenting with different partnerships and combinations in an attempt to find the right formula. There is a quiet authority to Cele's game. He does not dominate matches through spectacular goals or eye-catching moments, but through control. He positions himself intelligently, protects possession under pressure and constantly makes the right decision at the right time. His presence gives structure to those around him. The statistics underline his contribution, but they do not fully explain it. Cele brought rhythm to Chiefs' midfield. He linked defence and attack, helped manage the tempo of matches and provided the tactical discipline every successful midfield requires. There was a sense that the game slowed down whenever the ball reached his feet. Consistent, composed and technically assured, he emerged as one of the few certainties in an area of the pitch where Chiefs spent much of the season searching for them.

2 Tholente Mbatha **Orlando Pirates**

7.22 average rating (22 appearances)

There are midfielders who play the game, and there are midfielders who impose themselves upon it. Tholente Mbatha belongs firmly in the latter category. The Orlando Pirates star enjoyed another outstanding season, evolving from a promising midfield enforcer into one of the most influential players in the country. Every week, he seemed to leave his fingerprints all over matches, whether through a crunching tackle, a timely interception or a driving run through midfield. Mbatha's numbers reflect the relentless nature of his game. Averaging 5.4 ball recoveries and two tackles per match, he was a constant source of disruption for opponents. Yet to describe him purely as a defensive midfielder would be doing him a disservice. His passing range continues to improve, while his ability to break lines and carry the ball forward adds another dimension to his game. In a Pirates side that finally climbed back to the summit of South African football, he was one of the driving forces behind their success.

1 Teboho Mokoena **Mamelodi Sundowns**

7.25 average rating (23 appearances)

South African football has become accustomed to excellence from the Mamelodi Sundowns and Bafana Bafana midfielder, yet it remains remarkable how consistently he continues to deliver. Season after

season, Mokoena sets the standard for what a modern central midfielder should be. His influence stretches across every area of the pitch. He scores goals, creates opportunities, wins possession, dictates tempo and provides leadership. There are few players in the country capable of affecting a match in as many different ways. His four goals and two assists were important contributions, but they represent only a fraction of his overall impact. What separates Mokoena from many of his peers is his authority. He plays with the confidence of a footballer who understands exactly how good he is, yet never appears consumed by individual glory. Whether launching attacks with his passing range, shielding the defence or producing moments of brilliance from set-pieces, he consistently delivers when his team needs him. In a league packed with talented midfielders, Mokoena remains the benchmark. Reliable without being predictable, influential without being flashy and elite without needing constant recognition, he continues to be the complete package. For another season, no central midfielder in South Africa performed at a higher level.



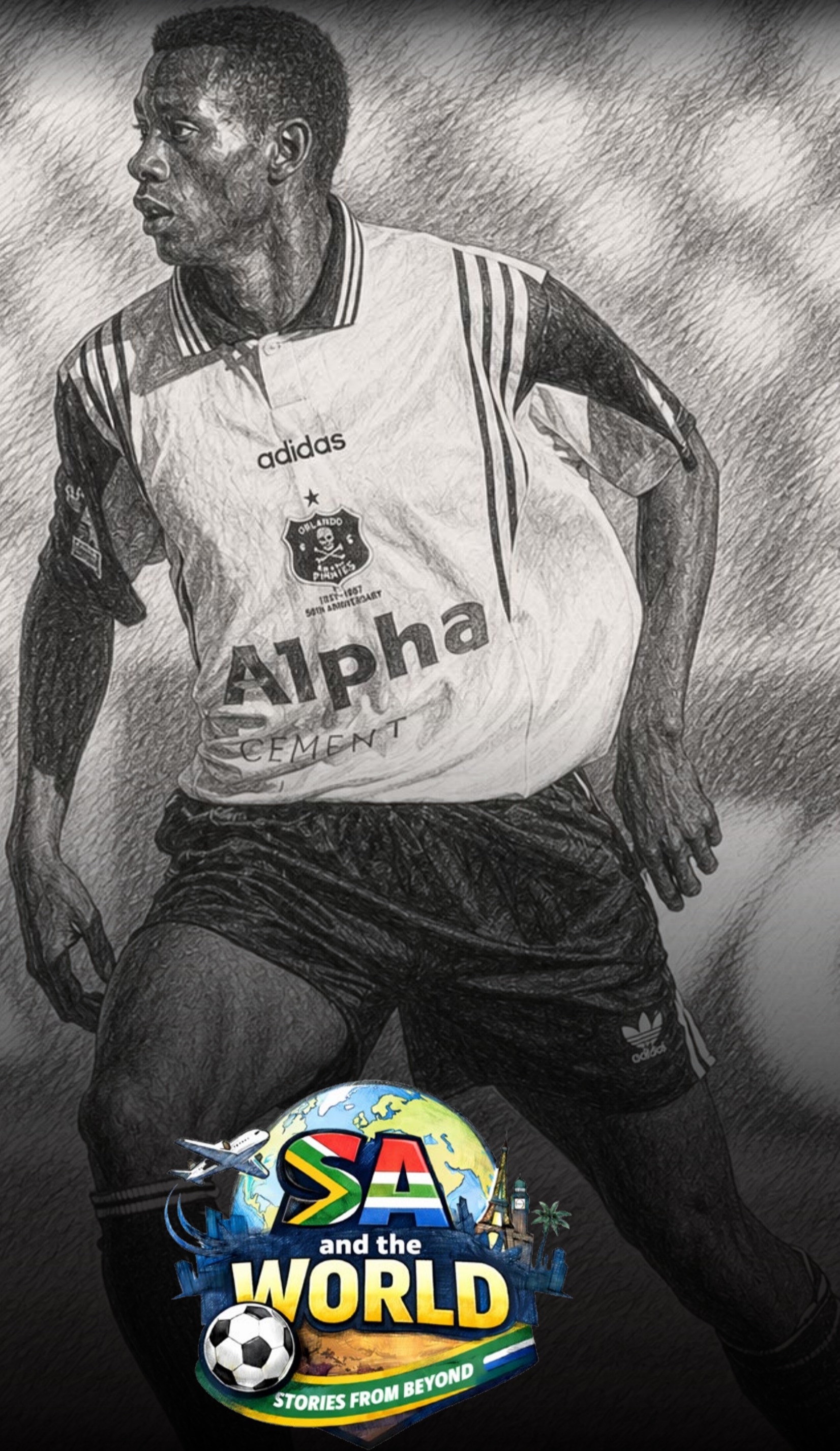


**ACE OF THE WEEK:
TEBOHO MOKOENA**

This week's iDiski Times Ace of the Week can only be Bafana Bafana star Teboho Mokoena, who scored South Africa's first goal of the 2026 FIFA World Cup and, so far, the nation's only strike at the tournament. But this recognition is about far more than his

equalising goal in Bafana's 1-1 draw with Czechia. Mokoena produced a performance full of heart, leadership and determination, embodying the spirit of a team competing on football's biggest stage. He had already won over many South Africans before a ball had even been kicked, with tears streaming down his face during the national anthem, a powerful reminder of what representing the country means to him. That emotion carried into his performance, as his relentless work rate and commitment helped inspire Bafana to a hard-earned first point at the global showpiece. Unfortunately, Mokoena will miss the clash against South Korea after picking up a suspension. However, should Bafana overcome the Asian side and reach the knockout stages, South Africans will be hoping their midfield talisman gets another opportunity to showcase his quality to the world.





The World & South Africa

We continue our 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.

THE MIDNIGHT EXPRESS

By Rob Delpont

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Mkhalele surname already carried weight in South African football circles. Long before Helman Mkhalele became a household name, his older brothers, Sydney and Lazarus, had earned admiration for their footballing exploits.

Growing up in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, football was woven into the fabric of the family, and young Helman and his twin, Nkosiyabo, spent much of their childhood watching their older brothers with a mixture of pride and wonder, dreaming that one day they might carve out paths of their own.

That opportunity arrived sooner than Helman could have imagined. While Nkosiyabo would stay in KwaZulu-Natal, playing at one time for African Wanderers, a young Helman heard that Giant Blackpool were hosting trials and set out to test himself. Around the same time, word reached him that Jomo Cosmos were also holding trials. It proved to be one of those seemingly small moments that changes a life forever.

The trials were being overseen by Jomo Sono himself. South African football history is filled with stories that somehow circle back to Sono, the legendary talent scout, chairman, coach and visionary whose eye for a footballer bordered on the supernatural. Time and again, he spotted players before the rest of the country knew their names. Helman Mkhalele would become another jewel in that remarkable collection.

The moment Sono saw him play, he was convinced. The teenage winger was quickly brought into the Cosmos setup, and from there, the journey accelerated. Blessed with extraordinary pace, confidence on the ball and an attacking instinct that defenders struggled to contain, Mkhalele wasted little time establishing himself in the first team under coach Roy Matthews.

Yet football rarely follows a straight line. Despite boasting talented players, Cosmos endured a difficult period and, in 1993, suffered relegation for the first time in the club's history. For many players, it would have been a devastating setback. Mkhalele, loyal to the club that had given him his opportunity, intended to stay and help restore Cosmos to the top flight.

But Sono had different ideas. Recognising both the player's potential and the opportunity in front of him, he told Mkhalele he would not stand in his way if a bigger club came calling.

Before long, Orlando Pirates came knocking. The move would transform his career. At Pirates, Mkhalele arrived at a time when South African football was awakening from decades of international isolation. The game was entering a new era, and the Buccaneers were one of the clubs helping lead the charge.

Silverware followed. Success followed. And so did continental glory.

In 1995, Pirates conquered Africa, winning the African Cup of Champions Clubs (CAF Champions League) and cementing their place among the continent's elite. Mkhalele's electrifying speed on the wing became one of the team's most dangerous weapons, and his reputation continued to grow with every passing season.

At the same time, another dream was beginning to take shape. Bafana Bafana were building momentum under Clive Barker, and a generation of players was preparing

to write itself into South African sporting folklore.

When South Africa hosted the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations, Mkhalele was right at the heart of the story. The tournament remains one of the greatest moments in the country's football history. A nation united behind a team that played with courage, freedom and belief. As the celebrations erupted around Soccer City following the final, Mkhalele stood among the heroes who had delivered South Africa's first AFCON title.

It was the beginning of Bafana's first golden age. By then, he had already earned one of the most memorable nicknames in South African football: "Midnight Express".

The nickname perfectly captured his game. Defenders would often seem comfortable until suddenly Mkhalele accelerated into space, disappearing down the flank like a train hurtling through the darkness. His explosive pace and dark complexion made the name stick immediately, and it followed him throughout his career.

Ironically, the next stop on his football journey would be Turkey, the very setting of the famous 1978 film that shared the same title.

In 1997, Mkhalele took the bold decision to move abroad, signing for Kayserispor. At the time, the club were competing in Turkey's second division and pushing hard for promotion. Leaving South Africa was not easy. The language was unfamiliar, the culture was different, and even everyday routines became new challenges. Like many African footballers venturing abroad for the first time, adaptation required patience and resilience.

But once he stepped onto the pitch, football became the universal language. Mkhalele settled quickly and immediately made an impact. His pace terrified defenders, while his direct style offered something different to what many Turkish teams were accustomed to facing. Promotion ultimately proved agonisingly out of reach, but his performances had already attracted attention from clubs higher up the football ladder.



After scoring six goals in 23 appearances, he earned a move to top-flight side MKE Ankaragücü.

It would become the defining chapter of his club career abroad. For several years, Ankara became home. While his statistics never fully reflected his influence, supporters quickly fell in love with him. Mkhalele was the type of winger whose contribution could not always be measured in goals. He stretched defences, created opportunities, opened spaces and constantly forced opponents onto the back foot. His speed remained his trademark.

There were moments when defenders appeared to have him under control, only for him to explode past them in a blur of yellow and blue, leaving entire back lines scrambling in pursuit.

The supporters adored him. The media respected him. And the club embraced him as one of their own.

Meanwhile, his international career continued to flourish. In 1998, Mkhalele became part of another landmark moment in South African football history when Bafana Bafana qualified for their first-ever FIFA World Cup. For players who had grown up during apartheid, denied the possibility of competing on football's biggest stage, it was a moment of immense significance.

Mkhalele was among the pioneers. The players who carried South Africa's flag onto the global stage for the first time. He remained a regular fixture in the national team for years thereafter, eventually earning 66 caps and scoring eight goals. His final appearance came in 2001, bringing to a close a distinguished international career that spanned one of the most exciting periods in South African football history.

That same year also marked the end of his time at Ankaragücü. His Turkish adventure, however, was far from over. Mkhalele joined newly promoted Göztepe, where he spent two productive seasons and made more than 50 appearances. He later moved to Malatyaspor, adding another two years to a remarkable spell in Turkey that lasted the better part of a decade.

Throughout those years, South African footballers developed an excellent reputation in the country. Players such as Steve Komphela, Fani Madida, Ace Khuse, Shoes Moshoeu and Mkhalele himself became respected ambassadors for South African football. They were admired not only for their talent but also for their professionalism, humility and work ethic. Turkish supporters appreciated them. Turkish journalists praised them. And in many ways, they helped open doors for future generations of South African players

considering careers abroad.

Eventually, after years away from home, Mkhalele returned to South Africa in 2005. Fittingly, the final chapter of his playing career took him back to where so much had begun: Jomo Cosmos.

Three years later, he brought the curtain down on a playing career that had taken him from Newcastle to Johannesburg, from African glory to World Cups, and from the PSL to the passionate stadiums of Turkey.

Retirement, however, did not mean stepping away from the game. Far from it. Mkhalele pursued education and qualified as a teacher, demonstrating the same discipline off the field that had characterised his playing career. Yet football remained close to his heart, and it wasn't long before he found himself back within the national structures.

He worked as a scout. He worked with young players. He served at both the U17 and U20 levels, helping identify and develop the next generation of South African talent. I would often bump into him watching games at every level. We shared birthdays "together" - both born on October 20, celebrations were often on the side of a soccer pitch.

Eventually, he succeeded Thabo Senong as head coach of the national U20 side, continuing his contribution to the game from the touchline rather than the wing. His progression through the coaching ranks led him to Bafana Bafana, where he joined Molefi Ntseki's technical team as an assistant coach. When Hugo Broos arrived in 2021, Mkhalele remained part of the setup, providing continuity, local knowledge and invaluable experience.

In many ways, it felt like the perfect role for a man whose entire football life had been built around service to the game. From the young boy in Newcastle watching his older brothers play, to an AFCON champion, World Cup pioneer, respected professional abroad and national team coach, Mkhalele's journey has spanned virtually every era of modern South African football.

And perhaps that is why his story resonates so deeply. The Midnight Express may no longer be racing down the wing, leaving defenders in his wake, but his influence continues to travel through South African football, carried forward in every player he mentors, every lesson he passes on and every generation he helps shape.

For more than three decades, Helman Mkhalele has been part of the fabric of the South African game. Few can say they have served it quite so faithfully.



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