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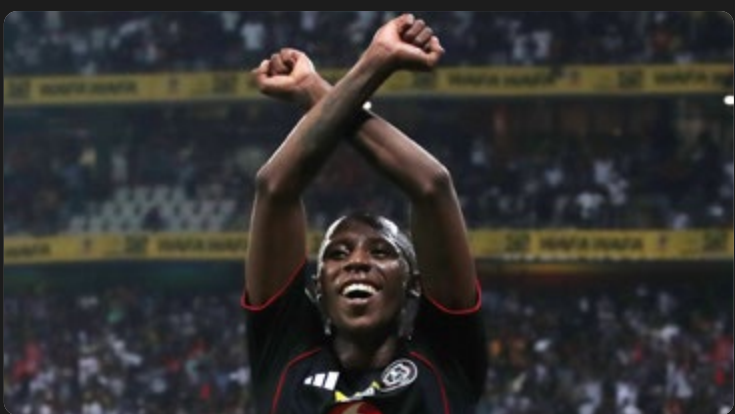
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SUNDOWNS IN TALKS OVER NEW SIBIYA DEAL

Mamelodi Sundowns have engaged promising defender Thato Sibiya about a potential new contract as he enters his final year. Sibiya, 20, made four first-team appearances last season and is aiming for more senior minutes in the upcoming season amidst major competition in the left-back role. Aubrey Modiba, Fawaaz Basadien, and Divine Lunga are all vying for a role with Sibiya, while Asekho Tiwani remains on the books after his loan at Stellenbosch FC.



LAKAY SET FOR LIBYA SWITCH

After four-and-a-half years in Egyptian football, Bafana Bafana forward Fagrie Lakay is set for a new chapter in Libya. The 29-year-old is on the verge of joining Libyan giants Al Ahli Tripoli after completing a successful spell in Egypt that began with his move from Cape Town City to Pyramids in 2022. Lakay spent two-and-a-half seasons with Pyramids, helping lay the foundations for the side that went on to lift the 2025 CAF Champions League, before joining Ceramica Cleopatra for the past two campaigns. Across his time in the Egyptian Premier League, the South African striker made 92 appearances and scored 26 goals, establishing himself as one of the country's most consistent foreign forwards.



BROOKS MULLING OVER PSL RETURN?

After parting ways with Panserraikos following their relegation from the Greek Super League, South African international midfielder Ethan Brooks is understood to be weighing up a return to the Betway Premiership. The former TS Galaxy and AmaZulu midfielder made 18 appearances and scored once during his spell in Greece and is now assessing his next move. While Brooks remains open to opportunities both locally and abroad, regular first-team football is believed to be his priority as the 25-year-old looks to reignite his career and force his way back into the Bafana Bafana conversation.



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LILEPO EXIT IMMINENT?

Glody Lilepo's time at Kaizer Chiefs appears to be drawing to a close, with all indications pointing towards the DR Congo international leaving Naturena before the close of the transfer window, as interest in the attacker continues to gather momentum from across North Africa.

iDiski Times understands that Lilepo has no shortage of admirers, with clubs in both Libya and Morocco actively pursuing his signature as they look to strengthen ahead of the new campaign. While no deal has yet been finalised, negotiations are believed to be progressing, and the coming weeks are expected to determine where the 28-year-old continues his career.

Among the clubs showing the strongest interest are Libyan heavyweights Al Ahli Benghazi and Al Nasr Benghazi, although the race is far from over. Moroccan giants Raja Casablanca and Wydad Athletic Club have also entered the conversation, setting up what could become one of the more intriguing transfer battles involving a Betway Premiership player this window.

Lilepo arrived at Chiefs in January 2025 after spells with Valenciennes in France, Sudanese giants Al Hilal and DR Congo powerhouse AS Vita Club, joining with a reputation as a versatile and experienced attacker capable of playing anywhere across the front line. While his time in Soweto produced moments that hinted at his quality, it never quite developed into the consistent success many had anticipated.

Across all competitions, Lilepo featured 53 times for Amakhosi, scoring 13 goals

and providing five assists, contributing in important moments but ultimately finding himself among several foreign players whose futures have come under scrutiny as Chiefs reshape their squad ahead of the 2026/27 season.

One storyline worth watching is the involvement of Raja. The Casablanca giants are now coached by Nasreddine Nabi, the very man who brought Lilepo to Naturena during his tenure at Chiefs. Having worked together previously, Nabi knows exactly what the Congolese international can offer, and a reunion in Morocco could prove an attractive option for both player and coach if Raja decides to formalise their interest.

However, Libya remains a very realistic destination. Both Al Ahli Benghazi and Al Nasr Benghazi have been increasingly active in the transfer market, targeting established African internationals as they look to strengthen their squads, and Lilepo's experience in CAF competition and proven pedigree could make him an ideal addition.

While Chiefs are yet to officially confirm the player's departure, all signs suggest Lilepo's chapter at Naturena is entering its final pages. With his notable absence during the club's pre-season in Europe, multiple clubs circling and strong interest from two of North Africa's biggest football markets, the next move of the Congolese forward could be settled sooner rather than later, bringing an end to an 18-month spell that promised much and delivered flashes of the quality that first made him such a sought-after attacker.

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‘SOUTH AFRICAN COACHES DOMINATE MOTHER AFRICA’

Last week saw two more South African coaches employed by African giants, as Rulani Mokwena was announced by Pyramids FC, and Eric Tinkler was announced in Ghana by Asante Kotoko.

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.

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‘These Coaches Are Further Cementing Our Country’s Reputation’

“In the last 10 years, South African clubs appeared in the finals or semi-finals of CAF competitions on numerous occasions.

“Mamelodi Sundowns won the Champions League twice in the last 10 years.

“Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs reached the latter stages of the Champions League recently.

“Marumo Gallants, Stellenbosch FC and SuperSport United all reached the latter stages of the CAF Confederations Cup.

“These achievements by South African clubs cemented our reputation as a go-to nation for coaches by other African countries.

“Coach Pitso Mosimane won the CAF Champions League with Al Ahly. Bafana Bafana reached the semi-finals of the AFCON.

“The South African reputation and football currency are at an all-time high.

“Congratulations to coach Eric Tinkler, who was announced in Ghana by Asante Kotoko. Well done to Coach Rulani Mokwena for his employment in Egypt at Pyramids. Manqoba Mngqithi has joined Steve Barker in Tanzania. Fadlu Davids was at a big club in Morocco, Raja Casablanca.

“These coaches are further cementing our country’s reputation as a leader on the continent.”



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ERTUGRAL ASSESSES CHIEFS CHALLENGES FOR DA CRUZ

Another season, another coach and a couple of new players for Kaizer Chiefs! What is new as Amakhosi continue their seemingly futile quest to reclaim the elusive glory days that once made them the country's most successful and most revered club? Nothing really, for it all seems like a case of rewinding a movie we have all seen before.

But what are the chances Fernando Da Cruz will succeed where numerous of his predecessors failed and bring the coveted league title to Naturena? The Frenchman talks a good game, saying – as he did prior to their pre-season camp in Europe – that ‘we will try our best to win silverware, and we need our supporters to help us make that happen.’

Of course, he would say that. Why would

he say otherwise when he has been heralded as the man to deliver local football's Holy Grail to Amakhosi for the first time in 12 seasons?

That he can is a possibility, after all, football is fickle at the top, and nothing is impossible. And given he previously lifted the league title out in the tough Moroccan Botola Pro with AS FAR Rabat, there is something to be said for the 53-year-old.

But for Da Cruz to win Chiefs the league title, he has some countless hurdles to jump over – massive challenges to overcome, the toughest of which is the stiff competition in the form of superior sides in title holders Orlando Pirates and the just deposed serial champions Mamelodi Sundowns.

Granted, Chiefs had a markedly improved performance in the recent campaign, which saw them finishing third with 54 points, the most they've garnered since 2019/20 under Ernst Middendorp. It is for that reason that there are those who argue that Amakhosi should have kept faith with the duo of co-coaches Ben Khalili Youssef and Cedric Kaze instead of starting afresh with a new man.

Are they right? Would Chiefs have been better served by opting for continuity? Did they make a mistake by entrusting their fortunes to the Frenchman more renowned for his work as a technical director than as a coach?

In this article, iDiski Times senior soccer writer **MATSHELANE MAMABOLO** speaks to former Chiefs coach **MUHSIN ERTUGRAL** about the challenges Da Cruz will face and how he can overcome them.

Matshelane Mamabolo: Coach, thank you for making time. Your former club, Kaizer Chiefs, have a new coach and there's some excitement among their fans that he could be the man to take them back to the glory days. What kind of challenges does a coach face when starting at a new club such as Amakhosi, especially given the fact that they've been changing coaches as regularly as they have?

Muhsin Ertugral: Ja, he has a bit of a challenge because he's coming into a big club that has a pedigree, although in recent years Chiefs have been chopping and changing coaches and they've not had the success they are usually used to. So, as a coach, you can come in and set up a system and the tactical issues in two months, when you have a pre-season. But what's the culture? When you look at Sundowns, they have a playing culture. When you look at Pirates now, they too have a playing culture. It is because there's

“I WOULD SAY, AFTER ABOUT NINE OR TEN GAMES, CAN YOU BE ABLE TO SEE WHERE THE TEAM IS HEADING TO, ACTUALLY. ONLY THEN CAN YOU SAY, ‘HERE ARE THE THINGS I NEED TO FIX.’”





been some continuity at those clubs. But when you look at Chiefs, what is Chiefs playing? Every time you're doing a reset, it's always a bit of a challenge. For me, it was very difficult when I came in the first six months to understand the players, to understand the surroundings, and to understand the teams. So, looking at this season for Chiefs and their new coach, the big challenge is how will they overtake Pirates and Sundowns, who have been very solid. And you also have Arthur Zwane's AmaZulu, who I think will be a team to watch. Chiefs, on the other hand, are starting from scratch under a new coach, and it is not going to be enough that they have beefed up their squad. I always say that it's like an orchestra. Everybody can play the notes, but there's the synergy, the understanding of each other. And you look to today's football in the systems and tactical issues, the relations of players on the field. That has to be gained over time and now with a new coach and new players, finding the consensus will take time.

MM: But coach, as you know only too well, the Chiefs fans are always expectant. And the team finishing third last season would have raised their hopes for this coming campaign. How much extra pressure does that then put on the new coach?

ME: It does, obviously. Chiefs couldn't have done better than what they did last season because Pirates and Sundowns were superior to them. So, third place was actually a fair position for Chiefs. But now

“WHEN YOU LOOK AT SUNDOWNS, THEY HAVE A PLAYING CULTURE. WHEN YOU LOOK AT PIRATES NOW, THEY TOO HAVE A PLAYING CULTURE. IT IS BECAUSE THERE'S BEEN SOME CONTINUITY AT THOSE CLUBS.”

that there's a new coach, what is next? Is that second place? Is that challenging for the league title? Is it winning a cup? So, these are the questions that have to be asked. Although the reality is that at Chiefs you don't need to find words for it. When you start the season at Chiefs, you have to play for the title.

MM: Even though they've not won anything but the one Nedbank Cup in such a long time? And there's the fact that they had an impressive run in Africa, where they got close to getting into the knockout stage. Is it realistic to expect them to do something similar, if not better?

ME: I think it is a bit too early to say anything about that. You need to wait to see how the team plays under the new coach. I would say, after about nine or 10 games, can you be able to see where the team is heading to, actually. Only then can you say, 'Here are the things I need to fix'.





But in the end, there is no waiting because everybody wants to win against Chiefs. That is a given culture in South African football. So, the pressure is obviously there, but I think the management needs to decide to give the coach at least two or three years to build a team that is so secure that every weekend they can call up a certain degree of percentage to be in the challenge. For the Confederation Cup, I would say wait a bit. As I said, eight, nine, 10 games, then you can see how the players are stable as a team and can challenge.

MM: When you first came to Chiefs, you had guys who understood the club’s culture. Lately, coaches have their own people, and Da Cruz has brought his assistant from Egypt. But he will have Dillon Sheppard as part of his technical team. How is that dynamic going to help? Is Dillon somebody who can help this new coach understand what Chiefs are all about?

ME: Yeah, it’s a very interesting, very good question. Yes, you need to have your people, to have a supporting team that is around you, the supporting team. It’s important that the coach has people who understand his ways of doing things because he doesn’t lose time. But from the other side, you need people who understand South African football, the cultural diversity. I mean, I learnt that the players born in Johannesburg and those born in Cape Town, they’re completely different personalities. So that alone is a challenge for a coach in itself. I call them multicultural challenges. So it helped me a lot that the chairman [Kaizer Motaung] was always involved with me and provided direction, not tactical, but in a cultural way, and guided me to understand the cultural diversity, the backgrounds of the players. And still, I was sometimes like an elephant in a porcelain shop. In the end, you want to bring something in, but there are also some obstacles that you have to tackle. I had Doctor Khumalo, and I had Farouk Khan, who understood the culture, and even Elsa Storm – all South Africans. So that ensured I didn’t lose time, let me say, on the emotional matters, if you understand what I’m saying. I could concentrate on football, and they could handle my background when I was too

“THE BIG CHALLENGE IS HOW WILL THEY OVERTAKE PIRATES AND SUNDOWNS, WHO HAVE BEEN VERY SOLID. AND YOU ALSO HAVE ARTHUR ZWANE’S AMAZULU, WHO I THINK WILL BE A TEAM TO WATCH.”

harsh, or when I went a bit overboard, or when I was too much or even too little. So they can manage my back much better. The important part is that I could concentrate on the decisions that I’m taking. Obviously, Dillon is a great person. He’s a fantastic human being. I had the privilege to work with him, and I think he’s very good to understand because he also played at the highest level and understands how to bring things over. The big question is how much they [Cruz and his crew] are going to listen to.

MM: Sure. Coach, the squad itself there’s been a few departures of players who were not really regulars and a couple of new additions. Do Chiefs have the kind of squad that can be competitive? Do they need to add to it?

ME: I’ve seen that they added a few, but not really big ones. You can never know what a team really needs until the coach has taken over. Look, no coach in the world has a magic stick. It doesn’t matter who that is. What is important is for a coach to quickly understand what it’s all about to work with South African players. It’s all about dealing with the expectations. His challenge will also be how much he can handle those stress-related issues when the crisis is coming up. Is he going to help the team in the moment when things are not going very well? When things are good, everything is rosy. So the point is, when you have one draw and two losses in a row, the next one you need to win. And your decision sometimes is how much you are in yourself to make healthy decisions. Let’s see how it goes. It’s Kaizer Chiefs.

MM: Thank you, coach.



ELLIS ON BANYANA PREPS FOR WAFCON, KGATLANA & DONNELLY RETURN

The 2026 Women's Africa Cup of Nations (WAFCON) tournament will finally kick off on Sunday, 26 July, between host nation Morocco and Kenya at the Moulay El Hassan Stadium in Rabat. The tournament was initially set to be played from March to April this year, but was moved due to what the governing body CAF said were "unforeseen circumstances". At stake for 16 teams participating in the event are four tickets to the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup in Brazil – and, of course, bragging rights. 2022 champions South Africa will open their account in Group B against East African side Tanzania as they bid to make it a hat-trick of successive World Cup appearances, after their maiden tournament in France 2019 and historic outing in Australia/New Zealand in 2023, where they qualified for the second round. Banyana Banyana, who will be based in Casablanca for the group stages, will also face Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso in their pool. iDiski Times journalist LETHABO KGANYAGO caught up with Banyana head coach Dr DESIREE ELLIS to speak about preparations for the tournament, the final 26-member squad she announced last Friday and the importance of meeting the big target of going to the World Cup.

Lethabo Kganyago: Coach, we appreciate your time. We understand that you have landed safely in Morocco. How was the trip?

Desiree Ellis: The trip was long but reasonably okay.

LK: That's alright, coach, and let's get into it; let's look at the final squad. I think obviously a lot of people are wondering about Robyn Moodaly-Salgado's return. Is she in a good space now for her to be included in the team?

DE: Yes, she is. People are saying she retired, but she actually did not retire. If you remember, she took a step away due to her mental health, and yes, she is in a good space. I don't want to go into too much detail on that because it's not my place, you know what I mean? But she is in a good space.

LK: Understood, coach, but you must have been pleased with her performance domestically because she continued to play in the league?

DE: Look, Robyn has been excellent in the league. We all saw her qualities during the 2022 WAFCON. I think it was herself; it was Amo [Amogelang Motau], it was Bongeka [Gamede], Nomvula [Kgoale], a few others who were not regulars, but they came on, and they did the work, and she's really been good in the league.

LK: And to have Thembi Kgatlana back for this very important WAFCON as well, how important is it that you have her experience looking at what's at stake at this WAFCON?



“PEOPLE ARE SAYING [ROBYN] RETIRED, BUT SHE ACTUALLY DID NOT RETIRE. IF YOU REMEMBER, SHE TOOK A STEP AWAY DUE TO HER MENTAL HEALTH, AND YES, SHE IS IN A GOOD SPACE.”

DE: Experience is important. Remember last year we had a Fifi [Refiloe Jane] that had just come back from injury. We had a Hildah [Magaia] that had just come back from injury. We also had a Bongeka who picked up an injury in the tournament and also played very little. So it's great to have all of them back from injury. Ronnel [Donnelly] is also back from injury, a long-term injury. We are always looking at players that have been in the national team that have come back from injury. We've always looked at them. Wendy [Shongwe] came back, we had a look at her because we want to make sure of where they are and how we can help them. So yeah, really great to have all those players back, not back from injury, but back fully fit for this very big WAFCON. We all know it's not just a normal WAFCON; it's a World Cup qualifying tournament, and that's what makes it so huge.

LK: Coach, you also have an 18-year-old in the squad. I'm sure that some people got introduced to Zoe October at the COSAFA Cup this year. To have her be part of this camp as well is this also a sign to say you are not just looking at the tournament, but building for the future?

DE: Remember in 2022 we had [Nthabiseng] Majiya that just turned 18 in June of that year, before we went to WAFCON. We actually have seven players, if I'm not mistaken, under the age of 24. So you know we've always done that and always brought them in, and the nicest thing about those players

is none of them are completely new. A lot of them have caps through COSAFA and through other international matches. So it's exciting; we're always looking at bringing in one or two young players. As I said, Majiya was new the last time she came into the national team, but Zoe has played a couple of international matches also at COSAFA and also played a couple of league matches. And we all know what Zoe's capable of, but we have to tread carefully with Zoe, a young new player. You have to make sure that you really help her to develop and not throw her under the bus, like they say, but manage everything, manage the noise around her and manage everything around her because that's going to be really important.



“IT’S A WORLD CUP QUALIFYING TOURNAMENT, AND THAT’S WHAT MAKES IT SO HUGE.”

LK: Coach, you’ve had high-profile friendlies, and the league has not played so many games. Does that worry you, maybe for the majority of the girls, or do you feel like there’s been enough preparation?

DE: Look, we worked a lot behind the scenes over the last couple of weeks to get us to a certain level. A lot of work has been done behind the scenes: five league matches, four friendlies, which we would not have had if the WAFCON were in March. So we are really happy for that. Players that have come back – Ronnell probably would not have been there because she was still on the injury list, and a few others since the WAFCON that we did not play for various reasons, picking up niggles here and there, so I think it’s a blessing in disguise that the WAFCON was postponed. It was a disappointment because we had planned and prepared, but you know, there’s always a silver lining in everything. There’s always a reason for everything.

LK: Coach, a big target, I’m sure that your first target is to qualify for the World Cup, and then you look, there are 16 teams this time around, does this make the qualification process that much tougher?

DE: It is tough, it was tough, and it’s continuing to get tougher because a lot of countries are putting in a lot of investment. A lot of countries have already been in Morocco because it’s a World Cup qualifying tournament, so you cannot take anything for granted. You saw at the last WAFCON how teams have stepped up, and I anticipate seeing teams to step up again. If you saw the likes of Ivory Coast were so unlucky; lost on a penalty shoot-out. Cameroon and Mali came in, you know, those countries were added. It just shows how tough it was qualifying. I mean, our game against the Congo, both games were very tight, and if we look at all around, the games were tight for the last leg of qualifiers.

LK: How important is it that Banyana qualifies for a third successive World Cup?

DE: Oh, that would be immense. You know, we always talk about sponsors. A lot more sponsors have come on board for women’s football, and we’re hoping that through our qualification, when it happens, we get more sponsors on board. We hope for more sponsors on board, but we’re also hoping for players to be scouted to bigger and better clubs around the world. I think that’s what going to a World Cup means. You know, going to a World Cup will elevate our game. Hopefully, we can get a sponsor for a professional league, all of those things. So, going to the World Cup will really push that to that level. And I said when we won the WAFCON in 2022 that it is going to change things, and hopefully, going to a third successive World Cup will also change things.

LK: Last question, coach. In the first game against Tanzania, we know that they arrived in Morocco a little earlier than Banyana. You have a week to prepare for that opening game. How big is it to start on a good note, also considering Banyana’s history with this team?

DE: Very big because it will set the tone for this tournament. And now, because there’s 16 teams, only the top two qualify [out of the group]; there’s no best third place. So you’ve got to make sure that you get a good result in that first game, and then manage the rest of the group matches and how to get out of the group stages. But our games against Tanzania have always been either very tight or we’ve won by a small margin. We beat them 3-0 away from home and won 1-0 at home in Olympic qualifiers and then drew 1-1 at last year’s WAFCON. But you cannot underestimate a team.

LK: Thank you so much for your time, Coach, and all the best to you and the girls at the tournament.

“WE ARE SAD THAT WE ARE LOSING A PLAYER OF THIS CALIBRE, BUT WE ARE ALSO HAPPY FOR HIS GROWTH AS A FOOTBALL PLAYER.”

WHY PIRATES SHOULD NOT TRY TO ‘REPLACE’ RELE

By Matshelane Mamabolo

The inevitable has finally happened.

After three seasons of dazzling defenders, carrying Orlando Pirates’ creative burden and establishing himself as one of South Africa’s brightest exports, Relebohile Mofokeng has left for Belgium, where he now plays for defending Belgian Cup champions Royale Union Saint-Gilloise.

For Pirates supporters, it is a bittersweet moment. They are losing the player who lit up the Premier Soccer League (PSL) with his fearless dribbling, imagination and ability to produce something out of nothing. But at the same time, they are watching one of their own fulfil the dream of testing himself in Europe.

That, says Buccaneers legend Teboho Moloi, is exactly how the departure should be viewed.

“It is two sides of the coin,” Moloi says. “We are sad that we are losing a player of this calibre, but we are also happy for his growth as a football player. He needs to go and compete at the highest level. But, yes, to fill his boots is going to be a challenge for any youngster because of what he has done with his teammates.”

The temptation, naturally, will be to ask one question: Who replaces Relebohile Mofokeng?

Moloi believes that would be asking the wrong question.

“There must not be a player who arrives with the tag that he is replacing Rele,” he says. “That would not be fair. It must simply be another player who comes in and grows.”

It is a sentiment rooted not merely in football philosophy but in Pirates’ history.

For more than five decades, the club has repeatedly watched iconic figures leave, retire or move on. Every generation has feared the worst. Every generation has eventually discovered another hero.

Moloi’s own family lived through the first great transition.

When his father, the legendary Chippa Moloi, retired after Pirates’ celebrated 1973 “Clean Sweep” side, supporters wondered how the club would survive without one of its defining figures.

It did.

“It wasn’t about finding a replacement for my dad,” Moloi recalls. “People missed him, of course they did, but Pirates continued with the brand of football they had built. That entertaining style, winning trophies, that identity remained.”

That pattern has repeated itself



“THERE MUST NOT BE A PLAYER WHO ARRIVES WITH THE TAG THAT HE IS REPLACING RELE; THAT WOULD NOT BE FAIR.”

throughout the club’s history.

Ephraim ‘Jomo’ Sono emerged as the next superstar before departing for the United States, with another star Webster ‘City Late’ Lichaba, alongside him. The late Nick ‘Bazooka’ Seshweni carried the club through turbulent years when financial instability often overshadowed individual brilliance. There was also the now dearly departed Ernest ‘Botsotso’ Makhanya, who carried the torch of a Pirates team struggling to shine as Kaizer Chiefs dominated in the 80s.

Then came Irvin Khoza’s era at the turn of the decade in 1991, during which The Chairman deliberately shifted the focus from one superstar to a collection of elite players capable of carrying one another.

Moloi remembers that early period vividly as Khoza rebuilt Pirates, recruiting the likes of already established superstar Marks Maponyane along with a myriad of players from the Jomo Cosmos team that was relegated in 1993. Mark Fish, Helman Mkhalele, Innocent Mncwango. All of them stars who joined the likes of Moloi and Makhanya to form a Galacticos of sorts who won the domestic championship in 1994, for the first time since 1976.

Jerry Sikhosana joined the following year and earned himself legendary status with that goal in Abidjan as Pirates became African champions.

Years later, there were some big names too. Steve Lekoelea. Benedict ‘Tso’ Vilakazi. Gift Leremi. Benedict McCarthy.

Each had the ability to dominate a match, but none existed in isolation.

“The Chairman always believed in building a team effort,” Moloi explains. “There is always a special player, but he is surrounded by other quality players.”

That, perhaps, offers the biggest clue to how Pirates should approach life after Mofokeng.

For the past three seasons, so much of their attacking rhythm flowed through the diminutive winger who also plays as a number 10 that it became easy to forget football is rarely won by individuals alone.

Mofokeng’s genius flourished because Tito Maswanganyi found spaces between the lines. Mohau Nkota and later Oswin Appollis created movement around him. Thalente Mbatha offered balance behind him. The collective allowed the individual to shine. Now the collective must evolve again.

Moloi admits there will never be another player exactly like Mofokeng.

“He’s an extraordinary player,” he says. “We’ll all miss him. There will be another star one day, but it will take time.”

To illustrate the point, he reaches beyond South African football.

Argentina, he says, spent years searching for another Diego Maradona. They produced gifted footballers like Juan Román Riquelme and Juan Sebastián Verón, but only decades later did Lionel Messi emerge.

Generational talents cannot be manufactured.

“They kept knocking until Messi came,” Moloi says. “Maybe six months down the line we will discover another special player.”

That optimism is characteristic of Pirates themselves.

Every era has produced its icon. Chippa Moloi... Jomo Sono... Nick Seshweni... The star-studded generation of the mid to late 1990s... The Lucky



“WHEN RELE WORE 38, I WONDERED, ‘DOES HE KNOW? DID SOMEBODY TELL HIM?’ IT BROUGHT BACK MEMORIES.”

Lekgwathi-captained ‘double treble’ winning group... Steve Lekoelea, whose swagger, celebrations and thunderous free-kicks made him impossible to ignore despite his playing alongside accomplished teammates.

“Steve stood out because of his individual presence,” Moloi says. “But he was surrounded by quality players.”

Even Mofokeng, Moloi reveals, stirred memories of another era.

When the youngster chose to wear the famous No. 38, Moloi could not help smiling. His father had once worn that same number.

“When Rele wore 38, I wondered, ‘Does he know? Did somebody tell him?’ It brought back memories.”

Perhaps that is fitting.

Pirates have always been bigger than any one player.

Their history is a relay race rather than a sprint. One generation hands the baton to the next. Every outstanding footballer eventually departs. Another eventually emerges.

The challenge confronting coach Abdeslam Ouaddou, therefore, is not to find another Relebohile Mofokeng.

There isn’t one.

The challenge is ensuring the next Pirates side continues playing football that excites supporters, competes for trophies and creates the environment where another young star can eventually announce himself.

Because if Orlando Pirates’ history has taught us anything, it is that while great players come and go, the badge has always endured.

And somewhere, perhaps already inside the current dressing room, another youngster is waiting for his turn to carry the torch.

And the reality is that there are a few players in the current squad who can step up to lead the team. Of course, they will not do it like Rele did. But in their own way, the likes of Tito Maswanganyi, Oswin Appollis, Masindi Nemtajela, Kamogelo Sebelebele or Tshepang Moremi can step up and shine in what is going to be a highly demanding season as the Buccaneers look to hold on to the Betway Premiership title while also seeking to add that second star above the club’s crest by winning the CAF Champions League.

The Ghost will miss Rele. The Amstel Arena will long for the youngster’s magic. The Pirates line-up will seem like a bird without a song in Mofokeng’s absence. But that will be only for a while. For as Chairman Khoza often says: “Nature does not allow for a vacuum.”

The Relebohile Mofokeng gap will eventually be filled. Khoza will ensure that happens. He has done it before, albeit in his own inimitable way, as Teboho Moloi has explained.

Yet what the youngster’s departure does is offer an opportunity for another player to add their name to a list of great Orlando Pirates stars who stood out and created a lasting legacy.

Who that will be is what will make watching Orlando Pirates in the upcoming season all the more exciting.

BAFANA THERAPIST ON WORLD CUP, JOMO SUPPORT & BEING DETAINED IN LIBYA



There's a popular phrase, "it takes a village," borrowed from the idiom 'it takes a village to raise a child'. It's not only relatable where raising children is concerned but also to most situations that involve teamwork or group work. It took a village for Bafana Bafana to rise back as one of the competitive African sides. Of course, coaches and players always naturally take centre stage and deservedly so. The team has recently returned home from a successful outing at the 2026 FIFA World Cup, where they qualified for the knockout phase for the first time in their history, after a 16-year absence on the international stage. Bafana's village also included the backroom staff, which consisted of the medical team. In this edition, iDiski Times journalist LETHABO KGANYAGO caught up with AMOS DHLOMO, an elite fitness coach, Sports Massage Therapist, High performance Specialist who also possesses a CAF C Licence, backed with 20 years of experience in professional football. 'Dina', as Dhlomo is affectionately known, currently works for Marumo Gallants, and he was part of Bafana's medical team led by Dr Tshepo Molobi. The man from Ikageng in Potchefstroom reflects on the World Cup, his journey in football that started with one Dr Jomo Sono giving him a chance, the importance of having a complete medical team even at club level, among other matters.

Lethabo Kganyago: Thank you for speaking to us, Amos. How has it been coming back home from the World Cup?

Amos Dhlomo: Yeah, it's been a good experience. From club level to international, you know it's not the same. Even the Africa Nations Cup is not on the same level as the World Cup. So it's a big experience, and I think everyone wished to be there, but I can tell you I'm very happy to have been part of that team. I'm very happy to have been there, and the experience that I got from that tournament is something that I cannot forget.

LK: You were part of the teams that went to the last two AFCONS and are now part of a historic World Cup side. Are there any similarities, or how are they different?

AD: With regards to the World Cup, we are babies. Remember, South Africa had only qualified three times. We only played three times in the World Cup, so

"I WANT TO THANK DR SONO FOR GIVING ME THAT LITTLE CHANCE THAT I NEVER KNEW ONE DAY I WILL GO TO THE WORLD CUP."

we are still babies in the tournament, but the experience is something else. It's very unique; you might take other countries lightly, but everyone at the World Cup is on par, so you must be on par as well when you play in that tournament.

LK: Let's talk about the job that you do. Do you feel that maybe people might underestimate its importance in a technical team?

AD: It's very much important to do recovery. The job that I'm doing, works too much on recoveries. A Massage Therapist is someone who understands cardiovascular and a little bit of anatomy and physiology. So you need to have that experience on how to recover your players after the game, how to recover everyone after the injuries, rehabilitation stuff like that. You need to be on the level that the coach needs, especially in terms of playing, in terms of working, in terms of injuries. You need to be at a level where you can take the players back to fitness as quickly as possible.

LK: With this tournament, how hard was it because we would hear in the press conferences coach Hugo talking about how much of a toll the travelling took on players' recovery?

AD: I will never say it was tough. Yes, but it was part of the tournament that everyone knew that we are going to travel every seven days, every four days. When you qualify again after three days, just like that. So we knew that the programme was going to be like that. So we planned beforehand how we were going to travel, where we were going and the time zones. We discuss everything in the medical team of Doctor Tshepo [Molobi]. So we discussed everything, we went through the programme, we planned everything. It was not so bad. We didn't have a lot of

problems, we didn't have a lot of injuries. The only injury was Aubrey Modiba's, and he was well looked after. After that, he went back and played all the games.

LK: The importance of having Massage Therapists from the club level, also going to the international stage, when you look at it, are we doing well as a league medically, in terms of all of the posts that are necessary?

AD: At club level you know, there are few teams that they consider Massage Therapists, but it is important to have a Massage Therapist, because big teams, let me say, teams that qualify for CAF competitions like the Champion League, [Mamelodi] Sundowns, [Kaizer] Chiefs, [Orlando] Pirates, Sekhukhune [United] you need someone who can recover the players. Most of the teams, if you count the games it's up to 50, 54 games if you play all the games in all the tournaments. I mean, including all the domestic competitions. Massage is not the only type of recovery; there are different kinds of recovery, aqua recovery, meaning you're doing a recovery in the pool. You're doing recovery in the gym; you're doing massage recovery. So it's not only about massage, it's about everything. When they say you are a Massage Therapist, you need to know every massage category that you have to do with the players.

LK: You look at the World Cup, what have been some of your highlights in terms of your job? Do you think that, as South Africa, we are on par with the rest of the world?

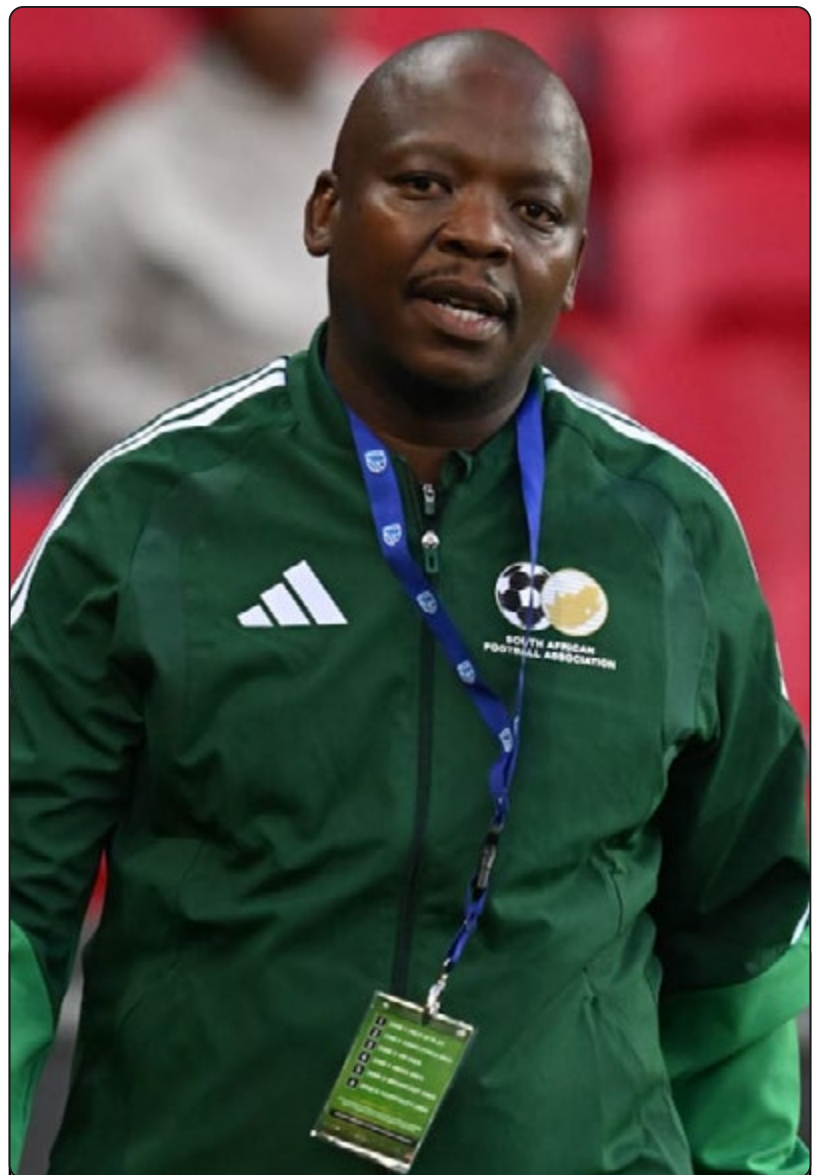
AD: I believe that we are on the right path, in the right way, but I still believe that we still need more in terms of the medical side of high performance. We still need more people, because at the World Cup we went with two Physios, one Doctor, and two masseuses, which doesn't make a big medical team. Other teams would have more than 10 people in the technical team, and I think we are in a good space.

LK: When you come back from these major tournaments, do you always feel like you have a lot to contribute at your club?

AD: I believe that we learn every time; we learn every day. And I believe that clubs need people like us, not only big clubs, even the clubs South Africa calls small clubs. I believe that every club in the PSL needs people like us to recover the players, to look after the players to get to be injury free. Most of the clubs in the PSL, they will only hire a Doctor and a physio, while you need someone who can work on recoveries after the game, someone like us – after, before and during the game, before training, after training, you need someone like us. Players need to be looked after every time. You need to focus on the players in terms of minor injuries, in terms of stiff muscles, and in terms of recoveries.

LK: How crucial does the medical team become when a competition progresses further? You've also been through this at the AFCON, where you've reached the semi-finals and even played in the third-place playoff.

AD: It's very important. When we have a clustered program, it's very important to concentrate more on recovery. That's when we need to be there, that's when you feel why you were hired, that's when



“YES, I WAS DETAINED IN LIBYA, BUT AT LEAST I’VE LEARNED ONE OR TWO THINGS. TODAY I HAVE THAT EXPERIENCE OF CAF, EXPERIENCE OF AFRICA NATIONS CUP, EXPERIENCE OF WORLD CUP NOW; NOTHING COMES EASY.”

you have to bring all your experience, your everything into the game.

LK: So, in a league format, it must mean more pressure in the title chase, for example, the recovery team that's also right there on that same level and especially teams that compete in everything?

AD: Yeah, and I'm going to make an example with a team like Sundowns. They travel, they play in the Champions League, local competitions, and the league. If you check, the last time they were complaining about playing seven games, etc, and I know they have a big medical team, they have everything. That's why they keep on performing well, because they have good people there. They've assembled a good medical team that can help the club to recover quicker.

LK: On a personal front, how did you get involved in football? Take us through the journey, because you didn't just wake up and you were part of the Bafana Bafana squad that went to the World Cup.

AD: I started at Jomo Cosmos. But let me start at the beginning. I started at the Cams Institution and did my courses, and then after that I moved to Jomo Cosmos, where Jomo gave me a chance. I started working there. I stayed at Jomo for 10 years; after that, I moved to Polokwane City. I stayed there for five years. Then I moved to Marumo Gallants for five years. And I want to thank Dr Sono for giving me that little chance that I never knew one day I will go to the World Cup. As a disciplined person and a hard worker, I took a chance, and I worked with him.



He put me under his arm. He showed me some of the stuff. He took me to some of the Courses. The qualification that I have is from Jomo Cosmos, is from him, Jomo. When I was a small boy, players couldn't even recognise what I was doing because I was the same age as some of them. I couldn't control them. But he was there, he took time, he gave me lots of chances, he believed in me, and today, I am what I am because of the chance that he gave me. So I started there. I will always speak about Cosmos wherever I go, because I started there.

LK: He must have been very happy for you that you're going to the World Cup, especially as someone who's also been to the World Cup and coached there.

AD: I think he's proud of where he is. He's very proud that I was one of the Cosmos members that was happy to have gone through his hands. You know, he's a legend of the game, everyone respects him in South Africa for what he has done for South African football. Those were good hands, and now I'm achieving because of what he has done for me. Not to say he was the only one who took a chance on me, because Polokwane City and Marumo Gallants also gave me a chance. Also, Dr [Abram] Sello, I talk about him as well. He gave me a chance, and I am where I am today because of Marumo Gallants, too, because Cosmos is where I started. He gave me a chance, believed in me, he helped me where he was supposed to help. I'm privileged to work for clubs like those.

LK: There's no way one mentions you and Gallants and the story of Libya a few seasons ago when the team was in the Confed Cup doesn't come up. When you look back at those kind experiences, does going to the World Cup make all of it worth it?

AD: Yeah, football is not an easy journey. Some people may think that football is an easy job, but for me, I don't think it's easy. We go through a lot in football, pressure, stress, you go through a lot. But yes, I was detained in Libya, but at least I've learned one or two things. Today I have the experience of CAF, the experience of the Africa Nations Cup, the World Cup now, so nothing comes easy. You need to knuckle down and work hard to be where you want to be. So it will always be a story to tell. Of course, it's not enough. It's not enough to achieve. It's not enough to achieve because once you achieve a little bit, you want more out of sports. I still want more. I'm from the World Cup, I'm from the Nations Cup, I'm from CAF. I still want more. I want Olympics. I want

"I STILL WANT MORE. I WANT OLYMPICS. I WANT MORE BECAUSE YOU'VE ALSO SEEN THAT IT'S POSSIBLE. I'M STILL FRESH, I'M STILL YOUNG, I STILL WANT ACHIEVEMENT."

more because you've also seen that it's possible. I'm still fresh, I'm still young, I still want achievement, I still want a big club, I still want where I can go, I still want where I can express myself.

LK: Do you have words for the technical team that you worked with under coach Hugo up until this historic World?

AD: I've worked with very professional people. I just want to thank Doctor Tshepo Molobi, the national team head Doctor, Doctor Thulani Ngwenya, for trusting me, Doctor Siboniso Dlamini, as well whom I've worked at Polokwane City. He saw the skill he believed in me. He has become a friend and family. and the national team as well, when I arrived there, I saw Dr Molobi, one of the doctors with a very unique style of working. He's got that eye of an eagle that sees what players need and what we need to do to support them. He never undermines anyone. It felt like home.

LK: I wanted to sneak in one last question: how has it been working with Coach Hugo, and what influence has he had on you?

AD: I'm going to be sensitive. He is one of the people that gave me a chance. Sometimes he'd come into the medical room. He's not a difficult person. He's a very good coach. I don't want to say a lot. He's a good human being, a very good person. He will come into the medical room and he will never comment. He will never say anything. He'll just come to the medical team, look at how we're working and then go out. He will never say anything; he'll let you do your job. I was very happy under him. He's one of the coaches that I admire a lot, and he's a good person. I mean, he never said anything about medicals. He will get only the report from the team.

LK: Thank you so much. Congratulations on your achievements with the national team.



THE IDISKI TOP 10... WORLD CUP STARS

This week, iDiski Times turns its attention to the biggest stars of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, looking beyond the headlines and highlight reels to identify the 10 players whose performances defined football’s greatest spectacle across the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Despite lifting the trophy through an outstanding collective effort, Spain placed surprisingly little emphasis on individual dominance, with only one Spanish player finishing among the tournament’s top 10 highest-rated performers and just three featuring inside the overall top 30.

The World Cup has always been a stage where reputations are made, legends are born, and the finest footballers rise when the pressure is at its greatest. While unforgettable goals and iconic moments inevitably capture the imagination, sustained excellence over the course of

a tournament is often revealed through the finer details of the game, where consistency, influence and efficiency separate the very good from the truly world-class.

Our rankings are therefore based not only on eye-catching moments, but on overall performance throughout the competition, drawing on statistics, performance data and player ratings from a range of leading football analytics companies to build as complete a picture as possible. Every contribution has been considered, whether it came in attack, midfield, defence, or between the posts, with the emphasis firmly placed on players who consistently elevated their teams on football’s grandest stage.

*(*statistics as of 19 July 2026, Player average ratings as per FotMob)*

The Top 10:

10 Ousmane Dembélé
France
7.87 average rating

Ousmane Dembélé looked like a man who would help carry France all the way to another FIFA World Cup triumph. His devastating acceleration, intelligent movement and clinical finishing made him one of the most feared forwards in North America, while his ability to create as well as score ensured defenders could never afford a moment’s lapse in concentration. With six goals and two assists, Dembélé was at the heart of almost everything France did well, producing the kind of performances that reminded the football world why he has long been regarded as one of the game’s most unpredictable attacking talents.

9 Michael Olise
France
7.87 average rating

Throughout France’s run in North America, Michael Olise was the creative heartbeat of Didier Deschamps’ side, repeatedly unlocking stubborn defences with a blend of vision, precision and effortless technique. Whether drifting into pockets of space or delivering defence-splitting passes, the gifted attacker constantly dictated the tempo in the final third, forcing opponents to remain alert every time he found possession. His remarkable



tally of seven assists – which broke Pele’s longstanding record – was the highest of the tournament and reflected just how influential he was in France’s march towards the latter stages. Add to that his own attacking threat in front of goal, and Olise emerged as one of the standout performers of the World Cup, once again underlining why he is considered among the finest creative talents in world football.

8 Malik Tillman

USA

7.92 average rating

The United States arrived with enormous expectations, and although their tournament ultimately ended in disappointment, Malik Tillman emerged with his reputation enhanced. Calm in possession, creative between the lines and capable of producing moments of genuine quality, the Bayer Leverkusen midfielder became the Americans’ most influential performer throughout the competition. His return of two goals and one assist reflected his attacking importance, even if one of those strikes came merely as consolation in the heavy Round of 16 defeat to Belgium. Football is often a collective game, and while the USA fell short of their ambitions, Tillman gave every indication that he could be one of the faces of American football for many years to come.

7 Ismaïla Sarr

Senegal

7.99 average rating

Senegal once again demonstrated why they remain one of Africa’s footballing heavyweights, and much of that success revolved around the brilliance of Ismaïla Sarr. Blessed with electric pace and a directness that few defenders could contain, Sarr repeatedly stretched opposition backlines and delivered when his country needed him most. Four goals and one assist underline just how influential he was, even if Senegal’s adventure eventually came to an end against Belgium in the Round of 32. While their exit was disappointing, Sarr departed North America having reaffirmed his status as one of the continent’s premier attacking talents.

6 Vinicius Junior

Brazil

8.01 average rating

Brazil’s campaign never quite reached the heights their supporters had dreamed of, but Vinícius Júnior remained a shining light amid the frustration. The Real Madrid superstar produced moments of breathtaking skill throughout the tournament, tormenting defenders with dazzling footwork, explosive acceleration and fearless attacking intent. His four goals and one assist reflected another outstanding individual competition, although they could not prevent Brazil’s surprising Round of 16 exit to Norway. Football can sometimes be cruel, rewarding collective excellence above individual brilliance, and while Brazil fell short, Vinícius once again proved he belongs among the game’s very finest performers.

5 Pedro Porro

Spain

8.04 average rating

Few defenders enjoyed a tournament

as complete as Pedro Porro’s. Spain’s journey to the World Cup final was built on collective excellence rather than individual stardom, yet Porro continually found ways to distinguish himself through his remarkable consistency at both ends of the pitch. Defensively, he was disciplined, aggressive and composed, while going forward, he offered relentless width and energy that stretched opposition defences throughout the competition. Remarkably, having never scored for Spain before the tournament, Porro found the net twice in North America, adding decisive attacking contributions to an already exceptional defensive campaign. It was the kind of all-round performance that elevated him from reliable full-back to one of the outstanding players of the entire World Cup.

4 Florian Wirtz

Germany

8.12 average rating

Germany may once again leave a World Cup wondering what might have been, but Florian Wirtz provided ample evidence that the future remains bright. The gifted Liverpool playmaker’s name might be a surprise to be so high on the list, but he was the creative heartbeat of his side, constantly finding pockets of space, unlocking stubborn defences and supplying teammates with opportunities through his remarkable vision and technical quality. Although he did not score himself, his



three assists only tell part of the story, as countless German attacks flowed through his intelligent movement and precise passing. Amid collective disappointment, Wirtz emerged as Germany's brightest spark and one of the tournament's most elegant footballers.

3 Erling Haaland Norway

8.24 average rating

Erling Haaland arrived carrying the hopes of an entire nation, and the towering striker delivered exactly what the world had come to expect. Powerful, relentless and ruthlessly efficient inside the penalty area, Haaland scored seven goals as Norway became one of the surprise packages of the tournament, advancing all the way to the quarter-finals after beginning the competition as outsiders among the favourites. Yet his influence extended beyond the goals themselves. His sheer presence transformed the way opponents defended, creating space for teammates while inspiring belief throughout the Norwegian squad. Once again, Haaland demonstrated that the biggest stages rarely intimidate the biggest personalities.

2 Kylian Mbappé France

8.49 average rating

For much of the tournament, it felt inevitable that Kylian Mbappé would

once again leave the World Cup as one of its defining figures. The French star combined devastating pace with ruthless finishing, producing breathtaking displays that earned him the Player of the Match award on four separate occasions. He was the Golden Boot winner with an incredible 10 goals – also becoming the tournament's all-time record goalscorer with 22 at all World Cups. Add four assists, and it illustrates just how dominant he was throughout France's run, with defenders repeatedly left chasing shadows as Mbappé dictated matches almost single-handedly. Only Spain's superb semi-final performance prevented him from reaching another World Cup final, but even in defeat, he reminded everyone why he continues to stand among the very best footballers on the planet.

1 Lionel Messi Argentina

8.49 average rating

There are moments in football when statistics almost become secondary, because they merely reinforce what every eye can already see. At 39 years of age, Lionel Messi once again produced a tournament that bordered on the extraordinary, inspiring defending champions Argentina to a second successive FIFA World Cup final with performances that blended genius, experience and an almost supernatural understanding of the game. While Spain neutralised him in the final, Messi collected the Player of the Match award an astonishing six times, orchestrating comeback victories in the knockout rounds while contributing eight goals and four assists. Long after the final whistle of this tournament fades into history, North America will be remembered as another stage upon which Messi reminded the world that greatness does not simply endure, it continues to redefine itself.

Special Mentions...

There were countless outstanding individual performances across a month of unforgettable football, making the final few places on this list incredibly difficult to separate.

England's Jude Bellingham (7.84) once again demonstrated why he is regarded as one of the complete footballers of his generation, while Player of the Tournament, Spanish captain Rodri (7.86), was just outside the top 10. Young Player of the Tournament, Spain's teenage centre-back, Pau Cubarsí, had the 25th best overall average rating (7.65). Mexico's dynamic duo of Roberto Alvarado (7.82) and Julián Quiñones (7.81) played leading roles in their country's impressive campaign, and Morocco's Achraf Hakimi (7.77) was once again among the tournament's most influential full-backs.

France could just as easily have been represented by the ever-reliable Aurélien Tchouaméni (7.79), while Switzerland's Gregor Kobel (7.77) was the highest rated goalkeeper, though Spain's Unai Simón (7.56) won the Golden Glove with seven clean sheets in eight games. On another day, any one of those players could comfortably have found a place in this top 10, which perhaps says everything about the extraordinary quality on display throughout the 2026 FIFA World Cup.





ACE OF THE WEEK: TSHEPANG MOREMI

This week's iDiski Times Ace of the Week is Orlando Pirates and Bafana Bafana winger Tshepang Moremi. It may only be pre-season, but the 24-year-old has wasted no time making a statement, producing a match-winning display as Pirates defeated Spanish side Cádiz 2-1 during their training camp in Marbella on Saturday. After the Buccaneers fell behind early, Moremi drew them level with a superbly taken goal before turning provider, setting up Zimbabwean winger Daniel Msendami for the winner. Fresh from playing his part in Bafana Bafana's historic 2026 FIFA World Cup campaign, where his pinpoint cross created Thapelo Maseko's unforgettable winner against South Korea, Moremi looks full of confidence, if his performances in Spain are any indication.



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 BLACK PRINCE WHO CHANGED SA FOOTBALL FOREVER

By Rob Delpont

There are footballers who entertain, footballers who inspire, and footballers who leave behind a legacy that stretches far beyond the white lines. Then there is Jomo Sono. For those fortunate enough to have watched him in his prime, there was something almost supernatural about the way he played the game.

The first time I saw him was on a chilly afternoon at St George's Park in Gqeberha, a venue better known for cricket than football, yet on that day it belonged entirely to one man. I was still a youngster, but I remember watching him glide across the field as though everyone else was playing at a different speed. He seemed to glow, almost as if a spotlight followed him wherever he moved, and while others chased the ball, Sono appeared to conduct the entire match with effortless elegance. More than four decades later, that memory remains vivid, and perhaps it was one of the moments that cemented my lifelong fascination with South African football and ultimately led me to make a career of covering the game.

Ephraim Matsilele Sono, born Madoda Walletjies Mkulwana on 17 July 1955, would become known throughout Africa as the "Black Prince", while others simply called him Bra J or Mjomana. Long before he became the owner, coach and driving force behind Jomo Cosmos, he was simply a gifted boy trying to survive.

Although many associate him with Orlando, Sono was actually born in Queenstown in the Eastern Cape before moving to Soweto as an infant. Life dealt him cruel blows almost immediately. When he was only eight years old, his father, Eric Sono, himself a respected Orlando Pirates midfielder, was killed in a motor vehicle accident. Not long afterwards, his mother disappeared from his life, leaving him in the care of his elderly and impoverished grandparents.

Those difficult circumstances shaped the man he would become. Football was never simply a pastime; it became a means of survival. Young Jomo and his grandparents sold apples and peanuts at railway stations and outside football grounds, using every cent to buy food for his grandparents, clothes, and to keep himself in school. Even then, the determination and resilience that would later define his career were already evident.

His football journey began almost by accident. During a local match, an Orlando Pirates player failed to arrive, and the young Sono

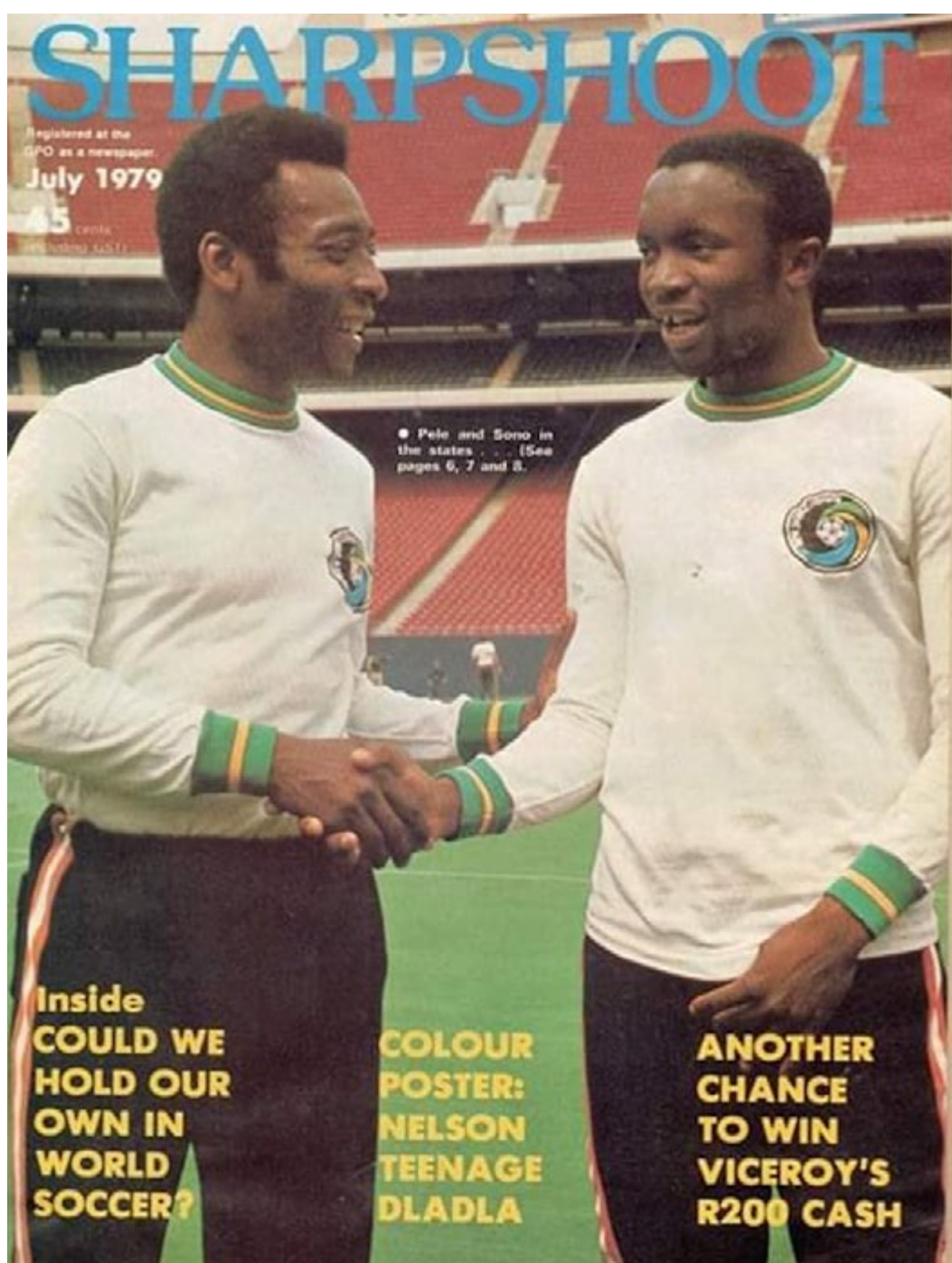
was asked to fill in. It took only a handful of touches for everyone watching to realise they were witnessing something extraordinary. His balance, close control, fearless dribbling and almost telepathic vision separated him from everyone around him. Around that time, a Pirates supporter began calling him "Jomo", believing the young footballer possessed the leadership qualities of Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta. The nickname remained for life.

At Orlando Pirates, he evolved into one of the country's biggest stars during an era when South African football was overflowing with gifted individuals despite the isolation of apartheid. Yet eventually even the local game became too small for his talent.

Few stories capture the legend of Sono quite like the one that unfolded on what should have been the happiest day of his personal life.

On the day he married the love of his life, while family and friends were gathered to celebrate the beginning of a new chapter, word filtered through to the wedding reception that Orlando Pirates were in serious trouble. The Buccaneers were trailing 2-0 to Highlands Park, and one of the country's biggest clubs looked destined for a painful defeat. For most people, the scoreline would have remained little more than a conversation topic between speeches and celebrations. But Jomo Sono was not most people, and football was never simply a profession to him. It was part of who he was.

Sono did the unthinkable. With the blessing of those around him, he slipped away from his own wedding reception and made his way to the stadium, arriving during the halftime interval with Pirates staring defeat squarely in the face. The sight of the Black Prince walking into



the dressing room alone lifted spirits immediately, and what followed has become one of the great stories in South African football folklore.

Sono took complete control of the contest, producing the kind of performance only the truly special are capable of. He scored one goal himself, created three more with the vision and creativity that made him such an extraordinary footballer, and inspired Pirates to an unforgettable 4-2 comeback victory that has lived on in football mythology ever since.

Only then, after rescuing his club in the most dramatic fashion imaginable, did he quietly leave the stadium and return to continue celebrating with his new bride, as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

Whether viewed as romance, madness or the ultimate display of commitment, the story has become inseparable from the legend of Jomo Sono. It perfectly illustrates the man South African football came to know: someone whose love for the game burned so fiercely that even on the most important day of his own life, when duty called, he simply could not ignore it. Few players have ever lived football quite as completely as Bra J, and few moments tell that story better than the afternoon he quite literally left his wedding to save Orlando Pirates.

While South Africa's return to international football arrived too late for Jomo Sono to grace the global stage in the green and gold, his brilliance had already announced itself to the football world. In 1976, at Johannesburg's Rand Stadium, he lined up for a South African XI against an Argentina select side captained by the formidable Antonio Rattín. What unfolded became part of local football folklore. Faced with one of the game's traditional powerhouses, Sono delivered a masterclass of breathtaking skill, vision and audacity, scoring an astonishing four goals in a resounding 5-0 victory. It was the kind of performance that transcended the occasion, leaving even the illustrious visitors with a first-hand appreciation of why the "Black Prince" was spoken about with such reverence.

In 1977, Sono embarked on what was then an almost unimaginable adventure, leaving South Africa to join the famous New York Cosmos in the North American Soccer League. At the time, the NASL had become the glamorous frontier of world football, attracting some of the biggest names ever to lace up a pair of boots, and suddenly the young South African found himself sharing a dressing room with none other than Pelé.

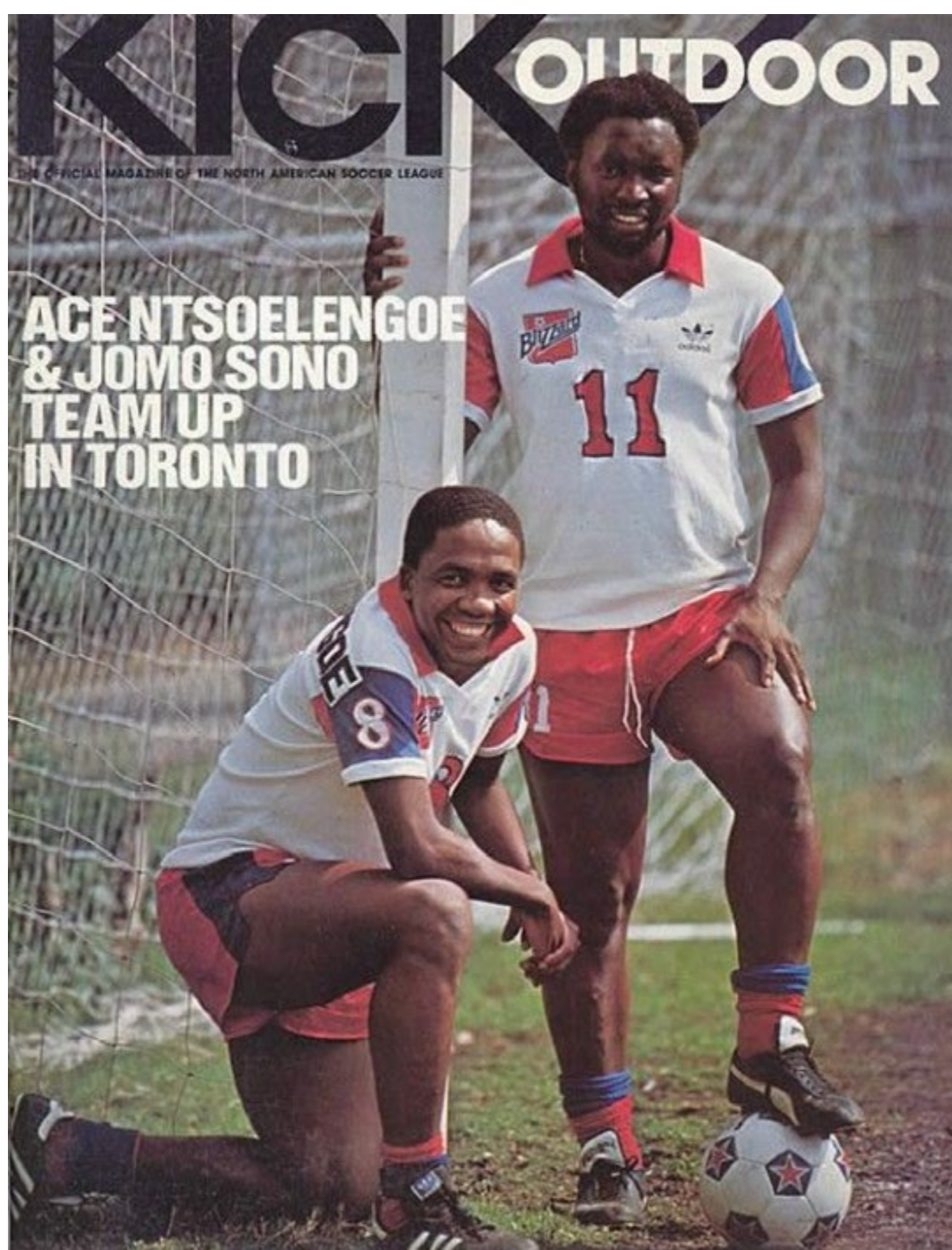
For many players, merely training alongside the Brazilian icon would have been enough. Sono embraced the opportunity completely. He often spoke of how much he learned from watching the world's greatest players every single day, absorbing professionalism, preparation and confidence that would later influence every aspect of his own career.

The New York Cosmos were football's equivalent of Hollywood. Giants such as Pelé, Franz Beckenbauer, Carlos Alberto and Giorgio Chinaglia transformed the club into an international attraction, playing before enormous crowds and introducing football to audiences across the United States. For a young South African who had grown up selling peanuts to survive, walking into that dressing room must have felt surreal.

His American adventure did not end there.

In 1978, he joined the Colorado Caribous, one of the NASL's most memorable clubs, famous for their striking leather-fringed jerseys but also for their exciting football. Although the Caribous existed for only a single season before relocating to Atlanta, Sono quickly became one of their standout performers.

Sono completed his North American journey with Toronto Blizzard, where he spent three productive summers between 1980 and 1982. By then, he had become one of the NASL's respected foreign stars, admired not simply because he came from South Africa but because of the effortless brilliance he consistently displayed. His years in America broadened his understanding of football enormously, exposing him to different tactical philosophies, training methods and professional environments that were decades ahead of what existed back



home.

In Toronto, he was also reunited with another South African genius, Patrick “Ace” Ntsoelengoe. Together, they gave American supporters a glimpse of the incredible talent South Africa possessed during years when political isolation prevented many of its footballers from receiving the global recognition they deserved. Their creativity, technical quality and natural flair made them crowd favourites and helped elevate the league’s reputation.

During that period, he also spent time with Portuguese giants Sporting CP and Italian powerhouse Juventus. Both clubs recognised his exceptional talent and offered opportunities, but restrictive work permit regulations prevented permanent moves that many believe could have elevated him into one of Europe’s biggest stars. It remains one of South African football’s great “what if” stories.

When his time in the USA finished, he returned having played 128 NASL games, scoring 32 goals, and assisting 33 times.

Returning home in 1982, Sono could easily have settled into retirement. Instead, he made perhaps his greatest contribution to South African football.

Purchasing Highlands Park, he renamed the club Jomo Cosmos in honour of the New York Cosmos, forever linking his American experience with his South African dream. Cosmos soon became far more than just another football club. It became a production line of extraordinary talent.

Few people have identified and developed young footballers quite like Bra J. Philemon Masinga, Mark Fish, Helman Mkhalele, Sizwe Motaung and countless others all passed through his hands before representing Bafana Bafana and earning moves abroad. Much of the spine of South Africa’s unforgettable 1996 Africa Cup of Nations-winning squad emerged from Cosmos, with Sono also serving as technical advisor to Clive Barker during that historic triumph.

His influence on the national team extended even further.

Thrown into the impossible task of leading Bafana shortly before the 1998 Africa Cup of Nations after Barker’s dismissal, Sono guided South Africa all the way to the final against Egypt despite having almost no preparation time. Four years later, following Carlos Queiroz’s resignation,

he again answered the country’s call and led Bafana to the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Although South Africa narrowly exited in the group stage after drawing with Paraguay, defeating Slovenia and losing narrowly to Spain, captain Lucas Radebe later credited Sono for creating an outstanding atmosphere within the squad, insisting the unity and belief he inspired played a major role in their performances.

His club journey, meanwhile, reflected the unpredictable nature of football itself. Jomo Cosmos experienced glorious highs, winning the National Soccer League, Coca-Cola Cup, BobSave Super Bowl and SAA Super Eight, but also painful lows, suffering multiple relegations before eventually slipping into the ABC Motsepe League. Yet regardless of league position, Cosmos remained one of the country’s greatest football academies.

In recognition of his extraordinary contribution, Sono was voted among South Africa’s 100 Greatest South Africans in 2004, before receiving honorary doctorates from the University of London and the University of Dubai in 2016 for his contributions to football and business.

Yet perhaps no honour captures his legacy quite like the generations of footballers whose lives he transformed.

Some people leave behind trophies. Others leave behind statistics. Jomo Sono leaves behind something far more valuable. He leaves behind a football culture, countless careers, and the enduring belief that somewhere in a dusty township or rural village, another gifted youngster can still dream of following the path first walked by the Black Prince.

Last week, South Africa paused, if only for a moment, to celebrate the 71st birthday of a man whose name has long since transcended football. Jomo Sono is more than a former player, coach or club owner; he is one of the architects of the modern South African game, a football visionary whose influence stretches across generations.

His story is woven into the fabric of South African football, from the dusty streets of Soweto to stadiums across the world, and from the brilliance of his own boots to the countless stars he helped discover.

Some men become legends through what they achieve, while others become symbols of an entire era. Jomo Sono is both. Happy 71st, Bra J, and thank you for a lifetime devoted to South African football.

