

# FIRST TOUCH

August 2018

## 03

CAN POGBA HELP LEAD  
MAN UTD TO A PREMIER  
LEAGUE TITLE?

## 05

LIVERPOOL ARE FIRST AND  
THEIR AFRICANS ARE  
HELPING IN A BIG WAY!

## 11

CAN CAMEROON HANG  
ONTO THEIR AFCON 2019  
HOSTING RIGHTS? ►



# TABLE OF CONTENTS



**p.3**

## CAN POGBA HELP LEAD MAN U TO THE TITLE?

World Cup winner Paul Pogba will look to continue his winning ways with Manchester United this season.

**p.5**

## LIVERPOOL MAKING THE RIGHT NOISES

Man City are looking like they may be EPL runaway leaders once more. But last campaign's UEFA Champions League finalists, Liverpool are looking quite sharp with their African talent on fleek.

**p.7**

## HIDDEN GEMS: ADAMA TRAORE

Wolves winger Adama Traore is a talent with pace, power and skill of scarce supply. We think the 22-year-old born to Mali parents will light up the Premier League in the 2018/19 season.

**p.9**

## VICTOR MOSES WAVES GOODBYE

Chelsea's Victor Moses announces retirement from international football at 27, after appearing 37 times for Nigeria, scoring nine times and winning the 2013 AFCON title with the Super Eagles.

**p.10**

## ZAHA EXTENDS WITH PALACE

Wilfried Zaha will be staying put at Crystal Palace fending off interest from Dortmund, Tottenham and Chelsea after agreeing a new 5 year deal with club.

**p.11**

## CAF PRESIDENT WARNS CAMEROON

Already having cast doubts of Cameroon's AFON 2019 hosting viability, Ahmad questions if the West African nation can assemble the resources and infrastructure needed for a 24 team tournament.



# CAN POGBA HELP LEAD MAN U TO THE TITLE?

Written By: Siphosethu Thwala

***"I ALWAYS GIVE MY BEST  
FOR THE FANS, FOR MY  
TEAM-MATES, FOR THE  
PEOPLE THAT TRUST ME"***

Surely this has to be the Frenchman's season, or so we think. His heroic exploits in the World Cup where he helped the French national team claim football's greatest prize, have not gone unnoticed. Paul Pogba's time to shine is now. The Manchester United talisman has received his fair share of criticism both at the club and national level for all the wrong reasons.

Some cite his failure to offer more defensive work in his game, some criticize him for trying to do too much (or little) with the ball, and lest we forget, he's also received stick for his numerous hairstyles which have been said to somewhat contribute to his disappointing displays at times. Nonetheless, the real question to be addressed right now is can he replicate his France form to the Red Devils' midfield, going into the new season? Let's wait and see. Paul Pogba's time at Manchester United has been rather bittersweet. Carrying a record-breaking \$90 million price tag on his shoulders, the stakes were bound to be high for the Frenchman and they surely have been. In his first season, Pogba had quite an average season by his standards, chipping in with 5 goals and 4 assists in the league.



Fast forward to the 2017/18 season, the stats didn't change much, though we did see some improvements. Pogba managed to score 6 goals and provided 6 assists in what was rather a mixed season for him as his problems and consistency with fully expressing himself on the field continued. Pogba's season was filled with loads of activity, good and interesting. For instance, his perceived "fallout" with Jose Mourinho in the middle of the season affected the player's morale as criticism of his play flew in left, right and center. The bone of contention about Pogba's play has been more about his failure to assist his teammates defensively, exposing the already suspect Man United defense with the inconsistent midfield cover. This was largely attributed to the way Mourinho was deploying the charismatic Frenchman, playing him in a two-man defensive midfield alongside Nemanja Matic. This made Pogba get caught out of possession countless times, something that infuriated Mourinho who is a master of keeping things tight with his teams. As Pogba's struggles continued to haunt him, Mourinho set tongues wagging when he started benching the Frenchman in a couple of United's games, opting for the young Scott McTominay instead. Many assumed Mourinho was trying to teach Pogba "a lesson" for his disappointing and inconsistent displays, but the Portuguese coach was quick to squash those allegations, citing that Pogba had not been playing at the level he wanted him to play at. own goal by Aziz Bouhaddouz on the 95th minute. That performance was promising, and expectations started building up towards the match against the European Champions, Portugal.

Most Manchester United fans were hoping that Matic's signing would "unlock" Paul Pogba's offensive prowess and enable him to provide those key passes and open up defenses with his defense-splitting passes. However, that wasn't necessarily the case. The glimpses of what he can do were existent nonetheless. A good example that comes to mind was during the Manchester derby where Pogba played a pivotal role in helping United overcome runaway title winners City in a 3-2 victory. In that game, Pogba looked like his former Juventus self, winning balls and initiating attacks for the Red Devils, doing pretty much what we expect of him in every game.

In the lead up to the World Cup, there were worries that Pogba's place in the France team was not guaranteed due to his poor form at United with some of the French fans even turning against the player. However, coach Didier Deschamps showed Pogba support and assured him of his key role in the French midfield. And indeed he seemed to be proven right as Pogba's World Cup displays started to accrue more consistency and effectiveness. He was a threat going forward, always looking for the likes of Mbappe and Griezmann with his inch-perfect passes to unlock defenses.

Defensively he also did due diligence as he was constantly falling back to assist Kante and company. Moreover, he also scored some crucial goals for France, including one in the final. Overall, Pogba's World Cup play was a refreshing reminder of the talent he possesses and how impactful of a player he can be when motivated. It was like he had something to prove to the world and especially his critics, those of whom have been on his case for some time now. He definitely proved us wrong (his celebrations at the end of the final said it all). Every Manchester United fan was most definitely pleased with Pogba's World Cup showing and are surely hoping that he can bring that form to the United team when the season commences.

With the World Cup being signed, sealed and delivered (to France), the focus has now shifted to club level for all players, Pogba included. As mentioned before, the expectations remain high for him and rightly so. I personally believe Pogba has all the attributes to become the best midfielder in the world and emulate the midfield greats such as Luka Modric and Andres Iniesta. Some blame his poor form at club level on Jose Mourinho's defensive tactics which do not allow Pogba to have the freedom he needs in order to thrive. The validity of that assertion is rather open for various interpretations. But what I know for a fact is that Manchester United can get the best out of Pogba with him playing further up the pitch where he doesn't have to worry too much about defensive duties. Perhaps the arrival of Brazilian midfielder Fred is the right tonic for Pogba's chance to shine. It is expected that United will mostly play a three-man midfield with Fred and Matic taking care of the defensive duties and Pogba being the man more responsible for the creativity going forward from midfield. This is what most United fans want, for Pogba's sake but it all boils down to Mourinho's preference and we all know he can be very unpredictable with his lineups. Nonetheless, the presence of Fred should surely be the key to unleashing Pogba.

Above all, Pogba's potential cannot be overlooked. We know he's one of the best passers of the ball and on his day can make the tightest of defenses look ordinary with his mouth watering passes. His switch of play, footwork, and flair make him lethal and a threat against anyone. As such, coming off a successful World Cup, things look promising for Pogba and many believe the real Pogba will be unleashed this season. Great times lie ahead in the Premier League and many will be keeping tabs on Pogba's performances. Hopefully, he will shame his critics and earn the respect he deserves with some outstanding performances throughout the season. More importantly, I believe Pogba is the one man who can help the Red Devils wrestle the title away from their cross-town rivals Manchester City and finally satiate the hopes of United fans longing for Premiership glory, a triumph of which they last enjoyed during Sir Alex Ferguson's era.

# Liverpool's African Connection

Written By: Tinotenda Magiya

The English Premier League is back with a bang, and some teams have already started looking promising. Manchester City shuttered Arsenal 2-0 at the Emirates Stadium in Matchday 1 and thrashed Huddersfield in a 6-1 win at home the following week. These results are not surprising at all considering how the Cityzens ended their season last year with a record-breaking 100 points after 38 games. Liverpool however went all out in the transfer market to beef up their squad after their bitter loss at the hands of Real Madrid in UEFA Champions League final a couple of months ago.

Since then, there's been talk about them being ready to mount a title challenge in the league this year.

Rightly so since they have already picked up wins in the first two matches they played against West Ham United and Crystal Palace. One thing that has been quite interesting though is their core of players who are of African heritage. Let's look at what these players bring to the table. Naby Keïta is the latest addition to the Merseyside team after he joined the club in a \$67.6 million deal from RB Leipzig. We wrote earlier, about how the 23-year-old midfielder from Guinea was the missing piece of the spine of the Liverpool after they sold Philippe Coutinho to Barcelona in January 2017.

We are starting to see the signs of a midfield general that dictates play when in possession and is not afraid to instigate the press whenever the team loses the ball. Keïta looks ready to emulate Steven Gerrard's role in the team where the Englishman was the pinnacle of all the attacks in the team. Keita looks to have the engine to bomb up and down the pitch which has become one of the most significant assets of modern midfield players. Think of the likes of N'golo Kante. Mo Salah. Not much needs to be said about him other than that he looks as sharp as ever. The Egyptian forward will bring the goals to Liverpool.







"I think he brings plenty in our team and I think it's also not easy for the new players to come into the Premier League but for him, he's unbelievable."

– Sadio Mane on Keita's impact

Although he could have a tough time this round now that the players know him and how he plays, still he poses a threat to any team with his blistering pace. Liverpool will be looking to pick another 3 points this weekend against Brighton, a match that will be aired at 12.30pm, Washington DC time, and you can bet on the African superstar to score.

Next up, there is the new Number 10, Sadio Mane from Senegal. The forward did not have the greatest time at the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia tournament because his team was knocked out in the group stages but only just. He has since returned to the club that pays his bills, and he has been showing the hunger that Jurgen Klopp wants to see in all his players. His persistence can be seen in Liverpool's most recent game, against Palace when he burst forward and kept going especially after some contact from Van Aanholt. He set his mind on the goal, and he saw to it when he rounded past the Palace keeper to score Liverpool's second of the night.

He set his mind on the goal, and he saw to it when he rounded past the Palace keeper to score Liverpool's second of the night. Mane's creativity will be of great importance throughout the season and it is an added bonus for the club that he will not be leaving for the AFCON tournament in January like before because the tournament has been moved to September 2019. (Be sure to subscribe to our Newsletter where we keep you up to date with the build-up to this tournament).

In essence, these three players will be crucial to Liverpool's fortunes if they remain fit because they have the quality and are delivering at the highest level. They are setting the bar high for other African players who wish to play in the best soccer leagues in the world. Do not be surprised if Liverpool wins it this year because their core of players is hungry and is willing to work tirelessly for that silverware that has eluded them for over two decades now.

# Hidden Gems Series: Adama Traore

Written By: Dennis Takaendesa



The outspoken Tim Sherwood who managed Tottenham and Aston Villa said he had a bit of both Ronaldo and Messi. The Belfast Telegraph pointed out that, "he's built like an absolute tank. Size of the arms on that man. One drive and it would be lights out". Catherine Wilson of ESPN FC commented on his remarkable "athleticism" also highlighting that his "footballing brain and teamwork skills are definitely up for debate." If you know Adama Traore, you probably understand what these people said and why I wrote this feature. If this is your first point of contact with the 22-year-old, you may realise that he is a work-in-progress, excellent work-in-progress. Note down the name of this Malian, he probably rock the football world quite soon. But who is he?

Adama was born in Spain to Malian parents and began his footballing career at Barcelona at the age of eight. Things didn't work out as he might have envisioned as he managed to make a few countable appearance for the B-team as well as the first team. Perhaps, one of the Catalonia highlights for Adama was coming in late for Neymar in Barca's 4-0 over Granada FC in the La Liga. He was just 17, at the time.

In 2015, the Spain youth team international arrived in the Premier League, signing for Aston Villa under Tim Sherwood. Times were hard at Villa Park. Traore appeared eleven times for the team that was eventually relegated to the Championship, scoring zero goals in the process. The winger then joined Middlesbrough a year later and was unfortunate to take part in 32-scoreless matches for the club which also got axed from the English Premier League. Stuff is beginning to take shape now for the young winger.

He was named Middlesbrough Fans Player Of The Year, Players Player Of The Year and Young Player Of The Year in the 2017-18 Championship season where he scored five times and served up ten assists. Premier League newcomers, Wolverhampton Wanderers acquired his services in the just ended summer transfer window for a fee reported to be in the region of £18 million pounds.

*"In three more years, I think this buzzing around Zaha will be just a pin in the haystack compared to that we will hear of Adama Traore. "*

- Dennis Takaendesa on Traore

Now, what do I think of this player? He has come to the EPL for a second time when he is familiar with the league's demands and playing for a club with big ambition to stay, demonstrated by their summer spending. He will get regular game time playing alongside some quality and experienced players in the form of Ruben Neves and Joao Moutinho - players who will really bring out the best of Adama. I mean, this guy might outpace Aubameyang in a foot race and his ability to take on players makes me think of Zaha. In three more years, I think this buzzing around Zaha will be just a pin in the haystack compared to that we will hear of Adama Traore. Of course, I probably exaggerated, but that's just how exciting he is. I literally feel butterflies in my stomach.

Adam is yet to make the Wolves debut as he is still getting back to fitness after the holiday and a shoulder injury, but the hype around him is already of the charts. His new teammate and defender, Matt Doherty, described the winger to be "unplayable."

Having been capped only by Spain's youth teams, Adama is still eligible to choose either Spain or Mali for his international career. At FirstTouch, we are really watching Adama Traore's space.



"We played against him last season and at times he's unplayable - I've not seen that type of running with the ball, pace and power, from anyone."

— MATT DOHERTY, WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS



# WAVING GOODBYE TO NIGERIA

Written By: Dennis Takaendesa

## VICTOR MOSES RETIRES FROM INTERNATIONAL DUTY

On Wednesday, Chelsea's Victor Moses shook most in the footballing world after announcing his retirement from international football at the age of 27. Most footballers usually hang up their boots at an average age of 34 or 40 if you are Italian. But Moses' one is a rare find, even Mesut Ozil's early retirement at 29 was astounding but maybe justified because of the racism claims he fired against some officials in the German Football Association. Could there be more to Victor's decision?

Moses was capped 37 times for the Super Eagles and scored 12 times including in the most recent world cup appearance in Russia from the penalty spot in their 2-1 loss to Argentina. Nigeria eventually failed to reach the knockout stages of the tournament after that result. He played at two FIFA World Cup tournaments and won the 2013 African Cup of Nations in South Africa. Moses has chosen to take a bow at a time where most are expecting the Super Eagles to continue building from recent positives and soar to new heights. Could he be missing out on sweeter times in the Nigerian camp? The Chelsea player who will be under new management in London after the arrival of Maurizio Sarri did not forget to explain his decision.

"I have experienced some of the best moments of my life wearing the Super Eagles shirt and have memories with me that will last a lifetime. However, I feel that now is the right time to step away in order to be able to focus fully on my club career and young family, as well as to allow the next generation the opportunity to step up and to flourish. Thank you for the memories and good luck to the team for the future."

— VICTOR MOSES, CHELSEA AND FORMER NIGERIAN INTERNATIONAL



# ZAHA COMMITS TO PALACE LONG-TERM

Written By: Dennis Takaendesa

***"I JUST WANTED TO GET IT OVER AND DONE WITH, SO I CAN FOCUS ON THE SEASON. I'M BUZZING THAT WE MANAGED TO GET IT SORTED."***

Many of you know him for the edgy haircuts, some for the ear to ear smile, diving criticism and quite a number of you for the "stop it bro" captions on our FirstTouch Instagram page for embarrassing defenders. Yes, the amazingly talented forward who has terrorised Premier League defenders in the Eagles colors has penned a new deal keeping him at Selhurst park until the 2022/23 season.

The 25-year-old has really become the backbone of the Crystal Palace side that survived a relegation scare in the 2017/18 campaign after a poor start that saw them lose all of their opening seven matches with scoring a single goal. The fans actually came for the eighth match wearing 007 shirts telling the story of their mishap, only for Zaha to return and break the curse by handing them a 2-1 win over the then Champions Chelsea. In total, he netted nine times in the 2017/18 EPL season and started of this campaign in the similar form, scoring in their 2-0 win over Fulham to become the club's joint English Premier League top scorer. He has been a subject of speculation with the likes of Tottenham, Borussia Dortmund and Chelsea being linked to the forward whose reported price tag falls in the region of £70 million. It could be much more now because of this new contract.

# CAF PRESIDENT AHMAD ISSUES ANOTHER WARNING TO CAMEROON

Written By: Topher Hegngi

More doubt has been cast by the Confederation of African Football over Cameroon's ability to host next year's Africa Cup of Nations, with CAF President Ahmad Ahmad raising the possibility that the tournament may be moved.

This isn't the first time President Ahmad has expressed doubt in Cameroon's ability to hold AFCON 2019. With the Confederation of African Football's decision to expand the tournament from 16 to 24 teams made back in July 2017, the demand for up to snuff infrastructure has been a source of increased tension between the federation and host nation.

After an inspection in February, CAF President Ahmad Ahmad urged Cameroon to improve their efforts to convince the federation of their viability as hosts after the inspection revealed that preparations were behind schedule. Now a year after challenging Cameroon to prove they can host AFCON, taking place between June 7th and 30th 2019, President Ahmad has once again raised the possibility that the tournament could be moved.

"I am not sure Cameroon is ready to host the AFCON," he told KweséESPN. "There are many things which are still wanting and yet there is little time left. "It would be dangerous to risk African players, especially the professionals plying their trade in Europe and other continents, to play under difficult conditions and facilities."





It must be said that there seems to be a small fount of pressure coming from the Royal Moroccan Football Federation's official offer to support Cameroon's hosting efforts. Even though in March, Fouzi Lekjaa, the Royal Moroccan Football Federation President, moved to end speculation regarding next year's AFCON during a press conference during the ongoing CAF Women's Football Symposium, let's think about it from CAF's perspective for a second.

With less than a year until AFCON 2019, to express doubt in a nation's preparations suggests the federation may have contingencies to fall back on. Even though Morocco was eventually looked over by FIFA in their selection of North America as World Cup 2026 hosts, they proved during that process that they had the resources and infrastructure to ensure the potential of a positive, professional, and safe experience for the players and fans alike on that scale.

Dieudonne Happi, the chairman of the Normalisation Committee appointed to run the Cameroonian Football Association said it was a historical moment to see that Morocco is ready to come in and help them stage the biennial tournament. "This is real brotherhood because the governments of the two countries have always been close," added the FECAFOOT chief. "This puts an end to all rumours. There is no way we can fail to help each other."

In addition to the indirect pressure for Morocco, CAF President Ahmad further expressed the possibility of the tournament being moved by urging Cameroon to be ready. "If you are not ready, come out open and say you are not ready," Ahmad urged, but will be ready next time. "In 1996, Burkina Faso was supposed to host the AFCON but said they were not ready, and South Africa took up the chance to host." Should Cameroon retain the 2019 event, it'll be the first time they've hosted AFCON since the 1972 edition, which was won by the Republic of Congo after defeating Mali 3-2 in the final.

"If you asked me", President Ahmad added," Cameroon would be the best country to host the AFCON now because of their football history, but there are still some questions about their readiness to host a successful tournament.

"Cameroon are still having big problems with infrastructure like the pitches and even hotels," added Ahmad. "Equatorial Guinea jumped in at the last moment to host 2015 AFCON and this can also happen."

The CAF are expected to officially pronounce whether or not Cameroon will retain their hosting rights during the CAF Extraordinary General Assembly to be held on September 30 in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. We wait with bated breath.



"I think he brings plenty in our team and I think it's also not easy for the new players to come into the Premier League but for him, he's unbelievable."

- Sadio Mane on Keita's impact

FT

**LET US KNOW  
WHAT YOU'D LIKE  
TO SEE IN OUR  
JULY NEWSLETTER!**

**Stay Connected**



**FirstTouch Africa**



**@firsttouch\_AF**



**@firsttouch\_AF**