

FIRST TOUCH

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HEROINES WITHOUT CAPES

LIVERPOOL'S FAB 3:

PREDATORY REIGN IS JUST
GETTING STARTED

IS KHAMA BILLIAT

THE MOST IMPORTANT
FOOTBALLER IN SOUTH AFRICA?

REMINISCING THE GLOBETROTTING
CAREER OF

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IS KHAMA BILLIAT THE MOST IMPORTANT FOOTBALLER IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Written By: Dennis Takaendesa

***"SHOULD YOUR SCHOOL
PLAY GWINYIRO PRIMARY
SCHOOL, THEY WOULDN'T A
STAND A CHANCE BECAUSE
THEY HAD KHAMA"***

I vividly remember as an eight year old student in primary school being told that should your school play Gwinyiro Primary School, they wouldn't stand a chance because they had Khama. That was wisdom curated by slightly older brothers and sisters of mine in Mufakose, a suburb in Harare, Zimbabwe who had the privilege to be in his inner circle and see him dazzle the Mufakose crowd, young and old alike. Khama Billiat must have been just thirteen at the

time, not enrolled in a fancy youth football academy but had made the dusty Mufakose streets and pitches his own. He was already the most important footballer in Mufakose, Harare and fast forward a few years, he has probably become Southern Africa's pride and treasure. But who is he really?

EARLY CAREER

Noises about him definitely got louder as he finished primary school and soon became an Aces Youth Soccer Academy player in Harare where he continued developing into a professional footballer eventually grabbing the attention of Zimbabwe Premier Soccer League giants, CAPS United who handed him his first professional contract. He was so good that Makepekepe failed to keep Billiat for more than three months as South African Premier League

side, Ajax Cape Town paid big money and snatched him from right under their noses. It was at Ajax Cape Town where his career really took off.

BLESSING THE SOUTH AFRICAN PSL GIANTS

It's generally considered a big break or breakthrough moment whenever a young player gets a chance to play for one of the big guns but for Khama Billiat, it was different. The big guns got a big break by winning his signature, he became an unfathomable blessing wherever he was. From 2010-13 at Ajax, Khama bagged a total 21 goals in 89 appearances for the Cape Town club. One of the memorable moments in that period was when Ajax welcomed Manchester United for a club friendly in July 2012. It was really a lowkey match as both teams fine tuned their methodologies before the new season, the match eventually ending in a 1-1 draw but Khama left a lasting impression on Manchester United legend, Rio Ferdinand. The retired England international described Billiat as an agile and exciting player to watch, with great speed and ball control.

It just got even better for the Zimbabwean as he eventually got a trial with Russian Premier League side, Lokomotiv Moscow in 2013 even though he signed for the Shoe-Shine Piano Boys, Mamelodi Sundowns.



2016, THE CROWNING YEAR

At Mamelodi Sundowns, Billiat cemented his place not just as great footballer in the country but across Africa. Bafana BaStyle refined their attractive style of play nicknamed shoe-shine piano with Khama in their ranks as he eventually formed a formidable partnership with youth striker, Percy Tau who recently got signed by English Premier League side, Brighton & Hove Albion. With both of them not short of pace, trickery and killer instinct - it was like watching Messi and Suarez decimate their opponents at Barcelona. He played an indispensable role in the team as Sundowns marched

on to glory, winning the CAF Champions League for the first time in their history in 2016, three Premier Soccer League titles, the 2017 CAF Super Cup, 2014-15 Nedbank Cup and the 2015 Telkom Knockout. It was a pretty solid five years from 2013-18 with many armpits raised moments as silverware came like running tap water for Khama and the Tshwane club. In total, he scored 39 goals for Sundowns in 99 appearances and was named the 2016 PSL Player of the Season, Players' Player of the Season and Midfielder of the Season. He was pimped to the individual continental award by teammate goalkeeper, Denis Onyango who took home the 2016 CAF Player Of The Year Award (for players based in Africa).

"Khama Billiat must have been just thirteen at the time, not enrolled in a fancy youth football academy but had made the dusty Mufakose streets and pitches his own. He was already the most important footballer in Mufakose, Harare and fast forward a few years, he has probably become Southern Africa's pride and treasure."

— Dennis Takaendesa, FirstTouch Africa

STILL MARCHING NOW, NOW UNTO LEGENDARY STATUS

The 28-year-old parted ways with Sundowns in the summer for another PSL giant, Kaizer Chiefs, for a new challenge. He has already scored 5 goals and assisted 3 others in all competitions for Amakhosi who are currently sitting third on the PSL league standings, a point behind bitter rivals Orlando Pirates. Chiefs will be confident that Billiat can help bring to Soweto, some long lost silverware. The Amakhosi gaffer, Giovanni Solinas was not slow to heap praise on Billiat and highlight his importance to the team;

"Barcelona have ten players and Messi. Kaizer Chiefs have ten players and Billiat. Khama is the best player in the PSL and he's one of those rare players who makes the difference."

— Giovanni Solinas, Kaizer Chiefs Coach

KHAMA, THE WARRIOR

He has been capped thirty times now by Zimbabwe and scored ten international goals. He is a major ingredient in the Warriors of Zimbabwe setup and a protagonist, as he oversaw the operation where most successful nation in the biggest Southern Africa Football tournament, COSAFA took home two more titles in 2017 and 2018. He is a crowd favorite and big game player for every club he has played in the most followed and competitive league in Southern Africa, he is a midfielder, a goal scorer, and a dazzler. He is Khama Billiat and perhaps the most important footballer in the Southern African football right now.

NATIONS IN FOCUS SERIES: DR Congo, the unsung hero of African football

Written By: Dennis Takaendesaa

Whether you are African or not, you probably have come across the fact the continent is richly endowed with vast natural resources. It's almost the singular biggest reservoir for the world's oil and minerals. What's also true is that the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular is a major powerhouse if not "the powerhouse" of everything. Put aside the cobalt mines providing the mineral for global smartphone manufacturers such as Apple, the Central African country is also a rich pool for footballing talent. They are a nation still figuring out their democratic

identity but way ahead in its football one. Now, why is this so?

DR CONGO, THE PERSONIFICATION OF CONSISTENCY IN THE GAME

It is an undeniable fact that West African nations such as Ghana, Nigeria and Ivory Coast together with North Africans ones in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and the likes of Tunisia are hugely celebrated for their successes in the football and quite rightly so if you ask me. In fact, the Pharaohs of Egypt is the most successful men's football team in Africa with a record seven AFCON titles while Nigeria's Super Falcons have won the most titles in the Women's African Cup of Nations history with ten. The Leopards of DR Congo might have won the tournament just twice, but have really been the most consistent and stable performer on that stage in recent times. They have hardly missed an AFCON tournament since 1994 while the above big guns have gone AWOL on a number of occasions. You might hardly see them on trophy podiums or the biggest of tournaments like the FIFA World Cup, but it will definitely won't be a lack of talent issue. Their current 40th place ranking on the Coca-Cola FIFA rankings,



and third in Africa behind Tunisia and Senegal just further tells the story of how good they are. They were even the highest scorers of the 2018 World Cup qualifier games for Africa, with Egypt slightly pipping them to a spot in Russia. Despite DR Congo's political and social challenges as a country, football has not stopped progressing and filling out some socio-economic gaps. For instance, at club level, DR Congo's domestic clubs have won the second highest number of continental titles, that is the CAF Champions League and the CAF Confederations Cup. They have a combined eight titles, six shy of the leaders Egypt. TP Mazembe, a club from Lubumbashi is one of the most feared clubs on the continent and a dream destination for many even though it still has to compete with carefully funded clubs such as those in the South African Absa Premiership. It's not only at home, the Congolese footballers shine abroad as well.

A GOOD NUMBER OF GLOBAL TALENTS TODAY ARE FROM DR CONGO

Forget the likes of the Lingala speaking Romelu Menama Bolingoli Lukaku, the Belgian record-scorer born to Congolese parents in the European country and made his mark on the world from there. In fact, there is an interesting relationship with the Belgians and DR Congo with Monaco's 21-year-old considered to be one of the world's bright talents, Youri Tielemans, Watford's Christian Kabasele and Crystal Palace's Christian Benteke all having some Congolese roots. The second-most expensive African footballer in history, Cedric Bakambu who switched Villareal for a Chinese Super League club after rocking the Spanish La Liga with a bag full of goals is Congolese. Some other notable talents in the game today who are Congolese include West Ham United's left winger/wingback in Arthur Masuaku, a born dribbler, super comfortable on the ball and my personal favorite, Yannick Bolasie. Before Zaha, Bolasie was kind of Crystal Palace's Zaha or maybe we should we say Zaha is now Palace's Bolasie? The 29-year-old who is currently an Everton player on loan at Aston Villa is such a joy to watch. He can dribble blind-eyed or sweep the pitch with his arm as he dribbles. Great great talent. Time will not allow me to mention the likes of Stoke City forward, Benik Afobe and many more.

The 2019 AFCON Qualifiers are currently ongoing with the Leopards being one of the favorites to qualify and to be once again dark horses with the capability to win the tournament in June next year. They are currently second behind Zimbabwe with both teams tied on four points in group G, a group also occupied by Liberia and the other Congo, Congo Brazzaville.

They might be an "introverted" nation but really a host to many things we love and need in the world. Football talent is no exception.

Do you have a favorite DR Congo footballer?

"Despite DR Congo's political and social challenges as a country, football has not stopped progressing and filling out some socio-economic gaps. For instance, at club level, DR Congo's domestic clubs have won the second highest number of continental titles, that is the CAF Champions League and the CAF Confederations Cup. They have a combined eight titles, six shy of the leaders, Egypt."

— Dennis Takaendesa, FirstTouch Africa



SOUTH AFRICA

PSL's "Shakespeare," Steve Komphela, may finally win Silverware

Written by: Siphosethu Thwala



A SURPRISINGLY TROPHYLESS CAREER

A man popular for his touchline match analysis and fatherly advice to football players, Steve Komphela is as unique as they come. The former Kaizer Chiefs mentor has endured some tough times in his coaching career, particularly during his time with the mighty Amakhosi but he now looks like he's on the rise again.

"Bra Steve" as fondly known by many, has come under severe scrutiny so far as his coaching credentials are concerned. During his time at Kaizer Chiefs, Komphela was unable to salvage any cup or league glory for one of the PSL's big boys. This made him unpopular amongst the Amakhosi faithful, causing the team's fans to riot every other match calling for the coach's sacking. It eventually came. What's more, Komphela has coached a few other Absa Premier Soccer league sides such as Free State Stars, Platinum Stars and Maritzburg United and is still yet to win any silverware. Such a bad record has earned Komphela an unlikeable reputation as many consider him to be an average coach and will remain so until he actually wins something.

Take nothing away from Bra Steve, I consider him to be one of the vastly experienced local coaches in South Africa. Unfortunately, being at a team like Kaizer Chiefs came with high expectations that the 50-year old tactician couldn't meet. Being trophyless for three consecutive seasons at a team as big as Chiefs is not something easily acceptable especially by the supporters. While others believe the coach was often times than not eluded by mother luck, things were just not falling into place for Bra Steve. His history for not winning any silverware didn't make things easier for him and many thought that misfortune was seemingly following him during his stay at Amakhosi.

"His mastery of the English language is second to none. In almost all of the post match interviews, he is seldom relenting to drop some words of unpopular wisdom in a serious manner that comes across as humorous. His use of rare english words and philosophical quotes can only be comprehended by few but widely accepted by all."

— Siphosethu Thwala, FirstTouch Africa

Having recently moved on from Amakhosi in the summer, Komphela was snatched by a Free State side, Bloemfontein Celtic to spearhead the team in the recently started ABSA premiership season. In what has been a terrific start for the team, under Komphela's management, Celtic have amassed a total of 13 points from the first 5 games of the season, only dropping points against Komphela's former employers in Chiefs during a 2-2 draw. This excellent run has set tongues wagging from the football fraternity and many have started believing that perhaps Komphela might be onto something here. To crown him for the glittering start to the 2017/18 season, Komphela was awarded the Absa Premiership Coach of the month for August. With Celtic looking like a well-oiled machine that is on a roll, this can probably be the season where Komphela finally breaks his duck and salvages some silverware in his cup-shy coaching career. However it should also be noted that it is still early in the season and a lot could still happen. Nonetheless, the signs are there and certainly football fans have noticed Steve's "comeback mission" judging from his team's performances.

HE IS PROBABLY NOT THE FIRST UNSUCCESSFUL COACH, WHY FEATURE HIM?

Outside the pitch, Komphela is your "Shakespeare" of the Absa Premiership. His mastery of the English language is second to none. In almost all of the post match interviews, he is seldom relenting to drop some words of unpopular wisdom in a serious manner that comes across as humorous. His use of rare english words and philosophical quotes can only be comprehended by few but widely accepted by all. That's typical vintage Komphela for you and it is in such moments that make him a popular figure in the football circles of Southern Africa. Being one of the most experienced coaches in South Africa, one would think it is only a matter of time before we see Komphela lift some silverware that has long eluded him. The breezing start to the season with Phunya Sele sele (Bloemfontein Celtic) seems to suggest that. Whether Celtic can go all the way remains to be seen. Can Steve do it? Is he the real deal? You decide.

HIDDEN GEMS SERIES: Franck Kessie

Written By: Tinotenda Magiya



Ivorian talent Franck Kessie moved to AC Milan in the summer of 2017 with a lot of hype around him in the Italian league. The midfielder enforcer looked to emulate the influence created by legends who played in his role at the club which include Seedorf, Pirlo, Gattuso, among others. In this piece, we look at where Kessie came from, what he brings to AC Milan and how the club has let him down in terms of his career progression.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

Franck Kessie initially joined AC Milan from Atalanta on a two-year loan deal. This was in the summer of 2017 when the club went all in with their transfers that summer in a bid to fight for UEFA Champions League qualification. Kessie came in as a raw talent but with a lot of promise to become a regular first team player in one of the biggest teams. He had scored goals from midfield like Yaya Toure did during his stint at Manchester City. The 21-year-old was also trusted with some penalty kick duties in a star studded team with players like Suso, Andre Silva, Bonucci, Rodriguez and Calhanoglu at AC Milan. He helped his team during the season especially in the UEFA Europa League before they got knocked out of the tournament by Arsenal. Nonetheless, Gattuso reserved some praise for his young successor who fought hard in the middle of the park against players of the calibre of Mesut Ozil. In the end, AC Milan, failed to lift a trophy in the 2017/18 season on top of their failure to qualify for the 2018/19 UEFA Champions League tournament. They finished 6th in the Serie A which left many disappointed.

KESSIE'S ABILITIES

If you did not know what he brings to the table already, it is great to know that he is comfortable with protecting the defence. Kessie is a no-nonsense type of midfielder who draws comparison only to a few players in his position today. The closest one, I could think of is World Cup Winner, N'golo Kante who annoys his opponents by tracking them down and shrugging them off the ball. It is no surprise that WhoScored identified one of his weaknesses as being the protagonist that commits too many fouls. Professional fouls if you ask me because he gets away with them and saves the team from counter attacks. He also averages 3.3 interceptions and 3.2 tackles per game. This type of player is rare to find in the current market. Teams like Liverpool and Manchester City lack that type of a traditional

defensive midfielder that Kessie is and it's only a matter of time before they come calling for the young African's service.

Besides, limiting a player of Kessie's calibre to focus solely on defensive duties would be a waste of his talent, and AC Milan have since noticed that. He offers so much more on the field of play with his fantastic ball control, dribbling ability and power to bomb up and down the pitch. Kessie can easily suit as the modern 'box-to-box' player who supports the team when in attack and also being the first to fly into a tackle when out of possession. His distance covered per 90 minutes averages at around 12.1km which is the third highest behind Vecino and Marco Benassi in Italian soccer. Kessie has the legs to roam the pitch and influence matches for AC Milan. He just needs quality players around him to keep developing his game.

Also, he comes to the rescue with his odd goals here and there. Franck Kessie has already scored 6 goals for AC Milan and has the potential to add more if he gets through on goal. Barcelona fans might not like hearing that Kessie has that striker's instinct that their former player, Paulinho, has – probably because they are probably bitter that the Brazilian left them for China after the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia. The youngster is not scared to make forward runs and create options for his teammates in the penalty box which is an asset for his team who need the goals if they are to compete with the best teams in Italy.

Finally, his all-round play and defensive contribution gives license to other players like Higuaín and Suso to play freely and express themselves in the last third of the pitch. Kessie's work rate basically relieves them of defensive duties which is every playmaker's dream. This brings out the best in those players and it would not be a surprise to see Higuain topping the scoring charts once more this season in the Italian Serie A despite the arrival of the Portuguese goal machine, Cristiano Ronaldo.





REMINISCING THE GLOBETROTTING CAREER OF KEVIN PRINCE-BOATENG

Written By: Tinotenda Magiya

THE STORY OF KEVIN PRINCE-BOATENG

There is so much to talk about when it comes to the career of the peculiar Ghanaian, Kevin Prince Boateng. Who does not remember his days at AC Milan when he played with Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Robinho and crew or his heroic efforts at the 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa where Ghana proudly carried the weight of the entire continent on its shoulders. The half-brother to the German footballer, Jerome Boateng, has enjoyed an illustrious career but it was not all rainbows and unicorns. The player came from humble beginnings and faced many setbacks to be where he is today. This is the untold story of an African child and star, Kevin Prince Boateng.

"After playing for ten European clubs across the Bundesliga, English Premier League ,and the Italian Serie A, he is still going and doesn't look like he will hang his boots anytime soon."

— Tinotenda Magiya, FirstTouch Africa

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The Ghanaian international was born in Germany and started his career at Hertha Berlin. He was not quite an early bloomer as he made his first team debut at the age of 20. He later moved to Tottenham in a deal reported to be worth £5.4million. His success at the club was limited and got loaned to Borussia Dortmund in 2009 where he had a decent showing in front of the Dortmund fans. Financial constraints meant that the club could not secure his services on a permanent basis which later saw him moving to Portsmouth.

PORTSMOUTH DAYS

It was at Portsmouth that he started showing signs of a potential World Cup player despite his issues with anger management. Although he led his club to the FA Cup final, he also went on to injure Michael Ballack's ankle in retaliation to a slap that he claimed to have received from German international who was at Chelsea at the time. That is the incident that made him unpopular among the German fans. Kevin Prince-Boateng then moved to Genoa in 2010 who immediately loaned him to AC Milan who made it permanent a year later.

THE BIG MOVE

The move to Milan is what brought attention to an attacking prodigy that had been flying under the radar. In the past decade, not many Africans were being trusted in that Number 10 role that players like Mesut Ozil have made a name for themselves in. It's quite difficult to remember one who played in that position aside from Kevin Prince. Since then, only Younes Belhanda and Ziyech are the notable Africans who have played as an attacking midfielder in Europe. Boateng became a highlight reel at the club where he won the Italian Serie A in the 2010/11 season before following that up with the Super Coppa Italiana later that year.

FIGHT AGAINST RACISM

Several Milan players were the targets of racial chants from a section of the Pro Patria crowd in a friendly match back in 2013. The former Ghanaian international reacted by kicking the ball into the stands before leaving the pitch, and his teammates followed him off.



LIFE AFTER AC MILAN

Boateng has always been on the move as he has played for FC Schalke, Las Palmas, Eintracht Frankfurt and Sassuolo since his departure from Milan in 2013. He, however, had a brief spell when he returned to the Italian club in 2016 but it was short lived as his contract was canceled by the club by mutual consent. Kevin is still pretty much an active footballer wearing the Sassuolo colors and turned 31 in March. After playing for ten European clubs across the Bundesliga, English Premier League and Italian Serie A, he is still going and doesn't look like he will hang his boots soon.





2018 WOMEN'S AFCON: HEROINES WITHOUT CAPES



Written By: Simiso Shabangu

As an African woman myself, I know that whenever you show an interest in “manly” sports like soccer, a good number of your neighbours will start questioning your sexuality. Once you start playing it, it does not get any better because you are told that nobody will marry you as your soccer will scare men away. In spite of all these stereotypes, there are women who have not just played soccer but have taken a huge societal stance, and are going to represent their nations.

As you pack your bags to Accra, Ghana for the 2018 Total Women's Africa Cup of Nations, here is a list of five women that you should look out for as they fly the flags of their countries high.

“There will of course be oozing talent, excellent tactics and impressive dribbles that will leave us yearning for more from others as well. Most importantly, this tournament will continue to combat the stereotype that soccer is a manly sport. Soccer is a passion that can be pursued by anyone, regardless of their gender.”

— Simiso Shabangu, FirstTouch Africa

ASISAT OSHOALA, NIGERIA



After winning the Africa's Female Footballer of the Year award in 2017, the 23-year old Nigerian has been rising from grace to glory. She has appeared for the Super Falcons in the 2010 and 2014 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup. She was with Liverpool ladies in 2013, before she was taken by Arsenal Ladies in 2016. She is currently in China where she is not just playing for the China Dalian Quanjian FC, but has been crowned the best striker in the Chinese Women's Super League. We are waiting expectantly to see what she will do for Nigeria in November 2018.

BARBRA BANDA, ZAMBIA



The number 11 is currently hailed as the Zambian Sportswoman of the Year and she was She-polopolo's top scorer in the 2017 Cosafa Women's Championship. Notably, she is the reason why the Zambian team is even present at the tournament as she scored the winning goal against the Mighty Warriors of Zimbabwe. The striker's tactics has wowed the whole of Southern Africa and we hope she will also grace the continent with her skills as it gathers in Ghana.

GRACE ASANTEWAA, GHANA



She is only 17 but the midfielder was crowned player of the match in Ghana's game against New Zealand in the final group game at the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup. If this young lady does grace us at the tournament, keep your eyes on her. It is inspiring and quite powerful to have someone at her age who has developed her passion to the level that Grace has. She is a gem for now and the future of global football.

THEMBI KGATLANA, SOUTH AFRICA



The 22-year old was so instrumental in South Africa's COSAFA Women's Championship in Zimbabwe that she left with the Player of the Tournament award. As if that was not enough, she has also been nominated for the African Player of the Year Award. This means that in this tournament, we will not just be looking out for her spectacular performance on the field, but we will be watching if she takes this award away as well. She is not just the top goal scorer in her team, but she also represented the University Sports South Africa National Team at the World Student Games in Taipei, Taiwan.

GABRIELLE ABOUDI ONGUENE, CAMEROON



She is also nominated for the Female CAF Player of the Year Award, but this is not the first time the recognition has shone on her. She was the best Player at 2016 Africa Cup of Nations. As we can guess, this title does not just fall on anyone, but it comes as a result of hard work and unquestionably splendid performances. These are some of the things that are drawing us towards this 29-year old Cameroonian player. She is currently progressing her career with Rossiyanika in the Russian Championship.

This is not in anyway a comprehensive list of the women that we should look out for in this tournament. There will of course be oozing talent, excellent tactics and impressive dribbles that will leave us yearning for more from others as well. Most importantly, this tournament will continue to combat the stereotype that soccer is a manly sport. Soccer is a passion that can be pursued by anyone, regardless of their gender.



Asisat of Nigeria competing for the ball amongst some Senegalese players.



LIVERPOOL'S FAB 3 PREDATORY REIGN IS JUST GETTING STARTED

Written By: Dennis Takaendesa

PREAMBLE

Those who took the liberty to gather the spoils on Tuesday (18/09), UEFA Champions League night at Anfield will tell you that Liverpool plundered the Parisians and made their coveted and expensively assembled squad look like knock-offs from a cheap store. Okay, maybe the description is a bit exaggerated but that's exactly what I thought, jaw dropped as the Reds ran out 3-2 victorious against PSG on Champions League Day 1 in a dominant performance decorated by the men in red but in the stands' "you never will walk alone" spirit packaged in a song-like noises while the visitors lit flames as they tried to settle in an unfamiliar hostile Anfield environment.

What really was on my mind as the referee blew the final whistle to signal the end of the match was, "Salah and Mane are onto something special here. They could go down in history as flanks of the most devastating attack in world football". My African blood couldn't help but selfishly feel proud for the lads.

GREAT ATTACKING TRIOS IN RECENT TIMES

Well, you probably won't exhaust the list but names that cannot be robbed of a mention include Barcelona's MSN with Messi, Suarez and Neymar who led Barca's capture of the Champions League, La Liga and Copa Del Rey trophies under Luis Enrique in the 2014/15 season. El Clasico rivals Real Madrid also had BBC with Bale, Benzema and Cristiano Ronaldo who were regular Champions League entertainers especially in their recent three straight conquest of the competition before Ronaldo departed for Serie A giants, Juventus. PSG's "prada" looking MEN with Mbappe, Edinson Cavani and Neymar have been bullying opponents in the French Ligue 1 but got a taste of their own medicine against part of the FAB 3, Salah, Firmino and Mane. Liverpool's attacking trio may not have costed big money to put in

place but are really claiming a stake at global dominance. Here is a number for you; in May 2017, the FAB 3 Became the highest scoring trio in a single UCL campaign with a total of 29 goals surpassing Real Madrid's BBC who had a record 28 goals. With growth inevitable, the extent of the FAB 3's reign is unimaginable?

"Clearly, these two can understand each other more. If they can be devastating at this level, imagine the damage they could do if the bromance improves. With Roberto Firmino being the anchor of this cutting edge trio, the slower of the two players who holds up the ball and shoves defenders for the flankers in Mane and Salah to run down the wings and inside the box - we are in for a real treat."

— Dennis Takendesa, FirstTouch Africa

26 IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

Now make no mistake, Salah and Mane were far below their usual standard in the PSG contest on Tuesday night with both of them failing to find the back of the net but what we saw from the match revealed a lot about how much they can grow and win even bigger battles. In particular, Mane appeared to be too keen to score such that at times he would shoot when the best decision would have been laying off the ball to a teammate. Salah happened to be a regular victim of such decisions. There are reports that even the Egyptian fans are not happy with their starman being starved off goals because of a supposed dysfunctional relationship with the Senegalese. Clearly, these two can understand each other more. If they can be devastating at this level, imagine the damage they could do if the bromance improves. With Roberto Firmino being the anchor of this cutting edge trio, the slower of the two players who holds up the ball and shoves defenders for the flankers in

Mane and Salah to run down the wings and inside the box - we are in for a real treat. To add to their ability, Liverpool's trio still has more time to show the world what they are all about. They are all still 26, a prime age in football and relatively young compared to other trios. If the doubters thought Liverpool's Champions League final appearance was a fluke, their recent dominance in the Premier League was infant then perhaps the Tuesday night win against one of the celebrated teams in the world in PSG showed that they are really open for business and that their attackers are not shy to shop anywhere, anytime and from anyone.

KLOPP, THE KEY ORCHESTRATOR

In most cases, the challenges have always been to keep the trio, that is to ward off interest from any potential suitors seeking some members of the trio and to distribute the pressure from just the trio to the whole team.

Salah, Mane and Firmino have entertained us, maybe have even just begun and all media eyes and any other eyes are likely to narrow down to only their performances. This usually adds unnecessary pressure on the players to deliver all the time which is next to impossible. Liverpool Manager, Jurgen Klopp seem to know one or two things about managing players and expectations. With his midfield set-up also able to bang in goals in Keita, Milner and Wijnaldum and excess world class attackers in Shaqiri and Daniel Sturridge, you would really back the German to always do the right thing by taking some players off the firing line and mix up the recipe as he did against PSG to preserve the potency of the entire team.

Whether or not the Merseyside club would be able to retain the services of all three for the foreseeable future is really down to the future when it arrives. Only time will tell. For now, we will just sit back, relax and enjoy Salah and Mane, African brothers who are protagonists in the world conquering trio that is **FAB THREE**.



UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE: Five Young Africans To Watch

Written by: Tinotenda Magiya

The time that we have all been waiting for has now arrived. The most enticing soccer tournament at club level, the UEFA Champions League, returns on Tuesday, 18th of September, 2018. The very best clubs in European football will once again face each other in the group stages of the elite European soccer tournament in a bid to win the UEFA Champions League trophy from defending champions Real Madrid who have won it 3 times in a row to date. The Spanish giants are one of the favorites to win the competition but the rest of the teams in the 32 team tournament have made necessary improvements with the aim to compete at the highest level. This feature is not about identifying the team with the best chances of winning the 2017/18 edition. Instead, it is an opportunity to present the five African players that you need to watch out for in the group stages of the UEFA Champions League tournament aside from the popular ones like Mohammed Salah, Sadio Mane, Mahrez and crew.



ANDRE ONANA

FirstTouch brought you a short piece about the young goalkeeper who is currently plying his trade in the Netherlands for Ajax Amsterdam. He made the right noises last season when he made the number 1 spot his at the dutch club. Onana is a 22-year old Cameroonian that still has a lot to learn from the game but is already trusted at a club with so much history of developing world class players like Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Suarez, Christian Eriksen only to mention but just a few. Onana's Ajax is seeded in Group E with German giants, Bayern Munich, a fairly strong team in Benfica and AEK Athens.

These coming six matches will be like cup finals for the Cameroonian goalkeeper who dreams of playing for a big club after having come through Barcelona's La Masia academy. Ajax has already kept 5 clean sheets in the 6 matches that the young African has been between the sticks. It will take a lot for him to maintain such stats when playing with stronger opponents in the UEFA Champions League. Onana will surely be out to prove a point that he is ready for his big move and should be a player on your radar as you watch the group stages of the tournament.

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— Tinotenda Magiya, FirstTouch Africa



ACHRAF HAKIMI

His move to Dortmund was quite a shocker for us especially after being one of the best players for Morocco in the 2018 FIFA World Cup group stages before they were knocked out in Russia. We assumed that he would cement his place at least on the bench at Real Madrid ahead of Nacho who had been used sparingly as a deputy to Carvajal. Nonetheless, Real Madrid went on to buy another player in Odriozola which meant that the Moroccan international was further down the pecking order at the Los Blancos. He moved to Germany with an aim to prove a point that he is ready to play for the biggest club in the world but he has not been handed the opportunity yet as he is still yet to make his first appearance for Dortmund. If given a start, Hakimi will be doing what he does best which is defend with high intensity and overlap whenever he gets the chance. These are assets that big clubs need and he will be eager to show that he can do it on a regular basis. Achraf Hakimi will surely grab the opportunity once it is handed to him.



VICTOR WANYAMA

Yes. Must be surprised to see the Kenyan defensive midfielder on the list of the players to look out for in the UEFA Champions League especially considering the fact that he has not been starting matches for Tottenham in the English Premier League. The 27-year old is a defensive shield that has somehow struggled to cement a first team spot in the Spurs team despite being a better tackler than the preferred Dier. The European tournament comes soon after the international break where Dier was integral to the English team which means that he stands a chance of being fatigued. Victor Wanyama might be on his way out of Tottenham if he fails to grab his opportunity this season and this should serve as the necessary motivation to play his best football when called upon in the UEFA Champions League. Victor Wanyama has a knack for scoring long range goals and Tottenham will need these especially when playing against a very much improved Inter Milan team that has so much quality throughout the pitch. They will certainly not make it easy for Pochettino's men to play their game which requires the African's physique to budge through players, create space for his teammates or himself and hopefully score. Wanyama will be playing for his life, his career.



KEITA BALDE

The Senegalese winger must not be a surprise call on this list after his unexpected move back to Serie A with Inter Milan. The Italian club paid an estimated £4 million for loaning the 23-year old from French Ligue 1 side Monaco.

The African player is still yet to score and provide an assist for his teammates this season which should be something that is on the back of his head whenever he plays. He has been handed the opportunity in Serie A already when he deputised for Icardi who was being rested for the UEFA Champions League fixtures. Balde will be looking to play in his preferred right-wing position and show the promise that Monaco saw in him when they sought his services to replace Mbappe. It is undeniable that this could prove to be a lot of pressure after he also lost his place in the first team of Senegal. He was limited to second half cameos off the bench at the FIFA World Cup 2018. They say that a wounded dog is the deadliest, and Keita must be just that. He could prove his doubters wrong in this stage of the competition.



BERTRAND TRAORE

Finally, we have the Burkina Faso striker who currently plays for Lyon who are seeded in UEFA Champions League Group F with Manchester City, Hoffenheim and Shakhtar Donetsk. Traore will face some stiff competition in this stage and Lyon will be looking to the player to rescue them with his goals. The 23-year old left Chelsea for Lyon to save his career after cutting a frustrated figure from the endless loan spells which did not warrant a spot for the young forward in the London club's team. He has scored two goals already and will be looking to add more to his campaign in the group stages. Probably not against Manchester City because they are in a league above the other teams in the group. Maybe against Shakhtar. Traore did not rule out a move back to Chelsea because he still wishes to play in the English Premier League. The African striker will be hungry for goals and will look to hurt the aforementioned teams when supported by players like Memphis Depay. If Lyon are to have a chance to qualify to the next round, Bertrand Traore will have to carry the team with his finishing.

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