

JUNE ISSUE

# FIRST TOUCH

2019 AFCON ISSUE



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# FT's 2019 AFCON Stadium Guide

By Simiso Shabangu

## Introduction

Imagine if the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations were like high school lectures where you would have to go to the same place every day to attain value. It would be quite boring. The fun comes with watching players from a different stadium now and again, to see the players in different lens. The challenge that comes with that though might be the difference in cultures in the host communities which fans and players alike would need to adjust to quickly. This is where we come in with a pre-tournament detailed stadium guide that will give you all that you need to sit back and enjoy the games. It has been declared that the AFCON will be played in the Cairo International, Air Defense (30 June), Al Salam, Alexandria, Suez and Ismailia stadiums. The opening and final match will be hosted by the Cairo Stadium.



### Cairo International Stadium

The Cairo International Stadium is located in Nasr City of Giza and was built in 1960. Over the years, it has gone over certain renovations to ensure that it is still relevant to today's soccer needs. It was renovated in 2005 and of course in 2019 to ensure that it will be ready to host Africa's finest. It will not be the first time it has been home to a major tournament, having hosted the 1986 Africa Cup of Nations finals. Twenty years later in 2006, Cairo also hosted an AFCON final. In 2009, it was home to the FIFA U-20 World Cup. In this year's AFCON, it will host the Group A games, semi-final and the final match. At its full capacity, this stadium can carry up to 75 000 soccer fans.

Locally, it is home to Zamalek and Ah-Ahly FC (which we once provided a detailed account of its journey to continental dominance at club level). For all the great memories that it has amassed over time, Cairo International is nicknamed the Stadium of Horror. While enjoying the game, it might be great to give this stadium respect for the years it has lived. It is much much older than the people who will be on its turf.

Cairo City is the heart of Egypt that keeps the rest of the country alive even at night. While enjoying yourself in the games, it would be great to immerse yourself in the street food and how Egyptians live.



### Air Defence (30 June) Stadium

While all the other stadiums were going through the noises of hammering of innovation, this one was untouched because it was already looking sleek and ready for the 2019 AFCON. Only the roads around it were recently refurbished for the purposes of the Nations Cup tournament. The 30 June stadium was built in 2012 as home to the Air Defence Sports Village. In case you were also wondering why a place would be named after a date, here is why: It was simply founded on the 30 th of June together with other buildings which were being built by the Air Defence Force as part of the Olympic Village. It can carry up to 30 000 people. It is home to Pyramid FC who play in the Egyptian Premier League. Other than hosting football matches, it also hosts athletics, so you will also have a look at the grounds that train Egypt's athletes while you are still there.





### ***Al Salam Stadium***

It is located in the Northern part of Cairo, and like the Air Defence Stadium, it can carry up to 30 000 people. The 10-year-old stadium was built in 2009 to host the FIFA U-20 World Cup. It has hosted numerous local games between Al-Ahly and Zamalek. Like the aforementioned stadiums, it has more to offer than just the main pitch. It has hotels and training fields circling it. During the AFCON, it will host the Group D matches.



### ***Alexandria Stadium***

Unlike most of the stadiums, this one is located outside of Cairo and in the Mediterranean City of Alexandria. The city has had its own fair share of hosting of sports matches. It hosted the AFCON tournament in 2006 and it will host the Group B games in the 2019 AFCON. The Alexandria Stadium is home to Egyptian Premier League sides Al Ittihad, Smouha and Olympic Club. Even though it can carry only 20 000 people, it is still called "Home of Beautiful" because it is the oldest stadium, built in 1929. As an ancient city, Alexandria holds some of Egypt's iconic buildings and monuments which include the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and Greco-Roman Museum. Maybe one evening when the games are going well or not, you can take a peep at the city.



### ***Suez Stadium***

Even though it was opened in 1990, it will host its first international games this year. It was recently renovated this year to host the Nations Cup to increase its capacity to 20 500. It is located in the beautiful city of Suez which is characterised by touristic places such as Red Sea Resorts which are 55km from the city. The Group E teams who will have their matches hosted there will have more than the game to play. The city of Suez streams from a rich mining history, but has grown to position itself as the best commercial and industrial centre at the Red Sea that people are quite keen to visit.

### ***Ismailia Stadium***

Ismailia is arguably one of the most beautiful cities in the North Eastern side of Egypt and the players will just be caught in the midst of all that beauty. The home to Ismaily SC will be more than able to carry about 18 500 guests. It will welcome all the Group F games and one Group E game. It has also hosted the 2006 African Cup of Nations and the U-20 World Cup in 2009. There were some rumours that this city will not be included among the 2019 AFCON hosts because of the fans' clash that happened between Ismaily SC and Tunisian's Club Africain during a CAF Champions' League a while ago. This says that while fans are enjoying the games there, they should be conscious of their behaviour lest they enforce the stereotypes that may form against the beautiful Ismailia. This is a vibrant city with art so make sure you grab souvenir while still there.

### ***Conclusion***

If there is something we cannot doubt, it is the success and joy (or not for some) that will come with the 2019 AFCON Cup. Egypt has also opened the arms of its beautiful cities to host the rest of Africa. This guide has given us a feel of what to expect when we get to the different stadiums. While

enjoying the games, let us remember to explore the cities and most importantly respect the culture of the Egyptian people.



# Group D, the “Group of Death”

- Namibia, South Africa, Ivory Coast, Morocco

By Margaret Mandeya



Dubbed “the group of death,” group D of AFCON 2019 is arguably the toughest one of the eight determined by CAF in April. Three teams, Morocco, South Africa and Ivory Coast, have the potential to make it to the round of 16. Namibia also makes their appearance in the group of death after qualifying for the showpiece, for the first time since 2008. South Africa make an AFCON comeback after failing to book a spot in the 2017 edition and also making his anticipated entry in group D is Africa's favourite Frenchman, Morocco's current coach Herve Renard. The gaffer has coached 5 African national teams, leading two of them to AFCON titles including Ivory Coast who will go head to head against Morocco.

## The Elephants of Ivory Coast

Anchored by the talent pool of local based players, two-time AFCON champions Ivory Coast have more than fair odds of progressing to the knock out stage. Ivory Coast is synonymous for grooming world class players; this year is no different with a roster of experienced and highly skilled players. The forward trio of Cornet, Zaha and Nicolas Pepe make up a must see combination that will likely give defenders a run for their money. The Elephants' young talent represented by Pepe, Ibrahim Sangaré and ASEC defender Wonlo Coulibaly is exciting to watch and will usher in the new

generation of household names to continue the legacy of the Ivorian greats. Ivory Coast generally has an advantage when it comes to the attacking part of play. Eric Bailly's injury is a bit of a knock for the Elephants on the backline but despite this setback; the Elephants still have Wonlo Coulibaly and Tottenham defender, Serge Aurier.

## South Africa's Bafana Bafana

Bafana is hoping to make a strong come back to Africa's biggest tournament after missing out in 2017. After qualifying alongside Nigeria in Group E, unbeaten if I may add, the Southern African giants are in form. Stuart Baxter has named a provisional 30-man squad where he chose to take the mostly young talent from the local ABSA Premier League to Egypt. Percy Tau is one of the biggest names on the team and Bafana's star player. Missing from the squad is veteran goalkeeper Itumeleng Kune due to an injury, making the first choice for the goalkeeper a toss-up between Wits United goalie Darren Keet, Ronwen Williams of Super-Sport and Kaizer Chiefs' Bruce Bvuma.





## The Atlas Lions from Morocco

After making their world cup campaign where they exited in the group stages, Morocco will attempt glory at the continental stage which they last tested in 1976. The Atlas Lions are a firm favourite to progress to the knock out round of the showpiece after qualifying with ease. As would be expected, Herve Renard stuck to his world cup squad in the provisional 27-man roster with the same players that held Spain to a 2-2 draw in Russia 2018. The North African team is not short of powerhouse names — some of those featured are Saudi League top scorer Abderazzak Hamdallah, former Juventus defender Mehdi Benatia and the subject of major transfer speculation in Europe's top leagues, Ajax midfielder Hakim Ziyech.

## Namibia and their Brave Warriors

Namibia is the lowest ranked team in the group d line-up. The Brave Warriors qualified in the most dramatic fashion as a fortuitous fateful turn of events saw them added to the 24 team roster despite losing to Zambia 1- 4 on final match-day. Unfortunately for Namibia, they will come into AFCON after being knocked out in the first stage of COSAFA Cup, not the preferred momentum. They will begin their AFCON campaign against Morocco.

## FIXTURES NOT TO MISS

### Morocco vs Ivory Coast

*Morocco and Ivory Coast are both former winners. The last time that the Elephants won, they were under the coaching of Herve Renard, Morocco's current coach. Ibrahim Kamara's men have the biggest challenge of the group against the Atlas Lions. Nicolas Pepe's 22 league goals and 11 assists which helped Ligue 1 side, Lille OSC finish second and secure a Champions League qualification make him a star to watch. He has solidified himself as a critical player in the Ivorian squad. Morocco will likely win their match-ups against Namibia and South Africa, while the Ivory Coast - South Africa game is still a coin toss. This match is the toughest one to predict because of Morocco and Ivory Coast are on equal footing in most regards. It is a must watch of the group stages to see how Herve Renard's will fare against his former employers.*

### South Africa vs Namibia

*Bafana Bafana will have better odds against Namibia. However, the Namibians will have to win this match to stand a chance of reaching the knockout stages. Overall, South Africa are the stronger side, Namibia will have to break through Stuart Baxter's defensive formation, which will not be an easy task for the Brave Warriors. A win for Bafana will rattle the qualifying race against Ivory Coast.*



# Who are Burundi, Madagascar and Mauritania?

By Dennis Takaendesa

## MANDELA'S CALL

Every now and then, a generation is called upon to be great; you can be that great generation. Those are words in Madiba's own handwriting. Independent South Africa's first President, Nelson Mandela clearly had an insight and vision that transcended his time, domain or the politics of nations. No wonder he is regarded as one of the greatest persons to have ever lived, whose birthday is celebrated even long after he is gone. Of course, this note is not a Mandela refresher course, though that would also be pretty cool. The Barea of Madagascar, Intamba of Burundi and Al-Murabitun of Mauritania clearly took a leaf out of the late Pan-African's book by choosing to be that great generation in the footballing history of their dear nations. Let's explore how far they have come, how they made it and assess their affinity to write even newer history as they make their debut appearance at the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt.



## BURUNDI

### Brief history

Nicknamed Intamba m'Urugamba in the local Kirundi language, which means the Swallows in the War, the Burundi men's national football team fought the good fight by winning the East African nation their first ever AFCON finals appearance. With all due respect, the close to 11 million people nation is hardly recognisable as one of Africa's 54 nations, let alone the world. They are a rich people with plenty to share with the rest of the world but assumes a status as one of the most introverted nations of the world.

The not so informed weren't previously convinced that Burundi even had a national football team until they knocked out some hotshots to grab the elusive AFCON spot. Intamba actually first graced the football scene as early as 1964 in an international match against neighbors Uganda, a miserable affair in which they lost 7-0. Just like any other developing team, they took even more knocks as the years went by, more pronounced being their heaviest defeat to date, an 8-0 thrashing at the hands of Congo in 1977. They had to wait for March of 2017 to get a 7-0 victory of their own against lowly ranked Djibouti. Over the years, they rarely did a lot that warranted recognition, failing to qualify for the FIFA World Cup and only came close to qualify for the 1994 AFCON tournament. Guinea crashed their hopes in the final playoff, winning on penalty shootouts. The Swallows have mostly been known in CECAFA, East & Central Africa's organized football tourney, but remained adrift of a major tournament appearance let alone triumph, until now. Egypt 2019 will be their first hunting ground and best believe that the Burundi people will flock in numbers and stop every other business to back their heroes to continue swallowing new victories and soar in uncharted territories.



## HOW THEY MADE IT?

Quite honestly, there had never been a better opportunity for Intamba to secure a historic AFCON finals appearance than now when the competition will pit 24 finalists for the first time, extended from the usual 16. But, doing the business on the pitch would always pose a far from easy challenge given the level of competition and growth of football across the African continent.



Seeded in pot 3 of 6, Burundi straight away earned a group stage qualifiers spot alongside the highly rated Mali, Gabon and the preliminary round winners, South Sudan. The odds were obviously in favour of Mali and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's Gabon to proceed to the Egypt 2019 finals.

Intamba did not only steal Gabon's assumed spot but finished the qualifiers unbeaten. They did what was expected of them by beating South Sudan home and away but caused a few upsets by holding Mali and the 2017 hosts, Gabon in the other 4 matches played over two legs. Even the 2018/19 English Premier League Golden Boot winner with his 22 goals for Arsenal, Aubameyang, could not rescue the Panthers past a stubborn Burundi side determined to write new history. What makes their story even more compelling and this generation, undeniably Burundi's best football generation is that both the most capped and the highest goal scorer of all time are in the current squad. The 29-year-old Karim Nizigiyimana with record 52 caps and 26-year-old forward Fiston Abdul Razak on 17 international goals. The latter was even the second top goal scorer in the 2019 AFCON qualifiers after Nigeria's Odion Ighalo with 6 goals in 6 matches.

Some of the stars of the Burundi national team who have made rounds on the international scene and appearing in the English Premier League include 25-year-old midfielder, Gael Bigirimana who featured for a Newcastle side that made the top six in EPL. The controversial but highly talented Saido Berahino is another. The 25-year-old forward who last appeared for Stoke City is keen to represent Intamba in what he has labelled, "the biggest tournament" he will play in come June 2019.

At a time when most African nations are hiring football coaches from abroad, Burundi made it to their first finals under the guidance of Oliver Niyungeko, only their second local coach in their history, definitely has a nice ring to the overall story.

## EXAMINING THE PROSPECTS OF NEW HISTORY

Well, Intamba has so far written a fairy-tale story which will unlikely continue in the next few weeks. Honestly, it's enough reward for them and their fans that they will play in the biggest football tournament on the continent. The challenge doesn't become any easier going forward.

Drawn in group B against tournament favorites Nigeria, dark horses Guinea who dominated 2015 AFCON winners Ivory Coast in the qualifiers as well fellow debutants, Madagascar – it's a bloody affair.

*Here is a list of their fixtures:*

*22nd of June*  
**NIGERIA VS BURUNDI,**  
*27th of June*  
**MADAGASCAR VS BURUNDI**  
*30th of June*  
**BURUNDI VS GUINEA**

**Verdict:** If they can beat Madagascar and get a result against either Nigeria or Guinea, Intamba will most definitely set themselves up for a round of 16 spot, either as group runners up or one of the four best, third placed teams. They may be debutants with nothing to lose but their track record shows nothing is impossible for them Swallows.

## EXAMINING THE PROSPECTS OF NEW HISTORY

### Brief history

In terms of area size or the population, the Island of Madagascar is not as small as Burundi but their football history has been just as unattractive. The vast Indian Ocean islandic nation first made rounds in the footballing world back in 1947, participating in the Triangulaire tournament organised for fellow islanders Mauritius and Reunion. Back then, Barea were still very much under the shadow of the now lowly ranked Mauritius, suffering the heaviest loss at their ugly neighbor's hands. A 7-0 humbling in July 1952. They first played opposition outside the aforementioned nations in 1960, and in subsequent tournaments organised for French Speaking nations. It is through mingling with the likes of Burkina Faso, Chad and Benin, that they recorded their biggest win in history, a 8-0 thrashing of Congo Brazzaville. They began making strides up but never really became a threatening side. Unfamiliar with neither a FIFA World Cup nor an AFCON finals appearance, Barea's height of glory ended in the COSAFA, Southern African nations football tournament, which they have never won since their debut appearance in 2002. Their highest achievement was a third-place finish in South Africa 2015 and their only silverware has come in the form of 2 triumphs at the Indian Ocean Island Games in 1990 and 1993, which don't really count for a lot. It was during that period when they achieved their highest ever FIFA ranking of 74. Madagascar may be ranked 104 th in the world as of 4 April 2019 but what they have achieved by securing an AFCON finals ticket to Egypt 2019, surpasses all, its perhaps the realisation of their wildest dreams. Adding to that, what better time to do it, than when the serving CAF President, Ahmad Ahmad is Malagasy. The close to 26 million people nation is definitely flying without wings!

### HOW THEY MADE IT?

Barea had to do the most amongst all the 24 AFCON finalists. Seeded in pot 5 of 6, the last pot of all nations entering the qualifiers, they had to play a preliminary round match against Sao Tome and Principe to earn a group stage spot. After handsomely dismissing them 4-2 on aggregate; Senegal, Equatorial Guinea and Sudan awaited them in group A of the qualifiers, a group in which most gave them no chance. A 2-2 home draw against favorites Senegal on match-day two raised eyebrows and the dream train was on its way. Barea followed the miracle of Senegal with upsetting Equatorial Guinea, twice in three days with consecutive 1-0 victories.



With two games to spare, the unheralded Madagascar together with Senegal became first nations to qualify for Egypt 2019 apart from the hosting nation. Respectfully, Malagasy nationals' names may seem like wifi passwords to many, with little or unrecognisable involvement in some of the biggest tournaments or leagues in the world, but they have been more than impressive. All-time leading goal scorer, captain and veteran forward, Faneva Andriatsima is expected to continue leading the Barea further into dreamland. He may just well be the greatest footballer indeed the nation has ever seen.

## EXAMINING THE PROSPECTS OF NEW HISTORY

Just like all the debutants, with no experience at this level, Madagascar are more that content to have reached the finals. Anything above that is welcome luxury. Their greatest hope of getting a result will be against fellow debutants Burundi whereas matches against Guinea and Nigeria are but much needed experiences to play against the top sides on the continent.

*Here is a list of their fixtures:*

*22nd of June*  
**GUINEA VS MADAGASCAR,**  
*27th of June*  
**MADAGASCAR VS BURUNDI,**  
*30th of June*  
**MADAGASCAR VS NIGERIA,**

**Verdict:** In my opinion, they will finish fourth in group A. Just like Panama who made a historic FIFA World Cup appearance in 2018 with oldest average aged team and got outrun by younger opponents, Barea could have the same fate. They may not be the oldest team but could face numerous problems against the relatively younger Burundi, not mentioning favorites Nigeria and highly dangerous Guinea, captained by Liverpool midfielder in Naby Keita.

## MAURITANIA

### Brief history

You probably are familiar with the trend amongst all the three debutants. They will not only be making their first AFCON finals appearances in Egypt 2019, but also their first ever major tournament participation given the absence of any pleasant history with neither the FIFA World Cup nor Summer Olympics. The West African nation probably had the least interesting history among fellow debutants, Burundi and Madagascar. The Lions of Chinguetti first played football in April 1963 after their independence from France, a 6-0 loss to Congo in Senegal as part of L'Amite tournament.

What followed were a series of humiliating results without scoring amongst which included a 11-0 defeat to Mali and 14-0 annihilation by Guinea. Al-Murabitun first achieved competitive avoidance of defeat in 1976, 13 years after formation, when they drew 1-1 against Burkina Faso who were then called Upper Volta in the 1978 FIFA World Cup qualification matches. Their first ever win came 4 years later, a 2-1 home win against Mali in the Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers. A 2019 Egypt AFCON finals appearance is by far their highest ever accolade and boy, did they did it in style? It was definitely worth the wait.

## HOW THEY MADE IT?

The Lions of Chinguetti never looked like a minnow from day one of the 2019 AFCON qualifiers. Two wins in their first two matches against Botswana and Burkina Faso earned them a reputation as the tournament's most dangerous surprise package. The 2-0 win against Burkina Faso was most impressive. They made light-work of the 2013 AFCON runners-up, scoring two goals in 4 minutes of the first half.

They however capitulated in the ensuing match, losing 4-1 to Angola, perhaps the pressure and hype was catching up with them. Al-Murabitun did not take long and were at it again, getting one over Angola on home soil, four days later and secured a historic AFCON berth in the next match against the Zebras of Botswana. Burkina Faso restored pride with 1-0 win over their fellow West Africans on final match-day but it was all too little too late, the job was already done. They could have finished top of their group but an inferior goal difference to Angola stood in the way of that. That's just how good they were.

Under French gaffer, Corentin Martins, Mauritania have earned a likeable reputation as one of the youngest, most thorough and hardworking teams. Amongst those to look out for is the 21-year-old midfielder, Hacen El Ide who plies his trade for Spanish side, Real Valladolid B. At that tender-age, El Ide is already the 5th most capped player and the 3rd highest scorer in Mauritania's history. The most capped and highest scorer is obviously captain Moulaye Ahmed Khalil who will lead the line as the Lions of Chinguetti target further scalps of the big boys in Egypt.

## EXAMINING THE PROSPECTS OF NEW HISTORY

As a result of being drawn in Group E, alongside Tunisia, Mali and Angola; they once again kick off things in Egypt with the odds against them. Even though the 5 million people nation of Mauritania is over the moon because of their nation's historic qualification, there could be a set of their fans who are intentionally targeting more. The potential of their young side is there for all too see and might be around the top circles for quite some time.





*Here is a list of their fixtures:*

24th of June  
**GMALI VS MAURITANIA,**  
 29th of June  
**MAURITANIA VS ANGOLA,**  
 2nd of July  
**MAURITANIA VS TUNISIA,**

**Verdict :** Al-Murabitun obviously know Angola very well from the qualifiers and could have some unfinished business with them. Being one of the most youthful and exciting sides to watch, I suspect they will reach the round of 16. It's not very far from them to get a result against either Mali or Tunisia given they already dispatched the highly rated Burkina Faso out of the competition.

**Cheikh Moulaye Ahmed**  
*Mauritanian Forward*





# Who are the favourites: Senegal, Nigeria and Egypt ?

By Siphosethu Thwala

The 32nd edition of the biggest football tournament in Africa, the Africa Cup of Nations, is at our doorstep. Soon, 24 national teams will set foot in the land of Egypt to battle it out for the coveted cup. Amongst these teams, a number of powerhouses will be present, many of which are earmarked as favorites to win the tournament. These include amongst others, West African giants Senegal and Nigeria, as well as the host nation itself, Egypt. Below, we delve deeper into each of these three countries' prospects and chances of winning the cup.



## Senegal

Despite being one of the most consistent sides in Africa, one finds it hard to believe that Senegal have never lifted the AFCON trophy in 14 previous appearances at the tournament. Rather, the team's best showing at the tournament was when they became runners-up to Cameroon during the 2002 finals. In the last edition of the tournament, the Teranga Lions went out at the quarter-final stage, having arrived at the tournament as favorites. However, this is expected to change as the Senegalese side has been able to rediscover their form over the qualifying stages of the AFCON tournament. As such, they head to Egypt with their heads high and believing that they stand a good chance of winning the cup considering the quality of players at their disposal. During the AFCON qualifying stages, the Teranga Lions maintained an unbeaten streak of six games in the qualifiers, winning 5 games and drawing one, and ultimately amassing the highest points gathered by a team in the qualifiers (16). While this may be a confidence booster on its own, it counts for nothing when the stage is set for the AFCON tournament. Nevertheless, Senegal will be counting on their big players to show up at the tourney. The talent at Senegal's disposal epitomizes little or no doubt that Senegal can go all the way and win the cup. Central to the Senegalese squad and ultimately the carrier of the team is Liverpool forward Sadio Mane.

The 27-year old's sizzling form in the recently ended 2018/2019 English Premier League season sent tongues wagging and ultimately put him in the conversation of being the best African player alongside his teammate Mo Salah and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. Mane scored a record 22 league goals in the English Premier League in what has been a season to remember for the Senegalese man who also happen to have just clinched the coveted UEFA Champions league with his Liverpool side, which will likely put him in contention for the Balon d'Or award. Senegal will be hoping Mane turns up for the national side and uses his silkiness on the left flank to terrorize opposition defenses and carry the team to glory.

The showdown in Egypt provides a chance for Senegal to avenge the injustices of the past and finally bring home the AFCON title that has very much been elusive for the Senegalese. The Teranga Lions will begin their campaign against the Taifa Stars of Tanzania on June 23 rd , later wrapping up their group fixtures against Algeria and Kenya on June 27 and July 1 respectively.

## Egypt

It will be the fifth time record Africa Cup of Nations tournament that Egypt have hosted and being on home soil will be enough to propel the Egyptians to go all out to try and win the tournament. Egypt edged South Africa and replaced Cameroon as the hosts of the tournament. Having won a record seven AFCON tournaments, it comes as no surprise that Egypt are one of the favorites of to grab the tournament prize. The Pharaohs were beaten finalists in 2017 as Cameroon won 2-1.

Egypt will be looking to rise above the disappointing display at last year's FIFA world cup where the team failed to win a single match in the campaign. Their short participation at the world cup also saw the team waving goodbye to their long-serving servant in goalkeeper Essam El Hadary who has been a pivotal player for the team over the years. Egypt's AFCON qualifying journey proved to be rather shaky by their standards as they finished second below Tunisia. The team won four games including both home and away games against eSwatini, drawing one against Niger and losing the other against North African rivals Tunisia to finish second of the group with 13 points.

Many expect that the presence of Mohammed Salah is likely to lead the Egyptians to glory. Many would argue that Salah and his teammate Sadio Mane were easily the continent's two best during the 2018/2019 season across the whole of Europe. Salah has been in hot form all season long, becoming the first African ever to clinch back-to-back Golden Boot accolades in the English Premier League alongside fellow Africans, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and teammate Mane.





Egypt have produced several players of the highest quality over the years but Salah has reached an uncharted territory by proving his worth at the highest level as when it mattered the most. His impact however, has been somewhat criticized for failing to replicate his club form at national level. Be that as it may, his electrifying pace on the right flank, his skillful dribbling as well as his sharp eye for goal make him the go-to attacker in a team favored to tear apart the whole of Africa at home. Apart from Salah, forgotten Arsenal midfielder Mohammed Elneny could also be the difference maker at the belly of the park for the Egyptians as he will be hoping to make a name for himself in order to revive his footballing career.

Worth noting is that Egypt has won the AFCON tournament three out of the four times the country has hosted the tournament, a phenomenal feat if you ask me, one that should surely send a message about the threat posed by the Pharaohs particularly in their own backyard. It will be interesting to see whether home court advantage will be a significant factor even this time around considering the increase in the number of teams gunning for glory.

## Nigeria



After missing the last two editions, Nigeria make a return to the Africa Cup of Nations in 2019. Coach Gernot Rohr recently led the Super Eagles to the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, though the team could not proceed beyond the group stages.

Boasting the most youthful squad of the world cup teams, Nigeria's world cup performance was a matter of "so near yet so far" as they bowed out of the tournament at the hands of Argentina.

Nonetheless, the team was able to secure a win against Iceland in one of their group matches. This dismal performance however, did not deter the Super Eagles from securing a ticket to take part in the biennial African Cup of Nations in Egypt.

The Super Eagles had a somewhat smooth run to the biennial football showpiece despite making a false start in the qualifying series. The team kicked off their qualifying campaign on the wrong foot by losing 2-0 at home to South Africa. That defeat woke the three-time Africans champions' slumber as they won their next three matches against Seychelles and Libya before once again drawing against a resilient South African side. The Nigerians capped off their qualifying campaign with a win against the Seychelles, finishing as Group winners with 13 points.

The old adage "age is nothing but a number" might well be relevant during this year's AFCON showpiece, in as far as Villarreal winger Samuel Chukwueze is concerned. The 2015 U/17 World Cup Winner has enjoyed an impressive debut season with Villarreal since breaking into the club's first team, scoring ten goals in 46 appearances as well as chipping in with four assists. The 20-year-old is one of the most exciting young talents in Spanish football and he's enjoyed an excellent campaign with Villarreal where he's now considered to be an important first team player having progressed through the club's youth ranks. Still, some may point to Chukwueze's lack of international experience as his likely downside and something that may find him wanting when it matters the most. However, the presence of experienced players like Obi Mikel and Ahmed Musa should be able to guide Chukwueze and make him comfortable enough to do what he does best on the field: run at defenders.

However, despite qualifying for the AFCON, one could not say, emphatically that the Super Eagles are indeed a team to beat at the forthcoming finals in Egypt. The team is faced with different challenges such as injuries to some of its key players that include seasoned striker Odion Ighalo, who was the leading scorer during the qualifiers with six goals. Not only that, the team has had some of its experienced players opting to resign, such as Victor Moses who decided to focus on club football. These predicaments may haunt the Super Eagles especially if the team goes deeper into the knockout stages. Nonetheless, the return of trusted servant John Obi Mikel will be a key factor for Nigeria's youthful side. Count the Nigerians out at your own peril, they might be



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### The most in-form players

Many are, but captain and the highest scoring Tunisian of this generation, Wahbi Khazri tops the list. The complete forward was in sumptuous form for St Etienne as the Ligue 1 side narrowly missed out on the Champions League places. The 28-year-old carried forward his 2018 FIFA World Cup scoring form by banging in 13 league goals and 6 assists to help his French club to finish 4th. Many lovers of football will also be delighted to hear that the highly rated Youssef Mskani will likely appear for the Carthage Eagles and so will the diminutive and extremely talented attacker, 26-year-old Naiim Sliti

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If time and chance has its way, 24-year-old Montpellier midfielder, Ellyes Skhiri could finally enjoy a major breakout campaign and attract some coveted suitors. Another exciting youngster coming up

the ranks is 23-year-old Dylan Bronn who plays for Belgian side, Genk. At that tender age, Bronn already had 10 caps to his name, his stock will only rise from now going forward. Boosted by Tunisian club, Esperance de Tunis' retaining of the CAF Champions League, coach Alain Giresse will generally be spoiled for choice and the North African nation will be on song to try and grab the AFCON gold that has been out of their grasp since 2004.

Stuart Baxter's men are in the so called group of death with favorites Ivory Coast, Morocco and Namibia but it's pretty much non-fictitious that they can cause problems for any opponent. With a fascinating short passes attacking style of play, Bafana finished off the qualifiers as one of the five unbeaten teams, even shooting down the Super Eagles of Nigeria in their own backyard. They are one of the dark-horses and could once again feel the weight of AFCON glory.

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They haven't had a lot go their way since 1996 when they clinched their first and only Africa Cup of Nations on home soil. Being one of the oldest African teams, having played their first match in 1924, South Africans could probably feel the wait for some consistent major tournament success has been longer than most. Since 2000, Bafana have either failed to qualify for AFCON finals or qualify but go as far as the quarter-finals, even when they hosted the tournament back in 2013.

In many ways, their football structure is more or less like that of England. They have the best football league on the continent, the Absa Premiership, and most of their players are home grown. Over the years, Bafana hasn't had the best of talent come through their ranks, but their consistence and persistence in building the local league structures could pay dividends sooner rather than later. Just as England almost brought it home in the 2018 World Cup, boosted by efforts of the English Premier League.



**Lebohang Maboe**



# Who are the underdogs who could shock the world?

By Dennis Takaendes

## UNDERDOG IN THE AFRICAN CUP OF NATIONS CONTEXT

The term underdog largely refers to the least likely team to achieve a certain feat. In as much as this is similarly true for Africa when it comes to the biennial AFCON tourney, there's a small tweak to it. We have seen it over and over again. It's fair to say that there may be underdogs on paper but when that whistle blows, nobody cares about the name of the nation or the names borne on the team shirts.

The holders of the AFCON gold were somehow minnows heading into the 2017 tournament, with the youngest squad and a few of their star players opting not to turn up for the Gabon finals. But against all odds, the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon went all the way to the podium, eliminating Sadio Mane's Senegal and denying record winners Egypt an eighth title in the final. How about Zambia's 2012 title triumph or Burkina Faso's dominating display and final appearance in 2015, who saw all that coming? Not many did. In the same spirit, let's be not be caught by surprise and practise a bit of forward thinking by exploring the position of a few other sides who hardly make the favorites conversation but very much capable of becoming Africa's top side when that final whistle is blown on the 22nd of July 2019.

### CAMEROON

#### Overview

Hard as it may be to believe, the champions aren't really favorites heading into the 2019 Egypt finals. They were underdogs in 2017 and won, but are still pretty much an average side in comparison to the likes of Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, Egypt and Ivory Coast. This assessment is not based on their flamboyant history that includes the most FIFA World Cup appearances by an African nation, being the second most successful team in the AFCON history with 5 titles, only two behind Egypt; a 2000 Olympic gold medal win, the controversies of sleeveless shirts or heroism of the likes of the late Marc Vivien Foe. It's solely based on form and theirs has not been among the most impressive. Cameroon enter their first major tournament under the guidance of the celebrated Clarence Seedorf. They could have benefited from a massive home advantage, if their 2019 hosting rights weren't transferred to the Egyptians because of ill-preparedness and safety concerns prevailing in the Central African nation.

The Indomitable Lions still managed to secure second place behind Morocco despite a far from convincing campaign in a group that also featured lowly ranked Comoros and Malawi. Most concerning, was their overall tally of 6 goals during the qualifiers, as many as those scored by Burundi's Fiston Abdul Razak. That and more constitute the reasons why many aren't vouching for Cameroon and their more pragmatic fans will surely be cautious not to raise their hopes up.

However, just because they are probably retaining most of the players that won the AFCON title in 2017, bringing with them the experience of winning as well as the opportunity to enter as a mid-tier team, it's not impossible that the Indomitable Lions could slip under the radar and retain the championship. Even more, they arguably don't have as much pressure as the likes of Egypt, Morocco or Ghana to win, seeing they have done their fans well in recent times. Further validating their chances, it helps to look at their most inform players and explore the possibility of them channelling the same energy to the rest of the squad.

#### The most in-form players

Quite honestly, they haven't had a lot of exciting players in the just ended 2018/19 campaign, which is not a rare feature of underdogs. The 6 goals scored and 3 conceded in the AFCON qualifiers tells you why this is so. The 2017 final match-winner and FC Porto forward Vincent Aboubakar was injured for the majority of the season, Zambo Anguissa and his Fulham side were relegated from the Premier League while left-back Gaetan Bong survived the scare of relegation with his naïve Brighton & Hove Albion side. Veteran forward, Chopou Moting warmed PSG's bench as his Ligue 1 side completed an average season. Only 23-year-old goal-keeper, Andre Onana had a somewhat spectacular season with Ajax who missed out on the Champions League final by a whisker. It's not however a guarantee that Seedorf will start the youngster ahead of the vastly experienced Carlos Kameni or Fabrice Ondoa.





## Possible surprise stars

Three names stand out, the 23-year-old forward Christian Bassogog who plies his trade in the Chinese Super League, 25-year-old Marseille striker in Clinton N'jie and the 23-year-old Mainz 05 midfielder, Pierre Kunde.



## ALGERIA



### Overview

The Desert Foxes maybe the side that have a lot of players with more to lose but still remains an underdog. The North Africans have played some of the most entertaining football on the continent over the years, which makes it hard to believe that they only have 1 AFCON title to show for it, which came in 1990. Most memorable to many, they made the continent proud by proving to be a hard nut to crack in the 2014 FIFA World Cup finals, losing to eventual champions Germany in extra-time after a fiercely contested goalless 90 minutes. They have been however perhaps the most disappointing on the continental stage in recent times, with their best finish being a 4th place finish in the AFCON finals since their triumph in 1990. The Fennecs usually dominate possession, blow teams away in the early stages but falter towards the finish line.

Algerian fans have waited long enough and given the opportunity of being pitted against Senegal and lowly ranked Kenya and Tanzania in Group C of the finals, they have a chance to slip under the radar with ease towards the AFCON gold.

## The most in-form players

Amongst the 24-finalists, arguably no team has better depth than the Desert Foxes. Even better, their top guys finished the 2018/19 in sizzling form, something we have seen over the years but

hoping it would translate to some silverware this time around. Riyad Mahrez scored a magical goal in Manchester City's Premier League title win against Brighton on final day while Yacine Brahimi continued to be the mastermind in FC Porto's midfield, helping the Portuguese side to reach the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals. Long-time servant and tricky winger, Sofiane Feghouli who is in the books of Galatasaray remains available, MLS based Saphir Taider has been decent and perhaps the man of the moment, Baghdad Bounedjah. The 27-year-old may not be a household name but his 3 goals during the qualifiers and 39 league goals in 22 outings for Qatar Stars League's Al Sadd SC are a testimony that he will hurt goalkeepers and defenders alike.

## Possible surprise stars

The 23-year-old highly rated defender, Youcef Atal who plays for Ligue 1's OGC Nice is expected to increase his stock and 21-year-old Arsenal Academy Graduate and Empoli midfielder, Ismael Bennacer could find himself winning a major transfer deal if he remains consistent.

## TUNISIA



### Overview

If you consider Egypt to be favorites, Tunisia are pretty much in that fold even though they maybe skipped in the conversations. The two North African nations made a show of their opponents in the qualifiers, winning pretty much all their matches against Niger and Eswatini, with less-respectful score-lines. Their only losses were against each other. The Carthage Eagles finished top of the group ahead of the hosting Pharaohs as the latter dropped points in a drawn match. Tunisia are one of the highly ranked teams in the tournament, sitting on 28th place on the FIFA rankings as of 4 April 2019. Even though they have one AFCON title to show for their consistence, they remain one of the most respected, least spoken of but dangerous opponent on the continent. Just one year ago at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, they bowed out with their heads held high in the group stages after succumbing to 2-1 and 5-2 losses to eventual 4th place and 3rd place finishers in England and Belgium respectively.



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Lebohang Maboe



# Top 5 U-23 Players at the AFCON

By Tinotenda Magiwa

The 2019 African Cup of Nations Egypt is about to start and the true football fans will be glued on the edge of their seats when the spectacle arrives. There are many national teams that will be looking forward to having a great campaign. Like any other football tournament, we are hoping that another underdog will rise from the ashes and prove a stubborn team to beat for the giants or popular teams which include Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Egypt, Morocco, etc. Before that happens, you need to take note of a few individuals that have been doing very well for themselves. The following is a list of U-23 players that you should look out for in the upcoming tournament.

## Andre Onana (Cameroon)



Just as Liverpool celebrate their conquest in Europe, another Dutch club left the UEFA Champions League tournament with their chests held high. Ajax Amsterdam is the team in question. The surprise of the season. The youngsters who eliminated defending champions Real Madrid and a Ronaldo-inspired Juventus. In between the sticks was our very own Cameroonian international, Andre Onana. The 23-year old led his team from the back with the protection from Matthijs de Ligt who has since been rumored with a move to Barcelona. Onana himself was an impenetrable shield that only shipped in 34 goals in their 2018/19 Eredivisie title-winning campaign. Undeniably, the experience of playing in competitive leagues raises expectations on the youngster making him one of the players to watch in this upcoming 2019 African Cup of Nations finals in Egypt.

Prior international experience? Of course. Andre Onana is not only a capped Cameroon international but also an indispensable player in their goalkeeping position. Onana was first capped in 2016 but made a controversial decision to turn down the opportunity to represent his nation at the 2017 AFCON Gabon.

His reason was logical. He wanted to cement his position in the Ajax team after Jasper Cillessen left for Barcelona. That decision has paid dividends as he is now among the best young goalkeepers in Europe. At what cost though? His decision to stay back meant that he had to miss out on his nation's victory as they lifted the 2017 African Cup of Nations trophy after beating Egypt 2-1 on the 5th of February, 2017. However, he has an opportunity to redeem himself at the big stage and prove his worth to his nation.

Managing expectations is something that Andre Onana is going to have to deal with. Having led his club Ajax to the semi-finals of the 2018/19 UEFA Champions League, reaching the semi-finals of the AFCON tournament would be the bare minimum expected of him. Onana has already set the bar so high in Europe which has seen him mooted to be on the transfer wish list of German Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich. A player of his qualities would bring much-needed competition to Germany international Manuel Neuer who has since lost his crown as the best goalkeeper in the world and has dipped in form of late.

## Achraf Hakimi (Morocco)



A no brainer really. The Spanish born Moroccan was part of the Borussia Dortmund team that gave Bayern Munich a run for their money. The BVB club was as close as they have been in 7 seasons to win the German Bundesliga trophy as they finished just two points behind the dominant Bayern Munich team. The African defender who was on-loan from Real Madrid managed a total of 7 assists and 2 goals in 23 starts. His attacking creativity on the overlap gave manager Lucien Favre a headache on who to start between the Moroccan and the experienced Marcel Schmelzer. Nonetheless, Hakimi enjoyed his time at the German club as he bagged a decent amount of game time at a top club that also guaranteed him UEFA Champions League football. Of his primary role, Achraf Hakimi averaged 1.6 tackles, 1.4 interceptions and 1.8 clearances in the defensive phase.



His consistency reminded Real Madrid once again that in him, they have a young player capable of taking over the reins in the left-back position after Marcelo.

Let's talk about his experience at the international scene. Hakimi was one of the breakout stars for the Morocco national team that participated in the 2018 FIFA World Cup finals in Russia. Hakimi's Morocco was placed in the group of death that included European giants Spain and Portugal. On paper, there was no chance really but still, Morocco turned in some amazing performances with the young defender protecting the backline on the left flank. His defensive contribution stood out in the 3 matches played in the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia group stages where he averaged at least 3 tackles per match. The opponents were too offensive but Hakimi was up for the task to get his hands dirty and help out the center-back pairing. It is quite unfortunate that Morocco could not qualify to the knockout stages of the competition but the experience for the Madridista was priceless. It means that Achraf Hakimi goes into the AFCON commencing on the 22nd of June, 2019 as an experienced FIFA World Cup player and a hungry defender ready to prove himself on Africa's biggest stage.

To be honest, there is not much pressure on Hakimi to have an outstanding tournament because there are not many expectations on the Moroccan team to go all the way and win it. This means that Hakimi can play freely and show his quality again in an environment similar to that of Dortmund where he joined a team with huge potential but fewer expectations. In terms of transfer rumors, Hakimi has hardly been linked with a move away from the Bernabeu partly because of the hefty fee that it would require for clubs to prise him away from the Spanish club. This means that Borussia Dortmund will retain the player's services once more for another season on-loan. It is just a matter of time before the youngster starts knocking the doors hard enough for the Los Blancos to listen and realize the potential star he could become if given the opportunity at the highest level.

### Franck Kessie (Ivory Coast)



One of the most profiled players prior to the start of various tournaments, Franck Kessie is a player on the rise. Having cemented his position as the defensive midfielder for AC Milan not so long ago, the 22-year-old Ivorian is a player much respected in the Italian Serie A. As established, Kessie is a non-conventional holding midfielder who has the pace and power to offer more on the other end of the pitch. In the defensive phase, he chips in with an average of 1.2 odd tackles per match breaking up the play for the opponents. He also registers at least 1.5 clearances in each match guaranteeing some relief to the defenders in the heat of the moment. Kessie is also a player hungry for attack and does just fine in front of goal having scored 7 goals and assisted 2 in his 34 appearances in the Italian Serie A fixtures. To me, he resembles French World Cup winner Paul Pogba who has the same attributes and unpredictable in the 90.

Kessie also has experience at the national level. He has since represented Ivory Coast from the youth level up to the senior team. Kessie played at the U-17 and U-20 level before representing Les Éléphants 26-times. He, however, is yet to register his first goal for his national team which will be something that will be on the back of his mind coming into this 2019 African Cup of Nations group stages. The dynamic midfielder is also looking to use this opportunity to showcase his talent amongst Africa's finest. The likes of Mo Salah, Sadio Mane, Hakim Ziyech, Percy Tau, Khama Billiat, and Wilfried Zaha will all be participating in this competition and it would be interesting to see where the midfielder will be ranked as soon as the tournament closes in July.

The international transfer window officially opens on the 11th of June, 2019 and it would be a surprise to not hear speculations about Franck Kessie's possible destinations. A player of his calibre is something that many teams in Europe are missing. With the aging Nemanja Matic at Manchester United, Kessie would provide a more sustainable and competent partner to the free-spirited Paul Pogba. At Manchester City, Pep Guardiola is on the hunt for that player that can replace Fernandinho and who else could do the dirty work as well as intelligently offer support with the late runs into the box than the Ivorian. The list goes on. It will be interesting to see who will eventually get to acquire his services for they do not come cheap. Could this tournament be the key for Kessie to join one of the most prestigious clubs in Europe?

### Alexander Chuka Iwobi (Nigeria)





Alex Iwobi has had by far his best season in an Arsenal shirt this past 2018/19 season. The arrival of a tactical coach in Unai Emery as the Head Coach at the club meant that more playing time was going to be awarded to the Nigerian international from the wide channels. Alex Iwobi made 46 appearances this season scoring 5 goals and assisting 8 times. The Nigerian had been receiving some smack from the Gunners faithful who demanded more end-product in the final third of the pitch and the Haile End Academy graduate came up with the goods this season. Iwobi was a constant threat for Arsenal this season, especially when partnered with the Bosnian tank, Sead Kolasinac. The Nigerian's link-up play brought out the best in the left-back who created many goalscoring opportunities for Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Alexandre Lacazette. His improvement this season is typified by his last goal for Arsenal in their 2018/19 UEFA Europa League final match against Chelsea when he scored the consolation for Arsenal on the half-volley from the edge of the box. There is more to come from Chuka.

Iwobinho is a regular international ever since he switched his allegiance to Nigeria. However, the player has been limited to a bit-part playing role in the Super Eagles team. This is seen in the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia where the young midfielder started only one match and making 2 second-half cameos in the last two matches. To be fair, Iwobi was still discovering his best position on the pitch back then. Since his much-improved campaign with Arsenal this season, it is clear that Iwobi is a left winger equipped with dribbling abilities and the strength of a true West-African raised by fufu and garri. Super Eagles coach, Gernot Rohr, must have the 23-year old in his plans if the Nigerian national team is to challenge for the AFCON title. His experience at the club level and the maturity hitting at the right time could provide the juju for Nigeria in Egypt this month. I think Iwobi will be one of the standout performers in the tournament.

Apart from that, there had been rumors about the player's exit from the Emirates Stadium. Many Arsenal fans had called for his head in Arsene Wenger's final season as the Arsenal manager. However, his commitment and work rate convinced enough of those critiques that he has a lot more to offer. Now, both the club and the player are convinced of the marriage and are looking forward to what the future holds for them under a new manager. If there is a club that is to come calling for his services, Arsenal is surely going to quote a fee in the region of \$35 million which would not be surprising in this inflated market.

## Samuel Chukwueze (Nigeria)

A newcomer to this list of U-23 African sensations plying their trade in Europe. Samuel Chukwueze made a name for himself this season when his team Villarreal faced Real Madrid in the La Liga on matchday 18. Chukwueze produced a master class in an encounter against the former UEFA Champions League defending team and ensured that the yellow submarines shared spoils with the Los Blancos. His style of play is something to reckon. Dennis Takaendes said, "When one receives the ball on the flank, gets enough time to switch it to his favored left foot, goes at Marcelo, drops a shoulder to call in Casemiro to assist his compatriot, before Toni Kroos and Sergio Ramos are required to put out the fire - you know what's up." The 20-year-old winger managed a total of 8 goals across all competitions and provided 3 assists in 25 starts. Samuel Chukwueze will be looking to grab the chance to play for Nigeria at the tournament commencing on the 22nd of June.

Chukwueze was among the shocking omissions from the Super Eagles team in the previous international friendlies. The Nigerian coach, Gernot Rohr went for other wingers including Samuel Kalu, Alex Iwobi, Ahmed Musa and Henry Onyekuru because they were in better form than the youngster. However, Chukwu has been handed a rare opportunity to showcase his talent in front of the whole continent of Africa and football lovers from across the globe at this year's African Cup of Nations finals. Going into this tournament, he has not much experience playing for the national team having only made one appearance thus far, but, do not be fooled by that fact because Chukwueze is a boy with the right arrogance on the football pitch. His confidence to take on defenders with his much-favored left foot will surely remind you of the Bayern Munich legend Arjen Robben who recently left the club for greener pastures. Will the youngster grab his opportunity when it is handed to him?

I am more certain about the speculations that are going to sky-rocket from this point onwards. Samuel Chukwueze is a winger, a position especially for a club like Arsenal. The prospect of joining fellow Nigerian Alex Iwobi at the Emirates and bombing the flanks mirroring the performances of Robben and Ribery at Bayern would be a pleasant sight for the Arsenal fans. Chukwueze's flair means that he will continue to be linked with bigger clubs who are in need of that kind of a player that hugs the touchline and gets past defenders in the tightest of spaces. I would not even be surprised if a big move actually materializes in the aftermath of this tournament because Samuel Chukwueze has the raw talent that we have seen in other English players like Calum Hudson-Odoi.





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