

# FIRST TOUCH

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## FT Out Of The Box Series: "Forgotten" African greats who are still playing football

Written by: Dennis Takaendesa

Football stories of Africans playing abroad are decorated with names of upcoming talents spread across all of Europe's major leagues together with the established talents doing bits almost everywhere. I am referring to Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mane, Nicolas Pepe, Isaac Success, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, Franck Kessie, Riyad Mahrez only to mention but a few. There is another list of players who now hardly appear in the news, usually perceived to have retired but are still adding value to their teams and memories of their great exploits are still fresh in their minds, our minds and their feet. Of course feet are incapable of retaining memories but you get the idea. Here at FirstTouch, we have picked just three of those players for now.

"Asked about he manages to keep up with the demands of football at age 40 on Supersport's Thursday Night with Robert Marawa, Nomvethe cited that he doesn't drive to training, but jogs there. An inconceivable distance that has helped him stay fit."

— DENNIS TAKAENDESA, FIRSTTOUCH AFRICA

### Salomon Kalou - Ivory Coast

In as much as I was planning to present an aha moment to you saying, "the great Kalou still plays football," the weekend's highlights kind of spoiled all that for me. The great Ivorian reintroduced himself to the media houses covering African players by scoring twice for Bundesliga side, Hertha Berlin in their 2-2 draw away at league leaders, Borussia Dortmund. Kalou, now 33, joined Hertha in 2014 from French Ligue 1 side, Lille. The forward started his football career at ASEC Mimosas in Ivory Coast and went on to play in almost all of the European major leagues in his prime years as a footballer. Kalou first appeared for Dutch Eredivisie side, Feyenoord in Europe where he scored 35 goals in 69 matches becoming so good that a story of him getting a Dutch



citizenship by naturalization grabbed the newspaper headlines for quite some time. The forward eventually moved to Chelsea where he played alongside the likes of Didier Drogba and won a premier league title, four FA cups, FA community shield and the infamous 2012 UEFA Champions League trophy. In total, he scored 61 times for Chelsea in 156 appearances and also won some individual accolades such as the 2008 CAF Young Player of the Year and the 2005 Dutch Football Talent of the Year. The 2015 Africa Cup of Nations triumph with Ivory Coast meant Kalou won everything available to a footballer except for the world cup.

### Asamoah Gyan - Ghana

This is a man who obviously needs no introduction having been the face of Ghana for quite some time and more interestingly the

face of Africa in the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, when he broke hearts by missing a quarter-final penalty against Uruguay. Gyan is still very much an active footballer and the official captain of the Black Stars of Ghana at age 32. He plays for the Turkish side, Kayserispor and has been in their books since 2017. Gyan started his footballing career at Ghanaian Premier League club, Liberty Professionals and went on to wear the colors of several European clubs such as Udinese in the Italian Serie A, English Premier League's Sunderland and Rennes in the French Ligue 1. He also signed for UAE Pro-League side, Al Ain before moving to Chinese Super League in Shanghai SIPG colors, where he reportedly earned an astounding £227 000 per week, easily becoming one of the world's best paid players. Gyan became a crowd favorite for the exploits in seven AFCON appearances for Ghana and the 2006, 2010 and 2014 FIFA World cups. He is currently Ghana's leading all time goalscorer with 51 and the leading African goalscorer at the world cup with 6.

## Siyabonga Nomvethé - South Africa

Easily the most striking thing about Nomvethé is that he is 40 and still plays in the South African top flight league, the Absa Premiership. Most South Africans will never forget this name, a deadly striker in front of goal in his prime and very much a capable striker for Amazulu FC right now, even at 40 years of age. Nomvethé has had a career that has swung like a pendulum between Europe and his beloved South Africa. He appeared for sides like Udinese in the Italian Serie A, Empoli, AaB in the Danish Superliga as well as both halves of the infamous Soweto derby in Chiefs and Pirates. Even appearing for Moroka Swallows, the rival of the two aforementioned Soweto sides. Ubaba Nomvethé is popularly known for forming partnerships with other South African heroes such as Sibusiso Zuma and Aaron Mokoena. Asked about he manages to keep up with the demands of football at age 40 on Supersport's Thursday Night with Robert Marawa, Nomvethé cited that he doesn't drive to training, but jogs there. An inconceivable distance that has helped him stay fit.



# Could Morocco's Achraf Hakimi become one of the best full backs in the world?

Written by: Simiso Shabangu



We only loan our valuables because both the lender and borrower cannot do without them. When they are not as valuable, we give them away forever. That is the same principle that has applied on the 20-year-old Achraf Hakimi who is currently on loan at the German Club, Borussia Dortmund from Real Madrid. Apparently Real Madrid already regret that. But why? Is it because he could most likely become one of the best full backs in the world?

The player caught the eyes of many when Spain faced Morocco in the World Cup. Interestingly, he was playing for his native homeland against the country that had given him a place to be born and grow up. Even though he pulled impressive stunts at left back position, he prefers to play on the right where he likes running up and down the flank with the opportunity to use his favorite right foot to swing in crosses or weed out the ball from the feet of the opponents. Such versatility is what distinguishes a player from others. His coach at Dortmund, Lucien Favre also alluded to the fact that he does a great job when playing forward too. He was quoted saying:

"He's playing so well. He's great going forward and he does a good job at the back. He played at left-back for Morocco, but prefers to play at right-back. He has so much potential."

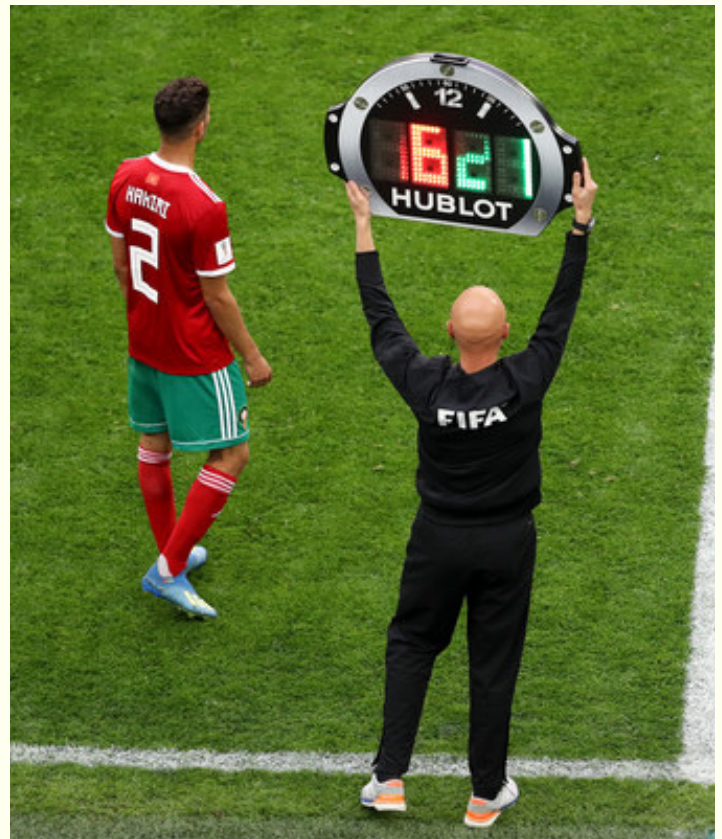
— LUCIEN FAVRE, BORUSSIA DORTMUND COACH

In his first three games with Borussia Dortmund, he rocked up two assists and one goal. He also won the Bundesliga Rookie of the month of September which places him right on track for winning the Bundesliga's Rookie of the season. Even though he has not scored in the UEFA Champions League, his unquestionable dribbling and crossing abilities have graced him with three assists.

The young star also has quite a teachable spirit. He says he is ready to play as an attacker, but since he is with a coach who prefers a team with a strong defense, he will do just that. In an interview, he was quoted saying, "He's a coach who likes his teams to defend well and that's what he's asking me to do. In attack I'm ready, but the coach wants me to improve tactically and defensively and I think I'm getting it."

"He prefers to play on the right where he likes running up and down the flank with the opportunity to use his favorite right foot to swing in crosses or weed out the ball from the feet of the opponents. Such versatility is what distinguishes a player from others"

— SIMISO SHABANGU, FIRSTTOUCH AFRICA



This is a multi-faceted player who is not, however, willing to use the field to flex talent but to ensure that he grows. It is these tiny things that ensure that a player is not just good, but continuously becomes greater. He also stated that the reason why he agreed to the loan was because of their willingness to help young players grow and help them become better. A great full-back who is persistently after growth!



# 3 AFRICANS LIGHTING UP THE CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE



Written By: Tinotenda Magiya

In recent years, players have been moving to the Chinese Super League mostly to wind down their careers. The Chinese have invested billions of dollars into their football project to make it attractive for players. At first, the older players from Europe, the likes of Didier Drogba and Nicolas Anelka fit the profiles of the footballers who switched continents and understandably so. However, Oscar's move from Chelsea to Shanghai SIPG at the age of 24 sparked a movement that not many had predicted. Many younger players have since moved to Asia to play in front of the Chinese fans in exchange for a bigger cheque. In this piece, we focus our attentions to the three best African players who have been lighting up the Chinese Super League this year.

## Odion Ighalo

Odion Ighalo is first up on the list of the on-form players. The Nigerian international has been potent in front of goal, scoring a total of 21 goals and providing a single assist in just 28 matches. These are Thierry Henry-like stats that the Nigerian is achieving in the Chinese Super League. It is delightful to see the Nigerian regain his confidence in front of goal after a dreadful World Cup outing where he was not his usual self as he fluffed a lot of chances. Ighalo was heavily criticised in the aftermath of the tourney and must have used this criticism to boost his adrenaline and push harder for his club. He has been nothing short of exciting as he has been firing on all cylinders for Changchun Yatai in the Chinese Super League. His goals however, do not reflect the performance of the rest of the team as the club currently ended the season in the 15th position on the table. The defence let in quite a number of goals in the 29 matches they have played this season which has resulted in their automatic relegation to the second division for next season. Rest assured, if they sort out the defence and Odion Ighalo keeps on scoring like he drinks water, his club will be back in the Chinese Super League calendar in no time.



## Cedric Bakambu

Then there is Cedric Bakambu who plays for Beijing Guoan. Bakambu has also scored 21 goals and created 4 goals for his teammates in 23 Chinese Super League fixtures. The player switched leagues to the CSL from Spanish side, Villarreal in a then record transfer for an African player early this year. The Congolese forward is predominantly deployed in the attacking midfield roles for his club where he is causing a lot of damage from the middle. The 27 year old is influencing the games in the Chinese Super League like the way how Lionel Messi bosses the Spanish La Liga with his freedom to roam all over the pitch finding pockets of spaces to exploit. The Asians are fortunate to have the forward in his prime after a number of clubs in Europe sought after his talents in January 2018 before he made the decision to follow in the footsteps of an African legend in Didier Drogba who also moved to China after his time in Europe.

**"The 27 year old is influencing the games in the Chinese Super League like the way how Lionel Messi bosses the Spanish La Liga with his freedom to roam all over the pitch finding pockets of spaces to exploit."**

— TINOTENDA MAGIYA, FIRSTTOUCH AFRICA



## Ayub Timbe

Kenyan forward, Ayub Timbe makes up the list of the three best African players who took the Chinese Super League by storm this season. The centre-forward was recalled from loan by his parent club Beijing Renhe to help them extend their unbeaten run between July and August. Ayub Timbe scored 7 goals and provided 3 assists for his teammates as he helped his team to an 8th place finish in the league. The 26-year old deserves some credit for his heroics in the CSL considering the returns he has given his club which surpasses that of other forwards who played more than double the matches he played in. In Timbe, Kenya have another soccer player who is raising the

Kenyan colours high alongside Victor Wanyama at Tottenham and Michael Olunga in the Japanese League.

That's it for the top African players in the Chinese Super League. Follow them on their journey as they lift the African flag high in a league that is improving year on year.



**Ayub Timbe**



**Cedric Bakambu**



**Odion Ighalo**



# Is Sadio Mane Real Madrid Material?

Written By: Tinotenda Magiya

During this period when one of the biggest soccer clubs in the world is struggling in the Spanish La Liga, many performing players across the best leagues in Europe will continue to be linked with a move to Real Madrid. This week, we assess the prospect of an African international, Sadio Mane, switching clubs to play at the highest level. Here are a few reasons why Real Madrid need the services of the Liverpool player.

Of course, one attribute that the biggest players need to have is the swag and confidence to take on defenders. Real Madrid is a club that thrives on fear in their opponents whenever they hear that they are set to face the Spanish team from the capital, but this fear factor has gradually died down since the departure of Cristiano Ronaldo. The likes of Marco Asensio, Lucas Vazquez and Diaz Mariano have lacked that fierce threat that the Portuguese had with the ball at his feet. Sadio Mane has it. The Senegalese international is always on his toes in the English Premier League, sweeping past either Kyle Walker, Antonio Valencia, Kieran Trippier, Hector Bellerin or Cesar Azpilicueta – supposedly the best right backs in the league. His swift touch and low body feint is enough to deal with opponents as he creates a path for himself on his way to goal. Mane also has those Ronaldo-like tricks that shake stubborn defenders and unlocks goal scoring opportunities for his club. Ask Neymar! Real Madrid need that quality and his place in the team will be undoubted if he so chooses to be another Real Madrid Galactico signing.

olf not that, then you need to have players who turn up at the biggest games. Arsenal fans have been at Mesut Ozil's back since his move from Real Madrid due to his inconsistent performances against big teams. Our African is the exact opposite. In fact, Sadio Mane turns up more in the biggest games as evidenced in the UEFA Champions League final against Real Madrid. The Liverpool forward stood up to the test in the absence of Mohamed Salah who unfortunately picked up a hand injury after an altercation with Sergio Ramos. Mane was a constant menace down the left channel and was the one who scored the equalizing goal in the final. Already, Real Madrid have lost to Sevilla and failed to win their local derby against Atletico Madrid as they currently sit in 10th position – an unfamiliar situation for the club. With Mane on their books, they are guaranteed a player who will fight for the pride of the club and performs to his best in such games. The Spanish Giants would probably not be trail in the likes of Barcelona in this early stage of the competition.

**"His swift touch and low body feint is enough to deal with opponents as he creates a path for himself on his way to goal. Mane also has those Ronaldo-like tricks that shake stubborn defenders and unlocks goal scoring opportunities for his club. Ask Neymar! "**

**— TINOTENDA MAGIYA, FIRSFTOUCH AFRICA**

In addition, the Hazard factor is a plus for Mane. The fact that Real Madrid are lining up a bid for the Chelsea forward proves they are in need of a player of Mane's stature. Eden Hazard like Mane, carries his team. He is the player that Chelsea look up to in times of need. This has been the case for quite a number of years which suits the setup of a club like Madrid who idolized Ronaldo and played to his strengths. Sadio Mane also carried his teams from Southampton to Liverpool who recently acquired another great gem in the Egyptian Mo Salah. Mane can easily step into Ronaldo's shoes and unleash his true potential playing next to the likes of Luka Modric, Toni Kroos, Marcelo etc. The club is already set up to play for an individual which explains their recent struggles in the Spanish La Liga. With Mane, they will be formidable force again.

Finally, I think it is about time that Real Madrid had an African player in their team. The last time I recall an African player turning up in the famous white jersey was back during Mourinho's tenure when the Portuguese coach sought the services of Emmanuel Adebayor and Michael Essien. You might wonder why I refer to these old times when Real Madrid have Achraf Hakimi on their books. That's because the player has not been handed the opportunities to play and is now further down the pecking order with the recent acquisition of Odriozola who competes with Dani Carvajal in the right back spot. It has truly been a while and the club need to think about this proposition if they want to go back to their rightful place at the top.

It seems as if all points are pointing towards the signing of the African forward but he also has his shortcomings. His numbers to be specific, are not enough to stake a claim for one of the biggest club in the world to invest hundreds of millions to bring him to the Santiago Bernabeu. Mane still scores goals short of expectations for a club like Madrid who require consistent goals in all competitions. Mane is yet to score more than 20 goals in a single campaign which brings questions about this claim. However, this has been down to the countless injuries that the Liverpool forward picks up as he is a target for all the defenders in the league. Dribblers will always be kicked and tussled as they are not well-protected in the English Premier League. Therefore, it is also tricky to judge this part of Mane's game. Maybe a move to Madrid will give us all the answers we need.

I think he is ready for a move to Real Madrid. What are your thoughts?





# FT SIDELINE: WHY HAS AUBAMEYANG BEEN SO PROLIFIC?

Written By: Dennis Takendesa

There is no use trying to make a case why Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is one of the best strikers in the world, simply because everyone knows and vehemently agree. It's a better use of time exploring what makes him tick, with the hope that such attributes can be learned and passed down to future generations of African and global strikers at large.

It is known that modern strikers usually go through what is famously known as a "goal drought," September used to be a boogey month for Harry Kane, Suarez is relatively going through a drought right now at Barcelona despite the impressive overall performances, Manchester United's Romelu Lukaku and the list goes on and on. The point is that the barren periods are almost part and parcel of a striker's package. But, that's not Aubameyang. The Gabonese captain has been scoring at least 30 goals a season since 2015 at Borussia Dortmund and before that, as a developing footballer in France and other places, he would hit at least half of the thirty goals. He was never an out and out striker to begin with, he just recently developed this goal scoring wit and has never looked back. But why is he immune to the droughts? Why is he so prolific?

Here are two simple reasons why:

## 1. SIMPLICITY, THE ULTIMATE SOPHISTICATION

It's modern "wisdom" that a good striker should contribute to overall play of the team, tracking back to help with defensive duties on set pieces, holding up play, taking on defenders, laying up assists for teammates and many other things. Harry Kane is increasingly becoming a member of this bracket after criticism of "selfishness," Alexandre Lacazette is Arsenal's version of that "modern striker" and Suarez is not a stranger to such duties at Barcelona. Now, Auba is different. The 29 year-old knows how to score goals and fundamentally sticks to that. His dribbling game is not the best nor is his hold-up play. He usually goes "missing" when his team is on the ropes but at any moment, with the slightest of chances - he can ripple the net. The African striker's winner over the weekend which bagged all three points for Arsenal resembles this attribute of coming out of nowhere to turn the tide in the favor of his colors. Joking with his teammate, Sead Kolasinac who was the assist provider on the day, Auba even posted on instagram about how

he loves tap in goals. He is the kind of guy who does not clutter his game with a lot of “best practices” or “modern tactics” but does one thing well enough to dominate the rest. No wonder he is currently joint-top scorer with Manchester City’s Sergio Aguero in the Premier League tied at 8 goals for the campaign. It’s this “one dimensional” play that has enabled him to reach 20 goals in 31 matches for the Gunners, quicker than the time Thierry Henry or legend Ian Wright took.

## 2. LIGHTNING PACE

Lightning and Auba usually go in the same sentence because he is that quick. EA Sports didn’t rate him the fastest play on FIFA 18 for no reason. It is this pace that aids him to latch on crosses the quickest and make a meal of no ingredients at all. Those tap in goes and numerous strikes inside the box, it’s never because defenders do not know what he will probably do, they just can’t catch him.

“Auba even posted on instagram about how he loves tap in goals. He is the kind of guy who does not clutter his game with a lot of “best practices” or “modern tactics” but does one thing well enough to dominate the rest. No wonder he is currently joint-top scorer with Manchester City’s Sergio Aguero.”

— DENNIS TAKAENDESA, FIRSTTOUCH AFRICA

Conclusively, Arsenal look like they are more than sorted in their attack with Lacazette complimenting the Gabonese in numerous ways. They will however need to continuously learn to play to his strengths if they are going to get the most out of the Gabonese international.





# FT Sideline: Are Banyana Banyana better than Bafana Bafana?

Written By: Siphosethu Thwala

It is an open secret that most South African football lovers consider the National women's team to be better than the men's team, Banyana Banyana, and their showing in the AFCON women's cup pays testimony to such assertions.

Led by the evergreen Desiree Ellis, Banyana Banyana have been dishing out stellar performances at the soon to end Women's championships in Ghana and they have done the impossible as they have not only secured a place in the final of the AWCON against rivals Nigeria, but they have also booked themselves a spot in the women's FIFA world cup in France next year! Quite remarkable if you ask me.

"On the other hand, Banyana Banyana have been growing in leaps and bounds. The quality of their football has consistently improved over time. Unlike the men's team, Banyana Banyana do not get as much resources compared to their male colleagues and yet, they have been able to put in consistent performances for a long time now."

— SIPHOSETHU THWALA, FIRSTTOUCH AFRICA

On one side, Bafana Bafana have been struggling for results to help them qualify for the upcoming 2019 AFCON tournament whose venue is yet to be confirmed after Cameroon was stripped of the hosting rights. At present, Bafana sit second in their group, behind Nigeria who have already secured their qualification at the back of the draw with Bafana Bafana in early November. As such, Stuart Baxter's men need at least a point against Libya in their last game in order to seal their qualification. The inconsistent performances have certainly not helped the team's fortunes as more criticism has continued to fall over them, with some even calling for Stuart Baxter's sacking. To add, Bafana's failure to qualify for any of the major international competitions since the 2010 FIFA world cup (which they qualified as hosts) has rather tarnished the team's reputation and raised more questions from the football fraternity.

On the other hand, Banyana Banyana have been growing in leaps and bounds. The quality of their football has consistently improved over time. Unlike the men's team, Banyana Banyana do not get as much resources compared to their male colleagues and yet, they have been able to put in consistent performances for a long time now. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Bafana Bafana. Such positive showing has drawn the attention of most South Africans who have called on the South African football body, SAFA, for Banyana Banyana to receive the same kind of remuneration, perks, benefits and sponsorship monies as their male counterparts, Bafana Bafana.



With all being said, perhaps for some it is not a black or white answer regarding which is the better team, taking into account the differing dynamics in which both sides play in. However, Banyana Banyana have slowly emerged as the only silver lining representing the South African nation in international football.

On a lighter note, many are fanning a Bafana Bafana match up against the Ladies team in order to see who is better. Are Banyana better than Bafana?





# Is the English Premier League similar to the ABSA Premiership?

Written By: Tinotenda Magiya

Being an avid soccer fan brings some exposure that another can only imagine. Following your favourite club in the English Premier League brings knowledge about the league, that is the culture of football in England, media coverage, infrastructure only to mention but just a few. However, being from Africa, I am also exposed to the South African ABSA Premiership which is quite entertaining. Passionately following local football has helped me in realizing the similarities between the English Premier League and the South African ABSA Premiership. The most notable one being the fact that both the ABSA Premiership and the EPL are widely regarded as the best domestic leagues on their respective continents. Allow me to compare the two.

**"However, even so, some players are seen being transferred to South Africa for special treatment. Adam Lallana of Liverpool came to Africa for his rehabilitation after his latest lengthy injury. This shows that South Africa provides the ABSA Premiership with the infrastructure that a player needs when they are on the treatment table."**

— TINOTENDA MAGIYA, FIRSTTOUCH AFRICA



Collectively, the English Premier League teams have the biggest financial backing in the world let alone the European continent. The English clubs have enough funding to compete with European clubs 2x bigger and with a richer history than them. For example, Chelsea managed to steal Eden Hazard from Lille under the noses of Real Madrid who were also interested in the player back in 2012. Today, only Paris Saint-Germain, Barcelona and Real Madrid can compete with the likes of Manchester

City, Chelsea and Manchester United on the transfer market. This dominance sees the best players joining the English League and improving the level of competition. The South African ABSA Premiership is also the dominant league in Africa with the largest financial backing. To put things into perspective, the local cup competition in South Africa has bigger prize money than the CAF tournament - which happens to be the "UEFA Champions League" for African teams.

Secondly, fan support in England has some striking resemblances with that down south. Many soccer fans support their local teams before other global teams. The population of Luton is about 211,000 and most of the locals support Luton Town despite the club being in the 2nd division. They attend the matches whenever and wherever they are played. This however does not mean that they cannot have other teams they support in the English Premier League, Spanish La Liga, Italian Serie A, French Ligue 1, German Bundesliga among others. Same applies to fan support in South Africa. The locals support their teams just as much as they support the likes of Manchester United and Real Madrid. There are intense derby matches respected in South Africa just as much as the El Clasico in Spain. The South Africans sing at the top of their lungs and blow the vuvuzela creating an amazing atmosphere for the home teams.

England has some of the best soccer stadiums in the present day. Walking into Anfield, Emirates Stadium, Old Trafford, Stamford Bridge and Etihad as a visitor is a frightening experience if you're supporting the away team on the night. However, it is a lovely experience for the tourists who tour the stadiums in admiration of the work put into building these artefacts built decades ago. Africa has made efforts to follow in these footsteps if not bettering them. The 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa saw many state of the art stadiums built across the African nation. To date, we take pride in the turfs at Moses Mabhida, FNB Stadium among others. These stadiums were beautifully made and can easily be used to host some of the biggest matches in world football.

Some players prefer to play in the English Premier League because of the quality of treatment given to injured players. The infrastructure in the country is up there with the best which makes it conducive for players to give their all on the pitch knowing they will be taken care of in case of accidents. However, even so, some players are seen being transferred to South Africa for special treatment. Adam Lallana of Liverpool came to Africa for his rehabilitation after his latest lengthy injury. This shows that South Africa provides the ABSA Premiership with the infrastructure that a player needs when

they are on the treatment table.

However, based on their geographical locations, there are bound to be differences between the two soccer leagues. I think what separates the South African ABSA Premiership from any other league is the style of play. I find this more entertaining because of the number of long shots taken in this competition which keeps the average fan on the edge of their seats. Hlompho Kekana is the common culprit causing this discomfort. Watch the ABSA Premiership, and you'll know what I am talking about.



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