

A new generation

by Neil Greig

Kaizer Chiefs fans have double reason to smile. Their team is powering on towards a third successive Premiership title and the emergence of a new generation of players is making the hair on their arms stand up.

"When those youngsters warm up, we get very excited. If they come off the bench together at the same time we say 'here comes the 24/25 combination,'" says number one fan, Saddam Maake. Maake was talking to *Kick Off* about David Mathebula (24) and Gert Schalkwyk (25) on the morning of Chiefs' 3-1 win over Santos in Cape Town. He was referring to a question about the impact the pair had made in recent weeks when used most effectively as substitutes.

But, unlike Maake who sees the obvious change of guard taking place, some fans still question the coach about the omission of last season's hero, Scara Ngobese, and veteran star, Shoes Moshoeu. Coach Ernst Middendorp prefers not to comment about Moshoeu's utterances over his omission from the team in the press a day after their 3-1 Absa Cup win over Supersport United. As for Ngobese, the German coach gave him a rare run in that game, but pulled him off at half-time. It seems certain that this move was aimed at showing the supporters that Ngobese has not done enough to warrant a place in the team. After 45 minutes, nobody could argue that he performed well.

Moving on, substitutes Mathebula and Schalkwyk turned the Supersport Cup match on its head just as they had done when coming on against Bloemfontein Celtic in the League. Then, when Chiefs played Santos at Newlands Stadium, Schalkwyk got a start and scored an impressive brace, characterised by his brilliant late runs into the danger area. To follow that up, he scored in the 1-1 draw with Moroka Swallows, and guess who made the goal? David Mathebula from a free kick.

"I found myself free a few times against Santos and that's what I like. I'm able to read the game and get into scoring spaces coming from deep. I've worked at this during training and talked with Shoes [Moshoeu] a lot about how to make these runs," Schalkwyk says.

In December last year, when *Kick Off* interviewed Schalkwyk, the young midfielder made a few interesting comments. At the time, he was in and out of the team, but had made a big impact in the first Derby win over arch rivals Orlando Pirates. In that interview, Schalkwyk said he much preferred playing in an advanced midfield position supporting the strikers. He also said that his strength is in his running, making defenders chase him all over the field.

What about his weaknesses though? Middendorp has told *Kick Off* a few times that he is looking for more all round consistency from Schalkwyk and the other young players like Mathebula, Gerald Sibeko and Kaizer Motaung Jr.

This is what the former Wits University man feels about his progress: "I'm better now than I was when we last spoke and I put that down to the sacrifices I've made. I now come to training earlier. If the coach says 3 o' clock, I'm there at half past two," Schalkwyk says. "I know the coach wants consistency so I've got to put in the extra effort. What I like is that he is straight with every player. You know when you have played badly. He tells you directly."

Asked whether he gets frustrated when he finds himself on the bench for certain matches, Schalkwyk says: "The coach is clever, he knows when best to use me and David [Mathebula] as



Gert Schalkwyk in action

substitutes. I have freedom on the field and that's most important to me. I feel I'm almost where I've been aiming to reach. I want to score more goals this season than I did at Wits and I'm coming close. David and I are getting it right with our quick passing. He plays quick one-tuos. Like me he doesn't want to hang onto the ball – that is not our style."

As for Mathebula, he is just happy to be getting regular opportunities to have a run for Chiefs and wants to take things slowly. "I've used my time on the bench to learn and see where I can improve," Mathebula says. "I've realised I must defend as well and that I must keep possession more. When I was at Dynamos, coach Steve Komphela told me to keep it simple by playing the ball the way I'm facing. I've remembered this and I have now come to an understanding with my team mates. This is making it easier for me to play each time I go onto the field. About my combination with Gert, both he and I like to get forward, play one-tuos and get the ball moving quickly. It feels good to be making an impact for Chiefs and contributing to victories."

Middendorp believes his young troops have not got enough credit for Chiefs' good run of late. He says most people are too focused on why Ngobese or Moshoeu are not playing to realise that something positive is emerging from this season. "You have to remember that this team has changed a lot from last season, so winning

the League now would not be normal. It just doesn't happen that when you introduce youngsters and see a team change so much, you win the title that same season. If we do, it will be a great achievement," Middendorp says.

"Look, we have brought in Jimmy Tau, David Oboa, Louis Ayemang and Ditheko Mototo, Schalkwyk and Mathebula are playing more regularly and Cyril Nzama is playing in a new position. This is a lot of change." But, despite this, Schalkwyk believes they can win the title. "We can win the League. After each game that we get a good result, we tell ourselves that we can do it. As for the new players, they are just as hungry as me. Jimmy Tau wants it badly and so does Louis. 'Tiger' Mototo is strong and reads the game well. He wants to fight all the way," Schalkwyk says.

Mathebula feels they are on the right track. "We are in there with a chance. I know we are on the right track and I'm happy to be doing my bit to help."

So, will the young guns, aided by seniors like Rowen Fernandez, Nzama, McCarthy and Patrick Mayo, be up for the title? If they pull it off, it seems, it would be a tremendous feat given that the young players, despite showing lots of promise, are essentially still finding their feet. **UM**