



*Siphiwe Tshabalala and Lebohang Mokoena training in Egypt for the African Cup of Nations
Photo: Lefty Shivambu / Touchline Photo*

Bafana's young guns

by Sandile Mchunu

South African football has reached its lowest point since winning the Africa Nations Cup on home soil in 1996. But five youngsters that are set to shine in tournaments if they are given an opportunity, can bring back the good old days for the once conquering Bafana Bafana side.

Siyabonga Nkosi (Bloemfontein Celtic)

The 24-year-old midfield genius is in the mould of the former Bafana hero, Doctor Khumalo, and it is no surprise that he has modelled his game around the legendary former Kaizer Chiefs midfield general. Nkosi himself wears the number 15 jersey that Khumalo made his own for both club and country, but that is not the only similarity that these two share. Coming from midfield and enjoying a free role in the middle of the park, Nkosi marvels at this role as he dictates the pace of the game with ease. His passing is second to none in the league, and he has scored some crucial goals for his club, Bloemfontein Celtic, on the way to lifting the SAA Supa Eight earlier on in the season. There is no doubt that the Newcastle born midfielder will be lost to South Africa in the next season as offers from overseas continue to pour in.

Siphiwe Tshabalala (Free State Stars)

It is unbelievable that Tshabalala made his professional debut only five months ago. His inclusion in the squad to Egypt proves what a good player he is, and certainly the young man from Phiri, Soweto is enjoying the ride of his life. The left winger has got the pace,

the skill to pass past his opponents and a sound crossing technique. However, if he wants to emulate the great Helman Mkhalele, he would need to work on his consistency. At this level, a player must be able to produce high standards every time he puts on a Bafana jersey. Having said that, Tshabalala doesn't need to panic, he just turned 21 four months ago. He is certainly one to keep our eyes on in the future.

Siboniso Gaxa (Supersport United)

After just two seasons in the professional ranks, very few players can boast about their achievements. But in the case of the Supersport United central defender, Siboniso Gaxa, he boasts about winning the SAA Supa Eight in 2004 and the Absa Cup in the same year. On top of that he has played in five successive cup finals. At 21, he is expected to show the same character, dedication and talent as his hero, Lucas Radebe, showed a few years ago. No one can bet against it, as Gaxa has shown maturity and, despite his achievements, he remains humble and continues to work hard on his game. The game in Egypt, against the best of what Africa can provide, will be a real test for him.

Elrio van Heerden (FC Copenhagen)

When former Bafana Bafana coach, Stuart Baxter, included this young winger in the Bafana Bafana squad early in 2005, he was criticised for selecting a player who was hardly active his club. The former UPE School of Excellence product, however, did not disappoint his mentor, and he has cemented his place in the team. His darting runs down the wing have earned remarkable applause from his former detractors, but it is his quality crossing that puts him head and shoulders above those who are fighting him for the same position. Playing in the tough European league has benefited his football, and at 22, Van Heerden can look forward to a long career for Bafana, but more specifically, he is going to be on the forefront of Bafana Bafana's revival.

“Sipiwhe Tshabalala's inclusion in the squad to Egypt proves what a good player he is, and certainly the young man from Phiri, Soweto is enjoying the ride of his life”

Lebohang Mokoena (Orlando Pirates)

He made his professional debut at the age of 17 and has earned his first Bafana cap at 18 during the Gold Cup in America in a famous 2-1 victory over Mexico. “Cheeseboy”, as he is popularly known by his legions of supporters, is probably the better of the upcoming youngsters. He is comfortable playing wide on both wings, but he can also be dangerous upfront as a striker. Although he does not score many goals, hopefully this will develop as he grows older. Mokoena is a menace to the opposing defenders. His lightning pace, dribbling skills and superb work rate are his best attributes and at 19, he is already in his third season in the professional ranks. **UM**