

MATHARE UNITED: A MODEL CECAFA CLUB INSPIRING KENYA'S YOUTH

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It's 9.00 am on a chilly morning at Kasarani Stadium in Nairobi and Mathare United are warming up. One of Kenya's top five teams and formed only seven years ago, Mathare United moved quickly through Division 1 into the Super League. In 1998, whilst still in the Super League they won the country's top football award, the Moi Golden Cup and in the same year they represented Kenya in the Mandela Cup whilst gaining promotion to Kenya's Premier League. Year 2000 saw Mathare win the Moi Golden Cup again and in 2001 they reached the final, losing on their opponent's home ground. In the same year they had five of their players in the national side. Not a bad record for any team with top class facilities, expensive coaches and high priced players. But Mathare United has none of these.

All of Mathare United's players come from the Mathare Valley, one of Africa's largest and poorest slums, where seventy per cent of the population consists of working mothers and children. Only a couple of kilometres from Nairobi's central business district, the Mathare Valley is a world away from the high tech aura of the city centre. Narrow, pot holed roads squeeze incessant traffic between poorly built structures and piles of smouldering rubbish. Second hand clothes stalls vie with fruit and vegetable sellers for custom and space, while plump goats compete with scrawny dogs for pickings. It's vibrant, noisy and dirty, crammed full of people and definitely not on the tourist map. Yet the Mathare Valley is also, underneath the apparent chaos, a model of organization, where the combined energy of 16,000 young people, mostly under 18, has been harnessed to promote a youth culture that could be the envy of the world.

It all started in 1987 when Nairobi resident, Bob Munro, watched the children of Mathare playing football with a ball made out of old plastic bags. Munro realized that sport, as a universal language, could be a way of empowering the youth of the valley, allowing them to release their energies in a controlled way. He then took the idea a step further by linking sport with service to the community and together with Mathare residents, he started a small self help project in which sport participation was linked to cleaning up the slum. Thus was born the Mathare Youth Sports Association, now commonly known as MYSA.

The foundation of MYSA philosophy is football leagues, and the aim, as in leagues the world over, is to win promotion on the basis of points earned. However, in the MYSA leagues it's how you earn the points that makes the difference. In addition to playing weekend matches, participants must undertake community service projects, for which six league points are awarded to the team for every successful project. Thus points are gained for not only winning the game, but also for cleaning the environment.

The project started with only 25 boys' football teams, but has since spread to include girls' football and sport education in primary schools. Today MYSA is the largest youth sports organization in Africa with over 1000 teams and 14,000 players. Leagues start in the Under 10 age group and progress through to senior level at Under 18. Mathare United, being professional, are not part of the MYSA leagues, but that does not exempt the players from community duties.

Back at Kasarani stadium, Mathare's home ground, the Mathare United team undertake rigorous physical training under head coach Gabriel Njoroge. Njoroge, a former United player himself, pushes them hard, proud of the fact that seven of his players are in the national team of Harambee Stars. They train for at least an hour, displaying the tight ball control and playing discipline that is the foundation of their success, before heading back to Mathare. Once there they take off their playing shirts and don their community caps, ready for the community service that is integral to being a part of MYSA.

Even though it is not a condition of being in the Premier League, all Mathare United players must complete at least 60 hours community service a month, for which they are paid. The team is sponsored by three local companies – Kapa Oil Refineries, makers of a wide range of consumer products such as Kasuku shortening, Safaricom, a mobile phone network, and Ngombe, a local wire products company – yet community service is still part of their conditions of work. Many of the players can be found cleaning up the neighbourhood as part of the MYSA 'Clean Up Project'. Some, however, will go straight from training to Nairobi's juvenile courts where they help street children who

have been arrested as vagrants. As the children are processed, MYSA volunteers, working in conjunction with the Jamii Bora Trust, give them food, help to secure their release and begin a process which often ends with the children being reunited with their families.

John Kureshi, 25, joined MYSA when he was 12 and is now Captain of Mathare United. Apart from playing regularly for his team John is also the club accountant, responsible for ensuring that revenue from club activities, including gate receipts, transfer fees and income from commercial ventures, is ploughed back to cover MYSA's operating costs. And like most of his team mates John is also a trained HIV/AIDS counsellor, spreading the prevention message in what is generally considered, due to poverty and ignorance, a high risk area. MYSA has over 200 youth leaders between the ages of 12 and 20 who have been trained in aids prevention and counselling. Most are top players in their leagues, role models to their peers and thus an effective way of reaching the young population of the valley.

The idea of using players as peer educators was born when it was noticed that MYSA players who participated in foreign tournaments such as the Norway Cup, often returned with more mature and responsible attitudes. "There was", says Salim Mohammed, leader of the MYSA HIV/AIDS Project, "a need to profit from that." Which MYSA duly did by ensuring that the returning teenagers attended twice yearly workshops intended to train them as peer educators.

The Norway Cup is the largest youth football tournament in the world and since 1990 MYSA teams have been regular participants. In 1995 the youngest boys' team won the championship in their age group and have since won it three more times. Other teams have regularly emerged either as champions or as runners up (in 2001 the Under 14 girls and Under 13 boys took the gold medals, while the Under 16 boys took silver) and significantly the MYSA teams have also won the 'Best Fairplay' award twice.

Fair play is very much the basis of MYSA philosophy and rules are strictly interpreted. For example, on the field only the Captain may speak to officials. All other players must remain silent and be at least 10 yards away. Offenders receive a yellow card for the first violation and a red card for the second in the same match. League points are deducted for bad behaviour and teams are responsible for the conduct of their supporters. In 1988 MYSA introduced a rule for players who abused the referee. Instead of being expelled they were expected to referee 10 games in the younger leagues. Since then, many of the offenders have become MYSA's best players, coaches and referees and the rule has not been invoked since 1990.

One of the most remarkable aspects of MYSA is that it is run by the youth, for the youth. Although Bob Munro still maintains a position as Chairman of the Board of Trustees (he is also Chair of Mathare United), the leagues, which are divided into 16 zones, are run by committees of coaches and captains, each of whom is elected by the team. The Chairs of these committees form the MYSA Sports Council which is responsible for all MYSA sports programmes. The Community Service Council, meanwhile, consists of trained youth leaders who organize the weekly clean up. Most members of these committees are under the age of 18. Both Councils elect members to the Executive Council which is responsible for the overall management, including budgets, of MYSA. Last year MYSA scored a goal for gender equality when a 16 year old female became Chair of the Executive Council, elected by her peers. Girls have been a part of MYSA since 1992, participating in the football leagues and being trained as both coaches and referees – the first in Africa.

MYSA is full of 'firsts': the first in Africa to organize football leagues in the slums on a self help basis; the first in Africa to organize Under 12 girls football teams; the first in Africa to send a girls' team to the Norway Cup – the list goes on. But it should be remembered that these 'firsts' are the direct result of the desire to succeed which is inspired by MYSA's role models – the successful players. While the role models exist the enthusiasm is self perpetuating, with no end to the innovations that could emanate from the valley. In fact the system has been so successful that the MYSA philosophy has spread to the vast refugee camp of Kakuma on Kenya's northern border. With a population of 60,000 from eight countries, the camp is a breeding ground for crime. In 1998 top MYSA leaders helped to set up a similar self help sports and community service project involving over 12,000 of Kakuma's youth. According to MYSA, incidents of conflict and violence have significantly dropped since the project began.

Education is not forgotten either. The points awarded for both sports and community projects count towards annual leadership awards which have a monetary value and which is paid directly to school tuition fees. MYSA youth are frequently called upon to address sports and youth conferences or to

take on advisory roles. In 1997 a MYSA youth leader addressed the Commonwealth Sport and Development Programme in Edinburgh and two years later, a youth leader was asked to join the Commonwealth Committee on Co-operation through Sports. The same year also saw the launch in London of 'Shootback', a book of photographs taken by the children of the Mathare slums under the supervision of a MYSA leader who had studied photo journalism. Proceeds from the book go directly to MYSA.

Mathare United, meanwhile, finish their community service and for the second time that day return to Kasarani for another punishing training session. They are the cream of the MYSA sports leagues, well aware that for every United player there are hundreds waiting to take over. It takes talent and commitment to make any professional footballer but to play for Mathare United requires something extra – a proven record of community service. According to John Kureshi when scouting for potential players, the Mathare United management "look at your MYSA record as well as your football skills." While every player goes through the MYSA system, cleaning rubbish, helping street children, acting as AIDS counsellors and peer educators, you can be pretty sure that the players of Mathare United will not forget their roots.

According to Bob Munro the valley may not have changed much in appearance, despite the clean-up campaign, but the people have. The young people who run MYSA are impressive in their professionalism and there is no doubt that those at the top of the organization have a major influence on those at the bottom.

Kids from the Mathare Valley begin life with the odds stacked against them and the road from slum boy to superstar is tough to say the least. But those who begin their sporting careers with MYSA have shown that the combined ingredients of competition, discipline, community service, successful role models and a desire to succeed, can produce the best in the business.

Selected Achievements in Kenya 1987-2002

1987 First football leagues in Kenya and Africa organized by youth on a self-help basis
1988 First in Kenya and Africa to organize U12 boys football leagues
1988 Kenyan U18 Boys Champions
1991 Provincial U16 Boys Champions
1991 Boit Ghetto Cup U16 Boys Champions
1992 First in Kenya and Africa to organize U12 and U14 girls football leagues
1994 First in Kenya and Africa to train young footballers on AIDS prevention
1994 Provincial U18 Boys Champions
1996 First MYSA players joined the Kenyan national team
1996 Provincial U18 Boys Champions
1997 Provincial U17 Boys Champions
1997 Kenyan Women's Football Champions
1998 Mathare United win the Moi Golden Cup
1999 MYSA "Shootback" photography book launched in London
1999 Provincial U17 Boys Champions
1999 Mathare United win Kenya Hedex Millennium Cup
2000 Mathare United win Tusker Group in Premier League
2000 First young girl elected to chair the MYSA Executive Council
2000 Mathare United win the Moi Golden Cup

International Achievements and Awards 1992-2002

1988 First organization in the world to link sports with environmental cleanup
1992 Eco-Youth Games U16 Champions in Brazil
1992 UNEP Global 500 Award for environmental innovation and achievement in Rio
1995 Norway Cup U12 Boys (Gold)
1996 First girls team from Africa to participate in the Norway Cup
1997 Norway Cup U12 Boys (Bronze) and U14 Girls (Bronze)
1998 Norway Cup U12 Boys (Gold) and U14 Girls (Silver)
1999 First player won a scholarship to a US college
1999 First player joined a professional team in Europe
1999 Norway Cup U12 Boys (Gold)
1999 Global Help for Self-Help Prize by the Strømme Foundation (Oslo City Hall)
2000 Norway Cup U13 Boys (Bronze) and U14 girls (Silver)
2000 First World Sports Academy/Laureus Sport for Good Award (Monaco)

2001 Colour Line Cup and Dana Cup U13 Boys Champions
2001 Norway Cup U13 Boys (Gold), U14 Girls (Gold) and U16 Boys (Silver)
2001 First CAF African Youth Development Award (Johannesburg)
2002 Norway Cup U13 Boys (Gold), U14 Girls (Bronze) and U16 Boys (Bronze)