

## **THE FEMALE SOCCER VISIONARY**

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By Phares Mutembei

Someday, maybe very soon, Anne Opana Nekesa, will, perhaps, be the most famous female soccer player in Kenya. Anne has been in love with soccer since 1997, when she was only 16. It is a love she has nurtured and which is growing and taking her places.

It is opening gates to once unimaginable opportunities too. She has had the opportunity to visit foreign countries in Africa, Middle East and even Europe. "If somebody had told me a few years ago that I would from time to time be boarding a plane to Europe, I would have dismissed them as liars."

Anne, 22, recently returned from an 11-month stay in Norway, where she spent her time coaching youth teams. "I was representing the Mathare Youth Sports Association (Mysa) and I had a real good time in Norway," she said. She says the trip was educational and an eye-opener. "I also had an opportunity to meet youth of diverse cultures and background. Some people are very different from us, and there are things I had difficulty in understanding and coping with."

But that did not hinder her from making friends and doing her work. "Tolerance of foreign culture is necessary, and I had to adjust to their way of living," Anne, the third born in a family of seven, adds. She says she worked with a community development initiatives including caring for the aged and disabled. She had also been in Norway in 2001 as a student at the Nordhordland Folk College.

This time, the highlight of her tour was conducting soccer clinics, for players aged between 19 and 20. "It was not difficult to teach the youths but at first I had to gain their confidence. You see, it was hard for them to believe a Kenyan girl could teach them soccer!" Once that was done, everything went according to plan. Her task, she says, was made easier by the warm nature of Norwegians. "They are receptive and supportive people and I had the time of my life." She was stationed in a remote area, where out of a population of 5,000 people, only four were black. With the little 'Norwegian' she knew, she got by.

She thanks MYSA, a youth development organization, for making the trip possible and for nurturing her soccer skills. MYSA has been nominated for this year's Nobel peace prize for its approach to sports, environment conservation, HIV/Aids prevention, leadership, education, and legal matters.

Adjusting to their lifestyle also involved being sensitive to what they don't like. "Norwegians, and I think most Europeans, find it rude when a friend just pops in at their home without invitation," she says. Unlike here, you have to be invited to a party and you do not go empty-handed, she says.

For Anne, her football success is a culmination of continuous effort, sacrifice, dedication and prayers. "I have given everything to be able to take part in sports, especially soccer. "I withstood humiliating taunts from boys and girls alike when I first took up soccer. People who saw me playing with boys whispered that I was getting immoral. They did not understand that I loved the game and was willing to face anything, to enjoy it and succeed."

Her resolve was rewarded and her earlier detractors even go to watch her dribble past her male counterparts. Some of the girls who taunted her, have become ardent fans and some have joined girls' teams. "In a way, I have influenced many girls to play soccer and I am proud of them, and myself too," an ever-smiling Anne adds.

She has every reason to smile. MYSA, in recognition of her organizational skills and service to the community, has appointed her the girls' soccer coordinator for the Kahawa Zone. The zone comprises Kimbo, Kahawa West, Kahawa Barracks, Githurai and Mwiki. Each zone has an under 2, 14 and over-16 team. "It is a daunting task, which I aim to carry out successfully."

She plans to introduce more girls to soccer and improve standards in the zone. She is well aware of the obstacles in this task but adds: "Although many parents in my neighbourhood are suspicious and think their daughters won't be safe mixing with the boys, I know it is okay and I will encourage their daughters to join me in soccer.

Before going to Norway, worked as a social worker with the Juvenile Court in Nairobi. Her work involved interacting with children, some of whom were arrested and remanded for various reasons, tracing their parents and finding accommodation for them at children's homes. "We were able to take a few children back to their homes but it was heart-breaking to see some parents hesitate to take their own children. I couldn't understand that." Mysel linked those children whose parents could not be reached to self-help groups in the city.

Anne is at the moment a defender with Old Is Gold football club, last season's runners-up in the national women league. She started playing soccer at Kahawa Secondary School, where she was also the sports captain, a first for a girl at the mixed school. Even then, she played in the MYSA leagues, something that did not go well with her parents then. "So we sat down and talked and agreed. My father told me to make sure my schoolwork did not suffer and I made a schedule that I stuck to," she remembers.

Her father is a KFF and FIFA class referee and also plays for Wazee wa Kazi, made up of soccer veterans. Her elder brother, Gilbert Obuya plays for Utalii in the premier league. "My younger brothers and sister also play soccer in the MYSA junior league. It is only my mother who does not play, though she was an athlete."

Last year, Anne represented MYSA and Kenya in the 'Women and Sports Conference' in Montreal, Canada, where they discussed the way forward for women in the various kinds of sports. Ultimately, Anne would like to play professionally in Europe. She would also like to start a children's home to take care of the less-privileged children. "My life would not have been like this without help, so I want to make other children's lives better. I owe the community."