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Zola Doda: Thabo, before we talk about anything else, just tell us about the experience of being part of the national team for the friendly matches against Guinea-Bissau and Angola.

TM: It was a good experience because it's always an honour to get called up to the national team and I believe it's a positive step in my career. Whenever I get called up, I consider it to be growth and I'm learn something every day there. I get exposed to different types of players, different styles and I always learn from it.

ZD: Was the call up something you expected?

TM: Hmmm, I won't say 'expected'. Obviously, it was a wish (to be part of the squad). When the squad was announced, I wanted my name to be there. But to be honest with you, I wasn't expecting it in a sense that I deserved to be there - it was a wish. But I didn't feel like I deserved to be there nor did I expect it.

ZD: Why didn't you expect it though, because you've been playing well this season?

TM: There are lots of players in my position and a lot of players in the PSL and overseas who are doing well. The coach has a pool of players he can select from and for your name to be amongst the names he selects means you are doing something right. So, for me, I just felt that we have a lot of good players in South Africa and that is why I didn't expect it.

ZD: When you were younger, was playing for the national team something you aspired to one day?

TM: Ya, that was the main goal. I remember in 2008 when I was in Grade 8, my father bought three soccer jerseys - the one of France, of Brazil and of South Africa. The France jersey had Zinedine Zidane's name at the back, the Brazil jersey had Ronaldinho's name and the Bafana Bafana jersey had a question mark. My father then asked me, "Which player's name should we put on the Bafana Bafana jersey?" My answer to him was that in a couple of years my name will be on that shirt.

ZD: That's interesting. How did your father react?

TM: He was shocked because he was expecting me to name a player that was playing. But I told him in a couple of years my name will be there, so when I got my first Bafana Bafana call-up I reminded him about that. When we talk and reminisce about that, my father laughs because at the time he didn't know it was something that was actually going to happen.

ZD: What gave you that self-belief at such a young age?

TM: I made a decision from an early age - I think I was maybe in Primary School - that I was going to pursue football and try my level best. That if I didn't make it, then I will still have my studies to fall back on. But my first love and first preference... it was always football. They understood and supported me. From an early age, there was a drive and belief that it's possible. If you look at people who came from my hood (Sebokeng, Johannesburg), like Steve Lekoelea, 'Sailor' (Daniel) Tshabalala and Abia Nale - I watched them play kasi football. That gave me that thing to say it's possible. If someone from my neighbourhood could do it, then why couldn't I do it?

ZD: You are saying you wanted to focus on both football and studies. But did any of the two suffer along the way?

TM: My studies suffered a lot in my Matric year in 2010. In that year, when I was supposed to write my tests, I played in Future Champs tournament and I wrote the tests late

He is one of a kind!

Thabo Mnyamane's outstanding 2015/16 season may not have been enough to spare University of Pretoria the relegation woes, but it was enough to capture the hearts of local fans. Now in the Blue and White colours of SuperSport United, the 24-year-old is having a ball of a time! Having recently been called up to Bafana Bafana, Mnyamane also stands a good chance to finish the season with a league winner's medal. In this heart-to-heart with Soccer Laduma's Zola Doda, he talks about his rise to stardom, the national team and how his studies suffered along the way.



and I didn't get the chance to study. In July that year, I went to Sweden for the Gothia Cup for 10 days and, when I came back, I had to write my exams late. For the preliminary exams, which were in August, I was in Cape Town for a week and I wrote some tests later. To be honest, I didn't pass as well as I thought I would pass in my Matric and that pushed me to take a course to cater for my marks. So 2010 is when my studies suffered a lot but fortunately, I passed with an exemption to go to varsity.

ZD: Congratulations on having obtained a varsity pass and going on to attain your diploma in Sports Science. Let's go back to Bafana Bafana. How was that match against Guinea-Bissau, where you came on as a substitute?

TM: It was a good game because obviously, the objective of that friendly was to prepare for the World Cup qualifier against Cape Verde. Guinea-Bissau is more a Portuguese team and their players are based in Portugal. They have a Portuguese flair and style, so we were preparing for Cape Verde, most of whose players play in Portugal. It was about the style of play and, for me, coming on as a sub was great. Obviously, as a player, you want to get more game-time, but it's now water under the bridge. But I enjoyed every minute of the camp and the game, and I'm thankful for that.

ZD: The general consensus was that this is one of the best Bafana teams assembled.

TM: You see, South Africa has a lot of talent and I think this is a good era. Right now, South Africa is at a point where every player is doing their part and it's easy for the coach to select the

team. People are playing well - be it overseas or here - and that makes it easy for the coach to assemble a good team.

ZD: How did you feel when you were not part of the matchday squad against Angola?

TM: Eish, ahhh. Hmmm, let me rather not comment about that one.

ZD: Even your teammate, Jeremy Broekie, tweeted that he was surprised when you were left out, while there were two goalkeepers on the

camp?

TM: Ja, there was some feedback from the coaches. This was my third camp - my first camp was against Swaziland and Nigeria and my second was against Mauritius in the CHAN qualifiers. They just told me, "We know what you can do. We know what you can bring to the table. We know your credentials and you are a good player."

ZD: When you came back from the Bafana camp, SuperSport released a statement saying your coach Stuart Baxter is talking to SAFA regarding taking over as the national team coach.

TM: Can I please not comment about that one too?

ZD: Should he leave, it would be some loss for you guys.

TM: He is a great coach, he is one of a kind and he is a teacher of the game. I'm growing so much under him and not a day goes by without him teaching us something. He knows what he wants from players, he knows how he wants his team to play and he has a certain philosophy. We as players are behind his philosophy, we respect it and we can see that it's working. As an individual, I'm learning a lot from coach Stuart and I'm glad that, at my age, I have a chance to work with him.

ZD: What did he make of you when you joined the club?

TM: He knew me from Tuks, when he was still the coach of Kaizer Chiefs. That was when I had a good run and scored seven goals in the league. When I joined SuperSport, he

told me he knew what I could do and produce, hence I'm part of his team. He told me he believed in my potential and that I can deliver for the team.

ZD: This is also one of your best seasons. How do you consistently put out these brilliant performances, not to mention your scoring prowess?

TM: I always say this to people and sometimes it sounds crazy... there are three things that make me, hmmm, I won't say consistent, but to perform the way I'm performing. It's prayer, support from teammates, the technical team, my family and friends, and belief. So it's prayer, support and belief. Those are the three things that I attach to my performance.

ZD: What else do you do differently?

TM: I try to put in extra work. I won't lie and say I'm Cristiano Ronaldo and that I come to training two hours prior. But I try to do some extra work. But you can see with the way the league is structured that it's hard. We need more rest than training and it's hard to find the time to put in a good amount of extra work because you need a good amount of rest as well. Games come in midweek and weekends.

ZD: Are you surprised with all the attention you've been getting?

TM: I wouldn't say 'surprised'. Performance is related to the team. As a team, we are having a good run and, when that happens, the confidence of the team is going to extend to individuals. That will make things flow. As for attention, I don't think I'm getting attention. Ha, ha, ha.

ZD: Matsatsantsa a Pitori are also having a good run. Can you go all the way and win the league?

TM: If you look at the bigger picture, a good run is cosmetic because we can have a good run and not win the league, you understand? I believe that it must be constructive and, at the end of the season, when we lift the trophy, we can say we had a good run and we are the champions. But that run must not go to our heads.

We must not think we have made it. There are still lots of games to play and the league is very tight for us to be complacent. Every point for us counts and, as players, we have to deliver in every match.

ZD: Good win in the Nedbank Cup Last 16 against KwaDukuza United, but you got sent off.

TM: It was a good game, but it's just that it was unfortunate that I got sent off. But I won't comment any further than that.

ZD: You will miss back-to-back Tshwane derby matches against Mamelodi Sundowns due to suspension...

TM: Obviously, it's a big disappointment, but we have a good squad and a good team that can do the job. We have depth in our squad and there are a lot of players that can do the job when one player is not playing. I'm really not worried about that because we have great players who can deliver when called upon.

ZD: Thibos, thanks a lot and best of luck.

TM: It's my pleasure. ☐

"There are three things that make me perform."

THABO MNYAMANE FACT FILE

Full name: Thabo Reitumetse Mnyamane
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Position: Midfielder
Jersey number: 23
Club: SuperSport United
Previous clubs: North West University Soccer Institute, University of Pretoria
Honours: 3 Bafana Bafana caps

bench. What did Owen da Gama say to you?

TM: Can I please not comment about that?

ZD: Fair enough. We respect your wish. But, overall, did the coach give you any feedback about



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