



**Peter Raath:** Before bouncing back by beating Milano United 2-0, Thanda Royal Zulu went four games without a win, including losing their unbeaten record to University of Pretoria. Why the sudden slump?

**Xolani Ngcobo:** It's wasn't a problem from our side, but everyone wanted to beat our unbroken record. All the teams stayed back in defence rather than coming at us, so it was difficult to penetrate. Against Witbank Spurs, we created many chances, but didn't convert them. Most of the time, Thanda concede during the first half and then come back. But in the AmaTuks match, they scored twice. That's why we failed. Coach Roger Sikhakhane warned us about that game, saying, "It's not going to be easy because in the first round, although we won, they were better than us." After that defeat, our team regrouped to start afresh. Now, if an opponent gives 100 percent effort, Thanda must give 110 percent. We're good going forward and if we don't concede, all that's needed is one goal to win. It's been a while since we kept a clean sheet, but at least I managed to do that against Milano.

**PR: How did you find the windy conditions?**

**XN:** It was hard, especially trying to kick the ball against the wind. If you hang it in the air, it comes back. Our head coach told us, "Guys, we're not here to defend, but are going all out for three points. When the wind's with us, we must score early." But that didn't happen, so in the second period, he encouraged us to keep the ball on the ground. After our first goal, Milano came at us, so I knew they would leave themselves open at the back for us to score a second. People were hoping to catch us, yet we maintained our seven-point lead. My goalkeeper coach, Sipho Zimba, who was unable to make the trip due to injury, called me the night before and again in the morning, to say, "Remember what we always do at training." There's



XOLANI NGCOBO

### NATIONAL FIRST DIVISION FOCUS

# The players love each other



*Thanda Royal Zulu goalkeeper, Xolani Ngcobo, talks to Soccer Laduma's Peter Raath about losing their unbeaten record. He also discusses team spirit, coaches and fans.*

no more rest for us, according to Sikhakhane. With five games in April, it's going to be tough, especially against second-placed Leopards and Eagles, who're fighting for a play-off spot. We also host Magesi, a side that doesn't want to go back to the ABC Motsepe League.

**PR: What's the Thanda team spirit like?**

**XN:** I've been on the books of United FC/Garankuwa United, Royal Eagles and Baroka FC, but have never played with such good guys. At Thanda, players support each other. We all eat cake and braai together as a team. You can see that there's a special spirit. The players love each other. They fight for each other. After training, the guys watch television. Everybody

is accommodating. Arriving from Baroka, I wasn't surprised to see Thanda at position number one. There's a small squad, where everyone competes for a place. If you lose that spot, there's always someone to grab it. I don't mind fighting with Siyabonga Mbatha for the posts. I must use my chance the proper way in order that both of us are happy. Mhlengi Cele, our leading

goal scorer, doesn't say much, but works so hard at training. Whether he starts or comes on as a substitute, he'll never ask, "Why am I not playing when I'm scoring?"

**PR: Is it a similar situation between Sikhakhane and his assistant, Sello Ntuli?**

**XN:** Yes, Peter. The two of them are always together, smiling. At my previous clubs, I didn't see the coaches associating after work, but that happens at Thanda. If you go to the office, people will also give you a smile. The structure here is perfect. Look at our wonderful supporters. Even before you warm up, there's a fully-packed stadium. If we draw at home, it's a loss to them, but when we get three points, they sing for us. In fact, we all sing together. Our chairman, Pierre Delvaux, who's a good person, is also motivating us. When we lost to Tuks, he spoke about our unbeaten 19-game run and encouraged the guys to focus. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

**PR: Before we let you go, please talk to us about Dan Malesela, who coached you as a Mamelodi Sundowns junior and later at United FC.**

**XN:** It's his culture to play the ball on the ground. We were doing that at Downs in 2011 when we lost in the semi-final of the Bayhill Cup. That's when I was still at school. Two years later, he took me to United, where we did so well to reach another semi-final in the Nedbank Cup, before losing 2-1 to Kaizer Chiefs. I'm not surprised Dan's doing good things at Chippa United.

**PR: Thanks, Zolani, and good luck in clinching the NFD title.**

**XN:** No problem, Peter. Thanda has Bernard Parker's jersey hanging in the office to remind us of their time in the PSL. We are want to win medals. It was great to keep a second successive clean sheet against Santos and maintain our eight-point lead over Leopards. □

### THE LATEST NFD NEWS

- Gauteng ABC Motsepe League champions, Maccabi FC, will be joining their Mpumalanga counterparts, Acornbush United, in the National Play-Offs after clinching the title by one point. "SAFA has written a letter to us confirming that we've won the league. We hope to do well in the play-offs, but there's no official date yet," said team manager, James Ndlovu.
- After netting a hat-trick against University of Pretoria to bring his total to eight goals, Witbank Spurs' striker, Joshua Sauls, is confident that Siyavutha can qualify for the play-offs. "Yes, we will," he told Soccer Laduma.
- With Moroka Swallows condemned to a third successive relegation, one fan wrote on Facebook, "Welcome to the SAB League, but beware there's no shower, no dressing room (you get dressed under a tree), no chairs for reserve players, no payment, no journalists, no experienced referees, no PowerAde or drinking water."
- Just before Milano United appointed Sayed Appels as a replacement for the ousted Boebie Solomons, veteran head coach, Mlungisi, 'Professor' Ngubane, told Soccer Laduma, "I think that I can help Milano survive, but can they trust me? That's the big question."
- When lower league side, KwaDukuza United, were bungled out of the Nedbank Cup by defending champions, SuperSport United, they fielded a tinge of former NFD individuals. In fact, the KZN side boasted ex-Thanda Royal Zulu head coach, Thami Ngubane, Real Kings' striker Lungelo Zondi and Royal Eagles' attacking midfielder, Khulekani Ndlela.
- As Thanda Royal Zulu fought hard at home to score their second-half winner against lowly Santos, the Cape side had five players booked in the last 25 minutes by referee Shumani Tinyani.

