



## Johannes is still positive that Bafana can qualify for World Cup

RODNEY REINERS

ROBYN JOHANNES is optimistic that, despite the recent setbacks, Bafana Bafana can still qualify for the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Cape Town City captain and central defender Johannes was called up to the SA national team on Monday after head coach Stuart Baxter lost both first-choice centre-backs, Eric Mathoho (suspended) and captain Thulani Hlatshwayo (injured).

"Robyn has been an important part of the Cape Town City team this season and even as far back as last season. People have to believe that if you do well in the PSL you will be rewarded," said Baxter.

For Johannes, the recall to the Bafana squad is certainly well-deserved. He has discovered, to his joy and advantage, that the old idiom "east, west, home's best" contains more than a kernel of truth. The 31-year-old's superb form over the last year has coincided with his move back to the Mother City, and he was justly rewarded with a Bafana call-up as the national team prepares to take on Burkina Faso in a 2018 World Cup qualifier at the FNB Stadium on Saturday (3pm kickoff).

The last time Johannes was in the Bafana squad was in 2008 – and, now, nine years later, back home, back in form, he's back at the top again, and back for Bafana.

Originally from Strandfontein, the talented Johannes was a junior with Parkhurst in Mitchells Plain, Wolves in Wynberg and in the youth academies of Hellenic and Old Mutual before he left the Mother City to join the University of Pretoria football youth set-up at the tender age of 15. As a professional footballer, he went on to play for Mamelodi Sundowns, Orlando Pirates, Golden Arrows, Maritzburg United and AmaZulu. But it was on his return to the Mother City to link up with new Cape PSL club, City, last year that Johannes finally realised his full potential.

"I'm happy off the field, all my family and friends are in Cape Town," said Johannes. "Most importantly, I've been in a good space and I guess that shows on the field. I'm really excited about the Bafana call, it has been years since I was involved with the national team. Every player wants to play for his country, and I'm no different. I'm sure it will be different with Bafana this time; there are different players and it's a different environment."

Ironically, when Johannes was first called up by Bafana in 2005, it was the very same Baxter who was the coach at the time. "Baxter is a top quality coach," said Johannes. "He has proved it over and over again. He gave me my first cap 12 years ago in the Cosafa Cup in Mauritius. I think he is a coach that you can learn from every day and that's what you want as a player."

But, after back-to-back defeats to Cape Verde last month, Bafana's hopes of qualifying for Russia is looking rather shaky. Despite this, Johannes remains optimistic.

"Those who have been called up to represent the country are all here to contribute to the success of the national team, collectively," said the City captain. "It's not about any individual, it's all about making sure we qualify."

"We've proved how strong we are and that we can beat anyone, so we must believe that we can qualify. We have to focus on the controllable and make sure that we win our remaining games; we have to give it our all."

