



FEATURE PHAKAMANI MAHLAMBI



A stepping stone to Europe

After initially struggling to break into Al Ahly's match day following his move to North Africa last year, South African starlet Phakamani Mahlambi was finally given his chance to shine as he helped the Egyptian giants win yet another league title at his first attempt. In this interview, he tells Zola Doda about life in Egypt and the reasons he sees the move as a stepping stone to Europe.

Very few players can go through what Phakamani Mahlambi went through and still have the courage and hunger to succeed.

The 20-year-old tore his medial and anterior collateral ligament during a league match against University of Pretoria in February 2016, as he missed out on representing his country at the 2016 Olympics in Brazil.

Just as things were beginning to get better, Mahlambi then suffered a hamstring injury just months after recovering, ruling him out of the Under-20 World Cup in South Korea. Further heartbreak ensued, as he was forced to watch his beloved Bidvest Wits from the treatment table as they marched on to clinch their first top-flight league title in their 96-year history.

But after joining Egyptian powerhouse

Al Ahly in September, the attacking player seems to have put his past woes behind him while enjoying a new lease on life in the Egyptian capital. Al Ahly were crowned Egyptian Premier League champions for the 40th time this campaign, with the handful of appearances made enough for Mahlambi to earn a call-up to Bafana Bafana for the recent Four Nations Tournament held in Zambia.

"Everything has been great since I moved here," the Egypt-based forward says. "It's been an interesting experience. I received a warm welcome when I arrived and the club showed me how things are done here. So it was not that difficult to adjust. Football wise, I had to adapt quickly because every country plays a different type of football. Off the pitch, the language is not the same, the food is different and the weather is

also very different, because it's always hot. But I'm trying to learn a few things so I can understand when people talk."

And for the player's business manager Glyn Binkin, negotiating a deal that made Mahlambi the first South African to play in Egypt might not have been easy, but he believes it was well worth it in the end.

"Phakamani has fitted in very well at the club and is adapting daily to life in Egypt," Binkin says of his client. "Obviously the language is a slight problem, but he is learning and able to communicate with his teammates who also try to speak English with him. He has also learnt that in order for him to be a top footballer and play at the highest level, he needs to sacrifice. It would have been way easier for him to stay in South Africa and play here, but he was prepared to sacrifice and adopt a new





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culture in a foreign land away from family and friends in order to forge a successful career for himself outside of South Africa."

Tough start

Having only signed for his new club at the very start of the current season, Mahlambi missed out on registration for the 2017 CAF Champions League as he watched the remainder of the continental campaign from the stands as Al Ahly reached the final before losing 2-1 to Algerian rivals Wydad Casablanca.

Despite netting a brace in a 6-0 friendly win against Second Division side El Gouna in September, it took the 20-year-old two months before making his official debut for the Red Devils. Coach Hossam El-Badry deployed the former Wits star on the wing as he came on as a substitute in a 2-0 win

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against Ismaily, before starting his first official match in a 2-0 win against El Dakhleya four days later.

His first goal came in February in a 3-0 win over El Mokawloon, as the youngster made a late surge into the box, pouncing onto a pass before slotting home with a composed finish in the eighth minute to open the scoring.

"When I played for the first time, I could tell the team expected a lot from me," he says. "The coach asked me to play either left or right wing, and I tried to fit in and play my normal football.

"Fortunately, the football is not that

different, it's almost the same [as in South Africa] except for a few things. People here love football; everything they do involves football which is why they are always at the stadiums watching the matches. Their national team has also qualified for the World Cup and now it's really crazy here. People are happy that Egypt qualified."

When Mahlambi was battling to break into the match day squad, there were reports in the media linking the player with a move to Orlando Pirates. But the talks were dismissed by Binkin as untrue.

"Mahlambi has a four-year contract and will stay there for as long as he



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AL AHLY PRESENCE IN RUSSIA

While Phakamani Mahlambi will be watching the 2018 World Cup in Russia from the comfort of his home following Bafana Bafana's failure to qualify for the tournament, most of his Al Ahly teammates will be polishing their boots and double-checking their passports in preparation for their participation at the global spectacle. Egypt qualified for the tournament for the first time since 1990 with the help of seven players from Al Ahly, with Mahlambi's business

manager Glyn Binkin saying this is proof of the club's strength.

"I believe it has been a wonderful experience for him, both on and off the field," Binkin says. "Phakamani is learning each and every day, and by being at the biggest club in Africa, he is training and playing with some of the best players on the continent under the tutelage of a top coach where he will inevitably become an even better player. Al Ahly have seven players in the current Egyptian national

team, of which three or four will be in the starting line-up when they play at the World Cup. Over and above the Egyptian players, the other three foreign players at the club are in the Moroccan, Nigerian and Tunisian national teams and will also be playing at the World Cup, thus in an Al Ahly starting line-up, they have probably seven players who will be playing and starting at the World Cup. If one compares that



Glyn Binkin

to the PSL where very few, if any, players will be at the World Cup, by training and playing with these players every day, one is bound to become a better player. Also, Al Ahly are only behind Real Madrid in terms of trophies won in world football, so they are

a massive club with a proud tradition and history. More importantly, the club and the players have a winning culture and mentality which breeds success."

ANOTHER SOUTH AFRICAN IN EGYPT



Phakamani Mahlambi is not the only South Africa currently playing in the Egyptian Premier League. Former

Platinum Stars player Gift Links is a 19-year-old winger who plies his trade with Alassiouty Sport, having signed a four-and-half-year contract during the January transfer window.

When Alassiouty Sport lost 1-0 to Al Ahly in the league in February, both Mahlambi and Links started the match in the battle of the only two South Africans currently turning out in the Egyptian top-flight. And Mahlambi hopes more South Africans can make it in North Africa.

"Egypt is a stepping stone to Europe," he says. "Look at the players who played in Egypt - it's easy for them to play in Europe. Everyone wants to play in Europe, and many of their scouts come to Egypt. Coming here is a good thing. If you are in a comfort zone, it gets too comfortable and you are not going to learn anything." And Mahlambi's representative Binkin shares the same sentiment.

"Obviously different faces fit in different places, but for South African players, in my humble opinion, it is a very good place to play and develop one's game," he says. "As I previously mentioned, Al Ahly is the biggest and most successful club in Africa and as such, they attract interest and attention from many European clubs. The club has a history of selling and developing players and if one looks at Mo Salah for example, who is one of the best players in the world at the moment, he also played in the Egyptian league. It makes sense for European clubs to scout in Egypt for top talents, and more so as it's very close to Europe."

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needs to do until such time as other opportunities arise which are in the interest of both Al Ahly and the player. He is very happy there at the club and is enjoying his life there on and off the field of play," the agent said at the time.

The player also adds that homesickness is the last thing on his mind.

"Homesickness? I never had a problem with that," he says. "I don't want to stress myself to a point where I can't even play well. There is a lot of competition in the team at Al Ahly and if I lose focus, it will take me a while to come back. So I need to keep focus. Physically, I'm in good shape as well. We have also just won the league and it's a great feeling, a very good thing. It's also good for my reputation. I had a few challenges at the beginning and that is why I couldn't be registered for the CAF Champions League. But I spoke to the coach and he said that in the group stages, I will be in the squad."

Vision 2022 prospect

With age on his side, Mahlambi is certainly one of the younger players earmarked to lead Bafana Bafana's long-term project labelled "Vision 2022". The winger started the first match in the recent Four Nations Tournament against Angola, making way for Ryan Moon after 70 minutes.

"It's truly an honour to get a call-up after my first season in Al Ahly," the proud youngster says. "I missed home, but I didn't want to think about that a lot while in Egypt. If I do that, that will take my focus



Mahlambi was named the 2016/17 PSL Young Player of the Year.

away from football and I don't want that. I just have to focus on my game until the end of the season and then I can think about home. Right now I can't say I want to achieve this and that with the national team. If I start saying that, I will be limiting myself in terms of what I want to achieve. I want the national team to develop and for us to compete in bigger tournaments. It's not nice when the national team is not in a major tournament. I want to achieve everything I can." **KO**