



FEATURE LERATO CHABANGU

'I have lost so much in my life'

For all the 'obituaries' that have been written about Lerato Chabangu's football career, the former Bafana Bafana attacking midfielder is refusing to give up. In this honest interview with Lovemore Moyo, the former Mamelodi Sundowns and Chippa United player insists that he is fighting on to fix up his life.

It is no secret that Lerato Chabangu failed to handle himself at the peak of his powers, resulting in the disheartening downfall of a career that held such promise.

The sight of the 32-year-old sweating it out with a smile on his face at ABC Motsepe League club Pretoria Callies is refreshing to see, considering this is the very same player touted as being down and out following financial mismanagement during the time when his career was cruising in the fast lane.

Chabangu now paints a picture of man who is doing what he has always loved doing – playing football.

That he has added to the long list of players moving from rags to riches and back is insignificant as he goes about his duties, bubbling just like he did when he was at Absa Premiership heavyweights Mamelodi Sundowns.

Just like all the players at Callies, his mode of transport is now one of the team's two mini-buses which collects him from his pick-up point in Tembisa and takes him to the club's training base in Arcadia.

"I have made mistakes before and I do acknowledge that," Chabangu admits straight after an intense session conducted by head coach Solly Luvhengo.

"At the same time, I don't want to live with regrets and fail to acknowledge all that happened in the past. I'd rather work on a plan going forward than focus on

the past. My past has been a life lived that I will not be able to reverse and correct. However, I can do something about my future. I am grateful I have been given a chance to play

football again. Football is all I have ever known, so I am genuinely appreciative to be playing again."

The football Chabangu plays nowadays is a far cry from what brought him fame and fortune when he broke through into the PSL as a teenager in March 2005.

It also doesn't taste the same as winning the PSL title twice.

Neither does it feel like scoring the goal that decided a Nedbank Cup final nor playing 90 minutes in a SAA Supa 8 final.

There aren't German sports cars in the parking lot at training or fans waiting to praise him after matches.

It is the rough and unfashionable world of the third-tier where he now plays for relative breadcrumbs.

"All the same, this is still an opportunity. Isn't it so?" he queries while twisting the rather strange ponytail that complements the mohawk he now sports instead of the trademark dreadlocks.



Chabangu (left) with KICK OFF's Lovemore Moyo.





"I can still afford to smile doing what I love instead of wasting away at home."

Yet the reality is that for someone of his talent and ability, he definitely shouldn't be already playing in the lower leagues in his early thirties when his previous peers remain regulars in the top-flight.

"I think you need to understand that this is where it all began for me, so it's nothing new at all. I played here when this league was still known as the Vodacom League when I was at Tuks and we then got promoted to the MTN [First Division]. I am grateful to have come back to this league with a team from Pretoria whose history I know too well, before it was

bought by the current owners.

"Playing in this league is a challenge for me because it is more about putting to use all that I have learnt through my career. Of course I am now older and whatever it is I have learnt, I need to teach the youngsters while also learning how to cooperate with them. Maybe one day I will be a coach as well. Who knows? It is two ways. You learn and then you give," he says in seeking to justify his fall.

Frankly speaking, however, Chabangu is only at Callies after desperation left him with no choice but to go as far as Nzhelele to join Mkhado FC as he sought to revive a career that stalled for a year after his departure from Chippa United in June 2016.

Over the year he was out of a job, the midfielder had been written off as a footballer, having become a sorry sight on the streets of Tembisa.

"Nothing happened at Mkhado – I just wanted to be closer to home after having lost my grandmother who raised me since I was kid. I lived my whole life under her support, so I felt I needed to be home next to my grandfather and my family. I made that decision based on this. My granny passed away in December," he explains.

Being at a third-tier club is not about the money, but the passion, he insists, while adding that he is not yet finished.

"You obviously can't hide that fact [that the money is little], but what you need to understand is that this is no longer about the money, but rather the passion and ambition. I cannot keep thinking about the money here; I'd rather teach the young ones after which everything else will follow. With regards to money, they will thank me with anything and I will accept it.

"I still have the touches and my ambition is still there, so that is what I still feel remains of me. Anything can still happen and what I need to do is push myself to the extreme and then see what happens afterwards. The only thing you must know is that a football career has its own time. In a country like ours, as you get older you must realise there is the first, second, third and fourth division leagues where you can still play football if you want to. It all depends on how you handle your body along with the kind of thoughts you have. I still want to play. I was approached by the guys from Venda who said I must come and help them, and while I was there I could see I still have it in me. For now, I will just keep pushing and then see what happens later on in the year."

'I'm still myself'

With all the downgrades he has had to deal with, just how does he feel to be Lerato Chabangu today?

"I feel like a normal person. I hope you understand me," he says in between a series of giggles. "There is obviously pressure, but I feel great that my family surname has been put on the map because of me," he notes before immediately realising that his answer is not convincing.

"Okay, what do you want to hear? When I walk in the streets I still do so in the

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CHABANGU'S ACHIEVEMENTS

In his prime playing in the PSL, Chabangu won 32 Bafana Bafana caps, scoring two goals. His debut came as a 19-year-old against Seychelles in the Cosafa Castle Cup, while he also notched up 14 Under-23 caps, having also previously played for Amajita. His medal collection includes the 2004 Cosafa

Under-20 Cup, the 2005/06 and 2006/07 Absa Premiership, the 2007 SAA Supa 8, the 2008 Nedbank Cup and the 2012 MTN8 crown. After his last game for Bafana during the Chan finals, he reacted angrily to Sports Minister Fikile Mbatula labelling the team 'a bunch of losers', memorably referring to the government official as a loser himself.



PICS FROM LEFT: Chabangu during an Under-23 warm-up session in 2007; celebrating his contribution toward Sundowns' 2006/07 Absa Premiership victory; enjoying SAA Supa 8 Cup success in 2007; in action for Bafana in 2012; being congratulated by Moroka Swallows teammates for a goal in the 2012 MTN8 quarter-final.

same way I used to. I walk like myself, the way I have always walked. I still have people and friends I grew up with that I still know up to today and we still click. We still communicate, and we smile when we see each other. There is no beef and life goes on. When we see one another we talk, plus we communicate via phones when necessary. That's it," he says, asking if this is an appropriate response.

For all the judgemental voices coming from the streets and social media about financial mismanagement and a questionable lifestyle, it seems few have bothered to try understand who the true Lerato Chabangu is, and how he became such a wayward character whose behaviour eventually led to him losing houses, cars and getting separated from his fiancée – the mother of his only child.

"Both my parents are still alive. My dad stays in Soweto and my mom stays with me in Tembisa. I have never stayed with my father," he reveals.

"When thinking about some of these things, I sometimes ask myself 'what happened?', but never find answers. Then some other things I simply cannot ask at all because I cannot put together the pieces about what happened with the elders, so I leave it. I had a wish of having both parents around me when I was growing up, but now that it happened the way it did, I just have to let go.

"I was brought up by Lister Chabangu, who is my late granny, and David Chabangu (his grandfather). We stayed in that house as a family. I'm a people's person and I love life ... I live my life like other normal human beings."

Does he think it would have made any difference having both his parents around?

"I wouldn't know. Only God knows," he retorts.

"I am a parent as well and I always want to be there for my own child, but when there are factors blocking you, then you can't force it. It is tough, but it is all part of life."

A bumpy road

Last year newspaper reports described Chabangu as being miserable after he admitted to wasting his money on beer, fast cars and women.

His biggest weakness was the bottle, as he was frequently seen drinking and intoxicated during hours when, as a sportsman, he should have been resting.

The suppressed laugh that symbolises Chabangu comes out first before he responds.

"It is always your choice to do such things. Things like that really do happen. Those things have their time, especially when you are free, but what you need to know is that you need to take care of your body as a sports person. It is not that I was spending all of my money on all that because I knew I needed to rest if I was

returning to Sundowns. In my very first training session back at Sundowns, my knee was broken, and I stayed out for a very long which eventually forced Sundowns to terminate my contract. That was the frustration I had, as I thought I was finished. Then Gordon [Gesund] came for me and I started to pick myself up again.

"You can have that problem [of being controlled by alcohol], but you will never see yourself because of frustration. Being frustrated was the reason why I drank too much. That was when I had given up on everything."

Through detailing his troubles, we ask about his drinking and smoking habits nowadays.

"I'm a normal person. I don't get that sickness easily, so I cannot say I am addicted. I am not controlled by beer," he claims.

Chabangu's mismanagement of money also

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to be able to perform. I knew I had to respect the money that the fans spend to watch me, so I shouldn't be a waste when they see me. As a sportsman, I have always understood the fact that when I am taking care of my body, I will be lovely to watch," he mumbles, contradicting himself about how a sportsman should live.

It is no secret that Sundowns terminated his contract in 2010 for reasons related to drinking and a general lack of discipline which accompanied his unhealthy lifestyle.

A beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other became synonymous with Chabangu.

"In football you have to understand that there are frustrations which come in many ways," he says. "I once got an injury that had the doctor telling me I wouldn't play football anymore. That was the period between leaving Sundowns for SuperSport United before

led to his bank-financed house in Ekurhuleni being repossessed, along with all the fast German sedans he owned.

The loss of his house is the reason why he has since returned home to Tembisa.

"It is true," he nods his head in agreement, the furrows on his face bulging after the issue of the house and cars he lost is brought up.

He appears to be drowning in thoughts at this juncture.

"All things like that did happen in my life, but what matters right now for me is how I pull myself up. I have made all those kinds of mistakes, but what I need to do now is push myself up," he responds.

For all the years he spent playing professional football since breaking through into the PSL during the 2004/05 season, Chabangu openly admits to having nothing to show for it.

"I don't have anything to show, but I don't live with regrets. What I have learnt previously



is what I have now. Whatever is going to happen now, I have to protect and keep it," he says while insisting that not all hope is lost.

"You wish to go back where you were, but it won't happen just like that. This is going to be a journey, which step by step calls for one to fight back. So right now, I am fighting and trying to sort out my life so that it goes back to where it used to be, though I am well aware that it will not be the same ever again. However, that doesn't stop the fact that I need to keep on fighting."

The depressed look that blankets Chabangu's face when the topic switches to that of his daughter gives evidence that despite the blunders that led to his life becoming such a mess, he still has a human heart.

"I have one child, but I don't get to see her anymore," he whispers while breathing heavily

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and almost coming to tears.

"I don't get to see her *outie yam*. I don't even know where she is... we don't see each other. Maybe my child now has another father, wherever she is. I have lost so much in my life and I can't talk about it. I know how important it is to have a relationship with my daughter, but if her mom doesn't want me with the child, should I fight? I have to continue with my life."

Asked about when he last saw his daughter, he poses for a while and then responds.

"I think that is personal now my *outie*," he states, bringing to an end the discussion on

that particular matter.

Being someone who can relate to feeling on top of the world before freefalling due to ill-discipline, Chabangu's rollercoaster rides makes him an ideal person to ask for advice – a subject that appears to thrill the former star, judging from his facial expressions and how he lightens up when asked about guiding the younger players.

"They need to be patient and fight for what they want and yet still be able to listen and learn," he starts. "School is very important. Listening to your parents is important, as well as listening to older people in general. You need to stop being stubborn. Yes, you can be stubborn and succeed in life, but you won't be successful forever because you will face a lot of boundaries. You need to have an elder who understands the industry to guide and give you genuine advice. It is very important to have that kind of person to provide you with that calming inspiration, rather than believing you can go through it all alone."

"I had guidance, but unfortunately in my case I was far away and so I was caught up in things when he was not around."

Through all the negative sentiments expressed over the downward spiral of his career, Chabangu remains hopeful that it shall soon be better, as the light afternoon showers signal the end of our conversation.

"I don't regret anything at all because I am still alive. There is hope, there is still time, things can still change so I have to keep fighting. You never know what could still happen," he concludes, picking up his backpack and cap on his way to the team's mini-bus that is ready to take him home. **KO**

A SECOND CHANCE

Pretoria Callies coach Solly Luvhengo explains his reasoning for bringing the talented yet troublesome Chabangu to the club. "We are rebuilding this team and obviously we have a lot of young players who will win you games, but not the league, so I needed a bit of experience," he says. "Lerato has been there and done that. There is a lot that happens in football, but Lerato is a strong character who can be an example to the young players. With him around you are able to make references in terms of good play and what happens outside the game."

"When I got here he was already here on trial for a week. Technically he is still very good, but not being

as young anymore means he is not as energetic as he once was. The touch and quality is still there – all I needed to confirm before signing him was just how serious he was. If he packed his bags and left, then I would have known otherwise, but since he has been here, he has never asked me any questions and trains like everyone else. I give him respect and he pushes the boys." Luvhengo insists he does not give the 32-year-old any special treatment, and says that Chabangu likewise does not demand any either.

"I told him that I will not nurse him and look after him like a child. I believe in second chances," he continues. "If you want him to be serious, provide him with that kind

of environment. He has never given us any problems since he arrived, and we are well aware that he will not give us 90 minutes of top quality football, but he can deliver 45 minutes. I will not guard him. He is passionate because he has learnt. It is tough to sit at home and beg from friends. Some people mock him and say 'you had your chance and wasted it'. I see the desire and hunger in his eyes. "He is not getting a lot of money, but has the chance to play football and get his life back and that is what he wants, instead of being at shebeens. He follows the schedule like everyone else and is picked up by the kombi. He is sober and I know so because I hug him every day before training."