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BALL WATCH

Zwelethu Ndlovu of FC Cape Town (f) and Khanya Gwala of FC Cape Town (Now with Ubuntu) (b) battles for the ball with Victor Letsoalo of Baroka FC.
PICTURE: BACKPAGEPIX

UBUNTU TARGETING ANOTHER BIG SCALP

Though they've accomplished their mission of uplifting and inspiring kids, the Cape NFD side want to knock Free State Stars out

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A FEW months ago, there wouldn't have been all that many football followers who knew the name Ubuntu Cape Town. Now, after a sensational campaign in the Nedbank Cup, which sees the National First Division (NFD) club participating in this weekend's quarter-final stage, there are plenty of fans across the country rooting for the competition's surprise package.

Everybody, as they always say, loves the underdog – and the rookie Cape club can most certainly be ranked in that category. Now Ubuntu host PSL side Free State Stars at the Athlone Stadium on Saturday as they look to continue their role as giant-killers in this Cup event; the Capetonians have already dispatched of top-flight clubs Polokwane City and AmaZulu.

The feel-good Ubuntu story would not have been possible without their courageous performances in this competition. As a club, they do so much good in their community – a youth academy and a soccer school – and the ultimate vision is always to uplift and inspire the kids who walk through their doors. Over the last few weeks, their message of hope has pervaded football circles throughout the country. So, win or lose against Stars, for Ubuntu it's already mission accomplished.

"The exposure for the club has been positively overwhelming," said head coach Casey Prince, who is also one of the founders of the Ubuntu football philosophy. "It has been important for the youth academy and everybody involved at the club has enjoyed the experience. By playing in this competition we've been treated like a PSL club – and it has really been great to see how things are done at that level. It has offered our club and its players the motivation to say: Why can't we in seasons to come begin a positive run and try to get to that level?"

Ubuntu got to the NFD by purchasing the franchise of neighbours FC Cape Town. They are in their debut season in the division, which is why they initially struggled to get going as everything was rather new. But in recent months, they have shown tremendous improvement, which coincided with the magnificent run in the Cup tournament.

The main motivation behind getting the club to the NFD was to provide something for players in their academy and school to aim for. The objective was achieved in that quite a few of the graduates are now making their presence felt in the NFD team. But, not just that, in addition to the club's youngsters coming through the ranks, Ubuntu have also managed to lure talent from other teams. One such name who has come to prominence is central defender Khanya Gwala.

The 25-year-old from the Eastern Cape has trod a long journey in his quest to make it as a professional footballer. He's had stints at Orlando Pirates, the University of Pretoria and Cape Town All Stars – but it's now at Ubuntu where he is finally blossoming as a player.

"It has been a great learning season for us," said Gwala. "But, despite that, it has also been a great season in that we have people behind the scenes who inspire us, not just as footballers but with regard to life too. It is like a family at Ubuntu."

As for coming up against Stars, Gwala is quietly confident they can pull off another upset.

"They (Stars) are a difficult team to play against," said the defender. "But we have prepared well and we are ready. We are just going to focus on ourselves and on what we have to do. We have many quality youngsters in the squad, who are improving with every training session and with every game. The players have a great mentality, which is why we have to make sure that we create chances and that we don't make any errors at the back."