

## FOOTBALL: MAMA RIA

# RISE OF MAMA RIA

Ria Ledwaba continues to enshrine a place for women in football, making history along the way

by *Matshelane Mamabolo*

Ria Ledwaba's election as the first-ever female Vice-President of the South African Football Association (SAFA) filled me with an ironic glee. The irony lies in the fact that she was, after all, hugely responsible for some of my biggest heartbreaks in football. Yet the sight of Ledwaba climbing the football ladder had me celebrating.

Ledwaba and I have a history: In the late 1980s, she owned a team called the Ria Stars which tormented my favourite team, the Flying Bees. And in one particular year of the Chappies Little League, the Flying Bees beat her team in the regional final — only to later be told that the match was a friendly and we had to replay. The Ria Stars won the match and went on to play at the FNB Stadium. To say how much I despised Ria Stars (and, hence, their owner) would be an understatement.

Over time though, Mama Ria grew on me. Blame it on her charming youthful looks, her enchanting voice or even her

infectious smile. But it is through her positive contribution to the game that she earned not only my respect, but that of almost everyone in the football world. This respect spanned wider than South Africa, across the continent and to the world at large, especially for the positions she held at the Confederation of African Football (CAF) and FIFA.

**“IT IS MORE A VICTORY FOR WOMEN BECAUSE IT IS A POSITION THAT WILL ALWAYS BE THERE AS WE AMENDED IT INTO THE CONSTITUTION”**

Through Ledwaba's sheer determination and hard work in football, she has defied the stereotypical notion that women have no place in the sport.

The story of Ria Stars' growth from an Under-12 side to an elite league outfit should be common knowledge to many football fans.

The fact that she continues to play a key role in the game — even after selling Ria Stars once the

PSL decided to cut the league from 18 to 16 teams — has made her elevation to Danny Jordaan's second-in-command speak volumes of her abilities.

Ledwaba is at her office when we meet to discuss her new position. Her trademark blonde brush-cut hair, gold earrings in the shape of hearts and slick navy blue suit makes a mockery of her status as a grandmother.

As expected, she plays down the enormity of her latest triumph, deciding instead to laud it as a step in the right direction for women as a whole.

“This position could easily have gone to any of the other women in the executive body as they are all very capable and have contributed a lot to the game. It is more a victory for women because it is a position

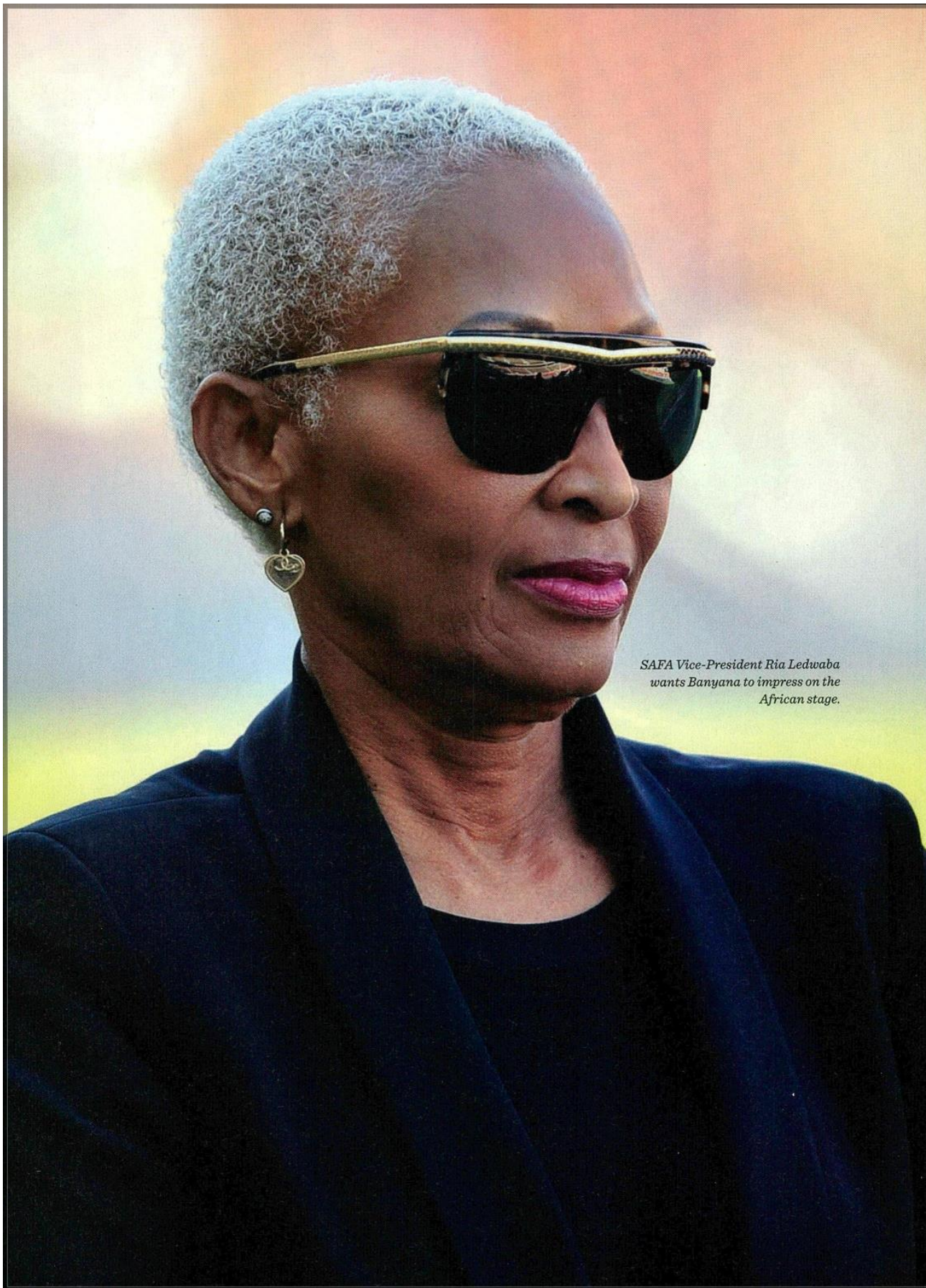
that will always be there as we amended it into the constitution.”

Not that the women are being done any favours. Far from it, according to Ledwaba. “We debated it when we decided on having this post. And we were very clear that it should never be an empowerment position but rather one that is given because of the individual's experience and one that will add great value

to the running of the game. We insisted that it must be in the constitution otherwise, due to the numbers, men would almost always win.”

As such, Ledwaba is pleased with the foundation that has been laid for future women to have a more serious role in directing football in SA.

“This achievement is not even for us but rather for the



*SAFA Vice-President Ria Ledwaba  
wants Banyana to impress on the  
African stage.*



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*Ledwaba's prodigy Lucky Lekgwathi gets out of a Lamborghini ahead of the MTNS Cup Final.*

generation after us to get into decision-making roles without having to fight like we have to. This will show women that it is possible for them to participate in the game at the highest level."

Never one to put a ceiling on her goals, Ledwaba is already envisaging an even larger role for women at SAFA: "This is good for South Africa. The football associations of Sierra Leone and Burundi have had female presidents so there is nothing to stop SA from following suit. We need to show that women can lead the game."

Aside from her great successes with her club, Ledwaba has had a huge impact on SA women's football in general.

**"I LOOK AT A MAN LIKE LUCKY LEKGWATHI. I AM VERY PROUD TO SEE WHAT HE HAS GONE ON TO ACHIEVE BECAUSE I TOOK HIM FROM (REAL) ROVERS WHEN HE WAS INJURED"**

"I used to stay with the U-19 women's team at the High Performance Centre (HPC) and I really enjoyed working with them and watching them grow. Mpumi Nyandeni was one of them and they went from being not just great footballers but also great individuals."

Football has the power to make a difference in people's

lives and that makes Ledwaba passionate about serving the game. "Football touches and changes lives. I look at a man like Lucky Lekgwathi. I am very proud to see what he has gone on to achieve because I took him from (Real) Rovers when he was injured. It was such a pleasure to see him grow into a leader and a responsible

person. And there have been many like that: Teko Modise, Thapelo Liau and 'Yeye' Reneilwe Letsholonyane. Then there is 'Shorty' Simphiwe Dlodlu and Janine Van Wyk who got to study at university through being in the squad – I am content that I contributed positively to this.

"I've always seen myself as serving football." ■

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