



NATIONAL FIRST DIVISION FOCUS

It's been difficult and confusing

Royal Eagles midfielder, Levy Mashiane, opens up to Soccer Laduma's Peter Raath about his early career. He also discusses four coaches, results and teammates.

Peter Raath: Before we discuss Royal Eagles' struggles, your teammate (Dillan Peter Solomons) previously described you in Soccer Laduma as "a brilliant U23", so please tell us about your footballing background.

Levy Mashiane: I began my career playing amateur football for an Atteridgeville-based team called Jacaranda Callies, before joining SuperSport United's MultiChoice Diski side about three years ago. I represented SuperSport at the 2015 U19 Bayhill Tournament in Cape Town, where I won R1 000 after scoring the quickest goal - I think it was after 38 seconds. But I had to leave the club after they couldn't help me with a problem. Actually, when I finished my matric, there was a financial crisis and after Gauteng ABC Motsepe League club JDR Stars FC agreed to assist, I decided to play for them instead. 'The Hammer Boys' from Pretoria enjoy promoting talented guys. In June 2016, one of their former players, Vusumuzi Ncabe, whom I look up to and learnt a lot from, signed for Chippa United. Last season was a very good one for me at Stars, with lots of assists. I was even called up for a trial at Baroka FC but I don't know what's special about me (laughing). The only thing I know is to play soccer.

PR: Then what happened?
LM: During a pre-season friendly between Baroka and Royal Eagles in KZN,



LEVY MASHIANE

coach Allan Freese spotted my talent and I was offered my first NFD contract. However, I initially struggled with my fitness level, which was a lesson for me. As a fast, dribbling attacking midfielder, who plays either on the wing or as a number 10, what I've experienced is that it's a tough league. Although Eagles have quality players, things haven't worked out like we wanted them to. We had a bad start, with only three wins in the first round and didn't gel properly. It's been a hard situation because not all the players know each other that well. During that period, I was happy to score a brace during our 2-2 draw against Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila FC when our former head coach, Zipho Dlangalala, was here. But with Roger Sikhakhane being the fourth man in charge this season, it's been difficult for us as well as very confusing. We've all had to set our minds right and then adjust because there's been no time. Everyone has had to prove themselves again and again, while some players have been released.

PR: Under your third coach, Kosta Papic, the team once scored 15 goals in four matches. However, your goalkeeper picked the ball out of the net on 11 occasions.

LM: Papic liked to attack a lot, but he left the back open (laughing). Look, Eagles showed that we were able to hit some big scores, with four and five goals

against Ubuntu Cape Town and Richards Bay respectively. I believe that he played his role, as did the two coaches before him, although things just didn't work out for them. Sikhakhane encourages us to defend prior to going forward. That's the difference between the two. Under Papic, we usually conceded during the first 15 minutes of play, but in our last seven games against Uthongathi FC, Real Kings, TTM, Super Eagles, University of Pretoria, Stellenbosch FC and Jomo Cosmos, the team has let in only three goals. That means four clean sheets. Eagles is therefore a much better side now. We should have beaten Stellenbosch but missed a few scoring chances, while I thought our goalless draw against Cosmos was a very tactical game. Luckily, they didn't convert their penalty and the ball hit the post. Coach Roger is both good and experienced. Last season, he won the NFD with Thanda Royal Zulu, so he knows how to motivate the guys to get out of this situation.

PR: Eagles moved well away from the drop zone with a 1-0 win over Ubuntu Cape Town and the 1-1 draw against Cape Town All Stars. Your final match is at Harry Gwala against in-form Witbank Spurs.

LM: We never intended to throw in the towel and we have been working hard as a team, with the aim to avoid relegation. Although I didn't play against Ubuntu - due to my suspension after picking up four yellow cards - it feels great that the side's doing well. As I said before, Eagles has quality. Our top scorer with six goals, Boikanyo Komane, is an exciting player, while Diego Brown has been in this league for a long time. He, Lesego Manganyi and Mphakamisi Nene have hardly missed a match. Mame Niang's a super guy. He scored the winner against Ubuntu. I know we've picked up too many yellow cards, but in the NFD, referees just book players for anything.

PR: Ha, ha. Thanks, Levy.
LM: No problem, Peter. It feels good that we secured our NFD status with the draw against Cape Town All Stars. God's plans are always better than ours. An eagle always flies high. □

THE LATEST NFD NEWS

• Despite two successive draws against Ajax Cape Town and D & G Orient FC, Steenberg United FC has again been crowned Western Cape ABC Motsepe League champions, while former PSL bigwigs, Santos, were way off the pace some 25 points behind. Steenberg, who failed to reach the NFD during the 2015/16 play-offs, have another opportunity of promotion into the pro ranks.

• It's almost a similar situation for Mpumalanga third-tier winners, Phiva Young Stars FC, who drew three of their last four games but still managed to pip TS Sporting FC. The team, which lost 2-0 to Chippa United in the Nedbank Cup, will now be looking to become the third NFD club in the province

after Witbank Spurs and Mbombela United.

• After netting five goals in four games, including a hat-trick when University of Pretoria overpowered Igugu Lekapa 4-3 plus a last-gasp penalty against Real Kings, Chemon Petersen remains humble. "The guys have been great supporting me back from injury," he told Soccer Laduma.

• During the tightly contested 1-1 draw between Cape Town All Stars and NFD champions, Highlands Park, referee Luxolo Badi booked seven players (four from All Stars) in a period of just 45 minutes. The yellow cards were mostly for reckless challenges or persistent offences.

• With Cape Town All Stars expected to lose both midfielder Ruzaigh Gamildien and defender Nathan Gerise to Chippa United next season, questions are being asked about the other players' futures, especially due to the fact that Swallows FC might be purchasing the club's franchise. "The people from Swallows are still in Cape Town, so let's see what happens over the next few weeks," said a source.

