



NATIONAL FIRST DIVISION FOCUS

Time to give others a chance

In this week's instalment, Soccer Laduma's Peter Raath chats to Witbank Spurs' COO, Freddy Mapulane, about the play-offs. He also discusses Vusi Mkhathshwa, Sabelo Nyembe and Quentin Debouto.

Peter Raath: What were the circumstances surrounding the appointment of Witbank Spurs head coach, Vusi Mkhathshwa, with seven games left to the season's end?

Freddy Mapulane: After losing 3-0 to Highlands Park, which was not a good result - especially considering that we were playing at home - our chairman, Mr Themba Mafu, thought it would be better to bring someone in with knowledge. Vusi is a very, very good coach, having previously promoted both Sivutsa Stars and Mbombela United to the NFD. But I must also mention that even before the Highlands match, we were already in discussions with the coach's former club, Mlambo Royal Cubs FC, of Nelspruit, who were at that point number two on the log. So it wasn't easy to bring him to Spurs, however, after deep discussions, it was agreed that we could rope him in. That's when Mr Mafu became the technical director.

PR: Is there anything that Mkhathshwa has done differently to Mafu?

FM: I think the only thing that Vusi introduced was more team discipline, while the boys understand him as well as his tactics better. He's down-to-earth, a friend to them, whereas when the players were being coached by their chairman, they were sometimes afraid to do certain things or ask questions. The new coach has been impressed with the quality of Spurs' squad. He said there was no need to sign



FREDDY MAPULANE

additional players - maybe that will only happen in the near future. Mkhathshwa feels there's enough depth, but since his arrival, Jermaine Christian, who'd previously started 22 matches, has been on the bench. He's a very good player, a motivator and even if he doesn't play, which has been the case, it's very good to have the 35-year-old around the team talking to

the others as an experienced pro. Despite his age, Jermaine still runs more than the youngsters (laughing). He gives them a tough time, is disciplined like nobody else and a gentleman. Thabo Makhele initially played in his place but, following a red card against AmaTuks, Humphrey Khoza was brought in. The coach knows him well because they're from the same location in Nelspruit and remember that back in 2008/09, when Mkhathshwa had his first stint here, Khoza and the Zimbabwean twins, Patrick and Peter Mubayiwa, were also on our books.

PR: The Mubayiwas have five goals between them, as does Benin striker, Quentin Debouto, who scored during your impressive 2-0 victory over Black Leopards.

FM: The twins are not slowing down. They're still going strong and are disciplined. That's helped them to keep fit for the past 12 seasons. The pair now has South African citizenship. Debouto is a top striker. He's quick and knows how to shield the ball, which makes it difficult for opponents to take it from his feet. When

Quentin scored our second goal to ensure victory over Leopards, it was their first loss after a run of eight unbeaten games, so they were very disappointed. Nobody gave us a chance but we had to go all out to fight for the three points. I wouldn't say that they were overconfident, but we were on top of them and wanted this win more. Leopards have been to the play-offs five times (laughing) and we're still waiting for our first game in that competition. It's time to give other people the opportunity.

PR: Briefly, was Spurs forced to sell Sabelo Nyembe, another man with five goals to his name?

FM: Absolutely. It isn't a secret that we're not financially okay. Moneywise, Nyembe's move did help us a lot. At that time, things were difficult because Highlands had already approached him. It was therefore not going to be easy for us to keep a player who knew there was interest from outside of this team. Our culture at Spurs is not to stand in the way of anyone who wants to leave.

PR: Following a 3-2 loss to Stellenbosch, the club bounced back with a 1-0 win over Mbombela United, but then went down to Royal Eagles by the same score line and once again finished just outside the play-off spots for the third season in a row.

FM: It was close. In the past, Spurs usually started to drop late in the season, but under coach Mkhathshwa, we won four of our last seven matches. I therefore believe that if he'd been brought in earlier, then the team would have qualified for the play-offs. Against Mbombela, who were out of the promotion race, we fought for our pride. It was about the bragging rights in the province of Mpumalanga, where there's a huge need for a PSL club. Look at the Mbombela Stadium, nobody's playing there except sometimes Super-Sport United. It would be a big boost for us to one day get promoted. Austin Dube got our winner against Mbombela and also scored in the Leopards match. We don't depend on one man to find the back of the net. Everyone can score. The tall Makhele, who uses his height as an advantage, has four goals mainly from set pieces and corner kicks.

PR: Thanks, Freddy. Best of luck!
FM: My pleasure, Peter. ☐

THE LATEST NFD NEWS

- Mthatha Bucks' top scorer, Mpho Erasmus, with 11 goals to his name, has finally received his ABC Motsepe League prize money from last season. "It took a long time to arrive, almost 11 months," he said. Meanwhile, Siyabonga 'Chicco' Dubula has parted ways with the relegated club, which might be a sign that others are set to follow. "I'm at home waiting for next season," he confirmed to Soccer Laduma.

- Ntwenhle 'Romeo' Zondo, who scored for Uthongathi FC during their 2-1 loss to Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila FC, is expected to leave the club upon the expiry of his contract in June. After a recent trial at Bidvest Wits, he's hoping to reach the Absa Premiership. "That's why Zondo's playing so well these days," said a source.

- There's a new twist to the alleged proposed sale of Stellenbosch FC, with two parties now vying to secure the club's

NFD status. "I'm still in the race," said one individual, while Soccer Laduma has also learnt that the University of Stellenbosch has first option.

- Maccabi FC has won the Gauteng ABC Motsepe League by one point after overpowering Dube Continental 3-0 as their nearest rivals, JDR Stars, unexpectedly lost 2-1 to Pretoria Callies. Last season, Maccabi were also crowned champions but missed promotion to the NFD via the play-offs.

