



Leopards show their claws

Masutha backs his side for promotion

NJABULO NGIDI

JOEL MASUTHA is confident he can lead Black Leopards back to the promised land after five years of hell in the National First Division (NFD).

The Prophet, as Masutha is nicknamed, has worked miracles at Lidoda Duvha since taking over as interim coach in December last year. Masutha took over a team that was languishing in 12th place at the halfway mark as he returned to his former club after working for their rivals Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila FC (TTM) as general manager.

His midas touch helped Leopards finish in second place to qualify for the promotional play-offs against Jomo Cosmos, who finished third, and the club which will occupy 15th place after the end of the Absa Premiership season on Saturday.

"I have won promotion twice with this team," Masutha said. "When Black Leopards were promoted the first time (in 2001), I was a regular player. I know what it takes. When we gained promotion for the second time (in 2011), I was an assistant coach. I know the pressure that comes with leading this team and what we need to do at this stage. We failed to gain promotion (in the play-offs) twice while I was still the assistant. There's nothing new for me here. The most crucial point is how you handle this position."

Lidoda Duvha will be campaigning in the play-offs for the fourth time in five years. The other three instances all ended in disappointment. Last season they were pipped by their neighbours

Baroka FC who retained their status after finishing 15th in the Premier Division, and winning the play-offs.

"It will be fourth time lucky," Masutha said. "We have been here a number of times, going past this stage and gaining promotion is long overdue. We just have to finish the job we've started. There's no other way. The play-offs are a second chance for us because we couldn't finish in first position. This is another shot at gaining promotion. It is a big chance for Leopards and Limpopo as a whole"

Leopards earned their spot in the play-offs with a 3-0 win over Cosmos on Sunday. Jomo Sono fielded a second-string team as Cosmos had already qualified for the play-offs. Ezenkosi have spent one more year than Leopards in the first division since being relegated at the end of the 2011/12 season. Sono played mind games with Leopards, saying that he saw their best XI in that loss while he was resting his key players. The Black Prince then said he didn't mind losing to Leopards as he wanted to finish in third place anyway, so that his team can rest a bit before starting the play-offs against Lidoda Duvha on May 20 - four days after Leopards would have hosted the team that will finish 15th in the Premier Division. Even though Cosmos have been in the first division longer than Leopards, Sono had a pragmatic response to how he would handle

his team failing to gain promotion.

"It wouldn't be devastating to lose the play-offs," Sono said. "If it wasn't devastating when we got relegated to the NFD, then it won't be devastating to fail in the play-offs because we will come back next year and fight. If you fail in life, it's not the end of the world. If your children fail matric, do you want them to hang themselves?"

"You can't ask your child to hang themselves. When you fail, you learn and grow. If we don't make it, we will come back next year. That's the problem with most people, they are so scared of failure that failure is the first thing they think about when they start a new challenge. I don't do that. If I fail, I fail. So what? There is life after failing."

PLAY-OFFS FIXTURES

May 16: Leopards vs PSL 15

May 20: Cosmos vs Leopards

May 23: PSL 15 vs Cosmos

May 26: PSL 15 vs Leopards

May 30: Leopards vs Cosmos

June 2: Cosmos vs PSL 15

STANDINGS

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Highlands.....	30	21	6	3	52	69
Leopards.....	30	14	8	8	21	50
Cosmos.....	30	14	7	9	11	49
Real Kings.....	30	11	12	7	9	45
Spurs.....	30	11	12	7	5	45
Tshakhuma.....	30	11	8	11	-12	41
All Stars.....	30	9	13	8	3	40
Stellenbosch.....	30	10	10	10	-7	40
Royal Eagles.....	30	8	12	10	-1	36
Tuks.....	30	9	9	12	-11	36
Uthongathi FC30	7	13	10	-4	34	
Richards Bay ..30	8	10	12	-13	34	
Mbombela30	10	6	14	-12	33	
Ubuntu.....30	7	11	12	-7	32	
Super Eagles ..30	7	11	12	-14	32	
Mthatha Bucks30	4	10	16	-20	22	



CONFIDENT: Joel Masutha, coach of Black Leopards
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