



2019 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS QUALIFIER, NIGERIA vs SOUTH AFRICA, UYO STADIUM, SATURDAY JUNE 10

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TALKING about the huge strides Bongani Zungu has made in Portugal in such a short time embarrasses him.

Zungu is quick to state that he hasn't done much at Vitoria Guimaraes even though he started on the back-foot — which makes his accomplishments more remarkable.

"I was injured [hairline fracture of the shin] when I arrived here last year," Zungu said at the airport in Portugal before boarding a flight back home.

"It was tough to adapt because I was in a new environment, in a new country and continent but I couldn't show them why I was brought there. I had to adapt to the weather and the new surroundings. I had to be mentally strong."

"The team was very understanding. They didn't rush me. They allowed me to heal and

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get ready in my own time. Once that happened I then had to adapt to the football.

"It's not like in South Africa. It's faster. I then had to fight for my place in the starting XI which was hard because I didn't have a pre-season with the team."

Despite all of that, Zungu became an instant hit at Guimaraes. He is loved by the fans, his teammates and the technical team. "The coach tells me that if I had pre-season with the team I would have been far."

The 24-year-old has done a lot since he started featuring regularly on January 22.

He missed only one match in that period, scored in the 2-1 loss to Benfica in the final of the Taça de Portugal, the Portuguese league's

Bongani Zungu: A warrior-artist who can help topple the Super Eagles

—Primeira Liga — version of the Nedbank Cup, and did enough to attract interest from England, Germany, Spain and Benfica.

Such a meteoric rise is not new to Zungu. Seven years ago he was playing in the National First Division with Dynamos. He spent two years there and then joined University of Pretoria in the Premier Soccer League. After a year at AmaTuks he moved to Mamelodi Sundowns.

Zungu spent just three years with the Brazilians before he fulfilled his dream of playing in Europe. "I love challenges. I thrive on them. I left Tuks for Sunowns even though a lot of people said that I wouldn't make it there."

"I used those words as motivation, without being big-headed, to prove them wrong. You don't grow when you stay in one place for a long time because you get comfortable."

The midfielder welcomed home comforts though after landing on Friday, especially pap. "I haven't had it in a year. It's one of the things I missed about home."

But don't expect Zungu to be back in Europe soon because he misses home like some of his local peers have, returning only after a few years from their European clubs.

"I look up to players like Benni McCarthy and Lucas Radebe because of the number of years they spent in Europe and what they achieved there. I have read a lot about them to find out what it took for them to stay here for a long time," he said.

"I am on the right path. I just have to keep my feet on the ground and not get too comfortable. I haven't done anything yet. This is just the start. If I think that I have arrived, then I will have problems."

"I am not saying that the guys who returned home thought that they had arrived and that's why they didn't last. I can only speak about myself. I watch myself after every game to see what I did wrong and what I need to improve on. I am confident in my ability and what I can offer. I am not where I want to be and I know what I need to do to get there."

Zungu and the 24 others that coach Stuart

Baxter selected for his first match in charge of Bafana Bafana report for camp today. Bafana are set to leave on Wednesday for Uyo where they will take on Nigeria in the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations (Afcon) qualifier.

In assembling the team Baxter said he wanted warriors who can take the fight to the Super Eagles. But he also needs artists who can do magic with the ball to complement those warriors. In Zungu, 63-year-old Baxter has an artist and a warrior.

The lad from Duduza on the East Rand can paint a masterpiece with his feet. He also has an unrelenting fighting spirit.

"I am a very versatile player," Zungu said. "I started out as a centreback ekasi. I can play as a six and a 10, wherever the coach needs me. That's an advantage, and I can deliver. I work hard and run a lot. But I also have skills."

Bafana will be looking to start on a positive

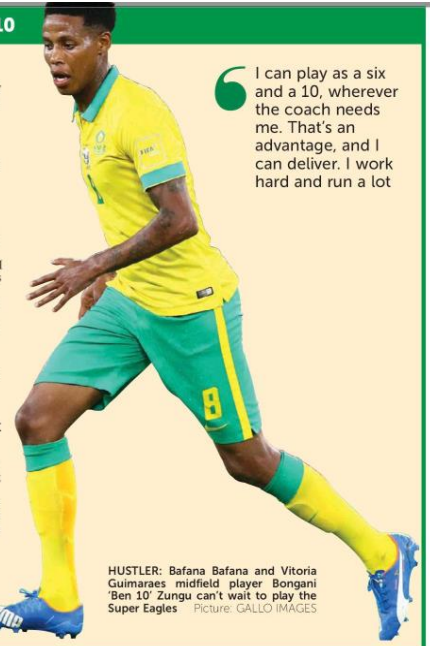
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note against their old enemy. The Super Eagles are unbeaten under Gernot Rohr. The 63-year-old German coach named a squad that includes Daniel Akpeyi of Chippa United.

"It means a lot to be back in Bafana," Zungu said. "Nigeria have a tactically good team that has players all over Europe. But I have faith in our abilities."

"The coach has assembled a formidable team. I know that I will have to hustle to be in the starting lineup but that doesn't faze me."

"I have been fighting all my life to get what I want. This is nothing new."



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HUSTLER: Bafana Bafana and Vitoria Guimaraes midfielder player Bongani 'Ben 10' Zungu can't wait to play the Super Eagles. Picture: GALLO IMAGES

