

B E N C E B O C S Á K



RISE OF THE UNDERDOGS

Football's New World Order

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Zambia

BA-DUM. BA-DUM. Bad-dum. Isaac Chansa could feel his heartbeat ringing in his ears. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum.* He could hear the cheers of the crowd inside Gabon's Stade d'Angondjé stadium. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum.* Most of all he could hear his team-mates singing.

On 12 February 2012, as Chansa walked up to take a penalty in the final of the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON), there was a lot at stake. But not for him, nor for his side, Zambia. Nobody had expected them to get to the final, let alone to hold out against a golden generation of Côte d'Ivoire stars led by the likes of Didier Drogba and Yaya Touré.

Somehow, some way, they had got there, and they were just a penalty shoot-out away from making history by securing Zambia's first AFCON victory.

'Before the match in the dressing room, the coach wrote: "Today is our day. On the 12th February we are going to make history. We are going to be remembered in the history books of Zambian football." That was his message to us,' Chansa remembered.

In the last seven AFCONs, before the 2012 tournament, Zambia had only gone further than the group stage on just one occasion. There were also just two European-based players in their squad for the 2012 AFCON.

Yet within the Zambian camp, there was a feeling of optimism even at the beginning of the tournament.

‘We were looking forward to the tournament,’ Chansa recalled. ‘Looking back at our performances in the 2010 tournament, we had hopes that this time around we could go all the way to the final.’

Frenchman Hervé Renard had taken charge of the team for his second stint a year prior. At the time few outside of Zambia and African football were aware of his talent. After retiring from playing in 1998, he had been a bit of a journeyman, coaching from Cambridge United to Thép Xanh Nam Dinh FC in Vietnam. He eventually ended up at the helm of Zambia’s national team initially in 2008. In his first spell in charge, Renard led Zambia to a quarter-final finish during the 2010 AFCON.

Going into the 2012 tournament, Renard had known his team’s strengths very well. He was a driven and astute tactician and he had spent months preparing his team. Renard was determined to deliver the same level of success as two years prior, or even surpass that achievement.

‘He made a huge difference. He changed our mentality,’ Chansa said. ‘He really pushed us in the training sessions. He is a coach who loves hard work. I remember he still woke up early in the morning to go running every day and he expected the same work rate from his players.’

During the 2010 AFCON, Renard’s counterattacking football surprised many of Africa’s giants. This time around he worked even harder to perfect it. Chansa and his team-mates were put through rigorous training sessions to hone every aspect of Renard’s tactics. The Frenchman had also prepared his players with meticulous detail on each of their opponents.

Facing them in the group stage would be Senegal, Libya and Equatorial Guinea. It was a tough group that few even expected Zambia to even advance from.

‘The mood was very fine. It was good. Just from the preparation for the tournament,’ Chansa said. ‘The coach had prepared us well. Especially for the first few games in the group stages, we knew those teams well.’

Zambia’s preparation was clear for all to see in the opening game against Senegal. Renard’s men took a two-goal lead in the first 20 minutes and held on to secure the victory.

Senegal tried everything to break down the resilient Zambian defence. This wasn’t necessarily a golden Senegalese side, but it was still full of superstars. Players like Demba Ba and Papiss Cissé were the darlings of Tyneside at the time, having formed a formidable partnership for Newcastle United in the Premier League.

But Zambia’s defence didn’t give them a sniff at goal. Much of that was thanks to Renard having studied the two forwards.

‘Before the game the coach Hervé Renard used to tell us about Papiss Cissé and Demba Ba because he used to work with them in France. We knew what to expect,’ Chansa remembers.

‘Our preparation was intense so we were ready and focused during the game. We followed the game plan and it went smooth.’

That victory over the far more favoured Senegal side gave Zambia a huge lift.

‘After the game, we thought we had a chance to qualify from the group, that’s what we were focusing on first. The win gave us a morale boost that we could do it,’ said Chansa.

A subsequent draw against Libya and a victory against Equatorial Guinea followed, which was enough to see them finish top of the group.

Sudan proved easy opponents in the quarter-final, with Zambia running out 3-0 winners. The big challenge came against one of the favourites, Ghana, in the semi-final.

‘The game against Ghana was something else,’ Chansa recalled. ‘That was our toughest game in the whole tournament.’

Ghana were full of Premier League and Champions League footballers. Senegal may have been full of superstars, but this Ghanaian team was superb, still widely regarded as one of the best sides Africa has ever assembled. They had reached the final of the competition in 2010, and had only grown in strength after a strong performance at the 2010 World Cup. Zambia knew what to expect. Renard had drilled the team’s defensive discipline and for 90 minutes Zambia dropped deep, withstanding the barrage of attacks that came their way. Zambia’s goalkeeper, Kennedy Mweene, was impenetrable between the sticks and thwarted several Asamoah Gyan efforts.

In the end, Zambia’s patience and hard work paid off. Emmanuel Mayuka broke clear in the 78th minute and nestled the ball into the back of the net to give his team a remarkable victory.

‘We were lucky and patient,’ Chansa said. ‘They [Ghana] were the best team, but because of our togetherness, and our belief in the coach’s game plan, we ended up pulling through and scoring on the break.’

‘Once we beat Ghana, we told ourselves this was our time. Before even going to the final. We told ourselves God had given us this tournament.’

In the final, Renard’s Zambia played the same tactic they had done throughout the tournament and frustrated Côte d’Ivoire’s star-studded team, despite Drogba, Touré and the likes of Salomon Kalou and Gervinho putting in their best efforts.

Back home there were a lot of expectations for the latest Ivorian generation to finally deliver another AFCON victory after 20 barren years. With a team full

of Premier League stars, those expectations weren't lofty either. That expectation weighed heavily on the shoulders of Côte d'Ivoire's big names, and it gave Zambia an advantage.

Back home in Zambia, even reaching the final was regarded as a huge success for the nation. There was no pressure on Chansa and his team-mates to do anything more, and that gave them the liberation to play freely.

'You could see the pressure on them,' Chansa recalled. 'In football it's easy if you are playing a big team, you'll be able to know the players and what they are like. We were underdogs and they didn't know anything about us. They had no idea what to expect. We were small but very hungry for success.'

'At half-time the coach told us, "These guys are getting tired, and you are the fittest team at the tournament, so let's take them on. They will get even more tired if we can take them on to extra time, I'm sure we will beat them on penalties."'

Renard's words proved prophetic.

Fast-forward through another barren 45 minutes of football and then extra time, Chansa was walking those dreaded steps in the penalty shoot-out. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum.*

'I remember praying, calling to God to be on my side,' Chansa said.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

'But I felt no pressure. I was concentrating on the moment, singing in my head, looking at the goalkeeper and picking my spot. I put a bit of power and thankfully the keeper went in the wrong direction.'

If the game was tense, the shoot-out was something else. A total of seven penalties were taken by each team before Kolo Touré's effort was saved by Mweene. Rainford Kalaba failed to capitalise on that error, though, blasting

his shot over the goal. At this point the pressure started to mount. Former Arsenal winger Gervinho stepped up next and missed his effort, gifting Zambia another chance. By then the shoot-out had lasted for over 17 minutes. For Zambia, 23-year-old Stoppila Sunzu was next. He stepped up to take the country's ninth kick and blasted the ball into the back of the net to summon an explosion of euphoria among the Zambians.

Chansa said, 'I could not believe it at first that we had done it. It was over. We were champions. That moment was crazy. I believed that this was our moment and then finally it came true. As we were running to celebrate together, I broke into tears of joy, celebrating talking to myself and God.'

In the annals of history, Zambia's 2012 AFCON triumph will go down as one of the greatest underdog stories in international football, up there with the successes of Greece and Denmark at the European Championship.

It would also inspire the next generation of Zambian youngsters already coming through the ranks.

* * *

Few knew it back then, but Zambia's unlikely victory proved to be a catalyst for the country's football evolution. A decade later players like Patson Daka and Enock Mwepu would set a new frontier when breaking into the Premier League, and the national team would be filled with European-based stars in a stark contrast to just two members playing in Europe from Renard's 2012 squad.

Much of that change began a decade earlier back in 2002 when a fresh-faced college graduate, Lee Kawanu, returned to his hometown of Kafue. Kawanu had studied in South Africa but his heart brought him back home from

his adolescent odyssey. Born in Russia to a Zambian father, he had grown up in Kafue since the age of two and he felt a special kinship with the town and the people.

‘That’s where I grew up as a kid and that’s where my journey started from,’ Kawanu said as he remembered his childhood.

Located 45km outside of Zambia’s capital city, Lusaka, Kafue is a small industrial town home to just over 200,000 people – a small fraction of the country’s almost 20 million total population. It is an industrial town, filled with factories that boomed during the 1960s and ’70s.

‘The town was mainly built around a fertiliser factory and a textile company that was built here,’ Kawanu explained. ‘It’s a small factory town. Although, the factories are not as active as they used to be. Most people stay here and go to work in Lusaka now.’

When Kawanu returned home in 2002, his initial thoughts were not about football. He first ventured into the electronic business to try and diversify the town’s infrastructure. He made money setting up his own company. But in the back of his mind, having grown up as a football-obsessed boy, the game was always on the back of his mind.

He said, ‘My dad was a team manager for Nitrogen Stars, which is when my passion started [for football]. I remember my dad used to take me to games every weekend, sometimes we would travel with the players, so it was easy to just fall in love with the game at that kind of intimate level.’

When he arrived back to Kafue, one of the things that shocked him the most was that the beloved football scene Kawanu had remembered had completely changed.

‘I quickly noticed that the activities that were there before, for example, Kafue having teams in the Super League or the First Division [the first and second tier of

Zambian football] were not there any more. The only team in the town were just playing locally in Kafue,' he recalled.

For Kawanu, still longing for the memories he made as a boy, he made it his mission to resurrect the football scene in the country. And an opportunity to do it fell serendipitously into his lap, 'One day two old men who played football in the past approached me and asked me to sponsor a team that they put together. Their thinking was to put all the best players together from the local area and make one strong team that we would then go and register with the Football Association of Zambia.'

This would form the foundations of Kawanu's and Kafue's legacy in Zambian football.

Kawanu admitted, 'Growing up you dream about owning your own football club, and then it happens. At first, I was not sure if I could do this, but I thought let me see if it's worth it.'

For Kawanu it was important to build the football club in the right way and to give back to the community, 'We named the team Kafue FC after the town just to get Kafue back on the Zambian football map.'

Kawanu also used the town's origins to form the club's mascot – a crocodile which also now adorns his club's crest.

'Kafue is by a big river called Kafue River, it's the widest river we have in Zambia, and of course there are some crocs there. I have always liked the nature of a crocodile; they have patience and the brute force when they need to pounce. So, it all tied in.'

It would prove to be a success story, as Kawanu continued, 'We started in the amateur leagues, and we went the whole season unbeaten and won promotion all the way to the second division.'

As Kawanu's success grew with Kafue FC, he gradually developed a feel for football and found he had a knack for

building a successful environment from the ground up. When in 2008 the sponsors of nearby Lusaka Celtic pulled out, Kawanu was offered the chance to take over the club as well by the Zambian FA. At first Kawanu kept the two entities, Kafue FC and Lusaka Celtic, separate. But in the end, after just a year, he merged them together to make Kafue Celtic.

This is where the course of Zambian footballing history would be changed for ever. Now possessing two football licences, Kawanu built a first team and an academy, and he shifted his efforts on making Kafue Celtic a sustainable football club by investing in youth.

Kawanu said, 'Initially, when I started, I could not afford older players so over the years, I just got used to dealing with younger players.'

In 2009, the club sold its academy graduate, Chisamba Lungu, to Russian side Ural. Lungu was a part of the Zambian squad who would later win AFCON in 2012. He was Kawanu's first success story, and there would be many that would follow suit. Lungu's sale also provided an important learning curve.

'By then I started to learn that football could be a financially viable business other than something I was just passionate about,' Kawanu explained.

'I met a scout who used to work in Russia, and he told me players below 20 were all marketable in Europe, so that was the beginning for everything. At the time I rebranded, and I saw the need to start preparing players at a young age [for Europe].'

From beginning as a grassroots club just a few years prior, Kawanu eyed a totally different stratosphere and he got to work straight away, 'Our philosophy came together. We would have youngsters in the team. Have a youth system, develop a scouting system. After selling Chisamba, I realised I now had to look around the country, not just Kafue and

Lusaka, for players. I would watch school competitions with my coaches and see which players could fit into our team.'

But success wasn't always easy to come by; there were knock-backs and learning curves along the way.

Kawanu said, 'In the beginning I had special players, but they never ended up anywhere, because they had the wrong character. They would get too easily distracted, start drinking and just lose their way.

'So, after that, when I was scouting players, I tried to do more of an investigation into their background, what setup they are in, their families and stuff like that. I asked around to their coaches about how they behaved. Then when I was given the full picture, I would call him for trials, and they would stay with us maybe two weeks so that we could assess the character of the player first-hand and also whether they fit into our attacking style of play.'

Kawanu didn't just develop a philosophy in the boardroom, but also on the pitch. He quickly realised the best way to showcase his players' talents to scouts was by playing an attractive, offensive, possession-based style of football.

'We have always played a 4-3-3 from the beginning with as much speed and possession as possible. The way Liverpool or Red Bull [Salzburg] plays, that's what we try to copy,' he said.

Things gradually started to fall into place, and Kawanu began to receive attention, working his way up the ladder with Kafue Celtic, 'After a while I became an executive board member in the Zambian FA. They put me in charge of youth football and that opened my eyes up to even more opportunities. I had the chance to interact with people in all the provinces to help us with the national teams.'

Around the same time, Zambia had delivered that glorious AFCON victory. Football was on the rise in

the country, and under Kawanu it was in good hands. But he still needed star players and top talent. He would soon find it.

* * *

In 2010, Kawanu was watching Kafue Celtic with retired player Nathtali. The game was insignificant. Why Kawanu still remembered that meeting so profoundly many years later was not because of what happened on the pitch, but what Nathtali said to him in the stands. 'Lee, one day you are going to be happy with my son. And he's going to bring you big things.'

Kawanu didn't think much about the late Nathtali's words until four years later, when he went to watch Kafue Celtic's reserve team.

He recalled, 'I saw this really skinny, active boy on the pitch. He was shooting with his left and right, from outside the box and inside the box. So, I asked the reserves coach, who's this little kid? And he told me: this is Nathtali's son.'

The boy in question was Patson Daka.

Kawanu continued, 'Patson really caught my eye. So immediately I told the reserve coach to move him to the first team even though he was really small.'

Kawanu had found Daka just like he had found Kafue Celtic – at a time of need. Still a young teenager, Daka had lost his father a year prior, and had to cope with the difficult family tragedy. He found refuge in football and Kafue Celtic.

'He was really close with his dad. Nathtali was always really into football and he was a really nice guy and very talented too. He played football here in Zambia for Nitrogen Stars,' Kawanu explained.

Without a father figure, Kawanu became a crucial person in Daka's early career.

‘Lee was always there to support me. He encouraged me and helped me make the right decisions,’ Daka explained. ‘He supported me and my family, making sure we had everything that we needed. He has been like a father to me, helping me to make big decisions when at some point I had to decide between football and school.’

On and off the pitch, Kawanu saw talent in Daka that he knew could take him far. The kind of talent Nathtali had promised all those years ago.

Kawanu said, ‘You could just see an aura around Patson. It takes a lot for me to be convinced by a player. I’ve been around the scouting game for a long time. I scout all the players who come to my team because there is a certain character that I look for and Patson just had this thing about him.’

In return, Daka would help to take Kafue Celtic to the next level. But he did not do it alone. Around the same time, Kawanu also spotted another exciting young talent playing in Zambia’s Copperbelt province by the name of Enock Mwepu.

Kawanu looked back, ‘When I first saw him, he seemed a bit slow, but then I realised he moved the ball so quick. I think when you really look at him you realise, he is actually quite fast. He could eliminate defenders with ease thanks to his movement. His technique was excellent.’

Immediately, Kawanu brought Mwepu to Kafue Celtic as well. Born in the same year as Daka, the two of them would form the spine of the academy. With Kawanu’s new role as a member of the Zambia FA, he also made them the spine of the national youth team.

In a bid to expose the players to new environments, Kawanu would arrange and embark on trips abroad with his talented Zambian cohort.

‘We played Italy, Brazil and all these kinds of games. The boys were standing out in every game,’ Kawanu

recalled of the friendlies Daka and Mwepu played with the national team.

It was at these tournaments and then later at the under-17 AFCON where Kawanu and Kafue Celtic's fortunes took an even better turn.

Around the same time, former African Footballer of the Year Frédéric Kanouté had set up his own football management company, 12Management, with the sole mission and purpose to bring more talented African players to Europe.

An elite forward in his heyday, Kanouté took a liking to Daka and secured him trials with Red Bull Salzburg. The Austrian side took him on a six-month loan, where initially Daka struggled to adjust to his new environment.

'He found it very tough to adapt to the weather and of course the training is very intense at Red Bull. The constant pressing and high intensity. Nothing could have prepared him for it,' Kawanu recalled.

'But he is a strong kid, he never complained. Patson just said, "I'll make it." And he kept on pushing. He was always positive and believed that he would sign.'

By the time the 2017 under-20 AFCON came around, Daka was already at Salzburg, but Kawanu was convinced that Mwepu had the potential to join them as well. The tournament hosted on home soil in Zambia was the perfect occasion for Mwepu to showcase his talent and to follow suit.

Kawanu had advised his player to turn down lucrative offers from Qatar, South Africa and Spain in favour of holding out for Salzburg. As always with Kawanu, it would prove to be the right decision.

By 2017, Zambian football had been starving for success once again after the achievements of the senior national team five years prior. The core of Hervé Renard's great side

were heading towards the twilight of their careers. Zambia needed new stars to inspire them and in Daka and Mwepu they found them.

Spurred on by the support of huge crowds, Zambia – led by Mwepu and Daka – marched all the way to the final, where they ran victorious over Senegal much to the delight of the adoring fans crammed into the Heroes National Stadium in Lusaka.

‘They both had a crazy tournament,’ Kawanu said.

Daka ended up as the Player of the Tournament and the top scorer. On the back of that success, in the same year he would be voted Young African Player of the Year.

But it wasn’t just Daka; Mwepu also made his moment count.

‘Everyone’s eyes were always on Patson, but Enock was also sticking out every time,’ Kawanu said. With the help of Kanouté, Mwepu was also recruited by Salzburg and the rest is history.

The two of them participated in multiple Champions League campaigns with the Austrian club, and both captained Zambia at senior international level, before making big-money transfers to the Premier League. In doing so they became only the third and fourth Zambians to play in the top tier of English football in the 21st century.

Unfortunately for Mwepu, that career was curtailed too soon. After being diagnosed with a heart condition he was forced to retire back in 2022, at the age of just 24 years old. A cruel blow to Zambian football, but even despite that setback, Kawanu has continued to work on helping more Dakas and Mwepus make it at the pinnacle of European football.

In the last few years, Kanouté had stepped into a consultancy role at Kafue Celtic, using his connections to help secure trials to the club’s most promising players.

‘Fred has opened us up to the rest of the world. He opened our minds to what it takes for a player to play in Europe. He has been very influential in the last six years that I have known him,’ Kawanu said.

Meanwhile, Kawanu has built contacts in Europe to give his players the chance to play abroad and gain exposure to different styles of play at an early age. As a result, in the summer of 2023, Kafue Celtic toured Georgia and played in friendly games against Georgian teams.

The club also secured promotion to Zambia’s top flight for the first time in 2021, another historic landmark to showcase how far Kawanu has come. Even after that achievement, Kawanu is determined not to slow down.

‘The dream is what we are working on now,’ Kawanu explained. ‘I want to have satellite academies in each province. We are already trying to partner up with boarding schools in provinces.

‘I’m hoping to start construction on a modern private school for privileged kids whose parents want them to learn football in an academy. But a section will also be for our elite players from all over the country who are most likely going to be underprivileged.’

Following his success, Kawanu has noticed he has had to face competition from new start-up academies, hoping to mimic his achievements. But he is not fazed. If anything, he has embraced the changes, and knows that it is all working towards the rise of Zambian football.

He said, ‘My big dream is to have 20 academies like Kafue Celtic in Zambia. People say if you have competition, it’s impossible to compete. But if we had 20 Kafue Celts doing what we are doing, all we would do is open up even more opportunities and open up Zambia to the rest of the world.

‘If we had that, everybody would know where Zambia is. With more academies running like us, we would have

a bigger chance of qualifying for under-17 and under-20 World Cups, which will increase the value of our players and their visibility.'

The priority, though, will always remain to give back to the community as well. Kawanu will never forget his roots.

'Lee has played a big part in the community,' Daka said. 'He gave a lot of us young people a chance. He is someone who is very passionate about football and he means well for the team and the players as well. The relationships he builds with people and players is just something that is rare and one of the unique qualities he has.'

Daka and Mwepu were pioneers. Others have since followed them to top-level European clubs, like Fashion Sakala who signed for Rangers, Lameck Banda who moved to Lecce in Serie A, and Kings Kangwa who signed for Red Star Belgrade in Serbia.

With the country's European-based players continuing to grow year after year, Zambia continue to improve at senior level on the international stage. In the coming years the goal will be to emulate the success of the 2012 generation, and to go even further. Zambia have never qualified for a World Cup. Led by Patson Daka, and others, that elusive participation may now be not just merely a dream, but a tangible target. If Zambia ever get there, they will have Lee Kawanu to thank.