

Ben Jackson

# THE AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS



The History of an  
**Underappreciated Tournament**

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## The First AFCON

BY THE end of World War Two, only four African states were independent. Of that group, it was South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia who were to begin the process of creating a tournament that would eventually feature, from qualification to the finals, 54 African nations. The end of the war brought questions of the validity of colonialism, resulting in the decolonisation of Africa from the 1950s onwards.

Alongside the independence movements, the footballing landscape in Africa began to rapidly expand. Colonialism had introduced football to the continent, and in 1920 Egypt had competed at the Olympic Games, then the major tournament before FIFA was established and the World Cup superseded it. However, for AFCON, it all began in 1954 in Bern. During the fifth World Cup, FIFA's congress finally voted to recognise Africa as a confederation. European and South American domination of FIFA had proved to be a barrier to Africa's recognition as the continent struggled for representation, alongside Asia, on FIFA's executive committee. The main crux of their argument against these two regions was that football had not reached a sufficient level to be considered an equal partner. Eventually, representation

within FIFA for Africa was won by 24 votes to 16. It would still take years for Africa to change the minds of many within the body, however. Even in 1965, the executive committee of FIFA labelled CAF as deficient.

Of the five independent states in 1954, Abdel Aziz Abdallah Salem of Egypt was chosen to represent the continent within FIFA's congress. The former engineer would be the one to get African football up and running, as he worked to ensure the continent was connected to the wider international game. Salem was also the one responsible for providing the first trophy, which he donated to CAF and which was used for many decades. Over the years, he would work to increase African football's ability to run itself.

It was at the 30th FIFA conference in Portugal that the idea of hosting a continental tournament began to take shape. In 1956, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa were joined by Sudan. Once under the rule of a joint British-Egyptian regime, Sudan had gained independence at the beginning of 1956, with the support of the new government in Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser. In Portugal, the four countries were able to discuss the future of African football, and the desire to create a tournament for themselves.

In keeping with the speed of political developments throughout the 1950s in Africa, it only took a year for plans to fully materialise. In February 1957, the Grand Hotel in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum played host to four delegations from the founding nations. It was fitting that this legacy of Sudanese colonial history would be the site on which one of the first official organisations of pan-Africanism was established, the Confederation of African Football (CAF). The first AFCON tournament was to start the same month, with the four founding nations vying for the trophy.

The Gold Coast, soon to be Ghana, had been invited by Egypt to join CAF. On three separate occasions between 1954 and 1955 Egypt reached out, but received no response from the British colony. This was probably a blessing in disguise for Egypt, as once Ghana did enter, they would certainly leave their mark.

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Two major international developments almost put an end to the inaugural AFCON before it had even begun. Egypt, being the most prominent footballing nation of the four, were favourites to host. However, when Israeli forces invaded Egypt on 29 October 1956, those prospects looked bleak. Both France and Britain also deployed troops alongside the Israelis, looking to take control of the Suez Canal. The Suez Crisis meant the country was in no fit state to host the tournament. Sudan came to the rescue, offering Khartoum as a host city for the four-team event. It was agreed by CAF that the inauguration of the country's new Municipal Stadium would be the perfect way to kick-start a continental tournament. One of the oldest clubs in Sudanese football, Al Ahli SC of Khartoum – formed in 1929 – which lies to the north of the capital across the bridge from the historical capital of Omdurman today and still use the stadium. Originally, the draw had pitted hosts Sudan against Egypt and Ethiopia against South Africa.

In 1948 the National Party (NP) came to power in South Africa. This began the period of apartheid, which would last over 40 years. Apartheid, an Afrikaans word meaning apartness, was an ideology that the NP introduced into all areas of South African life. The all-white government created a two-tiered society, with non-whites becoming second-class citizens. When it came to sports, this also meant that the

chances of a 'mixed' football team were null. Instead, the South African Football Federation offered that either an all-white or all-black team would compete in Khartoum. Unsurprisingly, this proved unacceptable to the other three founding members. Given that over the past decades, Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia had all been colonised by white Europeans and had only just gained independence, feelings of resistance were high. In response, the three expelled South Africa from the tournament and CAF. CAF led the way on the marginalisation of South Africa on the footballing stage, with FIFA only deciding to remove the country in 1961. CAF would continue to fight for apartheid South Africa to remain on the outside looking in on international football, often coming into conflict with FIFA.

Before a ball had even been kicked, Ethiopia were in the final. Sudan asked for the draw to be made again, which was rejected by Yidnekachwe Tessema of CAF citing FIFA regulations that said the original draw must be respected, regardless of if a team withdraws. Tessema, being Ethiopian himself, was probably content with the draw.

Egypt and Sudan had to battle it out on 10 February 1957 at the Municipal Stadium for the chance to face Ethiopia in the final. In charge of leading the hosts to glory was former Hungarian goalkeeper József Háda, a member of the golden generation of the 1930s. Háda was on the bench for Hungary's inaugural World Cup game, against Egypt at the 1934 finals in Italy. He was also on the bench when the eastern European side lost the World Cup Final to Italy in 1938. Around 20 years later, Háda was once again on the bench against Egypt. His opposite number was former Al Ahly SC defender Mourad Fahmy. Fahmy had only been appointed in 1955 but was now being looked upon as the man to bring home the trophy.

While most of his squad was made up of Egyptians, there was one name that raised eyebrows. Paraskos Trimeritis, also known as 'Brascos', was of Greek origin. Within all three of the founding nations there were several Greek clubs playing in the domestic leagues. Brascos was the favoured goalkeeper of Fahmy for the tournament, yet two other goalkeepers of Greek origin were eligible to play for Sudan. Both Giorgios Lengis and Skandros Minas were available, but Háda opted for Faysal Al-Sayed Ahmed Aly instead.

Around 30,000 people packed into the Municipal Stadium for the first-ever AFCON match, with Ethiopian referee Gebeyehu Doube in charge. It only took 20 minutes for the game's first goal, with Sudan giving away a penalty. Zamalek striker Raafat Attia converted the spot-kick, much to the dismay of the home crowd. Half-time came and it was Háda who had to come up with a plan to get the hosts back into the game. Háda's and the crowd's prayers were answered in the 58th minute when Boraí Bashir managed to pull the hosts level and grab Sudan's first-ever AFCON goal. Unfortunately for Sudan, Egypt had the future player of the tournament in their ranks. Alexandria-born striker Mohamed Diab Al-Attar, known as Ad-Diba, was one of the best strikers Egypt had. He was in the twilight of his career with Alexandria-based club Al Ittihad at the time, where he had won the Egyptian Cup in 1948 and finished top scorer in the first-ever Egyptian Premier League. Fahmy had named Ad-Diba captain for the game, and he repaid this faith by scoring the winning goal in the 72nd minute, setting up a final against Ethiopia.

Just six days after the semi-final, another full house was on hand in northern Khartoum, on the banks of the Blue Nile, to witness history. It was the Pharaohs of Egypt who were the favourites, as they had international football



experience. On the pitch they were facing the Walia Ibex, a side who had only played their first international match in 1947 against French Somaliland. They won 5-0, before playing the same side again five more times, winning every single encounter. In the years preceding the inaugural AFCON, Ethiopia had lost twice to Egypt in Olympic Games qualifiers in April 1956, 4-1 at home and 5-2 away. They had also played friendlies against Sudan a few months later, losing 5-1 in May before stunning Sudan at home with a 2-1 win. Going into the final, Ethiopia were looking for revenge for the Olympic humbling.

However, barely ten minutes after Sudanese referee Mohammed Youssef had gotten the final under way, Ethiopia were in deep trouble. It was that man again, Ad-Diba, who had decided that he was going to write his name into the AFCON history books. The veteran striker grabbed the first goal, before doubling his tally in the seventh minute. Zewde Moustafa's men were perhaps rusty having not played a competitive game for a long time. However, they did manage to keep the score to just two by half-time.

If the spectators were hoping for a closely fought contest, they were to be disappointed. Ad-Diba got his hat-trick in the 68th minute, before grabbing a fourth in the 89th. Remarkably, with only two matches played the man from Alexandria finished the tournament with five goals. He goes down in history as the tournament's first-ever top scorer, as well as the first player to score a hat-trick in an AFCON match and final. Ad-Diba never played another AFCON tournament, retiring in 1958 when his Al Ittihad side were relegated. This did not mark the end of his appearances at AFCON however. Following his retirement as a player, the striker turned to refereeing. It's hard to imagine any of the current Egyptian players taking up the whistle once their

careers end. Yet this is what the hat-trick hero did, and in the 1968 AFCON Final it was the Egyptian who was in charge.

Even with just three teams, the organisers were happy with how the tournament had gone. Their report to FIFA did raise into question the varying performances of the referees, but the crowd was also praised for its 'fair and impartial' manner. Clearly, as time progressed, the fans in Africa, like elsewhere, became a lot less impartial.

Fahmy's time as Egypt coach ended in 1958, and he would never manage again. He later became president of CAF, before eventually being made minister of agriculture under President Nasser. In his place for the 1959 tournament came a Hungarian by the name of Pál Titkos. Titkos, unlike Háda, had been a regular for the Hungarian team of the 1930s, and was a goalscorer in the 1938 World Cup Final against Italy. The former striker was chosen after his success with Fahmy's former side Al Ahly, where he had won both the Egyptian Premier League and the Egyptian Cup. Titkos's job was to retain the cup, but this time it would be hosted in Egypt, not Sudan.

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Once again it was a three-team tournament, but the format had changed. All three teams were put into one group, where they would play each other in a league format to decide the winner. The group games were to be held at the Prince Farouk Stadium, named after Farouk the 1st, who was the penultimate ruler of Egypt and Sudan. The stadium still exists today but was renamed the Mokhtar El Tetsh Stadium after Al Ahly legend Mahmoud Mokhtar El Tetsh who played prior to World War Two. It's hardly surprising that Prince Farouk's name was removed, given his exit via *coup*

*d'état* in 1952. Perhaps they should have named it the Ad-Diba Stadium after his heroics in 1957.

If Egypt were to win the second AFCON, it would be under a different name. Just a year before the tournament, Egypt and Syria formed a political union known as the United Arab Republic (UAR). Triggered by the Suez Crisis and the growth of pan-Arab sentiment, the union was short-lived, only existing until 1963 when Syria experienced its own coup and seceded from the union. The name remained after Syria left the union, and was only changed once Nasser died on 28 September 1970.

Back in 1959, Nasser's UAR were set to host neighbours Sudan and Ethiopia. Despite being in a union with Syria, the UAR side was made up entirely of Egyptians. Given that only two years had passed and being at home, the hosts were strong favourites. Titkos's first game, on 22 May 1959, was to be a repeat of the 1957 final; however, Ethiopia were also going into the tournament with a new manager. Moustafa was gone and in his place came former Czech midfielder Jiří Starosta. Starosta had plied his trade in the Czechoslovakian league with TJ Vítkovice, a side from the eastern city of Ostrava near the Polish border. This meant that the 1959 edition featured no African coaches, with all three coming from behind the Iron Curtain. This was an early indication of the emerging Cold War battlegrounds, with the Soviet Union keen to spread its influence by supporting recently independent nations.

Unfortunately for Starosta, the 1959 tournament would not be successful for him. His real success in Africa came with another of the founding three, Sudan, in 1970. For the first game against Egypt his side suffered a similar fate as that of his predecessor. This time Ethiopia put up a much better fight, only conceding just before the half-hour mark.

With Ad-Diba no longer in the side, the UAR needed a new goalscoring hero, and they found one in Mahmoud El-Gohary. The Al Ahly man clearly enjoyed playing at the Prince Farouk Stadium, scoring in the 29th minute, before adding two more, one in the 42nd and the other after Mimi El-Sherbini had made it three. These were the only goals that El-Gohary scored in the tournament, but the hat-trick was enough to earn him the golden boot. The striker only managed a handful of games for his country, with a persistent knee injury forcing him into early retirement. El-Gohary went on to have a wide-ranging managerial career, including Al Ahly, their rivals Zamelek and Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s.

By the time Yugoslavian referee Zivko Bajic had blown the full-time whistle, the UAR had once again handed Ethiopia a heavy defeat. Ethiopia's record now read played two, scored none and conceded eight across two tournaments. This was with a new keeper for the UAR, as Brascos had not been called up to the final squad. Instead, Titkos opted for Al Ahly goalkeeper Abdel-Gelil Hemeida. As expected, the entire squad was dominated by Zamalek and Al Ahly players. The hosts had made a statement with their victory, showing Sudan that if they wanted any chance of competing then they had to put in a performance against a beleaguered Ethiopian side.

Just three days later Sudan got their campaign under way. Unfortunately, there is no footage of the game, yet we do know that Sudan emerged victorious thanks to a 40th-minute goal from Mutalib Abdel-Masser, otherwise known as 'Drissa'. The striker from Al-Hilal Club of Omudurman had given Háda his first tournament victory, setting up a winner-takes-all-clash with Egypt. For their opponents Ethiopia, it meant they had now played two AFCONs

without registering a single goal. The Walia Ibex would have a complete turnaround by the time they hosted the tournament in 1962.

The UAR had been given a week off after their first game to prepare for the battle with Sudan. Clearly, there was much excitement at the prospect of the final game deciding who would win the trophy, with Sudan looking for revenge after the 1957 defeat. Attendance figures vary, with reports ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 for that final game on 29 May 1959. When looking at the footage, it is clear that the Prince Farouk Stadium was absolutely rammed. UAR wore their dark green kit while Sudan donned their white kit with the old Sudanese blue, yellow and green flag in the middle.

On a beautiful day in Cairo, the Pharaohs gave the home crowd reason to cheer almost straight away. In the 12th minute a missed tackle from one of the Sudanese defenders gave Essam Baheeg an opening, which he duly took. The Zamalek striker thundered a shot in from the edge of the box, which flew past the outstretched hands of goalkeeper Samir Mohammed Ali of Al Ahly of Khartoum. Zamalek fans would have certainly enjoyed seeing one of their own putting the ball past an Al Ahly player, even if it was the Khartoum version. However, much like in 1957, the Sudanese were not going to go down without a fight. It took them just over an hour to come back, with Al-Hilal Club striker Siddiq Mohammed Manzoul grabbing a 65th-minute equaliser. At this stage, the UAR were still on course to win the AFCON, having a superior goal difference to Sudan after their 4-0 victory over Ethiopia. Prior to the Sudanese goal, Egypt's players had gone from playing as a team to individuals trying to get their name added to the list of AFCON scorers. This approach had allowed the Sudanese back into the game,

with Manzoul becoming the first to score in two successive tournaments.

Manzoul's goal awoke the UAR and they sealed their second AFCON title with just minutes to go. Egypt won a throw-in level with the Sudanese box on the left-hand side. Baheeg quickly grabbed the ball, throwing it to a team-mate who chested it back to him. What happened next is probably one of the most under-appreciated goals in footballing history. With the outside of his boot, Baheeg fired towards goal. He hit it to perfection, with the ball flying over the goalkeeper into the far corner to finish the game. The players ran to the bench to celebrate with their team, and the fans celebrated their second AFCON title.

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At the end of the 1950s, Egypt were the masters of AFCON's founding fathers. They had not lost a single game and were defensively strong. However, things were about to change. The 1960s would see the expansion of not only the number of independent nations on the continent, but also of those competing for the AFCON trophy. Between 1959 and 1962, when it was Ethiopia's chance to host the tournament, 25 more nations had gained independence, such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.

While the borders of these countries were artificially created by the likes of France, Britain and Germany, these newly independent leaders now had to work out how to bring together various groups of people to create a cohesive national identity. Football has always brought people from all walks of life together. One of the continent's most charismatic leaders would demonstrate how football could be used to unite a new nation.