

Hard lessons stick

Age. Uganda had the youngest squad at the World Cup, featuring seven 16-year-olds who formed the backbone of the team. Among them were Nkoola, Owino, Walusimbi, Magala and Oyirwoth et al.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

FIFA U17 WORLD CUP

Result - round of 16

Uganda **1(3)-1(5)** Burkina Faso

When Uganda qualified for the Fifa U-17 World Cup for the first time, Fufa president Moses Magogo declared all the players "historical," emphasising the magnitude of the achievement. The 2025 tournament in Qatar became more than just a competition, it was a classroom, a shop window and a launchpad for Uganda's next footballing generation.

The Fifa U-17 World Cup has long been a launching pad for some of football's biggest stars, producing players who later dominated the global stage. Germany's Toni Kroos announced himself by winning the Golden Ball in 2007, while Spain's Cesc Fàbregas claimed both the Golden Ball and Golden Boot in 2003.

The tournament also introduced the world to Brazil's Philippe Coutinho (2009), Nigeria's Victor Osimhen, who set a tournament

scoring record in 2015, and earlier talents like Carlos Tevez (1995) and Ronaldinho (1997).

Other notable graduates include Giovanni Reyna of the USA (2019), Spanish legend Andrés Iniesta from the famed 1997 squad, and Nigeria's Kelechi Iheanacho, the 2013 Golden Ball winner. Their trajectories underline the tournament's power as a springboard to elite careers – a pathway Cubs players can aspire to follow.

A stage for exposure

Playing on the global stage against technically and tactically advanced teams exposed Cubs stars to top-level demands in terms of pace, intensity and discipline. From the opening match against Canada to the knockout clash with Burkina Faso, the Cubs quickly learned how little margins decide games.

"Playing against teams like France



Magala goes for a big hit in training. PHOTO/ COURTESY

and Chile showed us the speed and skill needed at this level. It was a challenge, but we grew with every game," said forward Arafat Nkoola. Uganda's ability to score first in all key games became one of their defining qualities at the tournament. Even when the Cubs snatched a late equaliser against Chile, the Cubs' response embodied courage and mental grit.

"Scoring first in every big match shows we never give up. Even when we conceded late, we fought until the final whistle," said John Asimwe.

Derrick Ssozi added: "The late equaliser against Chile came from our belief. We never lose hope."

Tactical discipline

Uganda had the youngest squad at the World Cup, featuring seven 16-year-olds who formed the backbone of the team in Qatar. Among them were forward Arafat Nkoola, midfielder John Brian Owino, defender Abubakali Walusimbi, attacker Isima Mulala Magala, as well as Steven Oyirwoth, Jovan Nsereko Mukisa and Shakur Magogo.

Individual flashes of brilliance were evident, but Uganda's real strength came from structure and discipline. Their historic 1-0 victory over France demonstrated how organisation, communication, and clear roles can neutralise superior individual quality. "Our strength was the way we played together. We trusted the plan and trusted each other," midfielder Enock Bagenda said.

Tactical missteps

The Cubs' exit against Burkina Faso highlighted tactical decisions that proved damaging at a critical moment.

In a bid to refresh the attack late in the game, coach Brian Ssenyondo introduced Derrick Ssozi, the same player who had rescued Uganda with a late equaliser against Chile. But the substitution did not yield the intended impact, and Ssozi would later miss his penalty in the shootout.

More questions arose when Ssenyondo substituted first-choice goalkeeper Edris Waibi for Adrian Mukwanga specifically for the spot kicks. Mukwanga had barely warmed up and was thrown straight into a high-pressure situation. Ironically, Waibi has a strong history with penalty situations, earlier this year he lifted the USSSA Boys Football title with Buddo SS, although he was similarly replaced for the shootout with Owen Wahugembe during that campaign.

The decision in Qatar backfired as Uganda went on to lose 5-3 on penalties. While bold tactical calls are part of youth football development, the moment underscored the impor-

tance of preparation, clarity, and focus in knockout matches where fine margins decide everything. "Penalty shootouts are always tough. It was painful to go out that way, but it taught us to stay calm under pressure," Nkoola admitted.

Coach Ssenyondo reflected: "The moments shape a young footballer. The boys showed maturity beyond their age."

Unique mission

For traditional football giants, the World Cup is a development opportunity. But for Uganda, it was also a chance to market players to scouts who rarely reach East Africa due to financial, logistical and infrastructure challenges.

Scouts often find it difficult to scout domestic matches because of limited modern performance data, irregular competition schedules, and inconsistent youth structures. Many talented players slip through the cracks. "We knew this was a chance to show our talent. While we were watching, and that's important for our future," Nkoola said.

Development pays off

Uganda's progress is directly tied to a growing, well-organised system of youth football – largely driven by the FA's strategic partnership with the Uganda Youth Football Association (UYFA).

Through this collaboration, the FA Juniors League now operates on a national scale, providing meaningful, competitive matches every season. This alone contributed nine players to the World Cup squad, showing that sustained investment in youth football pays real dividends. Adding to the structure are elite academies like El Cambio, which produced three members: Isma Magala, Hamza Gooba, and James Bogere.

Ssenyondo puts it succinctly: "The Juniors League and elite academies like El Cambio, Rays of Grace and others give players the right environment. They are the backbone of our growth."

The Cubs' journey has revived conversations about establishing elite training centres akin to France's famed Centre de Football de Fontaine, inaugurated in 1988 by former FFF president Fernand Sastre.

The 56-hectare centre represents a blueprint of what long-term investment and structured training can

SPORTS SUMMARY

Vipers play five games in 16 days

For the champions, this stretch could be a boon or a bane. Sweep through it with total victories and they could storm to the summit by mid-December. **PAGE 39**

