

Why Okello is real deal for Ugandan Tennis from now

Bright Talent. At just 14 years old, Samuel Okello already carries a presence that Uganda's tennis fraternity cannot ignore. It is not simply the results he posts, but the maturity, composure and tactical sharpness with which he handles moments that make seasoned players wobble.

BY INNOCENT NDAWULA

ODUKE LEGENDARY TOURNAMENT

Finals - Men's Singles

Samuel Okello bt Troy Zziwa **6-1, 6-3**

Road To The Title

Semifinals: Samuel Okello bt

David Oringa **0-4, 4-2, 13-11**

Quarterfinals: Samuel Okello bt

Daniel Ruyange **4-0, 4-2**

Round of 16: Samuel Okello bt

Paul Ssekandi **4-0, 4-0**

Round of 32: Samuel Okello bt

Burck Muweil **4-0, 4-0**

Previous Edition Winners

2023: Simon Peter Ayella (1st edition)

2024: David Oringa (Second edition)

There are juniors who grow into tennis, and then there are those who seem forged for the sport. Okello — fresh off winning the 2025 John Oduke Legendary Tournament — belongs to the latter class.

While many teenagers are still finding themselves athletically, Okello plays with the precision of a boy trained early, coached right, and mentally wired for competition. His ambidextrous style gives him rare unpredictability, making

him difficult to break down and even harder to read.

Yet his rise didn't begin on a fancy tennis court. It began in the dusty corners of Naguru Kasenke, where a football-loving left back known as "Afande" — for his command of the left flank — was unknowingly being scouted for a different destiny.

A Coach, A Pillar

If there is a single constant in Okello's journey, it is coach Edward Odockcen, the ITF Level 2 professional who heads Uganda's National Tennis Training Center — and the man who literally pulled him from football.

"I actually hijacked him," Odockcen admits with a laugh. "He was a very good defender, but I knew he had something special. I asked his mum to let him try tennis. When he traveled with the U-12 national team to Kigali, and then flew with the same team for the Africa Junior Tennis Championship in Mozambique thereafter winning in Rwanda — everything changed. The road trip, flight and the exposure — he didn't want football anymore."

Odockcen has truly grown into a mentor, guardian, travel companion, and the pillar the boy leans on.

"To me, Samuel is gifted and very intelligent," Odockcen adds. "He reads opponents very fast. He counter-attacks quickly. He is strong from the baseline but transitions well to the net when he

sees a short ball. His net game is one of his biggest weapons."

The numbers support the narrative. Okello trains thrice a week for three hours, supported by strength work, conditioning, and sports psychology — the complete modern athlete's package.

He belongs to COLTA — College Link Tennis Academy, a programme designed to groom elite juniors and connect them to U.S. colleges looking for high-level tennis players.

The Oduke breakthrough

His Oduke title was a signal of the gem's arrival.

He stunned celebrated Davis Cup player David Oringa in a dramatic semifinal comeback, taking the super-tiebreak 13-11 before sweeping aside Troy Zziwa in the final.

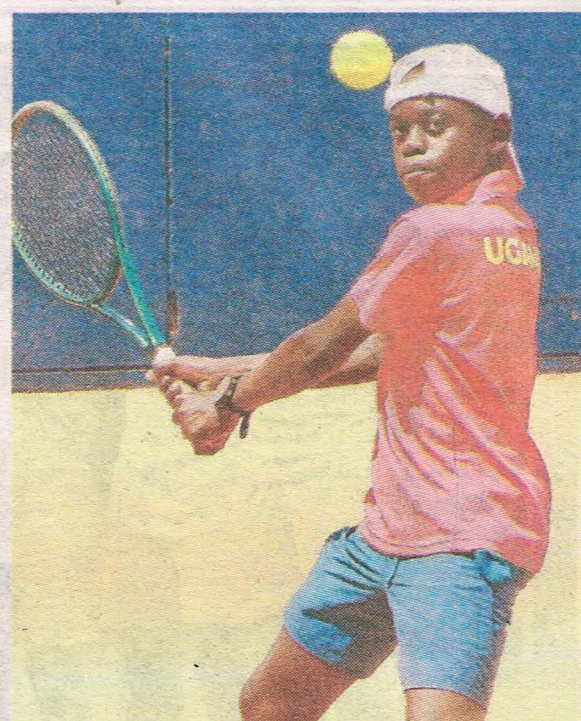
After the victory, Okello's smile said it all. "I am very happy I have won this tournament. Beating Oringa felt very good. I thank my coach and COLTA for giving me the training that has put me at this level. My mother will be very happy."

A 14-year-old beating one of the country's best players — and doing it with nerve, clarity and courage — is the kind of moment that shifts expectations.

Built on exposure

Uganda rarely produces juniors with the breadth of international exposure that Okello has accumulated by age 14.

He has already represented the country at the Africa Junior Team Championship in Egypt (2025), the Africa Junior Championships on Clay in the 14 & Under category, the U-14 Continental Finals in Mozambique (2023), and several East Africa Zonal Championships where he has collected multiple



Technique. Okello plays a double-handed backhand enroute his first Oduke title. PHOTOS/ COURTESY

gold medals. His résumé is even richer when you consider his early team successes — the U-12 Team Gold in Kigali in 2022, the U-14 Zone Championship team titles in Bujumbura in 2024 and Nairobi in 2025, and a silver medal in the individual event of the Zone Championships in Nairobi this year.

Ranked sixth on the CAT U-14 list, Okello also reached the quarterfinals of the Africa Junior Championships in Casablanca in 2024 and of both ITF J30 Kampala legs in 2025.

His International Tennis Federation (ITF) World Tennis Number (WTN) currently stands at 2611, with a career-high of 2327, and continues to trend upward — a trajectory that his coach believes will soon place him among the very best.

"In the next three years, I want to see him in the Top 100 ITF," Odockcen says confidently.

Talent ahead of schedule

Those who observe youth tennis closely agree.

Junior Tennis Initiative (JTI) regional officer Alvin Bagaya believes Okello is operating years ahead of his development curve.

"I expected him to peak in 2027. He has done it in 2025. That shows you his special talent."

Bagaya reveals another layer of Okello's story: his football past.

"In soccer, he was a deadly left back. His teammates nicknamed him Afande. His coach wanted him back after Covid, but the boy had tasted the joy of tennis — the travel, the opportunities. That early happiness grounded him."

Bagaya concludes with conviction: "He is part of Uganda's exciting next generation. Very few have his maturity at this age."

Player for tomorrow

What sets Okello apart is not only what he does — but how he does it. He anticipates early, adapts quickly, stays calm under chaos, and never drifts emotionally. These are traits associated with professionals, not teenagers. If nurtured properly, Okello could become one of Uganda's finest tennis exports. For now, the boy from Naguru Kasenke — once a promising left back — now carries a tennis racquet with purpose. And Uganda, cautiously but excitedly, believes it may have found something special. A star not waiting for tomorrow. A star already here!

NATIONAL HOPE

Uganda must prioritise a structured support pathway for elite juniors like Okello — one that ensures increased ITF competition, better funding, and sports science support. For the first time in years, Uganda's tennis future carries a spark of genuine optimism.

PROFILE

Name: Samuel

Okello

Age: 14

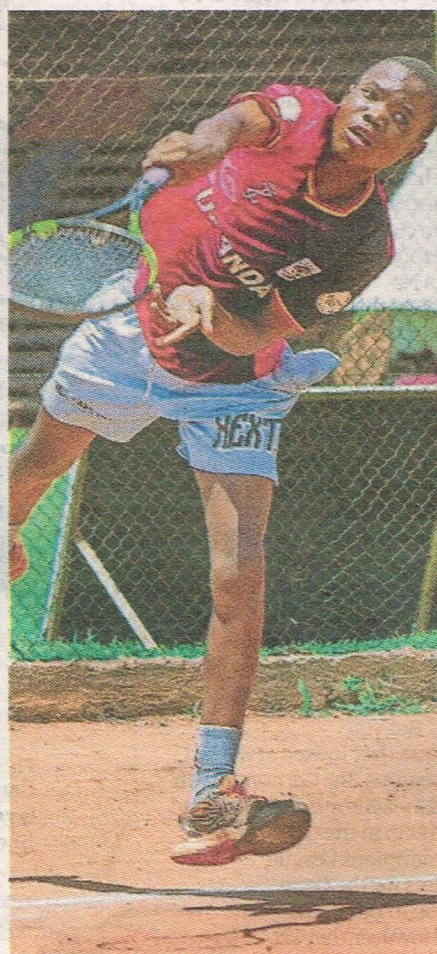
Born: July 21, 2011

ITF WTN: 2611 (Career-high 2327)

Coach: Edward Odockcen

Style: Left hander/ Double handed backhand

Major Wins: 2025 Oduke Tournament; multiple East African zonal titles; ITF/CAT U14 Circuit wins



Challengers to throne. L_R Cilian Asante Ndilima, Nicholas Malwaya and Muzamil Ssebi are not just making up numbers with every stroke.