

Rise With Flair. In a room filled with applause at Nanjing Restaurant in Kampala, three athletes from different disciplines stood tall - not just as winners, but as symbols of belief, timing, and undeniable X-factor.

X-Factor trio seize spotlight at Real Stars April Awards

BY INNOCENT NDAWULA

FORTEBET REAL STARS APRIL AWARD WINNERS

Football: Hannington Ssebwalunyo (NEC)

Rugby: Alex Aturinda (Stanbic Black Pirates)

Basketball: Edrine Ekau (Rezlife Saints)

All three first-time winners

There was something different about the applause inside Nanjing Restaurant yesterday - it was as much affirming than being mere celebratory.

For the three athletes; Hannington Ssebwalunyo, Alex Aturinda, and Edrine Ekau, April was a month in which they dared to dream differently and shoot the skies.

Each walked up to receive their first-ever Fortebet Real Stars Monthly Award, but more tellingly, each carried a story of impact that stretched beyond numbers.

Scoring goalkeeper

Goalkeepers are expected to save. Ssebwalunyo has chosen to rewrite that script.

Five clean sheets. Two goals. And a presence that continues to redefine what a modern goalkeeper can be for NEC FC.

"Glory and honour back to God. It is a blessing to be recognised. Sometimes you can put in



Debut Honours. April's finest bask in their breakthrough moment alongside the Real Stars Awards officials. Inset is goalie Ssebwalunyo who is currently the talk of town. PHOTOS/I.NDAWULA & J. BATANUDDÉ

the work and you never get recognised," Ssebwalunyo said, his voice steady but reflective.

"Thanks to my NEC teammates like Samson Kirya and especially the goalkeeping department - without them I wouldn't have been a winner today."

His penalties - taken with the calmness of a seasoned striker - have

become moments of theatre. One even came against his former mentor, adding narrative to nerve.

"I have a lot of trust from my technical team and fellow players and I have been happy to take responsibility as justified by the goals I have scored, too! The mental strength of our team is also super good! I want to continue doing well!"

Pirates' history maker

If April had a defining rugby story, it belonged to Aturinda and the surge of Stanbic Black Pirates.

A loose forward by trade, Aturinda turned into a difference-maker when it mattered most—especially in the Enterprise Cup, where Ugandan rugby found

new ground. "It is good that talent is recognised. I wish I could've shared this podium with my fellow nominees," he said in reference to those he edged; Daniels Otim (Toyota Buffaloes) and fast-rising Proscovia Mukyala (Thunderbirds).

April was a good month - it crowned him with recognition but more so gave him history.

In the semifinal at King's Park, Pirates stunned Kenya's Nondies 20-17 on April 11, with Aturinda delivering two assists and scoring the winning try in a performance that powered Uganda's first-ever finalist in the competition. Now, a date with Kabras in Nairobi awaits on May 30.

"That game stood out for me. I also took the Man of the Match award," he add-

BY THE NUMBERS

- 5: Clean sheets by NEC's Ssebwalunyo in April.
- 2: Goals scored by goalie Ssebwalunyo in the month.
- 2: Try assists by Aturinda in Enterprise Cup semifinal
- 20: Edrine Ekau's points per game average
- 1: First Ugandan club in Enterprise Cup final - Pirates.

ed. Ugandan rugby has long chased such continental moments. Aturinda, it seems, is running straight into them.

'Moving Basket' momentum

On the courts, Ekau is no longer just a rising name - he's a problem defenses are yet to solve.

Nicknamed the "Moving Basket," the Rezlife Saints guard has turned consistency into spectacle. Averaging 20 points per game - and dropping 25 to snap the unbeaten run of the 'Dictator' City Oilers - he is already being whispered about as mid-season MVP.

"Teamwork has helped us be where we are now and we have also played for each other," Ekau said.

"On my part, I am blessed and talented. I put in a lot of work. I hope to get better as a person. God's timing is perfect timing."

And for those who think his performances peak only in big games?

"It's not against Oilers that I have performed well. I have scored 25 points and more against other teams this season. Our target is to play deep into the playoffs and compete for the championship."

Massive moment

Organised by the Real Stars Sports Agency, led by CEO Isaac Mukasa and backed by Fortebet, who were represented by comedian Alex Muhangi, and Jude Colour Solution whose Eron Nandawula was in attendance, the awards continue to grow in stature since their 2018 inception.

But yesterday, the growth felt personal. Three different athletes and three different journeys. One shared truth - timing met preparation.

And April, in all its demands, found its stars.