



Miya is Copa's best ambassador, Kintu

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE
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KAMPALA. Since changing its name in 1993, what is today known as the Copa Coca-Cola Schools Cup, has been the yardstick for schools football.

But ahead of next week's kick off of the two-week festival in Jinja, veteran coach Nimrod Kintu has named Farouk Miya (pictured above) as Copa's biggest product.

Kintu, who has featured in the tournament as a player at Kololo SS and coached the same school as well as Ntinda View, Amus College and Old Kampala, added Robert Nsubuga and Alex Ariga as the most successful products of the tournament.

To most people, the names Kintu chose should not be too big a surprise yet it appears blasphemous to leave out the likes of Jackson Mayanja, Ibrahim Sekagya and David Obua. To Kintu, none fits the bills as they never won the trophy.

Kintu reasons that Ariga, the younger brother of Express FC legend Robert Aloro, scored winning goals for Kibuli in 1996 and two years later in 1998. Ariga quit football for personal business after sustaining an injury when he played for Biharwe. For Robert Nsubuga, who was named the best in 1996 beating the likes of Hamza Kalanzi and Robert Jjombwe, the St Mary's Kisubi goalkeeper set history. However, he never pursued the football journey and is now a manager with Tullow Oil.

But Kintu says the best of all is Miya, a two-time winner with St Mary's SS Kitende in 2012 and 2013. Miya, who plays for HNK Gorica in Croatia, is remembered for scoring the winning goal as Uganda broke a 39-year jinx to play in the finals of the Africa Cup of Nations in 2017.

A new dawn is set to unravel when the games kick off next week on Monday.



Knowledgeable. Copa scout, Nimrod Kintu.
PHOTOS BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

PAST WINNERS

- 1993 – Kibuli
- 1994 – Lubiri SS
- 1995 – Kibuli
- 1996 – Kibuli
- 1997 – St Leo's
- 1998 – Kibuli
- 1999 – Old K'la
- 2000 – Naggalama
- 2001 – Ngabo
- 2002 – Kibuli SS
- 2003 – Old K'la
- 2004 – Kitende
- 2005 – Kibuli
- 2006 – Kitende
- 2007 – Kitende
- 2008 – Kitende
- 2009 – Buddo SS
- 2010 – Nankyama
- 2011 – Kitende
- 2012 – Kitende
- 2013 – Kitende
- 2014 – Kibuli
- 2015 – Kitende
- 2016 – Kibuli
- 2017 – Jinja SS
- 2018 – Buddo SS

Malta: opening the pool



The young para-swimmers Veronica Nabitaka, Shawn Omoth, Precious Nankunda and Rodney Ainomugisha at Hotel Africana. PHOTOS GODFREY LUGAJJU

Para swimming. Rodney's father, I was told, is a good swimmer, who learnt in the Nile waters when he studied at Namasagali University. But his son wants the best: to swim better than daddy and get a scholarship to study in America. Become a marine diver, like Jjajja Coach. Become a civil engineer, like his uncle "because civil engineers are rich."

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“How do you feel swimming with nondisabled swimmers?” Rodney Ainomugisha, hardly 10, easily answered: “I love water...and I like being different.”

Rodney, as he is known among peers, was born with a deformed left arm. It touches just millimeters below his waistline, and instead of a palm, it has a thumb-like ending with a nail the size of your big toe. Yet this handsome budding para-swimmer is an interesting being, with confidence so rare with children even five years older. Enid Joselyne Kamugisha had some hard time expecting her first born. She spent a month on bedrest before the doctors agreed on a Caesarean at eight months because the breech fetus' head could not face downwards.

“I, think the doctors saw the problem before but they only told me they couldn't see the baby's left arm,” Mrs Kamugisha recalls. “But they often asked me ‘What if’ questions which indirectly prepared me psychologically.”

So when the baby was born with an underdeveloped left arm, “I didn't feel so bad.”

Rodney grew like any other baby. “Sitting, crawling, walking, talking, in normal time.” This quick progress is evident. “Rodney is a quick thinker,” his mother says. “Teachers say he can answer

you perfect before you finish the question.” This reminded me of his interjection as his mother explained his birth. Rodney said: “Also teacher Jimmy told us that when a pregnant woman gets an infection and it's not treated well, it can affect the baby's growth.”

Rodney is a favoured boy, loved at, school, church and his swim club. Nevertheless, Mrs Kamugisha recalls, some children and adults who used be surprised by his hand. “But we raised him to believe that he was better than many other people who can't even walk.” He does not like long-sleeved shirts. He has nothing to hide. And sometimes tells her: “Mummy this arm has made me a celebrity.” At school, he is emcee. At festivals he gets free entry.

On three occasions growing up, Rodney fell while playing and fractured that deformed arm. But he is now safe. He cooks himself tea, bathes, dresses up, mops the house, etc. Jjajja Coach knew Rodney through his mother, one of his swimming clients at Fairway Hotel. Rodney was already showing love for water whenever his school went training at La Grande Hotel. He likes Jjajja Coach, “because he demonstrates things which helps us learn faster, especially free style.”

“He also warns us not to jump close to the wall because we might hurt ourselves.”

Jjajja Coach returns that favour:

“Rodney is a very promising swimmer.” He adds: “I have bigger intensions for these kids with disabilities and their international body creates them many opportunities.”

Precious Nankunda, with underdeveloped fingers, won bronze in relays at the Midland Schools event in March but Matovu is preparing her and Rodney to compete with the nondisabled swimmers in October. Rodney's father Andrew Kamugisha, I was told, is a good swimmer, who learnt in the Nile waters when he studied at Namasagali University. But his son wants the best: to swim better than daddy and get a scholarship to study in America. Become a marine diver, like Jjajja Coach. Become a civil engineer, like his uncle “because civil engineers are rich.”

Rodney feels “excited” his story will be published “because most disabled people are rare on TV yet they have talent, like my friend Ike, who plays chess, me. But most are shy.”

“I want them to be confident because with support they can do anything.” Besides swimming, Rodney rides a bicycle, loves making friends, playing chess, draughts, basketball and reading. The primary five pupil of Trinity Primary School is brilliant at science but loves mathematics the most.

His best novel is Majo the Street Kid. And when we visited their home on Ssebaggala Road, Kisaasi, they were watching Knight Squad on Nickelodeon, his favourite TV program. He also loves SpongeBob.

IMPACT

Change maker. All the parents we spoke to feel the impact of swimming on their children. Rodney's mother admits that much as her son was confident, his levels have improved greatly since he begun swimming. He also backs her ambitions to become an elite para-swimmer. Nabitaka had become a loner because children mocked her but her mother says she is happy here, children treat her like any other. “And that's what I want for her for now.” For now Nankunda's mother is happy her daughter is more active than before yet her grades have improved. However, bringing her to the pool, especially on Saturdays comes with sacrifices, according to her schedule.

He is aware of his weaknesses too. “I can put something somewhere and I begin looking for it in the next five minutes when I have forgotten where I put it.” Exaggeratedly, he calls that amnesia.

We asked Joy, 7, what she likes about her brother. Standing on a table, smiling, she said: “He cares about me.” And what she dislikes about him: “He beats me.” Rodney smiled.

And what would she wish for him? “I wish he could have a better hand.” Rodney interjected: “No, no, that's mocking me, actually it's

for young para-swimmers

an insult. I'm okay with my hand."

Jjaja Coach

Collins Wasswa Matovu, revered as Jjaja Coach, is no stranger to para-swimming. He had gone to the USA for a master's degree in accounting. The graduate of Nakawa Vocational Institute had worked as an accountant first for Caltex from 1979 to 1984 and later for other companies. But destiny had other ideas.

One evening in Woodbridge, Virginia, in 2000, Matovu remembers, a three-year old girl who nearly died in a pool. She had failed to find her mother in the dark and when she saw someone in the pool, she went there hoping it was her mother there. The lifeguard was at the extreme end. Matovu saw her struggling in the vast pool and he jumped in to her rescue.

"Her mother said she had never seen a black person, not even black Americans, jump into the pool in their clothes." Coincidentally, the girl's father was a marine, and connected Matovu to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, an organisation that rehabilitates American soldiers wounded in foreign wars, working as a swimming coach.

Matovu worked there until 2007, when he returned to reunite with his family of six biological children and several adoptees. His memories are fond: "I enjoyed my stay there," he says. "The veterans [mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan] were very obedient and passionate about swimming; they knew it was the best and safest exercise they could do." And the pay was worthy.

Matovu also used the chance to tell the Americans the untold side of Idi Amin, Uganda's most tainted president.

"I used to tell them that he is the best sports personality that has ever happened in Uganda. When we were at Nabumali College, he used to come to school and encourage the development of sports and he was very passionate."

Matovu hoped to return to Virginia but his wife was diagnosed with cancer of the colon in 2009 and when she died in 2011, he decided to settle here, after all, he had found self-employment as a swimming trainer. His first clients were Hajji Ssewawa and his wife, the proprietors of Sir Apollo Kaggwa schools, who gave him the job to train pupils in all the six [now ten] campuses. For long, the schools had suspended swimming since a child reportedly died in a pool. This is how Matovu discovered Husna Kukundakwe, a girl with a deformed right arm, like Rodney, but with unbelievable passion for swimming.

"I started training Husna when she was about five years. Her parents didn't believe she would make it but her passion was ob-

INCLUSION

Better chance.

Malta is a merger between Matovu and Tabitha, the two founders of the club. Established in 2014, the club focused on nurturing young talents, especially from primary school. For seven years Matovu was a swimming coach for Veterans of Foreign Wars, an organisation that rehabilitates American soldiers wounded in combat. Returning here, Matovu, now 62, used his experience with disability to give young handicapped swimmers a chance. First was Husnah Kukundakwe, who is now eyeing the 2020 Tokyo Games.

vious,"

she drunk from the tiffin where some of the juice had been poured.

Nabitaka was born at home. When her father saw her deformed arms, he fainted. "I too felt so bad, and it took me some time to accept the reality," her mother recalls. "Of course I loved her as a child, my first born, but I always asked myself 'why?'"

Her husband and in-laws pointed fingers. Some suggesting it was due to contraceptive pills. But she says they were wrong. "I hid the baby for about the first six months, even though my mother comforted me."

She quickly conceived her second baby, hoping it would steady her wobbly relationship. But this one too had issues. Born a premature at seven months, she was very thin and though she recovered, the five-year old is vulnerable to infections. "Their father abandoned us," leaving the family under a mother whose seasonal jobs were limited by the very children she catered for.

Nabitaka has been trained to do light chores: bathing, washing her knickers, washing utensils. But her mother wonders how she holds the pool noodles and swim boards because teachers say her right arm, the lesser disabled, easily tires while writing. Fellow children and some adults used to mock Nabitaka into seclusion. She wanted to play alone. "But here she is happy. The children treat her like any other. And that's what I want for her for now. "I also want her to learn something other than just education."

Jjaja Coach also assured me that by the end of the holiday program she will have improved a lot. "She has the heart, she doesn't fear the water." Whenever doctors told Nabitaka's mother that her child's deformity isn't abject, she didn't believe them until she visited Katalemwa Cheshire Home. "I saw children with terrible conditions. Some couldn't move at all, some were oozing saliva throughout. I thanked God and felt Vanessa isn't disabled at all." Mobilised by Rodney's mother, parents pay Nabitaka's swimming fees. Her mother must transport her to training thrice a week during holidays. So she must get a job—to pay her tuition at ABC Primary School in Kitetikka, Gayaza Road, and bring her to swim every Saturday during the term.

For now, she is enjoying the outing, even attempting the backstroke.

Matovu says. Last year, Kukundakwe impressed in training camps in Nairobi and Korea. She clandestinely joined Dolphins, the country's most coveted swim club and she is now eyeing Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. Matovu opened the pool to four new young para-swimmers, and hopes it widens, sooner.

She doesn't fear water

In the interval of Monday morning training session, Veronica 'Vanessa' Nabitaka, 7, in a loose navy blue swimsuit decorated with small and big silver stars, the upper white part embroidered with beads reading USA, rose from the waters of Hotel Africana swimming pool with a slight shiver. The air was colder than the water. But she was smiling, exposing gaps departed by her milk incisors, happy that on just her second day here, helped by a coach, she had swum the 25-metre pool end-to-end. To her mother, Yvette Mutangampundu, that smile shone in her heart brighter than the morning sun on the pool waters. "Mummy I'm hungry," she said, as her mother wrapped her in a green tie-and-die cloth and pulled out two veg samosas in a plastic tiffin and green metallic bottle of passion fruit juice. Nabitaka avoided the poolside chairs, sat on the tiles and munched the samosas at her pace. With her deformed fingers, she tore the snacks on the tiffin cover, no single pea escaped, in one turn and in the other,



Rodney Ainomugisha.

FUTURE STARS > THE BEST OF THE PARA PACK

Precious Nankunda (10)

School: Sir Apollo Kaggwa-Nakasero
Best stroke: free style, breast stroke
Hobbies: swimming, reading
Honours: relays bronze at Midland Schools Championship
Dreams: being national champion



Rodney Ainomugisha (9)

School: Trinity Primary School
Hobbies: cycling, reading, watching movies, making friends
Best stroke: free style
Dreams: winning scholarship via swimming, being a marine diver abroad.



Veronica Nabitaka (7)

School: ABC Primary School, Gayaza Road
Hobbies: swimming, reading
Best stroke: I don't know
Dreams: swimming for my school

