

ONSEEPKANS:

WHEN KOEKSISTERS AND OFFAL POTJIE MEET SOCCER



GAME ON Participating teams in action

In a world saturated with despondent dysfunction, the sight of 11 players working as one to create gravity-defying displays of athleticism is inspirational.

Against the backdrop of majestic rock formations, ancient quiver tree forests and the mighty Orange River, 10 teams and their fanatical fans demonstrated that, through football, ordinary people achieve extraordinary things. And that, in so doing, they become larger than life.

Locals say that the name of their village, Onseepkans, is a combination of three Nama words - 'tconsiep' (elbow projecting into the river), 'nias' (rocky surface) and 'tcaans' (thorn trees) - and that it refers to a river bend where people and livestock have gathered since time immemorial.

These days, the area falls within the Khâi-Ma Local Municipality and is connected to the outside world by a border post into Namibia and a disintegrating 50km gravel road to Pofadder.

Onseepkans councillor Johnny Bock says: "This place is my home, my blood and my soul, but I am not blind to our problems. Drug and alcohol abuse. Unemployment. Domestic violence. There are some jobs on farms and at Vedanta zinc [mine], but we are told mining will end within one generation. Whatever problems we see now are going to get worse if we don't find ways to create new opportunities."

His colleague, councillor James Mowers from the Khâi-Ma community of Pella, is equally anxious to see improvement: "There is no time to waste. Dreams alone won't do it. And change requires involvement from the whole community, not just a few activists. We need to create a second economy with alternative employment and business. The problem is getting people to believe in themselves and their role in building change."

That's where football comes in.

THE POWER OF FOOTBALL

The people of Khâi-Ma are football fanatics. If anything can create transformative energy and faith in the future, it's football. Working through the Broad-Based Livelihoods programme (implemented by development organisations SocioTech and Umsizi, funded by Vedanta Zinc International as part of their social and labour plan), Khâi-Ma soccer fans decided to host a soccer tournament for the district at what is optimistically called the Onseepkans Stadium.

Economic stimulation was built into the plan with space set aside for traders.

Bock, who is a former police officer, says: "A child in sport is a child out of court. Soccer builds discipline and confidence that starts on the pitch but spreads into other areas. Whether it's mathematics homework done or a small business started, when we know strategy and commitment, things will change."

STADIUM MYSTERY RESOLVED

The choice of venue was initially complicated. The Onseepkans Stadium has come to symbolise community disappointment in and distrust of government services.

Built at vast expense in 2016 by the national department of sport, rumours of corruption abound.

By 2019, the rough sand and gravel pitch had eroded into hazardous ruts and corrugations. There was no shade or seating for spectators and no litter bins. Tap fittings at the stadium had been removed - locals said municipal workers came and took them - so no liquid could be drawn. The single toilet was as one might expect, given the lack of water. Gates were locked and the keys were kept at the municipal manager's office in Pofadder. No one knew who the stadium "belonged to", but they felt sure it wasn't them...

Creating a sense of ownership of the community resource was gradual but, by November, the stadium gate keys had been reclaimed, water had been reconnected and a three-team round-robin tournament was held. Bands of local children (who are always looking for something to do) formed themselves into a rubbish clearing crew.

Local football coach Xenobia Isaacs observes: "Those games were what made us feel like the stadium was ours. People came. The soccer was exciting. Old people. Young people. We came together and, after that, there was no stopping us."

PAYING HOMAGE TO A LOCAL STAR

A roaring trade in koeksisters and roosterbrood saw local business boom.

Inspired, Onseepkans youth groups approached the councillor with a plan to upgrade the stadium themselves and host a larger, two-day, 10-team tournament. The councillor said: "If you do, I do."

And they did. The event was renamed in memory of Bennut (sometimes spelt Bennuth) Jaar, a local hero football star who was killed in a car crash in 2017.

Some people believe football is a matter of life and death ...

it is much, much more

important than that' is

the often-quoted

opinion of legendary

Liverpool FC manager

Bill Shankly. Recent

events at the Bennut

Jaar memorial soccer

tournament in the

Northern Cape settlement of

Onseepkans prove his point,

writes **Anna Trapido.**

Katlego Moruthane took

the pictures



VIEW FROM THE BACK A goalkeeper awaits his chance to defend his team

Jaar is the pride and joy of Onseepkans. He was captain of local club Young Heroes FC and had been selected to attend trials with the national Under-23 team.

As Bock says: "Bennut was everything we want our youth to be, both on and off the pitch. My dream is to have his positive spirit live on through sport."

Long before the first goal was scored, Jaar's unifying spirit was evident as crowds of locals moved heaven and, literally, earth to fill in erosion holes on the pitch.

Xenobia Isaacs says: "It's our stadium in our community. We are honouring our hero with our actions. No one can do that for us."

MORE THAN JUST THE GAME

Each participating team painted their insignia on the stadium wall. As did the constables from the local police station. The word 'Onseepkans' was spelt out in stones.

Shade cloth was procured to create a makeshift VIP section - which was just as well because the councillor had invited VIPs.

Balls in the back of the net were not the only goals for the weekend. Two Cape Town-based investors and a Gauteng film crew were cajoled into coming for the football and staying on to see what else the area has to offer.

It's too early to spill many beans, but suffice it to say that progress was made and follow-up meetings have been arranged regarding economic activities associated with clearing and processing the invader plant, mesquite.

Of course, none of the above would mean anything if the soccer was not sensational. Playing what amounts to beach soccer has created almost superhuman levels of fitness, strength and determination. Bounce dies and players sink into sand, so, one-touch, sharp, springy ball mastery is essential.

The stadium perimeter was packed with stalls selling syrup-laden koeksisters, fire-baked roosterbrood, offal potjie and !xhom (pulled lamb). Between matches, !kxapara (AKA Rieldans) dancers, led by Nama local leader Franciskus de Koker, entertained the crowd. Dressed in a frilly apron and frontier-style bonnet, Angelica "Blommie" Afrikaner explained the style as "dans laat die stof so staan" (dancing to stir up the dust).



THE CONTESTANTS Teams take to the field at the Bennut Jaar Memorial Soccer Tournament



CHAMPIONS The Wings players celebrate their triumph in the Bennut Jaar memorial football tournament



STAMP OF APPROVAL The Wings FC emblem



INSIGNIA The Young Heroes FC emblem

ON-FIELD EXTRAVAGANZA

Speaking of stirring up dust, tornado-like swirls of sand were thrown up in a thrilling final between Wings and Young Totals. The latter took an early lead with a ball-bending goal from Andrew Kordom. His team-mate Heraldo Coetzee evaded the opposition with consummate ease to smash in a second soon afterwards. The Wings' comeback began with striker Godfrey Josop's sensational goal from the halfway line. Sithole Isaacs blasted through numerous defenders to even the scores. Neither side was able to find the winning goal in extra time and Wings won 5-3 on penalties. Celebration was loud and long.

The next day, the community came to clean up. Some of the younger members of the cleaning crew were distracted by memories of the final match - specifically Kordom's superb swivel-hipped strike, which every child present endlessly attempted to recreate.

Watching them practise and practise and practise evoked Bill Shankly's other famous observation that: "A lot of soccer success is in the mind. You must believe you are the best and then make sure that you are." Onseepkans, young and old, increasingly agrees.



DOCTOR AND PATIENT Banyana star Thembu Kgatlana and Safa chief medical officer Thulani Ngwenya

Injured star Kgatlana might not play for a year

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Banyana Banyana player Thembu Kgatlana has revealed that the injury she suffered in the middle of the Women's Africa Cup of Nations (Wafcon) in Morocco last month has ruled her out of action for a year.

The 26-year-old striker suffered a ruptured Achilles tendon during Banyana's final group match against Botswana on July 10.

However, she and Safa chief medical officer Thulani Ngwenya say there is no need to panic, as Banyana's poster player could recover just in time for next year's Fifa Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

Banyana have qualified for the July 20 to August 20 global showcase by reaching the Wafcon semifinals, together with Morocco, Zambia and Nigeria.

"As far as I know, the doctors said I'll be out for a year. Still, I'm happy that [I'll be back on the field] just before the World Cup, so everyone can relax," said Kgatlana on the sidelines of a media conference on Friday at Safa House to confirm Banyana's R400 000 bonus payments for winning the Wafcon.

"With the doctors who're working with me, I'm looking forward to a good recovery and coming back [into action]," she added.

"Thembu's injury was a complete rupture of the Achilles tendon, but we acted promptly in getting her from Morocco to Cape Town so that one of the best surgeons could operate on her," explains Ngwenya.

"In terms of the book, she's expected to be out of action for about nine months or so, but we're working around the clock to give her the best chance of recovering before the World Cup.

"She was operated on within two days of her arrival and she's healing well, according to the report I got from the second session after the operation.

"She's going for another follow-up consultation with the surgeon at the end of this month and we're hoping to get positive feedback. We've been in communication with the medical teams at both the clubs where she was playing and where she's supposed to go."

Kgatlana is due to join her new club in the US National Women's Soccer League, Racing Louisville, after leaving Atlético de Madrid Femenino in Spain recently.

Ngwenya says the star could start rehabilitation therapy now.

"We're going to work with the team who'll be doing Thembu's rehabilitation - the physiotherapists and biokineticists - to ensure we get her to where she's supposed to be," she says, adding that Safa has been paying her medical bills.

"Everything's been taken care of and Dr Ngwenya's been going up and down, sometimes calling at midnight to make sure everything's sorted," says Kgatlana, who scored in South Africa's 3-1 win over Burundi in the second group match and started in all of Banyana's three pool matches at the Wafcon until she was stretched off in the 69th minute against Botswana.

"Obviously, it wasn't nice watching my team-mates playing while I was supporting from outside, but I'm glad that, even though I wasn't part of their plans because of my injury, they were committed to winning.

"I know they said they did it for me, but they also did it for themselves and the country. It was great seeing them bring the trophy home," she says.

By coincidence, Kgatlana and another poster player of the tournament, Asisat Oshoala of Nigeria, were injured almost at the same time and both were subsequently ruled out of the tournament.

Oshoala, who plays for FC Barcelona Femenine in Spain, sustained a moderate tear in her knee muscle during the 2-1 defeat to Banyana.

On Friday, the 27-year-old became the first African woman player to receive a Ballon d'Or nomination.

She was crowned Africa's best footballer player for a record fifth time at the CAF awards ceremony that was held on the sidelines of the Wafcon last month.