

Analysis

How schools are changing tactics of age-cheating in schoooos games

Schedule. The 2026 schools calendar opens with the Elite Games at Janan SS Bombo from February 26 to March 1. Ball Games I will follow at Seroma Christian HS, Mukono, from April 29 to May 9, before the National Boys' Football Finals in Lira.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

In 2015, Kigezi High School stunned Buikwe Giants Rishah Standard 4-2 on penalties during the Copa Coca-Cola Schools Cup in Hoima. Their goalkeeper, Gerald Ssentayi, was the hero denying Isaac Ogwang in the shootout and pulling off a string of saves that left the crowd in awe. But Kigezi did not advance. Ssentayi was ruled ineligible.

Investigations later revealed that the goalkeeper was allegedly Tom Ikara, a former student of Jinja SS, who had impersonated another player to feature for Kigezi. Before a disciplinary panel, and even in the presence of his former teachers, he denied being Ikara. The incident became one of the most infamous examples of age and identity fraud in Ugandan schools' football. More than a decade later, as another schools sports season kicks off, the vice remains, but its face is changing.

Crude tricks

Age cheating involves deliberately misrepresenting a player's true age using falsified birth certificates, national IDs, passports or school documents. In football, it usually means older players competing in junior categories to gain a physical advantage.

In Uganda, the problem thrived for years in an environment where birth registration was inconsistent, especially in

rural areas and documentation checks were weak. Talented players could remain in secondary school for unusually long periods. Some repeated classes strategically to remain eligible for competitions. Tournaments such as Copa Coca-Cola and Airtel Rising Stars were frequently dogged by accusations of "mercenaries" where older players are drafted in to deliver trophies. Over time, the schemes grew more sophisticated. Fake National Identification Numbers (NINs), altered UNEB records, and learners re-sitting Primary Leaving Examinations under new identities became part of the playbook. Winning brought prestige, sponsorships, and in some cases scholarship opportunities, incentives that pushed some schools to bend the rules.

Now, the Uganda Secondary

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"Cheating seems to be part of human nature and worse in age-category football. Many schools want to win at all costs and do everything in their means to field ineligible players," Mugisha said. He recalls a school that presented players claimed to be around 14 years old, yet by physical appearance seemed over 20.

"We have now separated minors from U20 competitions. One cannot play U20 until they are at least 16. Minors now need parental consent. And if you are a minor but physical appearance makes you older, we shall not allow you to play," he said. Fighting age fraud is not without danger. A TikTok content creator, Champ Kaddo, who gained attention for exposing suspected overage players ahead of this year's championships, was reportedly arrested, highlighting the risks whistleblowers face.

Kennedy Mutenyo, a former member of the National Organising Committee of the Copa Coca-Cola Schools tournament, believes impartial enforcement is critical.

Schools Sports Association (USSA) says it has had enough.

Beginning February 2026, students under 16 will be barred from competing in senior competitions. The reforms align with the National Sports Act and are backed by the Ministry of Education and Sports.

New age categories; U15, U17 and U20, have been formalised. Registration now requires official birth certificates, NINs and Learner Identification Numbers (LIN). An online athlete registration system, introduced in 2025, cross-checks details and tracks player histories.

USSA president Justus Mugisha has repeatedly vowed to rid competitions of overage players.

"This beautiful Act has relieved us because our schools have been getting people who are over age and cheat their ages to 13 while they are having beads. This year those people are technically out of our competitions, and they will have to wait until they are 16," Mugisha said.

USSA chief executive officer Christopher Mugisha believes technology is tilting the balance.

"The introduction of an online registration system for all student athletes will curb the problem," Mugisha said.

Under Section 69 of the National Sports Act 2023, falsifying age or identity in sports is a criminal offence punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment or a substantial fine.

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Sanctions bite

The association has begun wielding the stick. Last year, St Andrews Kagame Gombe High School and Royal Giants High School were banned for two years from USSA football tournaments.

Tororo Town College will not participate in U20 football tournaments for two years, while Madinah Islamic was barred from U16 football competitions for the same period. Musana Vocational High School received a two-year suspension from U20 volleyball.

The offences ranged from age cheating and fielding ineligible players to document forgery and misconduct.

For USSA, the message is clear: trophies won through fraud will not stand.

The broader context

Age fraud is not uniquely Ugandan. Across Africa, inconsistent birth registration systems and socioeconomic pressures have made youth competitions vulnerable.

The pursuit of scholarships, professional contracts, and national prestige fuels the temptation.

In football, the issue has historically overshadowed youth development pathways. The Federation of Uganda Football Associations (Fufa) previously experimented with MRI scans for youth leagues — an expensive but necessary verification method borrowed from Fifa competitions.

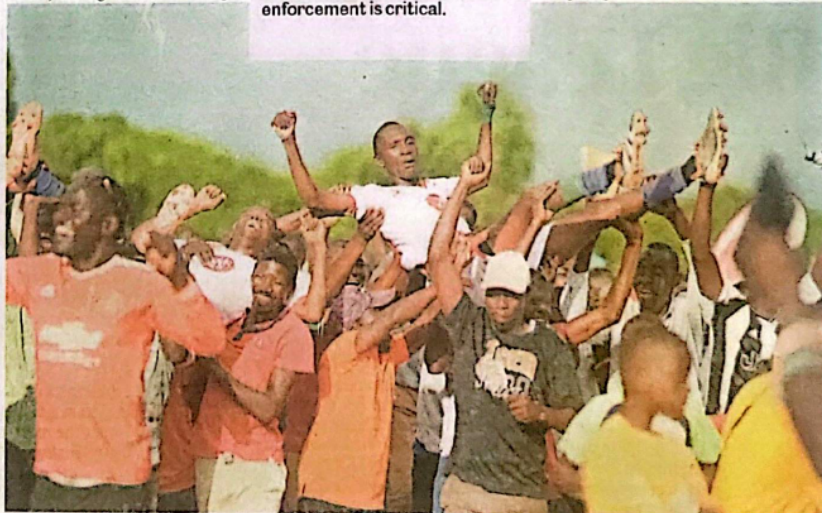
Other disciplines have taken notice. Uganda Athletics Federation officials have described age fraud as a threat comparable to doping, one that undermines fair play and blocks genuine talent from progressing.

Beyond regulations and bans, age cheating carries deeper consequences.

Younger athletes face physical risk competing against more mature opponents. Genuine talents lose opportunities; national call-ups, scholarships, podium finishes to impostors. Frustration and loss of confidence follow.

"Many young players cannot compete adequately because older players block their progress," youth coach Nirod Kintu noted.

For those involved in fraud, careers can collapse overnight. Titles are stripped, results nullified, reputations stained. Coaches and parents risk sanctions. Under the new law, they also risk prison.



Blood and sweat. Fans lift a player (above) after winning the schools title. PHOTOS/GEORGE KATONGOLE

