



Ahmed Dawlaty, an international technical expert, tips budding table tennis players in Nakasero Primary School where he held a two-week training clinic for holidaymakers recently. PHOTOS BY ALEX ESAGALA

TURNING TABLES THROUGH TENNIS FOR NAGURU DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

Few individuals are willing to devote time and effort to give back to the community but not for 27-year-old Amina Lukaaya. The tennis seed is reaching out to youngsters in her old Naguru suburb and the results are visible.

BY ABUL-NASSER SSEMUGABU
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Under the watchful eye of Coach Edward Koboyi, Kennedy Wambi, 13, takes on Hassan Aladin, 12, in a table tennis duel inside a small classroom at Nobles Junior School in Naguru.

The two young players are confident and with an admirable spinning speed. Midway, Wambi takes a kill shot that beats Aladin.

The walls are plastered with reading charts and a wooden blackboard, characteristic of classrooms in infant schools.

A loose lemon green string cuts across this small classroom. Other strings tied on it are sagging. I later learn that before any player takes to the table, he/she has to first practise playing with the balls tied on those sagging strings.

Coach Koboyi shares some words of encouragement after engaging, among others, Abdul-Malik Munyaneza, 11, on the table. Munyaneza is sporting blue shorts with white stripes and a yellow t-shirt labelled 'Right To Play' but here, you dress as you wish provided you are decent. This Primary Six pupil has not yet

mastered the backhand, serve or return of serve but his firm grip of the racket is promising.

Wambi, according to Koboyi, is Seed One at this table tennis club. He learns quickly and does not allow losing. Abubaker Babu is Seed Two, closely followed by Aladin and Arafat Kasozi. Seed is the ranking system in a tennis event. There are 32 seeds which are filled up by the 32 best players of that gender participating in an event.

Koboyi says, "We started this project in December but they are doing really well; they are highly motivated and always expect new things. They have got the talent, there's a future."

How it all started

The project was initiated by Amina Lukaaya as a way of giving back to the community.

"I grew up in Naguru and I see many disadvantaged children, here. Some don't go beyond Primary Seven. I think they deserve better. It will go beyond talent search and development. We also emphasise discipline, character, capacity building and creating opportunities—opening up the world for them."

Lukaaya, the 2015 Uspa female

table tennis player, attended Naguru Infant School.

She learnt the game in Senior Two at Nabisunsu Girls School. Her talent was recognised by Girls Education Movement Uganda (GEM-U) which topped up her tuition throughout secondary school.

In April 2015, she approached the administration of Nobles Junior School for permission to help nurture

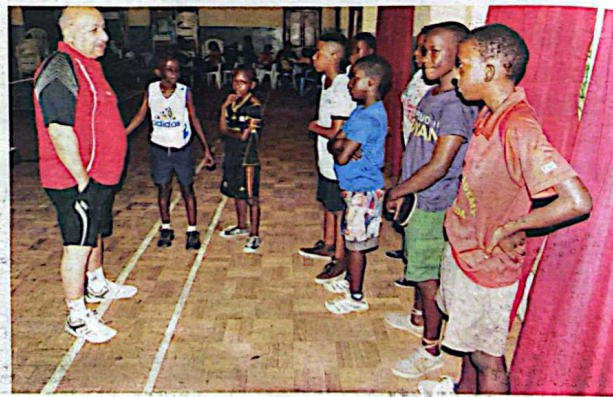
the children's talent early enough. But the breakthrough came in this long third-term holiday.

The first coach she got was too busy to give the children adequate attention. Lukaaya then hired the services of Koboyi, a student at Ndejje University, who shares Lukaaya's vision for the project.

"We began training, in the first week of December for three hours

daily (9am to midday)," Lukaaya shares, meanwhile shouting instructions to the few children in the room. "And considering the limited resources, there's a tremendous improvement, because all of them were first-timers."

Occasionally, Lukaaya takes the children to watch tournaments at Kololo SS to witness and feel what it is like playing. Their excitement is



encouraging, but she won't rush these budding players into big competitions because "they can be humiliated and demoralised by superior opponents."

Instead, "In about a year and a half, I want those in Primary Five to get bursaries from different schools. I believe they will have got the talent and the necessary skills to ably compete."

It's not all about table tennis. They train daily, but every Wednesday, after training they have time to talk life outside sports. In fact, before training begins, Lukaaya marks their homework.

"We now know their academic performance...we train them to have a goal in life and have the confidence to approach the world better. After just a week of interaction, one can switch dreams from aspiring to be a driver to being a doctor."

"For example, there's a girl who wants to be a nurse yet her best subject is English and her worst is Science. So we advise them accordingly."

The Impact Rebecca Mubiru, the director Nobles Junior School, lauds the programme for "instilling order and punctuality among the kids."

"They know they have to be here at a particular time, which has helped divert them from loitering during holidays," she says.

There are those who do not go to school. But here, all are welcome.

"They come in, fall in love with the game and request to join. We tell each to return on a particular day and time—to test their interest and punctuality," Lukaaya explains. Interestingly, they tick all the boxes.

"And that's what I considered initially, I'm not turning away anybody because they don't go to school. They might have the talent and who knows such opportunities could change their fortunes."

But aren't parents concerned about mixing their "good children" with dropouts?

"Not really. They are co-operative and understanding parents; we sought their permission formally, through letters stamped by the school administration. They know

that during this time, their children are here and in safe hands... we try to make it as legit as possible," Lukaaya explains.

Mubiru adds: "We allowed dropouts to give them a better chance of living; when they start dreaming that 'one day I will be a world champion,' they get hope and drop the other vices."

Equipment By the time we were there, a few children were present. While some had gone to the villages, others had gone to rehearse for religious study competitions.

But the numbers will soar when they return from holidays. Whenever necessity meets passion, invention is the likely offspring.

Two pieces of rubber, each at \$50 (about Shs172,000) and a blade worth \$100 (Shs344,000) make one racket. Due to resource limitations, children resort to improvised equipment such as nets and rackets cut out of plastic jerry cans. They just cannot wait.

"Imagine 20 children on one table, yet we want each to get adequate training time with the coach. We need more tables, balls, and rackets among others," Lukaaya hopes for partners in this project.

Potential Ahmed Dawlaty, an international technical expert, who recently conducted a two-week training clinic for several holidaymakers at Nakasero Primary School, acknowledged their potential, citing the lack of training time as their only obstacle.

"They are all good and very passionate kids; their biggest challenge is the education system."

ABOUT AMINA LUKAAYA

Lukaaya, 27, has won several trophies in East Africa and was named Uganda Sports Press Association (Uspa) female player of the year in 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2015. She has represented Uganda thrice at the Commonwealth Games, Melbourne 2006, Delhi 2010 and Glasgow 2014. She has been to the All-Africa Games twice, (Maputo 2011 and Brazzaville 2015). She blames Uganda's average performance on the

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Amina Lukaaya poses with some of the trainees at Noble Junior School.

Right: Some of trainees who benefitted from the training clinic.



international stage on lack of exposure.

With a burning urge to emulate her mentor Maria Musoke, a three-time Olympian, Lukaaya has been hoping for the African Olympics Qualifiers going on in Khartoum, Sudan but due to administrative bickering, Ugandan players have missed out on this prestigious tournament.

Lukaaya graduated with a Bachelor of economics and statistics at Kyambogo University.

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Ramon informs Margaret that he has failed to make contact with Rose in the Federal District. Sergio advises Jose Ignacio to seduce Eva and Jose Ignacio accepts the advice and calls Rose to a meeting at his office. There is a big scandal in Venus' office. Meanwhile, Jose Ignacio begs Barbara not to end their relationship.

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