PARENTS FUEL UGANDA'S SWIM SUCCESS

By Hope Ampurire

PHOTO BY SILVANO KIBUUKA



Hashima Batamuriza (left) has played a pivotal role in shaping Husinah Kukundakwe's success

THE SPORT LIGHT

In Uganda, we often treat sports success like a miracle something that just happens when a talented kid meets a bit of luck.

But if you spend a morning at a poolside in Kampala before the sun is even up, you will see that the real success of Ugandan swimming is not built on luck.

It is built on the grit of parents who have decided to become the primary sponsors, logistics managers, and emotional anchors of a sport that the national budget often forgets.

While the headlines usually belong to the swimmers, Brandon Ssemanda, the Chairman of Dolphins Swim Club, argues that the pool is merely where the work is displayed.

"The foundation is laid at home," Ssemanda shared with Vision Sport.

Ssemanda lives this reality every day as a father to elite competitors Manuel Kitibwa, a standout in the 13-14 age category, and Crystal Tendo, a powerful force in the 11-12 girls' category.

For them, and hundreds of others, the path to the podium is paved by a parental commitment that goes far beyond cheering from the stands.

Ssemanda notes that in an individual sport like swimming, the parent is the entire support system.

"It starts with the wee hours hustle, the 5:00am wake-up calls and the daily commute that ensures a child never misses a session,".

He further added, "Then there is the financial venturing from club and gala fees to the specialised equipment and the heavy cost of international travel, the bank of mum and dad is often the only reason many of these athletes stay afloat,". However, the role of a swim parent in Uganda is evolving into something more professional.

Ssemanda insists on a clear boundary where coaches coach and parents parent.

At the Dolphins, they have established a governance structure where parents run the board and manage accountability, but give the technical team the autonomy to drive performance.

This professional distance is what allows athletes like Kitibwa and Tendo to flourish without the suffocating pressure of sideline coaching.

Ssemanda is even pushing the envelope by introducing cash rewards for breaking records.

"Footballers and basketball players are rewarded with cash, so we are not doing anything new," Ssemanda says, noting he expects other clubs to copy with pride.

Monetary rewards were introduced last year in September for the swimmers that were able to break records at the Dolphins Fast and Furious two day championship at Kampala Parents School Pool.

The dream, of course, is the Olympics. While Uganda has sent swimmers to the world stage, the road is steeper for those training locally.

Ssemanda points to the 25-meter gap as the ultimate roadblock.

"Ugandan talent develops in short-course 25m pools but must compete internationally in 50m Olympic pools which we do not have," Ssemanda stressed.

As the Dolphins prepare to host over 800 young athletes at the Junior Championship this April 18th-19th at Kampala Parents School, the message remains clear.

Success is anchored in the discipline of families. If the infrastructure finally catches up to the parent's commitment, the vision of a consistent Olympic finalist from a local pool will finally become a reality.