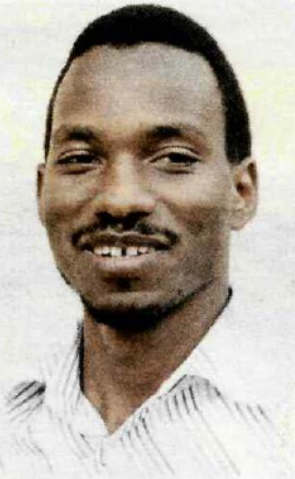
PRESIDA'S SUDDEN DEATH MIRRORS OUR SICK SOCIETY



I SAY SO

CHARLES MUTEBI

Moses Kityo's passing the other week drew a flood of sad emotions across the local basketball fraternity. Kityo, or 'Presida,' as the veteran referee was affectionately known, might have stopped refereeing league games years ago, but he was still cherished, thanks to his unique brand of game management. Presida understood the psychology of players more than anything.

When player emotions were high, he was low, rarely making a tense situation worse. When all was calm, he was then capable of the most surprising, most dramatic moments, where, making a simple call, say, the ball going out of bounds, he would blow the whistle with so much gusto and animation, you could not but laugh.

It was, in one sense, strange behaviour, and yet, in another, so engaging. So uniquely Presida.

Which is why it was shocking to hear that he was all by himself when he passed away. Alone and, according to several reports, generally a loner. It didn't seem to add up. And yet it is not entirely new.

Stories of retired sports personalities (players or officials) languishing in obscurity are all too common now. You hear of a former star struggling with addiction or mental illness. Alone.

And because of their reputation or fame, sports personalities often choose to hide their disorders, only making their plight worse.

One of the biggest gaps in Ugandan sport, and really Ugandan society at large, is in the area of mental wellness. There is an unhelpful stigma attached to mental disorders in Uganda arising from all manner of misconceptions and false ideas on the subject.

And yet the irony is that studies point to as many as one in four Ugandans having some kind of mental illness. It is a pandemic, and the stigma only makes it worse. Our social fabric continues to be strained by the pressures of modernization.

Life continues to move away from the old safeguards of family and community to a kind of Western individualism fueled by the quest for independence and career optimization.

Apartments, not villages, are rising. And so are depression, stress, crime. This is not by any means an exhaustive synopsis of our societal ills—far from it. But we can all agree that we are ailing, and, for the most part, the malady is just getting worse.

What can Ugandan sport do? Maybe not much. But what little it can do needs to be done well.

And at the moment, there is not enough emphasis on the importance of mental wellness and fostering communities that can help former players and officials cope with life after sport.

In their greatest hour of need, ex-athletes and officials should not be abandoned.