Cranes face goalkeeping test as Pamoja Afcon approaches

Coming soon. With Afcon 2027, officially branded the Pamoja Afcon, scheduled for June–July 2027, and co-hosted by Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, the stakes are higher than ever. Co-hosting means the Cranes will play crucial matches on home soil, raising expectations from fans.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

After a disappointing Afcon 2025, where the Uganda Cranes failed to keep a single clean sheet, it is clear that one major issue demands urgent attention, goalkeeping.

Uganda conceded at least one goal in all three group games: a 3-1 loss to Tunisia, a 1-1 draw with Tanzania, and a chaotic 3-1 defeat to Nigeria, during which all three goalkeepers saw action in just 11 minutes.

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This historic tournament marks the first time three countries jointly host the finals, demanding a more dependable squad.



CONTENDERS

Player: Nafian Alionzi
Age: 29
Club: Defence Force (Ethiopia)
Caps: 8

Player Ismail Watenga
Age 29
Club Golden Arrows (S. Africa)
Caps 19

Player Jamal Salim Magoola
Age 30
Club Richards Bay (S. Africa)
Caps 12

Player Mutwalibi Mugolofa
Age 24
Club KCCA (Uganda)
Caps 3

Player Charles Lukwago
Age 31
Club Bul (Uganda)
Caps 15

Legend. Goalkeeper Denis Onyango's decision to come out of retirement received a measure in Morocco.

Stiff competition. Mugolofa (top) is one of the many options alongside Alionzi (L) Magoola (C) and Watenga. PHOTOS/JOHN BATANUDDE



The Onyango factor

The return of Denis Onyango, the legendary Mamelodi Sundowns goalkeeper, was a headline moment for the Cranes.

The 40-year-old has more than 80 caps for Uganda and captained the national team for years.

Onyango's career is decorated: he won the Caf African Goalkeeper of the Year award in 2016, helped Mamelodi Sundowns lift the Caf Champions League in 2016 and has been a cornerstone of the national team for over a decade.

His shot-stopping, leadership and composure under pressure have made him a national icon.

83 ONYANGO CAPS

But Onyango's role is now conflicted. At Afcon 2025, he struggled with an early ankle twist and was eventually replaced at halftime in the Nigeria game, a match that deteriorated rapidly afterward. While his leadership and mentoring are valuable, relying on Onyango as the undisputed No. 1 through to 2027 when he'll be 42 may be unrealistic.

The Nigeria game was a stark illustration of the issue. Onyango started but picked up an injury; his replacement, Jamal Salim Magoola, lasted only 11 minutes before a red card for handling the ball outside the area; and then Nafian Alionzi was thrown on with minimal time to settle. The Cranes conceded three goals in that spell as Nigeria ran out 3-1 winners.

That match wasn't an isolated incident, Cranes' goalkeeping unit had been under pressure throughout the tournament, with defensive lapses and late goals conceded exposing a fragile system.

In the months leading up to AFCON 2027, Uganda will benefit from Fifa international windows (March, June, September, October and November 2026) to arrange friendlies and simulate competitive conditions.

While Uganda automatically qualifies as a co-host, these fixtures will be crucial for testing tactics, solidifying the starting goalkeeper and preparing the squad for home-tournament pressure.

Who can wear the gloves in 2027?

Nafian Alionzi

Alionzi, 29, has been capped several times for the Cranes and currently plays for Defence Force in the Ethiopian Premier League. He offers a solid physical presence and has shown resilience under pressure in qualifiers and friendlies. While his exposure at major tournaments is still limited, a consistent run of competitive matches could help him mature into Uganda's long-term first-choice goalkeeper. With proper preparation and match experience, Alionzi is well-positioned to become the Cranes' main custodian leading into Afcon 2027.

Ismail Watenga

Watenga, 29, has nearly 20 caps for Uganda and has played extensively in South Africa's Premier Soccer League with Golden Arrows. Watenga is known for his experience and composure under pressure. However, his international career has been inconsistent.

Following a poor showing in a 2025 Afcon qualifier against South Africa in a disappointing 2-1 defeat, Watenga was sidelined from subsequent national team call-ups. This setback, combined with strong competition for the number one spot, has prevented him from fully establishing himself as Uganda's starting goalkeeper.

Jamal Salim Magoola

Magoola, 30, plays for Richards Bay in South Africa and has been part of multiple Uganda squads. Known for his shot-stopping ability, he has occasionally shown brilliance, but his temperament has been a major issue. To challenge for the number one spot, Magoola must demonstrate both discipline and consistent form, but his experience makes him a valuable option in the squad mix.

Mutwalibi Mugolofa

At just 24, Mutwalibi Mugolofa has impressed domestically with KCCA. Mugolofa has excellent reflexes and command of his area, making him a promising option for the future. While his international experience is limited, regular exposure in friendlies and qualifiers could help him develop into a reliable choice for Afcon 2027.

Charles Lukwago

Lukwago offers both league and international experience, providing reliable depth and competition. While he is unlikely to be a long-term starter, his presence brings leadership and mentorship for younger keepers, ensuring stability and experience within the squad.



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