

Long road to professional longevity for Ugandan stars

players often struggle to communicate with coaches and teammates.



Godfrey Drabe
Careers



When Majid Musisi first stepped onto the grass in France, he carried the hopes of a nation that believed its gates to the world were finally swinging open. Thirty years later, those gates feel more like a revolving door.

Despite the undeniable magic in their boots, many Ugandan players find that the leap from the Namboole turf to the elite leagues of Europe is less about physical distance and more about a mental and tactical chasm.

It is time to look beyond the 90 minutes on the pitch and understand why our brightest stars often flicker out just

as they reach the horizon. For decades, Ugandan football has been a factory of "raw diamonds" players with immense natural talent and flair. However, very few of these diamonds ever get polished enough to shine in Europe's elite leagues or maintain long-term professional careers.

While West and North African nations consistently export players to the Premier League or La Liga, many Ugandan stars often return home prematurely or plateau in lower-tier leagues.

The journey of a Ugandan footballer has followed a predictable, tragic arc: domestic dominance, a high-profile transfer abroad, and a quiet return to the Uganda Premier League within twenty-four months.

While West African nations have turned football exports into a science, Uganda remains stuck in an era of 'raw talent' without tactical refinement. As the 2026 season kicks off, a new 4-tier academy system is finally attempting to bridge this gap, asking a difficult question: Can Uganda stop just producing players and start building pro-



Gold. Denis Onyango has won 12 Premier Soccer League (PSL) titles in South Africa, making him the most decorated player in the league's history. PHOTO/COURTESY

professionals?" The reasons for this struggle are a mix of systemic failures, psychological barriers, and economic pressures. Many Ugandan players grow up playing "street football." While this builds incredible technical skill and improvisation, it lacks the tactical discipline required in Europe.

By the time a Ugandan player joins a professional academy at 18, they are often competing against Europeans who have been in structured tactical systems since age 6. For many, football is a survival tool. Once a player gets a deal that allows them to build a house or buy a car, the hunger to reach the "next level" (like the Champions League) often fades. Life in professional leagues especially in Europe or North Africa is a culture shock. Diet and Etiquette: Adjusting to strict professional diets and the rigid time management of European clubs is a common hurdle.

Players often struggle to communicate with coaches and teammates, leading to isolation and poor on-field coordination. Ugandan players are also often undervalued and poorly marketed

compared to West Africans. Some players fall victim to "middlemen" who prioritize quick commissions over a player's long-term career path, often landing them in obscure leagues (like second-tier Vietnam or Lebanon) where growth is limited.

These players broke the mold through extreme discipline and physical resilience. Musisi (RIP) remains the only Ugandan to truly break into Europe's "Big Five" leagues, playing for Stade Rennes in France and becoming a legend in Turkey with Bursaspor.

Arguably Uganda's most successful export, Ibrahim Sekagya captained Red Bull Salzburg in Austria and played in the MLS for New York Red Bulls, proving that Ugandan defenders can compete at the highest level.

While Denis Onyango didn't go to Europe, he conquered Africa. Winning the Caf Champions League with Mamelodi Sundowns and being ranked the best goalkeeper in Africa (2016) makes him a gold standard for professional longevity. Many players dominated the local scene but struggled to adapt once they crossed borders.

For Uganda to produce more "Sekagyas," the focus must shift from discovering talent to nurturing it.

The writer is the former head of communication, Onduparaka