



*•Stella Nyamekye lifts the WAFU U-20 trophy amid celebration by her Black Princesses teammates after last Saturday's win over Nigeria. Inset: Afi Amenyeku proudly shows off her award as the tournament's best goalkeeper*

## Goalkeeping heroics secure Princesses WAFU Cup glory

From Kwadwo Baffoe Donkor, KUMASI

**T**HE Black Princesses goalkeeper, Afi Amenyeku, emerged as the heroine of the day as she saved three penalty kicks during a nail-biting shootout to help Ghana beat Nigeria 3-1 to win the maiden WAFU Zone B Under-20 Girls' Cup at the Baba Yara Stadium in Kumasi last Saturday. The match ended in a 1-1 draw

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## Voice of

## Graphic SPORTS

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## Bfoakwa Tano's return and the importance of traditional clubs

**BOFOAKWA** Tano's stunning triumph in the Access Bank Division One League (Zone One) playoffs last week, defeating Techiman Eleven Wonders, has sent shockwaves through Ghanaian football. Their victory not only secured their place in the upcoming betPawa Premier League but also held significant meaning for the players, officials, and supporters of the club.

The impact of Bfoakwa's victory reached far beyond the confines of the Accra Sports Stadium. The 16-year hiatus from topflight football had left a void that was keenly felt by football enthusiasts and natives of the former Brong Ahafo Region, which is now split into the Bono,

Ahafo, and Bono East regions. Even Bfoakwa's fiercest rivals, Brong Ahafo United, joined in the celebrations, highlighting the deep-rooted passion for the sport in the region. The streets of Sunyani were filled with jubilant revellers, rejoicing in their team's triumph.

The historical significance of Bfoakwa's return to the high table of Ghana football cannot be overlooked. For decades, the region, with Sunyani at its heart, has been a powerhouse of Ghanaian football. It has produced some of the country's finest players and served as a breeding ground for talent across various divisions and age groups. Bfoakwa and B.A. United, in particular, were fierce competitors, boasting two of the all-time greatest strikers, Kwasi Owusu and Dan Owusu. Their intense regional rivalry created an old-fashioned charm and showcased the immense influence of football in the area.

There is a prevailing belief that the waning interest in the topflight league and the dwindling attendance at some centres can be attributed, in part, to the decline of traditional clubs that once commanded a massive following. And despite the presence of regional rivals such as two-time league champions, Aduana Stars, Bechem United, Nsoatreman FC and Berekum Chelsea, the resurgence of Bfoakwa is expected to reignite enthusiasm for the sport, intensify regional rivalries, and have positive socio-economic effects on Sunyani and its environs.

And yet for a territory which blessed Ghana with two

of its all-time greatest strikers, there is no fitting football infrastructure befitting its immense contribution to Ghana football.

What Bfoakwa calls home ground currently will not pass the Ghana Football Association's Club Licensing Regulations test and approval process as a venue to host Premier League matches next season unless major structural changes are done to the facility ahead of the commencement of the 2023/24 season. How sad it would be for Bfoakwa to be denied the use of the Coronation Stadium for its league matches, which would also deprive Sunyani from dining at the high table of Ghana football. Additionally, the return of Kpando Heart of Lions, led by their president, Dr Randy Abbey, after an eight-year absence, brings some regional balance and representation by the Volta Region in the upper echelons of Ghanaian football.

The Graphic Sports strongly believes that the revival of traditional clubs like Bfoakwa Tano and Heart of Lions not only adds flavour and historical significance to Ghana football but also has the potential to rejuvenate interest and captivate fans across the nation.

As the new season approaches, anticipation builds, and football enthusiasts eagerly await the thrilling clashes and resurging rivalries that will unfold at the various league centres.

## Youssouf Fofana: From pizza delivery to football's big stage

Continued from last week

**HIS** form for Monaco, as well as his telepathic understanding with his former clubmate Aurélien Tchouaméni, convinced Deschamps to take him to Qatar and he was not there to make up the numbers.

He featured in six of France's seven matches, only sitting out the quarter-final against England, which he described as "the hardest match to prepare for" in the tournament. "We were less calm than in other matches," he says. "England were the finalists in the previous Euros. We saw ourselves in them and felt like we were playing against ourselves. They had lots of quality across the pitch and particularly in attack."

France made it past England and, with Fofana back in the heart of midfield, they beat Morocco 2-0 to reach the final. The game against Argentina started badly for the reigning champions, who were 2-0 down before they started playing. "Maybe we lacked a bit of experience," says Fofana, who was introduced into the game during extra time. "In the whole 120 minutes, we only messed up the first 15, which cost us dearly. If we played the first 15 like we did the rest of the match, we could have won."

Despite defeat in Doha, France have flourished in recent years. They have reached three of the last four major finals as well as being copied by other international sides, notably England. However, it is a different story at club level. French sides have underwhelmed in European competition this season, with no Ligue 1 side reaching the semi-finals of any of the three competitions. Nice went the furthest, reaching the quarter-finals of the Europa Conference League before being knocked out by Basel.

Bernardo Silva, a former Monaco player, said recently that Ligue 1 is "more difficult, more physical" than the Premier League, yet he is preparing to play in a Champions League final while Ligue 1's fifth place in the Uefa coefficient came under considerable threat from the Eredivisie this season. "The French league has a DNA as a physical, intense league," says Fofana. "On the other hand, there are the European competitions where perhaps we need to manage games more to win. France lacks experience given that not many clubs have access to it every year."

Despite recognising the challenges facing Ligue 1 teams, Fofana is positive about the future. "We lack experience at this level and, with experience, I think we can do big things in Europe. Little by little, we're getting our

bearings and why not next season or in two or seasons, we'll do what Italy did this season," he says.

Ligue 1 will have four clubs in the Champions League from next season, but the chances of Fofana still being at Monaco by then are slim. The French top flight — the self-

promoted

"League of Talents" — is transitory, especially for young players. "The league is evolving well," says Fofana. "The arrival of big-name players creates a good blend of star players with experience and young players who want to give everything." That combination has made France one of the best, if not the best, exporter of talent in Europe.

Monaco have become masters of the art of selling. "We are a big club in France and in Europe. It's a bit of a springboard. Lots of clubs grab players off us," says Fofana. "Tchouaméni joined Real Madrid for €100m last summer, Benoit Badisthille moved to Chelsea for €37m in the January window, and more departures are expected this year, with Fofana a target for Chelsea according to reports on both sides of the Channel. After

what he calls the "most complete season" of his career so far, he seems open to a move. "If it is the right opportunity or moment to see something else, I can't say. I don't know but at Monaco we are doing things the right way at the moment."

The story of the pizza boy turned World Cup finalist is a testament to his own determination and France's elite training system; very few prospects fall through the cracks and many go on to fill Premier League squads. Having stepped from

springboard to springboard, Fofana may be the next Ligue 1 product to take the plunge in England.



• Youssouf Fofana