



## CONIFA – Matabeleland Trip Report

*Sascha Düerkop, General Secretary*

### Victoria Falls

After spending a night at Victoria Falls in the very north of Matabeleland, I was waiting for Busani Sibindi, president of the Matabeleland Football Confederacy (MFC), to take me to the region's capital, Bulawayo. While waiting, I came across a legendary local youth academy coach, who has helped a number of local players make their way to the Zimbabwe Premier League. He instantly called the current Zimbabwe U21 player Trust Maseko to meet me. That very coach, interestingly, knew my host Busani and was full of praise for him and his visions to build a Matabeleland national team.

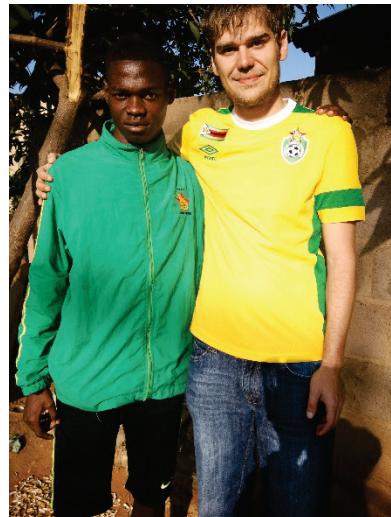
Shortly after that meeting, Busani and his two MFC colleagues, Bukhosi Mabhena and Busani Khanye, arrived and drove me to Bulawayo. During the six-hour drive through nation of the Ndebele People, the Victoria Falls-based academy coach called multiple times, just to hear if I am fine and if Busani picked me up as promised. The long drive gave me the chance to see a huge part of Matabeleland with my own eyes, including the many small traditional rural villages along the way, which usually consisted of around 10 roundhouses.

Arriving in Bulawayo shortly before sundown, we just freshened up and headed for a technical meeting with all the coaches of the Royal Cup, the first ever tournament the MFC organized, which was scheduled for the next day. A total of 7 teams enrolled for cup tournament, with most, but not all, teams coming from Bulawayo city itself. We closed the evening by having a braai, the Southern African equivalent of a barbecue, and discussing the current state of the MFC and future areas for collaboration.

### Bulawayo, Day 1

On the next morning we started early to do some last pre-arrangements for the Royal Cup, which was scheduled to begin at 8am at two pitches on the outskirts of the city. All teams showed up in time, including the team from the small rural village of Kalane, close to the Hwange National Park. This very team had to start the journey at 4 am with a total of 20 players and additional staff riding on a small 9-seater way through the night – which just perfectly describes how very serious and important this tournament was for all parties involved!

The tournament was played in 2 groups, one group having 4 teams, the other 3 teams, before the top 2 teams of each group proceeded to semi-finals and ultimately the finals. In the end, the Bulawayo-based club Burning Stars FC won the



final against Mthwakazi United, while HRM King Lobhengula FC won the bronze medal matches. Besides the glory that came with the top-3 placement in the first ever Matabeleland Regional Cup tournament, all three teams won a brand new kit for their teams!

Finally, CONIFA recognised the huge passion and dedication of the rural Kalane team and awarded them a special price for the “Most Dedicated team” – in form of a 100\$ credit in a local sport shop to buy well-needed equipment and develop further.

## Bulawayo, Day 2

My second day in Bulawayo city exposed me to the passion and love for football of the Matabelelanders and gave me a better understanding, why they are feeling left behind by the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA). The reason for both learnings was the visit of another football match: Highlanders FC vs. Dynamos FC.

My hosts went with me to the match which is locally known as “The Battle of Zimbabwe” and surely does not fall short to the big football matches in the world – The Merseyside Derby, El Clasico and the like – in terms of atmosphere and tension. During the 90 minutes of this match, the whole story of Matabeleland is told on the stands and pitch impressively, every single time the teams meet in the Premier League of ZIFA or the Zimbabwean Cup tournament. Both clubs are the oldest and most traditional clubs in the country and many studies show that the country divides into Dynamos fans and Highlanders fans across the ethnic division of the country: The Shona People overwhelmingly support the Dynamos and the Ndebele People of Matabeleland support the Highlanders, nicknamed “Bossos”.



This, again, leads to two very regular phenomena:

1. The officiating is traditionally very tendentious, favoring Dynamos FC, as nearly all referees are Shona and the whole football association is dominated by Shona, even though roughly half of the Premier League clubs are from the Ndebele-populated Matabeleland, which is also proven by the few to none Ndebele players that ever made it to the national team starting eleven, despite being top players of the local league and lifting trophies regularly.
2. The Highlander supporters repeatedly react with aggression to the ongoing and systematic degradation of their team by the referees. Such aggressions can range from missile throwing to pitch invasions and mostly are directed at the authorities of the state (police) and ZIFA (referees), rather than the fellow Dynamos supporters.

Today was no exception! The Highlanders dominated a very intense and high-level match from kick-off and took the lead after 23 minutes, following a corner. Shortly before the half-time whistle, in the 40<sup>th</sup> minute, Dynamos created danger in the Highlanders box for the first time in the match. They could get the ball through to their striker, who was clearly standing offside. The linesman observed that right and lifted his flag accordingly. However, the striker netted the goal and subsequently the linesman took down the flag quickly again and the goal stood. This being at least the 10<sup>th</sup> ridiculous referee decision against the Highlanders over the last few years, the crowd was looking for self-justice and

threw missiles at the linesman. After about 1h of repeated and ineffective attempts to calm down the masses and ongoing pitch invasions and missile throwing, the match was finally abandoned. Following the news after the match, the result looks likely to be the same as usual in this endless story of tense clashes: The linesman will most likely be banned by ZIFA and the Highlanders will be punished hard for their uprising supporters.

While this report might sound very tendentious itself, I would like to refer to a few more neutral sources here:

- The Harare based newspaper Harare24 mentions the ongoing injustice towards the Highlanders:<http://www.harare24.com/index-id-sports-zk-60091.html>
- Lyton Ncube researched on the ethnic tension behind the “Battle of Zimbabwe” and wrote his PhD on the topic: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21681392.2014.951153>