

Men of The Match

From DUSTY VILLAGE FIELDS to remote tropical beaches, boys all over Africa play football. All dream of becoming the sport's next superstar. Meet five of the few who made it big.

text Eva de Vries

Victor Wanyama

Nickname

The Lion of Muthurwa

Born

25 June 1991, Kenya

Teams

Kenyan National Team
& Tottenham Hotspur, Britain

Position

Defensive midfielder

Career highlights

First Kenyan ever to play in the Barclays Premier League

Fun fact

He loves spaghetti

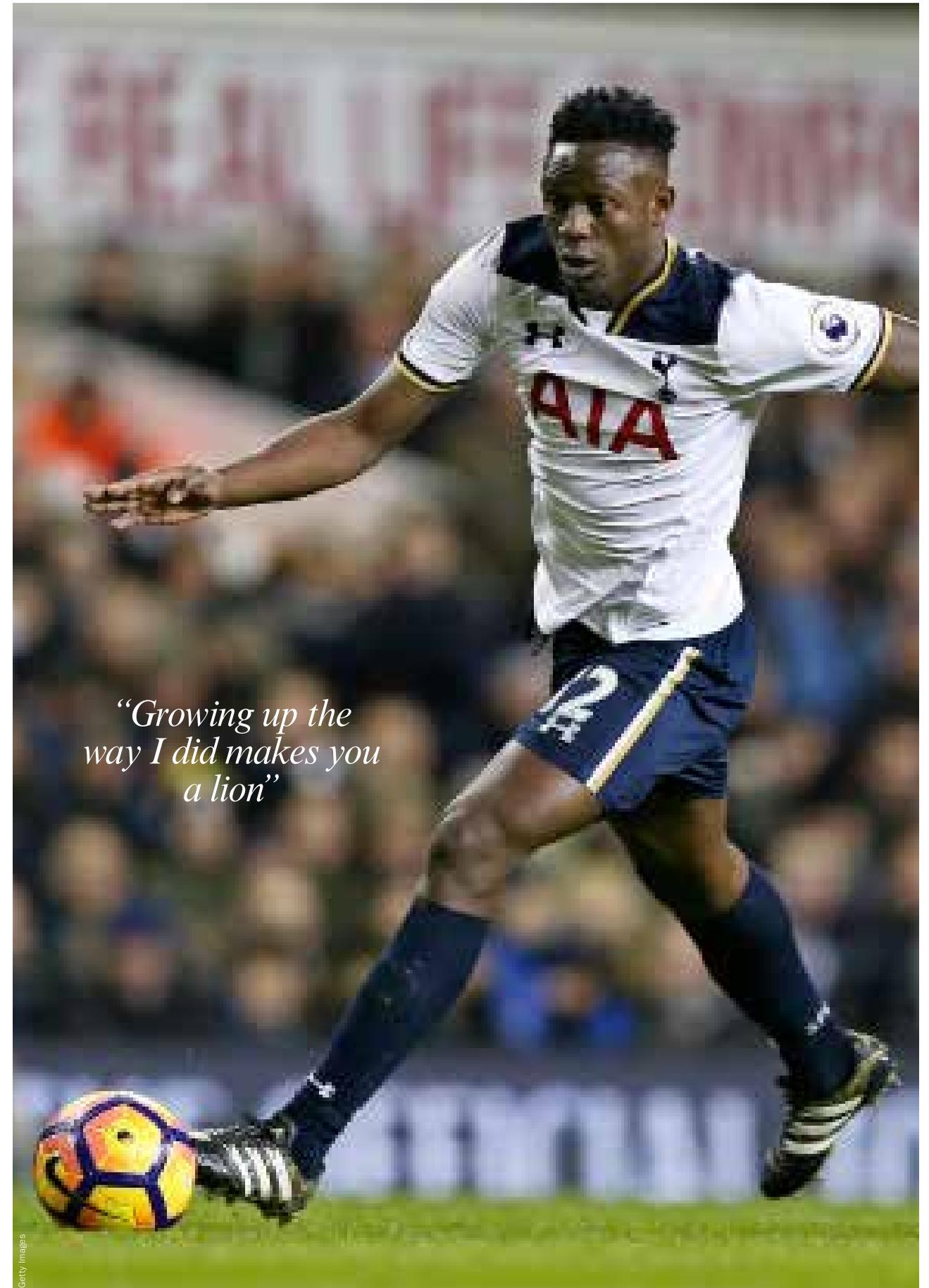
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VICTOR WANYAMA grew up in Muthurwa, a district in the eastern part of Nairobi, and became the first Kenyan to play in the Barclays Premier League. He loved football, but it wasn't easy to find a game. "I walked 10 kilometres to play with my friends," he says. "We played barefoot, so when we hit our toes, blood went everywhere. But we just kept on playing." Wanyama became entirely dedicated to the game. When he was 10, he won a pair of boots at a tournament. "After all those years playing without shoes, I really had to get used to it," Wanyama admits.

Five days later, he was called to join the Kenyan National Team. And less than one year later, in 2007, he arrived in Europe. He was only 15 years old. His first stop was Helsingborg, Sweden, but he also played in Belgium and Scotland. "Despite my immense culture shock, I felt so lucky to be there. It was an invaluable experience," he later recalled. In 2013, he started playing for Southampton in Britain. Last June, Wanyama was transferred to Tottenham Hotspur, where his incredible performance has only been improving.

His style? "I like to steal the ball, I like to tackle, but if I get the chance I'll go in for a goal too," he says. He hunts the ball like a lion chasing his prey, and that's part of what earned him his nickname, the Lion of Muthurwa. "Well, growing up the way I did makes you a lion," he adds. Wanyama has defied the odds and become a European football legend. "They say it doesn't matter where you come from, only where you are going to," he says in a short documentary about his life. "But if you come from Africa, this isn't true."



"Growing up the way I did makes you a lion"

Eric Bailly

Born

12 April 1994, Côte D'Ivoire

Teams

Côte D'Ivoire National Team
& Manchester United, Britain

Position

Centre-back

Career highlights

Winning the Africa Cup of Nations
with Ivory Coast in 2015

Fun fact

He is the first Africa Cup of Nations
winner to play for Manchester United

Follow him

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“I didn’t have to think twice when the Red Devils called me”

THE IVORIAN FOOTBALLER Eric Bailly was a 17-year-old teenager when he was spotted by the Spanish team Espanyol during a youth tournament in Burkina Faso. From kicking the ball with his friends in the streets of Abidjan, he was suddenly on his way to becoming an international football star.

“The way I grew up made me work hard to be the best,” Bailly says. However, his friend and former teammate Joan Jordán believes that his incredible talent definitely helped. “People freaked out when they saw him play. He was physically a beast.”

Bailly made his debut for the Côte D'Ivoire National Team in 2015 and helped them win that year's Africa Cup of Nations. In the meantime, his international career was quickly picking up speed. After Espanyol, he spent two years at Villarreal, before joining Manchester United in June 2016 on a four-year contract.

“I didn't have to think twice when the Red Devils called me,”

Bailly says with a big smile. “I'm really happy to be here at the biggest club in the world. A dream came true for me.”

The tall, fast central defender, who is particularly good in one-on-one situations, is known to be a good reader of the game. “I hope to progress as a player,” he says. “Hopefully that involves winning trophies as well.” Coach José Mourinho says that Bailly has the potential to be one of the best players in the world. “We look forward to working with him and helping nurture that raw talent.”

To honour his excellent work, Bailly was awarded Manchester United Player of the Month in August 2016. “I would like to thank all my teammates for the help they gave me. Thanks to them, I am standing here today,” a happy Bailly responded. “With all the efforts we make, I think we might even be able to win the Premier League,” he added confidently.

Sadio Mané

Nickname

Ronaldinho

Born

10 April 1992, Senegal

Teams

Senegal National Team
& Liverpool, United Kingdom

Position

Attacking midfielder

Career highlights

Winner Africa's Finest XI 2016

Fun fact

He is the highest-earning
African player in history

Follow him

@SadioMane10 (Twitter)

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“Sometimes things don’t turn out well. But that’s life. Nothing just comes easy”

SINCE SADIO MANÉ was three years old he and his football have been inseparable. It all started in the sandy streets of Sédhiou, a Senegalese town near the Casamance River, where he spent his childhood. “Sometimes I didn't go to school,” he says. “I ran away to play football with my friends instead.” He thought of nothing other than the Premier League, which he watched on television. “I wanted to be there as well one day. It was a big dream for me.” Mané's life changed when he was 15. He convinced his parents to let him travel to Dakar so he could participate in the qualification trial. “At first, they had other things in mind for me. But when they realised that this was what I wanted, they let me go.” Together with his uncle, he made the 500-kilometre journey north to the capital. Just before the trials started, one of the coaches looked down and asked: “Are you going to play in those old, torn-up shoes?” Mané told him they were the best shoes he

had and headed out on the field. “When I started playing, you could see the surprise on his face,” Mané says. The coach picked Mané for his team, tattered shoes and all. After the trials, Mané went straight to the Youth Football Academy and shortly after, was snatched up by the French team Metz and headed for Europe. After outings to Red Bull Salzburg and Southampton, he transferred to Liverpool in 2016 for a fee of GBP£34 million, making him the highest-paid African footballer in history. “The first person I called after I heard the news was my mum,” Mané says. He is very happy with his place on the Liverpool team: “These guys are so incredibly talented. Having excellent players around me really helps me improve. And we all want the same thing.” For Mané, this is only the beginning. “I'm still young and I want to keep improving. Every day is another chance to work hard and become more successful.”

Khama Billiat

Nickname

Khamaldinho

Born

19 August 1990, Zimbabwe

Teams

Zimbabwe National Team
& Mamelodi Sundowns, South Africa

Position

Winger, striker

Career highlights

ABSA premiership winner 2015 / 2016

Fun fact

He always goes for a run before his matches

Follow him

@IamKhamaBilliat (Twitter)



Farouk Miya

Nickname

Muyizi Tasubwa

Born

26 November 1995, Uganda

Teams

Uganda National Team
& Royal Excel Mouscron
on loan from Standard Liege (Belgium)

Position

Midfielder

Career highlights

Participation in the Africa Cup 2017

Fun fact

He never skips his prayers

Follow him

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@faroukmiya17 (Instagram)



*“It is a great honour to win something for the first time.
But I always look forward to winning again”*

LIKE MANY BOYS, Khama Billiat learned to handle a ball on the streets around his childhood home in Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital. His talent didn’t go unnoticed and he was recruited to the Youth Academy when he was 11 years old. Although he was still young, he worried about money and took a job selling clothes on the streets of Harare. A local coach approached him one day. “He said that I was wasting my time,” he says. “He told me to start playing football again.” Billiat followed the coach’s advice and not long afterwards, he was offered a trial at Ajax Cape Town. “I realised that this was what I really wanted.”

A strong attacker, Billiat’s creative style on the field has been compared to that of global football stars like Lionel Messi and Neymar. After his 2010 debut for Ajax Cape Town, he flew to Russia for a trial in 2013 with Lokomotiv Moscow. Later that year, he flew south again and joined the Pretoria-based team

Mamelodi Sundowns with a five-year contract. He soon became part of the team’s much-praised “CBD trio”, as his work with teammates Leonardo Castro and Keagan Dolly soon became known. The combination of the three footballers played a vital role in Mamelodi Sundowns’ win at the ABSA premiership in the 2015 / 2016 season.

Billiat particularly likes his South African coach, Pitso Mosimane, he says. “He tells us that talent is not enough. You need to put in a lot of effort. You need to fight so your talent can shine through.” This mindset helps Billiat stay focused and determined to improve.

“I think I am ready for Europe now,” he says. “I want to compete in a tougher environment to see if I can really make it. Getting there is one thing, but the real challenge is to stay.”

*“Always believe in yourself,
whatever you are doing. Your time is now”*

IN FAROUK MIYA’S early high-school years in Uganda, football became more than an opportunity to spend time with friends on improvised pitches. While at school in Kampala, he participated in many sports tournaments. His performance caught the eye of school coach Edward Golola, who introduced him to the Vipers S.C. national team, where his career would flourish.

Miya made his debut for the national team of Uganda, nicknamed The Cranes, in 2014 and has played for the team ever since. He calls it an honour. “I am playing alongside so many talented players, which means there is still a lot to learn,” he says. “I thank God for the opportunity.”

“The first day I saw him in the school’s football team four years ago, I knew he was a real deal,” a former Cranes coach recalls. “I saw someone that would drive Ugandan football to a new level.” In those years, Miya received his nickname “Muyizi

Tasubwa,” which means “a hunter who cannot miss” in his local language, Luganda.

After a while, though, Uganda started to feel small to Miya and he longed for an adventure abroad. While pursuing his studies at university, he got picked up by the Belgian team Standard Liège. “For a young lad who has given every ounce of his talent for the football cause, the move was the missing piece of the puzzle,” wrote a Ugandan blogger.

Miya is now on loan at Royal Excel Mouscron in West Belgium and trying to make a mark on the competitive European world of football. “I am driven by hard work, persistence and performing as a team,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what sport you play – discipline is the most important.”

We will probably see a lot more from the promising young Ugandan goal machine.