

"You're not in my plans"

Soccer players live an uncertain existence

The South African Football Players' Union (SAFPU) belongs to young people who have little knowledge of the working world and their rights. General secretary **Sipho Ndzuzo** spoke to the *Bulletin* about soccer players' conditions of work and how the union organises them.

Tell us about SAFPU and about yourself

Safpu was formed in 1997. I joined in 1999.

I studied a BA Education at the University of the Transkei in the Eastern Cape and I started playing soccer with the Umtata Bushbucks. I later moved to Durban Manning Rangers which I captained and I immediately took up many issues with management. After a while they told me "not to train with the team" so I took this, in effect, dismissal to court and was reinstated.

Between 2000 and 2002 I played

with the national team, Bafana Bafana. Thereafter I went to Ajax Cape Town, followed by Mamelodi Sundowns and finally moved to Hellenic Football Club. Here I was again told to "stop training with the team". They didn't follow proper procedures though, and I was paid out a lump sum for unfair dismissal after a court case.

At Safpu's May 2005 national congress I was elected general secretary. I retired from playing professionally and now I just play for fun.

Safpu is a democratic union which as a Cosatu affiliate believes in workers' control. We don't have shop stewards though in the way other Cosatu unions do. When we recruit teams we organise through the captain. The captain is like the shop steward. He informs workers of their rights and tells them about the union. There are however problems of victimisation and intimidation by the team manager of captains who are active in the union.

We have a National Executive Committee but unlike other Cosatu unions it often has to sit without the captains as it is so difficult to get them all to attend as they are always playing. So we liaise with them before an NEC and get their mandates on issues. At the annual national congress however all representatives are present and make policy and take part in electing office bearers. We find sponsors to help us organise a congress.

Most people think soccer players are pretty well off, why is a soccer union necessary?

It's hard to believe but about 40% of players only earn R2 000 a month. The rest get about R5 000, and it's only the top 2% that really earn good money.

Besides these low salaries, there are many other problems. Many teams do not give players pay slips and this causes all sorts of problems. They simply ignore the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

Club/Team administration is also badly lacking. Teams deduct tax and UIF from players' salaries but then do not pay the money across. Players then get into trouble with the Receiver of Revenue or find that they cannot claim unemployment benefits. This is very common. It is only the bigger teams like Kaizer Chiefs or Orlando Pirates which have proper administration in place.

Players take leave when the season finishes in June. They get 30 days leave in July to rest and gather their strength. But sometimes if they are called to play in the national team, say in France, they get no rest. The League starts in August and clubs are unsympathetic to their exhaustion. Clubs argue that they have given them leave and if they go off and play for the national team that is the player's choice. It's the nation's responsibility if the national team calls you. It's the nation's problem. But of course it's also the club's



problem because fatigue affects the players' performance.

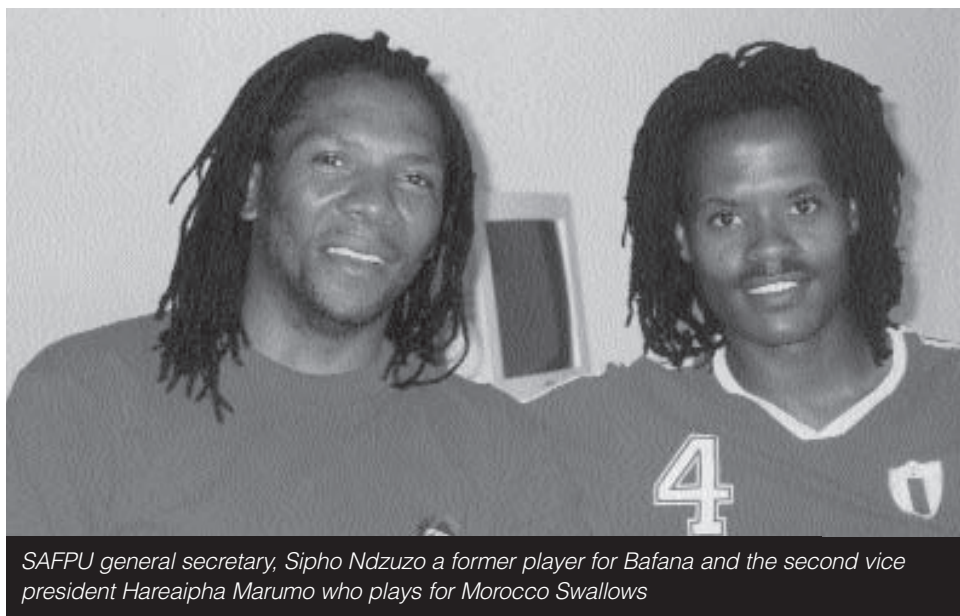
Then there's the question of pensions. No such thing exists. Players only have about 15 years of top work, then they are retired. They need to contribute as soon as they begin to earn.

Health care is good for soccer players. It has to be as good health is part of the job. But medical benefits seldom extend to players' families.

The PSL (Professional Soccer League) pays into a disability and death insurance scheme for players who get injured or have medical problems later in life. When players need this money the team claims on their behalf and the usual practice is for the team to take 50% or more of the money and the player gets the remainder. They behave like they are giving out charity whereas it's all the players' money.

Often, though, injured players don't get any insurance money, especially as they need pay slips to prove the contribution. Mainly they can't prove this. Also where they can prove it, teams frequently don't follow the correct procedures, such as observing time limits on claims. In the end very few players are paid out for injuries.

Unfair dismissal is a huge problem. A player starts with a coach who likes him. Then a new coach comes in who doesn't like the way you are playing and says "you're not in my plans, you're not



SAFPU general secretary, Siphon Ndzuza a former player for Bafana and the second vice president Harealpha Marumo who plays for Morocco Swallows

good enough". Then you are out in the cold. Performance assessment is very individual and you may not get enough time to show you can perform.

The coach also doesn't take into account problems you may have at home, or whatever, that affects your performance. There needs to be more support for players off the field. Especially younger players who do not know how to handle the sudden publicity and pressures. But teams are mainly interested in your performance on the field and don't care how you sustain yourself between games.

How do you organise players into the union?

We have signed a recognition agreement with the PSL and this has permitted us organisational rights. Safpu recruits in the professional and semi-professional (Imvela) Leagues of the PSL. We send a letter to the team manager, then we go and visit the club. We attempt to recruit each member in the team and then arrange stop order deductions.

Sometimes, especially young players are suspicious of the union. They fear victimisation as the forms go back to the manager and club. So some sign and some don't especially as the manager may have

advised them beforehand not to sign. Many do sign though especially as they have seen that the union has taken up and won cases for individual players.

It is really a challenge for Safpu to keep members as players often change teams and we have to follow them up and sign them up again. I would say 80% within these leagues are members. At the moment the union has about 800 members.

The union's only source of funds is members' subscriptions so you can imagine we are very poor. Team owners often don't pay subscriptions over to the union, or pay erratically, even though we are a registered legal union. It's hard to build up a stable union. We do, however, from time to time get donations from the Federation of International Football Professional Organisation (Fifpro) to whom we are affiliated.

Our affiliation to Fifpro allows for international solidarity. Soccer players are well organised in European countries but in Africa unions are weak. There are five other trade unions on the continent but they are very weak. So Fifpro has decided that building a South African union is the best way to go as the league is professionally administered as well as the



associations. It could later provide a model for other African countries.

At the moment we are demanding a R130-million slice from money that the PSL receives for television broadcasting rights. The PSL received R500-million and R800-million from SABC and Supersport respectively. The union believes this money belongs to players and players would like to see it going towards an organisation that represents their interests. So far the PSL's Trevor Phillips has rejected this claim so we think the next step is to take up the matter at the CCMA (Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration).

We are also starting to recruit the staff at clubs and teams who are unorganised. Administration people, cleaners, grounds men and so on.

What strategies do you have for dealing with grievances?

Our first strategy is to form a Bargaining Council where we will negotiate a range of issues. This would include the education of players, the application of the BCOEA around such things as the provision of pay slips, and a minimum wage. At present we are demanding a basic wage of R10 000

a month for professionals in the First Division and R5 000 for semi professionals in the Second Division. This minimum will operate as a benchmark for all wage negotiations.

The union will bargain with the PSL and SAFA (SA Football Players Association) and owners of teams affiliated to the PSL will sit on the Bargaining Council.

We also aim to negotiate a pension fund. We need a flexible fund that takes into account that at times a player may not have a contract and may not be able to contribute. We have been discussing a 'seasonal' pension fund in Cosatu as there are other workers in the same position as us, such as actors and musicians in PAWE (Performing Arts Workers' Equity). We are open to sharing a fund with such workers.

It will not be necessary to have a dispute resolution facility in the Council as the PSL has a dispute resolution chamber. We have won many cases there but teams often do not pay what was awarded to players. In fact they owe over a million rands from 20 cases we have won and we have been forced to take a test case to court to try and enforce these awards. These are often unfair dismissal cases when players are dismissed before their contracts expire.

Another of our strategies is to talk to the Department of Labour to strengthen their inspectorate so that they insist on things like payslips. The league must then make sure that players get copies of their contracts and get regular payslips. Many players don't even know when their contract expires and clubs add changes that players don't even know about.

Educating players is also an important strategy. We want to recruit amateurs and teach them

their rights from the beginning. We want to teach them things like don't sign a blank contract. They will pay lower subs but we will service them properly. We want to develop a union professional contract that players understand and have a system where players automatically become members of the union when they become professionals.

We don't spend time negotiating contracts for the big players as they have their own agents. We are not agents. We want to negotiate benchmarks which players can use in negotiations and advise them before they sign a contract.

What other areas of soccer player's lives are you active in?

HIV/AIDS. We take this very seriously as soccer players with their lifestyle are greatly at risk. We raised R6-million from the Swedish donors SIDA to conduct AIDS education. We are drawing up a policy which will be implemented by players. We are using former, injured players to conduct the education using the slogan "Footballers Unite Against AIDS".

We have a programme of visiting AIDS orphanages. We recently visited an orphanage in the North West. We played a game which included professional players and we donated funds to the orphanage. We go and meet the young people and they are delighted to meet players that they see on TV. The visit is as much to educate our players as it is to raise the spirits of orphans living with AIDS. We have done this at a number of orphanages and are continuing to do so all round the country.

We are also trying to change the behaviour of young soccer players as they are models for young people all over South Africa. LE