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African Talking Point Special: Discovering African Talents In America

In this special edition of African Talking Point, Goal.com's Africa Editor Ibrahim Dabo travels to Ohio, USA. He goes behind the scenes and discovers that many African footballers are uniting, training and preparing for a tournament - African Cup USA in Columbus.



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Watching African players training in Columbus, Ohio reminded me a lot about how it happens in Africa. There were players from different African countries pitting their talents against each other.

Many of the players, good youngsters and some veterans as well, are preparing for the second edition of the African Cup USA or otherwise, African Nations Cup, in Columbus.

During the training session, you could see many of the players wearing jerseys of big-name players like Thierry Henry, and other club and team jerseys like Manchester United and Cameroon.

I spoke to one of the officials of the Sierra Leone team who was filled with excitement as his team prepare to defend the title they won last year.

"The team we have now is Sierra Rangers but in the Cup of USA, we are representing Sierra Leone," said **Abu Kamara**.

"The Cup of USA is a competition that started last year and comprised of eight teams like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Ghana and Senegal.

"We [Sierra Leone] went to the finals and beat Ghana 5-2 so we're going again to defend the Cup. We had players like Junior Parade who just came on vacation and was able to play for us. We really enjoyed the tournament and we won it fairly.

"They want to make the tournament every year and hopefully this will bring some progress within the African community in Columbus."

The captain of the Sierra Leone team, **Alusine Kanu** is hoping he can achieve something from the tournament.

"I love to play soccer as the game is my dream career. I hope to play to another level," says Kanu.

"This year marks the second edition of the tournament and it is taken highly, as we will play at Columbus Crew's stadium," added Kanu.

Goal.com got in touch with an official from the Columbus Crew media department who confirmed that the final of the African Cup USA will be played at the club's stadium.

Another player who played in the Sierra Leone national league said he is just happy to be having fun with football in Columbus.

"I played for a couple of clubs, Old Edwardians and Mighty Blackpool [in Sierra Leone] and between 1994 and 1996, Mighty Blackpool won the Championship two years consecutively," said **Saidu Sesay**, who is commonly called *Tutu*.

Talking about the tournament in Columbus, he said: "It's really fun, so much talent around and I'm having a good time."

He has a message for other aspiring footballers and says: "Youngsters, if you have the talent, keep playing. Don't stop, follow your dreams."

I came across a Malian player who is looking forward to participating in the African Cup of USA again this year. I asked him to introduce himself.

"My name is **Makan Keita**," he said.

He added: ""I played in the Mali national team for 10 years and I was also captain of the team. I played in the African Nations Cup in Tunisia in 1994.

Keita played club football in Africa, Asia and Europe and brings his wealth of experience to Columbus.

"I used to play in Japan for the club called Nagoya, I played in the United Arab Emirates for Al-Shabab and I also played in Greece."

In the US, Keita is involved in the training sessions and is getting ready for the African Cup USA.

"This tournament reminds me about a lot of things. I have fun with them; we hang out and play together. I don't only think about it as a job, I have fun too.

"There are not many Malians so I played with the Sierra Leone team.

Keita is one of the experienced players within the African football fraternity in Ohio and says he normally shares his experience and advice with aspiring players.

"Yes, many of them know me as a[n experienced] player so they talk to me (for advice) and I talk to them also. There are so many youngsters that are very good and have a lot of potential," said Keita.

"If people have the chance to come and see them, they will know that there are some good players here who can even make it in Major League Soccer."

I asked Keita whether he is in touch with some of Mali's other top players and he responded saying he talks to a lot of them on a frequent basis.

"I think I talk to almost all these generation of players because I used to be their star. Like Mahamadou Diarra from Real Madrid, my cousin Seydou Keita [who used to play] in Lens and I have my younger brother who also plays for Lens called Sidi Keita," said Keita.

"I have a lot of Malians, young players who used to admire me [during the peak of my career] and so they call and enjoy talking to me.

"In fact the last time I spoke to [Frederick] Kanoute, he was supposed to come visit me, so I talk to them a lot and I'm still in contact with them."

Asked if he has any future plans to be involved in the development of Mali football, having already retired from the national team, Keita said: "Right now I'm trying to get my coaching license so I will try to focus on that and get the best one after which I will try to go back to Mali and try to coach there for sure."

Haqem Gulam is a winger from Tanzania and is also looking forward to playing in the African Cup of USA. He says the tournament is very meaningful.

"I feel good to be playing in this tournament," says Haqem. "You know, we're far away from home and it means a lot for us to get together as one big family. It doesn't really matter where you're from; we're all Africans so it's a good thing for all of us.

And what has Haqem got planned next?

"Well I'm trying. Soon I'm going to go home, they're trying to put our national

team together so I'm going to try out for that and see if I can make it," said the 27-year-old.

Many African players in Columbus find the Africa Cup USA, which is mostly overseen by Ethiopians, very meaningful and hope it will pave a way for more success in their careers over the coming years.

Veteran players have fun while participating in the competition and share their experiences with aspiring footballers.

The organizers hope the tournament can be staged on an annual basis, and that as many more become aware of it, the bigger it can grow in future.

Ibrahim Dabo

Africa Editor

ibrahim.dabo@goal.com

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