



## Cleopas Jnr Kundiona's rugby journey

### Description

Seeing Cleopas Jnr Kundiona on the field donning the number 3 jersey for Zimbabwe's First XV, the Sables, one would think that he's the quintessential 'born to play rugby' kind of chap. But that could not be further from the truth. Though now playing impressive rugby in the green and white jersey, Cleopas only took to the sport in his first year of high school. Starting out in the C team at Falcon College, a wonderful school tucked neatly in the Esigodini valley of Matebeleland Zimbabwe, he worked his way through the ranks, playing the last 3 of his 6-year high school career in the First XV and captaining the side in 2017.

I had the pleasure of interviewing him over Zoom, as is the norm nowadays. He was away on holiday in Ghana, recovering from matches played in the group stages of the Africa Cup. The winner of that tournament would earn a ticket to the 2023 Rugby World Cup tournament set to be hosted in France. I asked what the chances of winning the competition were and he sounded very confident. In his opinion, the Zimbabwe Rugby Union is on the right track and the team is enthusiastic and dedicated to winning. Credit was given to the Head coach Brendan Dawson and manager Jason Maritz for running what he calls the most professional national set-up he has been involved in since he started training with the national team in 2018. Zimbabwe's participation in the 2023 Rugby World Cup would break the country's 32-year absence from the competition. They last participated in 1991, before the game was officially professionalized.

Professional sports in Zimbabwe has not always been easy. Programs and teams are usually under-resourced with the private sector providing the significant portion of capital and sponsorship. He congratulated the coach and manager for working hard to ensure training infrastructure, food and dietary supplementation and salaries were up to par with professional standards. The proof is clearly evident, considering Zimbabwe Rugby's successful winter test campaign, beating their neighbours Zambia, Tunisia and showing a dominant performance against Burkina Faso, who lost 101-3 to the Sables.



Kundiona in action against Burkina Faso

From Falcon College, where he graduated in 2017 as a school college prefect and boarding house leader, Cleopas went on to ply his trade for the Cell C Sharks in Durban, South Africa. He was contracted for both the junior and the senior teams over a period of two and half years. Rubbing shoulders with good players and notable springboks like S'busiso Nkosi, Ox Nche and Lukanyo Am.

The jump from high school rugby to professional is a significant one. For him, the biggest change has been the INTENSITY of the 'men's game'. Whilst at high school he was able to fend and roll players at will, the professional set-up has been found to be faster, the hits stronger and defenses more challenging. The rush defense, a staple of the South African blueprint means less time on the ball, making it harder to have forward momentum. It calls for you to make more with less. The environment was challenging but he reckons the growth pains are an indication of the progress he is making.

Most mothers, I know mine for sure, cringe in pain when they see bodies smashing and colliding on the rugby pitch. The common perception is, 'well surely they don't have any brains if they can play such a game'. However, do not underestimate the importance of Rugby IQ. The professional game demands more from its players. They have to be observant and tactical problem solvers. He recounted an encounter with Springbok prop Ox Nche who advised him on scrummaging. From a supporter's view, the scrum is an enigma. Half the time we do not know why the scrum has to reset or why the penalty was awarded to one team when clearly both team were involved in its collapse. Ox, he said, told him that you can't watch rugby matches for the sake of watching. You need to analyze the opposition, how the opposite prop scrums, how he binds and how he plays overall. These words he said, have stuck with him to this day.

His two and half year stint at the Sharks was cut short at the end of 2020 when he was released from the franchise. The experience was 'heartbreaking'. He draws positives from it though, talking about the important lessons learned. It's comparable to a diamond forming under pressure: Though loosely talked about in rugby circles, the important lesson concerns the realities of life and the need for a

backup or post-career plan when pursuing the professional code.

A rugby player is not guaranteed a long career. The window to play your best footy is short if all goes in your favour. And very short if any plague should befall you. Considering the game's physical nature and the risk of injury, being let go by your employer without a backup plan can be disastrous. Players can be left questioning and confused and at times stranded. He talked about learning the need for financial freedom. Naming Robert Kiyosaki's 'Rich Dad Poor Dad' and George. S Clason's 'Richest Man in Babylon' as the books that are helping shape his pathway to financial freedom whilst pursuing a professional rugby career, Cleopas has started farming in his home town of Marondera and runs a piggery operation that's showing good levels of growth.

Getting cut was hard. But he pays credit to his faith in God and the comfort of the Bible for helping him sail the waves that come with uncertainty in the profession. Faith plays a significant role in his life. A typical good day for Cleopas starts with prayer and time in the Bible. He spoke insightfully about how this helped him through what he called a difficult mental slump. What made it tough was that he was coming into form, training well and challenging the older tenant of the Sharks outfit. Prop forwards play well into the thirties, it might be one of the toughest positions to breakthrough. Nonetheless he thanks God for guiding him through this period.



I asked him about who had been the most influential people he has had up to this moment. Aside from memorable mentions, anyone that has a good skill is always a source of inspiration. "If I can see that someone can do something I can't. I'm inspired. I go home and start envisioning myself doing the same skill." Special mention was made of his under 16 captain Stuart Doddington, under 16 coach Mr

Heymans and his first team and Sables coach Mr Dawson. Mr Heymans, he recalls believed in him when he didn't believe in himself. He would famously encourage him, telling the junior Cleopas that he would turn him into a scrummaging machine. Mr Heymans would consistently tell him how much potential he had and that he would be good enough to play at test and world cup level. And surprise surprise, those words have come true. Mr Dawson has coached him since the year 2015. Cleopas talks about how he has adapted well to his style of rugby, which he joked was inevitable since he had played under his leadership for so long. But also how passionate and generous Dawson is with his players: Unearthing and refining his players until they shine like pure gold on the field.

" My gift from God is hard work."

*Cleopas Jnr Kundiona*

Cleopas does not leave much to luck or chance. When we talked about how he managed to be involved with First XV rugby for 3 years, he recounted his origin story. In 2014, after a season with the 3rd and 4th XV and during a time when the First Team squad was preparing for a tour to England, he made a bold move and started attending their training sessions with the hopes of learning and becoming a better player for the season ahead. Sure there were quizzical looks from the senior players at the time. I mean here was this uninvited rookie who was clearly punching above his weight class at the time. His consistency to these practices, although he wasn't touring himself, were the backbone to his rugby development and consequently led to his recognition by Mr French who was the coach at the time. He talks about how after a few practices the gap between himself and the touring squad was shortened.

If asked about his work ethic, his dorm mates will tell of stories of blissful early morning sleep disturbed by the ruffling of sports bags as he made his way to the fields or the gym. By 1600 when the squad is training legs on an off day, Cleopas is on his second visit to the gym, having trained his upper body earlier that morning. "For me," he said with conviction, "my gift from God is hard work. I know when I put my mind to something and work hard, something will come out of it." And something did. He played regularly for the First XV in 2015, 2016 and captained a very successful Falcon side that went on to beat their major rivals Peterhouse, Saint Georges and Saint Johns, winning all but two matches in that season.



Cleopas raging against the St Georges Dragons- 2017



Zimbabwe v Burkina Faso – July 2021

Do Something Now. If not you, who? If not here, where? If not now, when?

– Theodore Roosevelt- ‘Cleopas’ favourite quote’

It is no doubt that at Falcon College when the students talk about who the greatest captain was, Cleopas’ name is in the conversation. It’s a topic that usually divides a room, because unlike looking at player statistics as you would with professional players, with high school rugby, you need to have seen it to believe it. I was privileged enough to watch Cleopas as a captain. I captained the Second XV in 2017 and whenever I was unsure about what to say to the team or what to do, I either thought, ‘ what would Cleopi do?’ or I asked him directly. In team huddles, he spoke with a gravity that captured all, even the ‘casual chaps’.

One of many stories that I think deserves mention was during the 2017 pre-season training. The squad had been training for a while and had become a bit causal during one of the practices. Mr Dawson was visibly frustrated because the team was capable of much more at that point. Dropped passes in the first week? Sure. But not after three or four weeks of practice. At the end of practice, before the players walked over to huddle around the coaches, Cleopas pulled the squad together and delivered a mini-speech about setting standards and what it meant to play a final season for the Falcon Maddogs. This was a great display of leadership. There was alignment in values and expectations between the coaches and the captain. He really was a good general. Early in the season, the team’s mantra, which undoubtedly came from him was, “My strength is the pack and the pack is my strength.” The team always came first and those values showed in the way that the team played on Saturdays.

What does the future hold? I asked him. At the moment, he is training and staying fit for national team matches that might be played towards the end of the year. The Zimbabwe Sables have progressed to the quarter-finals of the Africa Cup which will be played in 2022. Their current run of form foretells promising performances ahead. However, in the true Cleopas way of doing things, he has resigned himself to putting his head down and working hard towards achieving the dream that was birthed in

Marondera, cultivated at Falcon College nearly a decade ago and is unfolding before us today

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