



Tirikumhanya na Mwari: Kundiona's French Chapter

Description

Any student of Falcon College schoolmaster and respected historian, Dave Grant, can remember these words being uttered more than once in Room 1, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." How is that possible? Surely change, by virtue of its nature alters the status quo. Well, it took an hour and 45 minutes with Cleopas Kundiona to truly appreciate that brilliant piece of truth. That despite his hulking figure which seems to have doubled since our last interview and a fashionable bucket hat on his head (no doubt a consequence of his time in France), Kundiona remains a God-led, Hardworking, Conscientious, Passionate and Inspirational rugby man.

This past weekend I had the pleasure of interviewing Kundiona as he awaited to board a flight enroute to the motherland for yet another stint in the beloved Green and White Sable's jersey as the team takes part in the African Cup. Between the constant announcements from the airport intercom, an echoey classroom, and loads of laughter, we caught up on celebrating his nomination in his position, tight-head prop, for the team of the season. ?



The Transition: From Falcon College to Professional Rugby?

Rugby Union was professionalised in 1995, meaning players could make a career out of the game and get paid for playing. The allure of playing professional sports is irresistible. It answers two major questions many young adults have: “How do I follow my passion/ what I am passionate about?” and, “How can I make a living whilst following my passion?”

The professional game, as we shared a laugh about the good old days, presents some interesting challenges. The first, he owned, was that he simply cannot bulldoze his way through defence lines any longer. I remember vividly a practice session when I had to hold a ruck shield for Kundiona during a rucking session. I think he misunderstood coach Dawson’s instructions because it wasn’t supposed to be a ball carrying session. Nevertheless, I braced myself and closed my eyes as he made impact with the blue shield, but that didn’t stop him hurtling me several yards backwards.

??

He was simply unstoppable in those days, and it took opposing teams three to four brave defenders to finally bring him down. But this has since changed, professional teams have their own big boys that can match up with other teams. This has pushed Cleopas to add to his game. He has become a ball distributor and adapted his skillset to the running-style of rugby that is currently in vogue. Gone are the days when props held up the scrum and lifted jumpers in the line out – nowadays you won’t be surprised to find a prop slinging a long cut out pass to the wing if the need arises. ?



Is that Furlong or Sexton?

Being a Professional means you’re paid to play!

The other reality of being a professional athlete is that it is your **JOB**. Yes, you may be chasing your passion and that can drive you. But what about the days when you don’t feel motivated – do you simply decide not to come to work? Professional sportspeople should not entertain, but they must do their job and do it well and better yet, they must improve. Scrumming is one of those areas that he

identified as his little project. Whereas Kundiona rarely lost a scrum in high school when the only requirement was raw strength and the power to push the opposition back. That's simply not enough at club level. The tighthead prop position is a specialised position and scrumming as a tighthead requires deft of technique. The ability to scrum Kundiona says, "can be the difference between being selected for a match that weekend." In professional sports it's those who improvise and adapt who will most definitely overcome and avoid the risk of falling behind or becoming redundant in a game that is ever-growing and transforming.

So how does club rugby compare to Falcon? Kundiona reckons it's easier to play for school rather than club and this is because when you play for Falcon, you are playing for something other than yourself. There is an ocean of inspiration to drink from at schoolboy level: From a rich 70-year history, the example of legends like Leroy Sibanda, Stephen Bhasera, Corey van Rensburg and the Falcon Fire Teams of 1992 and 2005 which went unbeaten ? there is immeasurable pride in wearing the silver badge and representing the glorious Blue and White. Furthermore, there is a history of shared hardships and comradeship when playing alongside schoolmates whom you've known for the past six years and so you cherish every moment you get to play in the Maddogs Pit.????????

The professional game is different. As a newcomer to any club, you have a job to do and it is your responsibility to mentally prepare and psyche yourself up before games. However, what I found refreshing to hear was the depth of passion for rugby at club level in France: it quite literally rivals or equals the schoolboy experience in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The fans, especially when their team reaches the knockout stages, arrive in droves. Forming a tunnel for the players that stretches from the bus to the stadium. Flares and drums beating to create the ultimate supporter experience. It is no wonder, he pointed out, that most French teams barely lose when playing at home. The fans transform the green fields and concrete stands into an unconquerable fortress. In paying tribute to the [UNISON Nevers](#) fans, Kundiona happily noted that, "they carried us in our home games this season."

I remember when the Falcon students carried the Maddogs to victory once. The year was 2017. The location: Falcon College. The captain: Kundiona. After what had been a tight 65 minutes, the score was 8 – 10 in favour of Peterhouse Boys High. And with the sun nearly about to set, it seemed quite certain that the Dogs would lose on their home soil. I remember the war cry leaders rallying the school to hold their Budgie (school badge) and sing the school the song. During a sombre but passionate rendition of Sic Itur Ad Astra, the Dogs turned Peterhouse over on the halfway line and began stitching together some phases in the opposition half. Before we could complete the third verse, the crowd erupted into inaudible cheering as Ian Andrew Collette broke through the defensive line and made way toward the tryline. He stepped the fullback and with clear acres in front, went ahead and scored the try with a conversion to follow. The game ended 15 – 10 in Falcon's favour ? I am without a doubt that the supporters played their role in clinching victory.



A message to the Youngins

In circling back to the predicament faced by talented young Zimbabweans who want to make a career playing rugby. Some harsh realities must be accepted. The first is that Zimbabwe's professional rugby structure is at an amateur and semi-professional level at best. Zimbabwe doesn't have a thriving professional rugby structure and most of the players, including Sables, work a 9-5 to pay the bills. The next and nearest alternative is South Africa. This is a perfect environment for dedicating yourself to training and rugby education under the tutelage of the four-time world champions and there is no doubt that their schoolboy and academy structures are the best in the world. But South Africa has its limitations... There are only four major franchises (Sharks, Stormers, Lions, Blue Bulls) with the exception of the Pumas, Griquas and Cheetahs, playing on the global stage. The competition is stiff! And with clubs having to manage quotas and native-born players among other considerations, the South African may be untenable.

Kodwa ungalahli' Itemba mtaka mama (Do not lose hope). Cleopas, evocative of General Sun Tzu when he said, "Do not repeat the tactics which have gained you one victory, but let your methods be regulated by the infinite variety of circumstances," pointed out that France is currently the best place to pursue a rugby career. Boasting seven professional leagues, there is a place for every level of player. Former England lock captain Courtney Lawes currently plays in the D2 Pro league and earns about €40k (Euros) a month. To further prove this point, players in the Federale semi-professional league earn between €2.5k – 3k a month. This means that an average player in the the Federale earns up to €36k. Converting those numbers into the African context, that average player earns nearly R720,000 a year – this places them into the top 10% of earners, a comfortable upper and upper-middle class living.

With that said, he also raised a lesser-known pathway to professional rugby in France, the "[JIFF](#)".? Joueurs Issus des Filières de Formation, which is loosely translated as ?academy-trained players? are players who have spent three seasons in a French Rugby Academy before turning 21. By doing so, they benefit as follows: i) JIFF players are preferred before foreign players. Since clubs can only play a certain number of foreigners in a season, a JIFF qualifying player will not be affected by this rule and iii) You are eligible to play for the French national team. So to any youngsters thinking of going pro, consider France as one of the viable options for transitioning. Recently, [Shingi Manyarara](#) was snatched up by top flight club Racing 92 on a three-year deal straight from high school. ?

Secrets to Success?

default watermark



Behind any successful man is a safety net of supporters ready to catch and attend to him. My personal connection to Kundiona goes beyond rugby; we share a common faith. He has openly declared his faith on hi social media pages with bible verses to accompany the milestones that he has achieved. The interview took a deep turn when he finished off by saying that: ?

“It goes without saying [that the reason for my success thus far is] is Faith in God and how He always makes a way. Keeping Him close has been a huge part in how my life is.” ??

God has blessed him in more ways than one. The Bible clearly states that, “ He who finds a wife finds a good thing/ And obtains favour from God. Cleopas is more than blessed and high favoured. He recently got wedded to his partner who lives as stone throw away on the little island of England. She is a constant source of comfort, companionship and support as he chases his dreams. And I must say I haven't seen him smile this much since we left school.

default watermark





SABLES TEAM LIST



STARTING XV	
1	Victor Mupunga
2	Simba Mandioma
3	Cleopas Kundiona
4	Kudakwashe Nyakufaringwa
5	Simba Siraha
6	Tino Mavesere
7	Brian Nyaude
8	Aiden Burnett (VC)
9	Hilton Mudariki (C)
10	Ian Prior*
11	Takudzwa Musingwini
12	Kudzai Mashawi
13	Brandon Mudzekenyedzi
14	Edward Sigauke*
15	Tapiwa Mafura

RESERVES	
16	Liam Larkan
17	Zvikomborero Chimoto
18	Bornwell Gwinji
19	David Makamba
20	Dylan Utete*
21	Tadiwa Gwashu
22	Keegan Joubert
23	Dion Khumalo

*DEBUT

DATE: 20TH JULY 2024
 TIME: 15:00 HRS (CAT)
 VENUE: MANDELA NATIONAL STADIUM, NAMBOLE, KAMPALA, UGANDA



The Bellwether Team and all of Zimbabwe wish him and the Sables the very best as they fly out to Uganda for the Africa Cup. Success in this tournament could mean a return for Zimbabwe to the coveted Rugby World Cup to be hosted in Australia in 2027.

Category

- 1. Articles
- 2. Sport

Tags

- 1. Rugby

Date Created

July 21, 2024

Author

kuda

default watermark