

Football extra

Rwanda's magic moment

- **John Carlin**
- The Observer
- Sunday July 13 2003

Rwanda's home tie against Uganda had simmered on the edge of extreme violence. As the Rwandan goalkeeper pulled off one implausible save after another the Ugandan players grew wild-eyed with rage, absolutely convinced he was using juju, that he had either applied a magic potion to his gloves or dug protective witchcraft into the grass behind his goal.

The game, an African Nations Cup qualifier in March, ended 0-0. The return leg, played last month, was preceded by great tension. Whoever lost was out of the competition. The whole of Rwanda came to a standstill, everyone with an ear glued to a radio. The Ugandans, playing at home, were hot favourites, but they were leaving nothing to chance.

The traffic that confronted the Rwandan team as they set off by bus from their hotel to the national stadium in Kampala was impenetrable. Ordinarily the ride would have lasted 15 minutes but after one hour the bus had barely moved. It was clear the Rwandans were not going to arrive on time for the scheduled start of the game. What would happen? Would they have to forfeit the match? Was that the end of their African Nations Cup adventure? The players grew frantic. Brigadier General Cesar Kayizari, president of the Rwandan Football Federation, told them to settle down. He would absorb the pressure; he would sort things out.

So Kayizari, a cool customer who got a bullet through the mouth during Rwanda's guerrilla war in the early 1990s, got out of the car and walked two kilometres through the heat and the teeming traffic and the heaving throng of home supporters to the offending junction - a crossroads of traffic so thick there appeared to be no possibility of the cars ever moving again. A couple of traffic cops idly looked on.

Kayizari approached the cops and, pretending - in his dark suit and tie - to be a senior Ugandan police officer, addressed them sternly in English. The traffic cops snapped to attention. One moment they had been bored, incurious, absent. Suddenly they were transformed into demons, gesticulating, screaming, threatening hell and damnation to the poor bereft drivers whose plight was a direct consequence of the cops' own gross indolence.

Miraculously, the traffic began to move. Kayizari strode back to the bus and eventually the Rwandan team bus arrived at the stadium. Two hours late. Well after kick-off time. The Ugandans suggested calling the game off. The Ethiopian referee didn't know what to do. Kayizari, who not only demanded the game be played but that his players be given ample time to stretch their cramped legs, won the day.

As the players stepped on to the pitch the Ugandans cast leery glances at the Rwandan goalkeeper, Mohammud Mossi. Mossi, a flamboyant and fully paid-up member of the gratuitously acrobatic school of goalkeeping, did nothing to allay their misgivings. Holding up his gloved hands to them, he said: 'I've got electric juju today. It's so strong you can't see it.' Within 15 minutes of the start, the game had descended into a bloodbath. Mossi was to blame. A couple of great early saves had provided both the crowd (60,000 crammed into a stadium with an official capacity of 45,000) and the Ugandan players with conclusive evidence that the Rwandan keeper was invoking the aid of supernatural agents. One Ugandan player charged at Mossi and tried to tear off his gloves. Another started digging behind the Rwandan goal line with his hands, frenetically searching for the offending juju. That was it. Mayhem. The mother and father of all punch-ups. Blood-spattered shirts all round. One Ugandan player got off the bench and hit a Rwandan, Jimmy Gatete, over the head with his boot. Blood poured down Gatete's shirt from a gash on his brow. Then the police entered the fray. Not to stop the players from fighting, but to pile into the plucky Rwandans, who forgot where they were, ignored the baying crowd, and were giving as good as they got.

The referee ordered the players off the pitch. It was the Ugandans who were in trouble now. It was they who might have to forfeit the game. Kayizari led the negotiations on the Rwandan side, threatening to head home, making the Ugandans sweat. But half an hour later the game resumed. Within minutes, Gatete, his head heavily bandaged, scored. Suddenly you could hear a pin drop in the stadium. The Rwandan radio commentator informed his compatriots that it seemed as if he was the only person making any noise.

The Rwandans held on for a 1-0 victory. Back home they went bonkers. Never had the country erupted with such joy: certainly not, at any rate, since 1994, when Hutu madmen, incited by their government, massacred 800,000 people in 100 days - a rate of killing that exceeded the industrialised slaughter by the Nazis; as many people were murdered every day before lunch as died in the World Trade Centre. And almost all of them chopped to pieces with machetes.

But now they all danced on the streets. Hutus and Tutsis, genocide killers and genocide survivors. The team arrived back at two in the morning. The president, Paul Kagame, and the first lady, and half the cabinet, and seemingly half the country's eight million people were there to greet them. Then they all drove the mile or so from the airport to the national stadium, which was packed, floodlights on. Kagame, a football fanatic, gave a speech, virtually assuring right there and then that the presidential elections to be held next month - the first since he came to power by force after the genocide - were in the bag.

Any lingering doubts that the Hutu majority would vote for the Tutsi Kagame, and do so with as much gusto as the team's Hutu captain, were removed last Sunday when Rwanda - 119 in the world rankings and much lower in the international economic league - defeated Ghana 1-0 at home, clinching a place in the African Nations Cup finals for the first time.

The team's Serbian coach, Ratimir Dujkovic, has seen a few things in his life but never has he known such pleasure. 'The satisfaction is huge,' said Dujkovic, a big, bearish fellow who used to play for Red Star Belgrade and previously trained the national teams

of Venezuela and Burma. 'For me personally to give such joy to such a poor country is a huge honour.'

Only football could have had such a huge impact on the vastly ambitious national task of reconciliation, of restoring to health the world's most sad and damaged land. Football in Rwanda is joy, it is consolation, it is balm. It is, as Nelson Mandela has said, a force that mobilises the sentiments of a people in a way that nothing else can.