

It is another game of “waiting for a bus”

Twenty years ago, a defining moment in Rwanda’s football history unfolded, one that would forever change the nation’s sporting landscape. For the first time ever, Amavubi, Rwanda’s national football team, qualified for the 2004 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) tournament in Tunisia. It was a monumental achievement that went beyond football.

It marked a historic milestone in Rwanda’s sporting journey, one that would forever change the nation’s view of its place in the world of football. This achievement wasn’t just about football; it reflected the country’s resilience, determination, and belief in the power of sport to unite and inspire.

The journey to that historic qualification was nothing short of remarkable. Amavubi qualified at the top of Group 13 with seven points—securing two wins and a draw. Their journey to Tunisia, however, didn’t start smoothly. The campaign kicked off with two back-to-back defeats: a narrow 1-0 loss to Uganda in Kampala on September 7, 2002, thanks to a goal by Philip Obwiny, followed by a 4-2 defeat to Ghana in Accra on October 13.

Ghana’s goals in the 4-2 victory came from an own goal by Rwanda’s Elias Ntaganda, as well as strikes from Hamza Muhammed, Asampong Taylor, and Derrick Boateng. Rwanda’s two goals were scored by Milly Hassan and Hamad Ndikumana,



With no points and little hope, Amavubi defied the odds on March 29, 2003. In front of a sea of passionate fans at Amahoro Stadium, they fought to a 0-0 draw against Uganda Cranes, securing their first point in the qualifiers, which ignited hope that Amavubi had the heart to push forward.

Less than three months later, on June 7, the one-point lead became four points following a historic and controversial 1-0 victory over the Uganda Cranes in Kampala. This moment—much more than just a game—brought the nation together, igniting a sense of pride and hope. The victory turned Amavubi striker Jimmy Gatete, who scored the winning goal, into an instant hero. Not only did this mean defeating Uganda but it also significantly enhanced their chances of qualification.

The celebration was unforgettable. I still remember the sheer joy that swept across

the nation when Amavubi secured their place in the AFCON 2004. In a country still healing from the scars of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, that achievement was so much more than just a football victory. It was a symbol of hope, unity, and the power of sport to bring people together.

For some of us, seeing the national team qualify for AFCON was a moment of pride, a reminder that Rwanda had not only survived but was thriving—competing at the highest level of African football. It felt like a declaration that we were ready to show the world what we were capable of.

The 2004 AFCON tournament in Tunisia, though ultimately a challenge, showed the world that Rwanda was ready to stand alongside Africa's football giants. The nation's football scene seemed poised for greatness, and the expectations for future success were sky-high. Young players were inspired, fans were united, and the government pledged to invest in the sport, with hopes of replicating that magical moment in years to come.

However, it is fair to say, that moment of triumph also set the bar incredibly high. It ignited an expectation that, over the years until today, would prove difficult to meet. Despite continued efforts and glimpses of promise, Amavubi's return to AFCON has remained elusive. Yet, as we look back on that historic qualification in 2004, it serves as both a reminder of the country's potential and a challenge to the current generation to push beyond the 20-year gap and restore Rwanda's footballing pride on the continental stage.

Since 2004, Amavubi's journey to AFCON has been a tale of struggle, near-misses, and frustrating setbacks. Despite promising starts and moments of brilliance, the national team has found it difficult to break through and secure another AFCON spot, a gap that has now stretched for over 20 years.

Well, one of the major obstacles has been the inconsistency in performance. Following the 2004 qualification, Amavubi struggled to maintain a steady level of performance, often slipping in key matches during qualifying campaigns. The coaching staff, too, underwent frequent changes—21 coaches to date—with different management philosophies and tactical approaches, leading to a lack of continuity and cohesion. Coaches came and went, each with their own vision, but none has managed to sustain a winning formula long enough to replicate the success Ratomir Dujković achieved in 2004.

Another significant challenge has been the lack of consistency, today the team lacks standout players like Jimmy Gatete, late Hamad Ndikumana or Olivier Karekenzi who can inspire the team to greater heights. While there have been talented individuals like Meddie Kagere, and Haruna Niyonzima, the national team has struggled to find a generation of players capable of consistently competing at the highest level.

It is suffice to say, that the Ferwafa player development program has faced its share of challenges, grappling with limited resources and infrastructure that have hampered the nurturing of future stars. The Ferwafa football system, despite its efforts, has struggled at times to produce the depth of talent required to stand toe-to-toe with Africa's powerhouse nations. These hurdles have made the road to AFCON tougher, where each step forward seems met with a new set of obstacles, yet the hope remains that with time and persistence, the future stars of Rwandan football will emerge.

Over the years, there have been several campaigns that saw Amavubi on the brink of qualification, only to fall short at the final hurdle. For instance, in the 2013 qualifiers, Amavubi came agonizingly close, finishing just one point behind the group leaders in a tightly contested group. Strong individual performances from players like Meddie Kagere and Jacques Tuyisenge couldn't mask the overall team inconsistencies.

Similarly, in the 2017 qualifiers, Rwanda once again found themselves in a promising position only to falter in the final stages. Lack of experience and key injuries to influential players in the final rounds of qualification led to another disappointing exit.



Once again, the inability to break through into the AFCON has been the result of a combination of factors. While the team has produced moments of magic—such as their solid 2010 World Cup qualification campaign—the consistency required to succeed in the gruelling AFCON qualifiers has remained elusive.

To understand Amavubi's current journey and ambitions to end their two-decade AFCON absence, it's essential to look at the present players. Amavubi's hopes for an AFCON comeback lie not only in its seasoned players but also in experienced players like Thierry Manzi and Fitina Omborenga. Their experience and leadership

on the field, are essential to steadying the squad. Alongside them, players like Serge Kabanda, Arsène Tuyisenge and Taiba Mbonyumwami who have been gaining attention in the league clubs are injecting new energy.

In addition to current stars, Rwanda's football future can also be shaped by youth development programs that aim to break the cycle of missed qualifications. FERWAFA, along with local academies, should invest in grassroots talent identification. Academies should be at the forefront, scouting young players from across the country and honing their skills.

Equally vital is the unwavering support of Rwandan fans. For 20 years, they've continued to fill stadiums, rallying behind Amavubi with pride and passion. This dedicated fanbase and the growing football ecosystem give players the motivation and resources needed to strive for AFCON qualification, symbolizing hope for the team's resurgence on the continental stage.

As Amavubi eyes future AFCON qualification campaigns, the question remains: can they break the 20-year drought? Let's just hope their next shot at qualification doesn't turn into another game of "waiting for a bus"—where every time you think it's coming, it seems to slip right past!