

Rwandan referee Salma Mukansanga will be the first African woman to officiate a men's FIFA World Cup game, when defending champions France take on Australia in Group D opener, slated for Tuesday, November 22, at Al Janoub Stadium in Al-Wakrah, in Qatar.

Mukansanga, Stephanie Frappart from France and Japan's Yoshimi Yamashita – all women – are among 36 referees selected to oversee matches at the tournament which will be held from November 20 to December 18, 2022.

The Qatar-hosted event will be the first time in 22 editions of the international senior men's football tournament, that women will grace the field in officiating roles.

While this will be the first of possibly, many more to come, in a fast-changing gender-equalized world, Mukansanga will not be experiencing this pioneer life for the first time.

In January 2022, the Rwandan official was the first woman to officiate in the 65-year history of the African Cup of Nations (AFCON), leading an all-female officiating squad that included Fatiha Jermoumi (Morocco), Carine Atemzabong (Cameroon), and Bouchra Karboubi (Morocco) for the game between Zimbabwe and Guinea in Cameroon.

In Rwanda, the young female players of soccer club AS Kigali and their coach Egidie Kayitesi watched the game on television.

"She is someone who gives great importance to each game, that's why you see Salima at this level," said Kayitesi, who was in charge of Mukansanga's team when she was a youth player.

"I have loved refereeing since childhood," Mukansanga said in a FIFA Press Statement. "I was inspired when I used to go to games in my hometown and I would look on the field watching the players but also the referees."

"Seeing them in action was a big inspiration for me. So being a referee is really something I wanted to do, and it has been a motivation and driver within me. I just love it."

The 33-year-old had an early start to the life she says always loved, venturing into refereeing just after secondary school despite her then-desire to play football. She

was 15 at the time.

So far, she lives a double life. One as a football match official, and the other as a nurse.

“I’m not only a FIFA Referee. I’m also Rwandese. I’m also African. I’m representing my country and my confederation,” the official said.

“I’m also representing FIFA. So, I have that responsibility within me, but I know how to deliver that responsibility.

“I have been putting all my effort into refereeing these days,” said Mukansanga who possesses a bachelor’s degree in nursing and obstetrics, “Right now, it’s only professional refereeing, with daily training, matches, analysis of videos and watching the games.

“I’m just preparing for the World Cup tournament as a whole, not particular games. I don’t yet know which games I will be assigned, but for men or women, there is a selection process for the assignment of the games and the process is a bit the same for everyone.

“So, I have to prepare myself physically, mentally and theoretically to be ready.”

Like Merlin whose destiny, the great – and fictional – kingdom Camelot, rested on his shoulders, Mukansanga will bear nearly as similar weight on her shoulders, when she picks up her whistle in Qatar.

“In the beginning, I used to officiate in the local leagues for men and second-division women. It was not professional, just local in our FA. Soon after that, I developed my referee abilities and started refereeing in a national league second division, second division women and then up to the first division men.

“For me, I had a dream and with the help of FIFA, I am achieving this dream. It is a long process and a lot of hard work but when you have big dreams you can realise them.

“Here I am, and I deserve to be here. This is my time, and I have to seize this time to make it shine. I’m really glad to be going to the World Cup because I worked hard for this. And I want young girls to look at me and follow my footstep, because me too, I am now here because I followed the advice of people who have been there.”

After initially being rejected by the Rwandan FA on account of her age, having approached them about joining a referees' course straight out of secondary school, she taught herself the basics of officiating. She also studied the Laws of the Game and was eventually given the opportunity of studying with other new referees.

Having been given her initial formation, she returned to her hometown and began to officiate matches for veterans, then amateur players, and then eventually worked her way up through the local footballing pyramid, starting with third-division men's games.

After reaching the domestic topflight, continental and, subsequently, international responsibilities followed, and Mukansanga is acutely aware of how her passion for refereeing and love of the sport has transformed her life in ways she hadn't expected.