

FOOTBALL BUSINESS AFRICA MAGAZINE



OCTOBER - DEC 2025 | ISSUE 03

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FOCUS

THE COMMERCIAL
AWAKENING OF THE
AFRICA CUP OF
NATIONS, AFRICA'S
PREMIER FOOTBALL
TOURNAMENT

THE GOLDMINE PARADOX

WHY AFRICA
EARNS PENNIES
ON TRANSFERS.

THE DATA REVOLUTION

AFRICA CANNOT
AFFORD TO MISS

MANAGEMENT

HOW AFRICAN
CLUBS CAN SCORE
BIG OFF THE PITCH

PATRICE MOTSEPE,
CAF PRESIDENT



**NEW
DROP!**



AFRICA'S CUP


A SHORT HISTORY OF THE
AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

By André-Michel Essoungou

“You cannot understand modern Africa without understanding its football. This is why this short history is more than a football story”



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the heartbeat of a continent

IN FEBRUARY 1957, as the Saharan winds swept across Khartoum's dusty boulevards, three nations gathered to contest a trophy that would become the most coveted prize in African sport.

What began that sweltering afternoon at the Municipal Stadium, with a mere handful of teams, a controversial disqualification, and dreams as vast as the continent itself, has evolved into something far more profound than its founders could have imagined.

The Africa Cup of Nations is not merely a football tournament. It is a living chronicle of a continent's journey through independence, identity, and the pull of history.

You cannot understand modern Africa without

understanding AFCON. This is not hyperbole; it is political and cultural fact.

Since that inaugural gathering in Sudan, the tournament has served as both mirror and catalyst for the continent's most defining moments.

When Kwame Nkrumah's Black Stars conquered Africa in 1963, they weren't just winning a football match, they were embodying the Pan-African dream in real time, eleven players becoming standard-bearers for a unified continent.

When Zambia's hastily assembled team reached the 1994 final, playing in the shadow of their fallen predecessors who had perished in a plane crash, they transformed grief into the purest expression of national resilience the sporting world has ever witnessed.

When Nelson Mandela, draped in a Bafana Bafana jersey, lifted the trophy with Neil Tovey in 1996, the image transcended sport entirely. It was reconciliation made flesh, a Rainbow Nation's promise crystallized in a single, luminous moment.

The story that unfolds in these pages, alongside the podcast series of the same name, is one of extraordinary complexity. It is a tale where generals and revolutionaries have wielded football as a tool of statecraft, where victories have legitimized regimes and defeats have toppled governments.

It is about the Algerian team that won in 1990 as their nation teetered on the brink of civil war,

When Football Rhymes with Reconciliation



In his lonely cell on Robben Island, **Nelson Mandela** discovered early the redemptive power of sport. For him, football were far more than matches—they were national therapy, the glue for a fractured South Africa. Before his home side hosted and lifted the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations, in an address he spoke to a nation reborn. He was central to South Africa's successful bid to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup—calling it a "perfect gift" to his country. Through sport, Mandela sought not only winners, but a unified people. "Sport has the power to change the world. ... It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers." In his hands, football (and rugby) became instruments of national healing, political statement and collective hope.

Zambia's Tragedy and Triumph



The photograph is almost too painful to contemplate: eighteen coffins draped in Zambian flags, arranged in neat rows at Independence Stadium in Lusaka. The date was May 2, 1993, and Zambia was burying its golden generation. The DHC-5 Buffalo military transport plane carrying the team to a World Cup qualifier in Senegal had crashed into the Atlantic Ocean shortly after refueling in Libreville, Gabon. All thirty souls aboard (players, coaches, crew) were lost. This was the team that had been one of Africa's brightest hope. Kalusha Bwalya, who survived only because he was traveling separately from his European club, would later say: "We didn't just lose players. We lost brothers, sons, dreams that had taken a generation to build."

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Editor

André-Michel Essoungou

Designed and published by

Kobo Sport



A GOOD TIME FOR BUSINESS

Welcome to another edition of Football Business Africa Magazine.

In this edition, our focus is on the Africa Cup of Nations. It takes place in Morocco (December/January). The main story is, of course, be on the pitch. But it must also be about how the tournament became profitable.

The balance sheet doesn't lie. For years, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) was synonymous with financial loss. A continental giant hemorrhaging cash while sitting on an untapped goldmine of talent and passion. Then came a mining magnate with a plan, Patrice Motsepe. From the conference rooms of Kinshasa to the VIP boxes of Rabat, we have the story of how CAF got its house in order, and what it means for the beautiful game's richest frontier.

Beyond this success, we have stories on the potential for even more turnaround in the business of football in Africa. There is one about the ongoing data revolution in football globally, a trend Africa cannot afford to miss. We explain why and in details. We also focus on the gap the continent needs to fill, to benefit better from the transfer of players and on how many academies from Nairobi to Douala, could be inspired by the story of the Accra-based Rights to Dream Academy.

As the Africa Cup of Nations unfolds, along we the festive period, we wish you happy holidays.

We hope you enjoy!

The editor

DATA OR DIE

THE DATA REVOLUTION AFRICAN FOOTBALL CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS

AS EUROPEAN CLUBS INVEST MILLIONS IN PERFORMANCE DATA AND SCOUTING ALGORITHMS, AFRICAN FOOTBALL CANNOT RISKS BEING LEFT BEHIND. THE DATA TRANSFORMATION COULD HELP UNLOCK THE CONTINENT'S MASSIVE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL. FOOTBALL BUSINESS AFRICA MAGAZINE INVESTIGATES WHY CLUBS, LEAGUES, FEDERATIONS AND ACADEMIES MUST EMBRACE ANALYTICS TO COMPETE ON THE WORLD STAGE.

football data is power



JUST AS MOBILE BANKING ALLOWED AFRICA TO SKIP CONVENTIONAL BANKING INFRASTRUCTURE, SMART DATA ADOPTION COULD HELP AFRICAN SPORT COMPETE WITH EUROPEAN GIANTS WITHOUT MATCHING THEIR BUDGETS.

The numbers tell a remarkable story. Over 500 African players currently light up Europe's top eleven leagues, generating billions in transfer fees and salaries. Yet back home, most African clubs and academies still rely on gut instinct, traditional scouting, and outdated training methods while their European counterparts use cutting-edge data analytics to gain every possible advantage.

This data gap isn't just about staying modern—it's about survival in an increasingly competitive global football ecosystem.

"When you don't have a scientific opinion, it becomes very subjective," Kingsley Pungong, CEO of Rainbow Sports Global told Quartz in 2022. Mr. Pungong's company launched the African Football Data Center that year. "And when it's subjective, it becomes a subject to varied interpretations. That's why our football is mainly not appreciated because everybody has a subjective opinion."

Pungong's words highlight a critical problem: African football talent is consistently undervalued because the continent lacks the data infrastructure to prove its worth scientifically. "If you wanna say this guy is good enough for Bayern Munich, you just don't say it as being a subjective opinion, you say it based on a scientific assertion," the Cameroonian entrepreneur added.

The Global Data Revolution Leaves Africa Behind

While Manchester City analyzes over 1,500 data points per match and Liverpool uses AI to predict player injuries weeks in advance, most African clubs struggle to track basic performance metrics.



GPS tracker on a player's boots provide insights into performance

Recent surveys show that 76-79% of top-tier European clubs and national teams use live data to adjust training at both squad and individual levels, compared to only 54% in third-tier clubs—a gap that becomes a chasm when compared to most African clubs.

This isn't just about having fancy technology. Modern football has evolved into a science where Expected Goals (xG) models predict a striker's true quality, GPS tracking prevents injuries before they happen, and tactical algorithms expose weaknesses invisible to the human eye. European clubs now employ teams of data scientists alongside traditional scouts, creating hybrid scouting networks that identify talent with unprecedented accuracy.

Consider this: Barcelona's La Masia academy graduates are reported to now complete 15% more successful dribbles thanks to biomechanical analysis, while over 87% of Premier League academies use AI-powered performance tracking.

Meanwhile, African academies with tremendous raw talent—like Nigeria's Pepsi Football Academy (which produced John Mikel Obi) and Senegal's Generation Foot Academy (home to Sadio Mané)—could multiply their success rates with similar technology.



The Hidden Cost of the Data Gap

The consequences of this data deficit ripple through African football in ways both obvious and subtle:

Talent Hemorrhage: European scouts equipped with sophisticated analytics can identify promising African players earlier and cheaper than local clubs can develop them. The continent has become a major talent exporter without capturing proportional economic value from this migration.

Tactical Stagnation: Without data insights into pressing triggers, passing networks, or defensive positioning, African teams struggle to implement the complex tactical systems now standard in world football.

Injury Epidemic: Lack of workload monitoring means African players suffer preventable injuries that GPS tracking and heart rate analysis could predict and prevent.

Investment Flight: International sponsors and broadcasters increasingly demand detailed analytics to justify investments. African leagues without data struggle to attract these crucial revenue streams.

Youth Development Waste: Breaking The Lines reports that scouting software could revolutionize talent identification across Africa, yet most academies still rely on traditional methods that miss countless gems in remote areas.



Success Stories Show the Way Forward

Progressive African organizations are already proving data's transformative power: **Rainbow Sports Group's African Football Data Center** says it has begun collecting comprehensive data on player valuations, sponsorship deals, and performance metrics across the continent. Their approach aims to replace subjective opinions with hard facts.

Technology Integration: South African football legend Jomo Sono has introduced the PlayerMaker system—boot-mounted devices that track passes, ball touches, and movement patterns—providing coaches with precise data to refine training and improve performance.

Academic Excellence: Ghana's West African Football Academy (WAFA) combines football development with formal education while embracing modern training methods. Their systematic approach has produced numerous professional players and demonstrates how African academies can modernize without losing their identity.

Continental Connectivity: A platform like Afriskaut says it provide extensive databases of match footage and player statistics, enabling clubs worldwide to scout African talent more effectively than ever before.

Economic Opportunity in the Digital Age

The stakes extend far beyond football success. Africa's sports economy is projected for massive growth, driven by a young population and emerging global athletes. Countries like Rwanda have shown how strategic sports investment—including partnerships with Bayern Munich and Arsenal—can boost tourism and economic development.

Data analytics represents a unique opportunity for African football to leapfrog traditional development models. Just as mobile banking allowed Africa to skip conventional banking infrastructure, smart data adoption could help African clubs compete with European giants without matching their budgets.

Consider the multiplier effect: Better data leads to improved player development, which increases transfer values, which generates more revenue, which funds better infrastructure and technology. This virtuous cycle could transform African football from a talent exporter into a football powerhouse that retains its best players while competing globally.





The data revolution has begun. African football's future depends on joining it—today. The question is whether African clubs, academies, and federations will seize this opportunity or let it pass by.

The Competitive Clock is Ticking

European clubs aren't standing still. They're investing heavily in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and predictive analytics that will only widen the gap with traditional approaches. Surveys indicate that while elite football increasingly adopts data-informed approaches, the variability between organizations remains significant—creating a closing window of opportunity for African football to catch up.

The choice is stark: embrace the data revolution now, or watch African football become increasingly marginalized as the global game evolves without it.

Success stories like Liverpool's Sadio Mané (discovered at Generation Foot Academy in Senegal) and Arsenal's Mohamed Elneny (developed through traditional scouting) prove African talent can compete at the highest level. Imagine how many more world-class players could emerge if African academies had the same analytical tools as their European counterparts.

The data revolution isn't coming to African football—it's already here. The question is whether African clubs, academies, and federations will seize this opportunity or let it pass by.

CAF and national federations must prioritize data infrastructure investments. Government sports ministries should include analytics training in coaching education programs. Private investors should recognize data adoption as a catalyst for returns on football investments.

Most importantly, African football stakeholders must abandon the false choice between tradition and technology. Data analytics doesn't replace passion, skill, or cultural identity—it amplifies them. The most successful African football future will combine the continent's incredible raw talent with the scientific precision that defines modern football.

As Kingsley Pungong powerfully argues, the time for subjective opinions has passed. African football's global respect and economic potential depend on scientific assertions backed by hard data. The data revolution has begun. African football's future depends on joining it—today.

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FOR YEARS, AFRICAN FOOTBALL BLED MONEY. NOW, IT'S FINALLY TURNING PROFITS. AS 24 NATIONS DESCEND ON MOROCCO FOR AFCON 2025, THE REAL STORY ISN'T JUST WHO LIFTS THE TROPHY — IT'S THE \$9.48 MILLION PROFIT THAT SIGNALS A COMMERCIAL AWAKENING. CAN IT LAST BEYOND THE FINAL WHISTLE?

THE COMMERCIAL AWAKENING OF AFCON

(AND AFRICAN FOOTBALL?)



IN THE GREEN, AT LAST

For years, African football bled money. Now, it's finally in the black. As 24 nations descend on Morocco for AFCON 2025, the real story isn't just who lifts the trophy — it's the \$9.48 million profit that signals a commercial awakening. Can it last beyond the final whistle?

The air in the conference room in Kinshasa was stale, but the figures projected on the screen were fresh—and for the first time in years, they were written in black ink, not red.

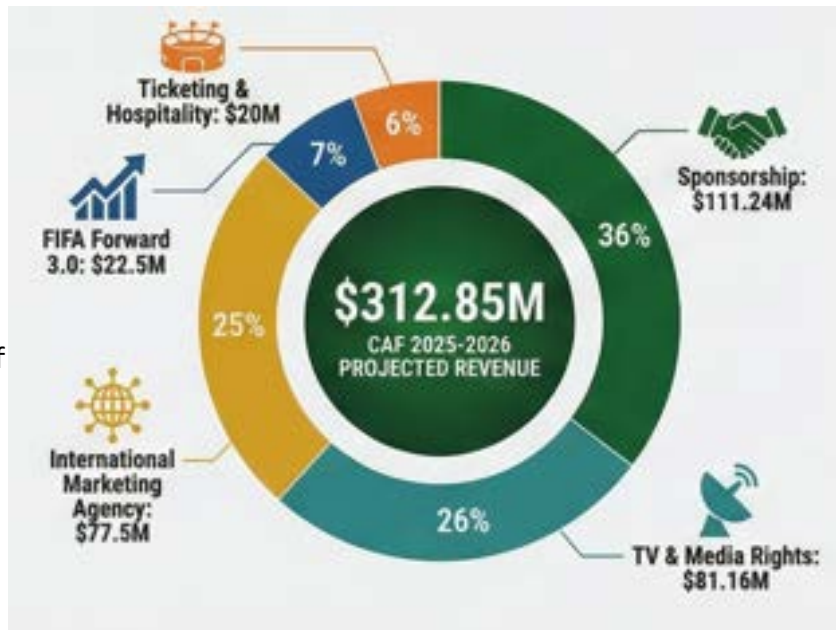
Patrice Motsepe didn't smile. The South African billionaire, often seen beaming in photo ops with dignitaries, wore the look of a man who had just balanced a very precarious scale. "We have been enormously successful," he told the 47th CAF Ordinary General Assembly this past October.

It was a statement that might have been dismissed as bluster three years ago. But this time, he had the receipts.

For years, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) was an organization defined by its deficits—a "cash-poor" giant sitting on a goldmine of talent.

Yet, just days before the opening whistle blows in Morocco for the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, the narrative has shifted. The organization has posted a \$9.48 million net profit, a sharp pivot from the financial hemorrhaging of the past.

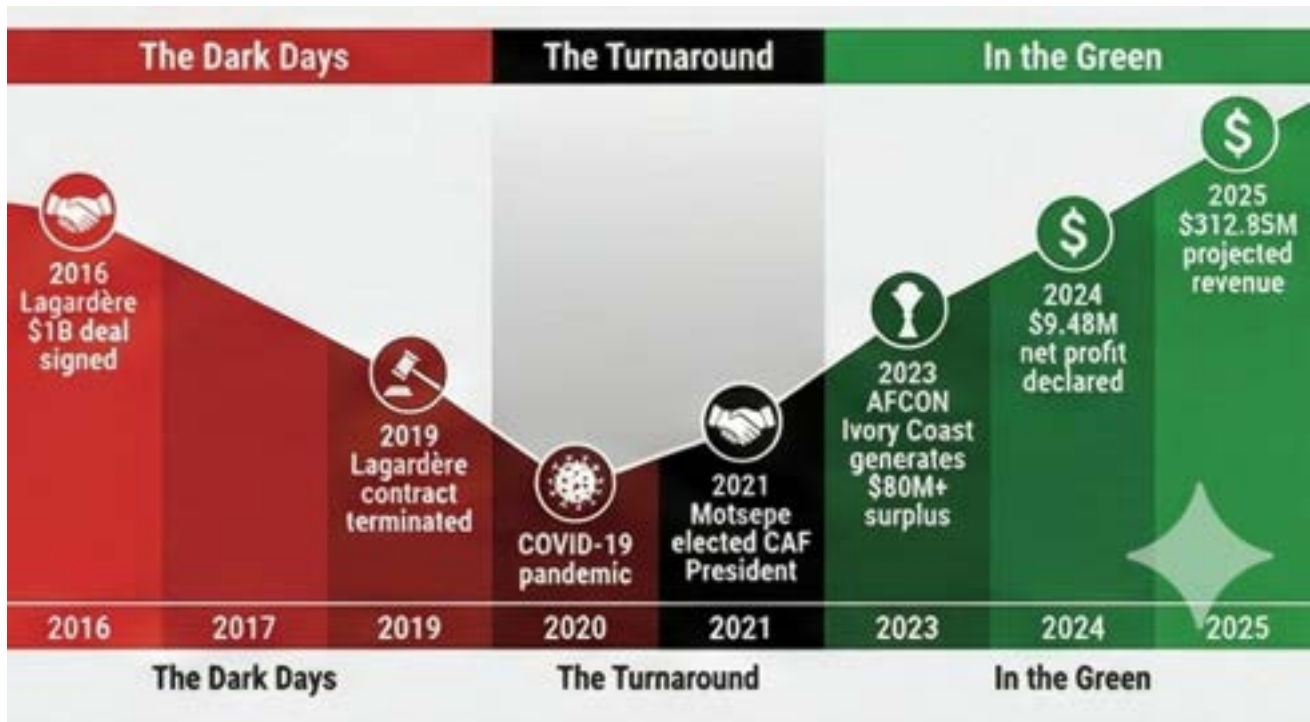
As the continent descends on Morocco, the conversation isn't just about who will lift the trophy on January 18. It is about a different kind of victory: the proof that African football is finally open for business.



CAF's money wheel...

The objective is to ensure that CAF and the 54 CAF Member Associations are financially self-supporting and the quality of football in Africa is globally competitive.

— CAF 2025-2026 Budget Report



CAF's financial evolution since 2016...

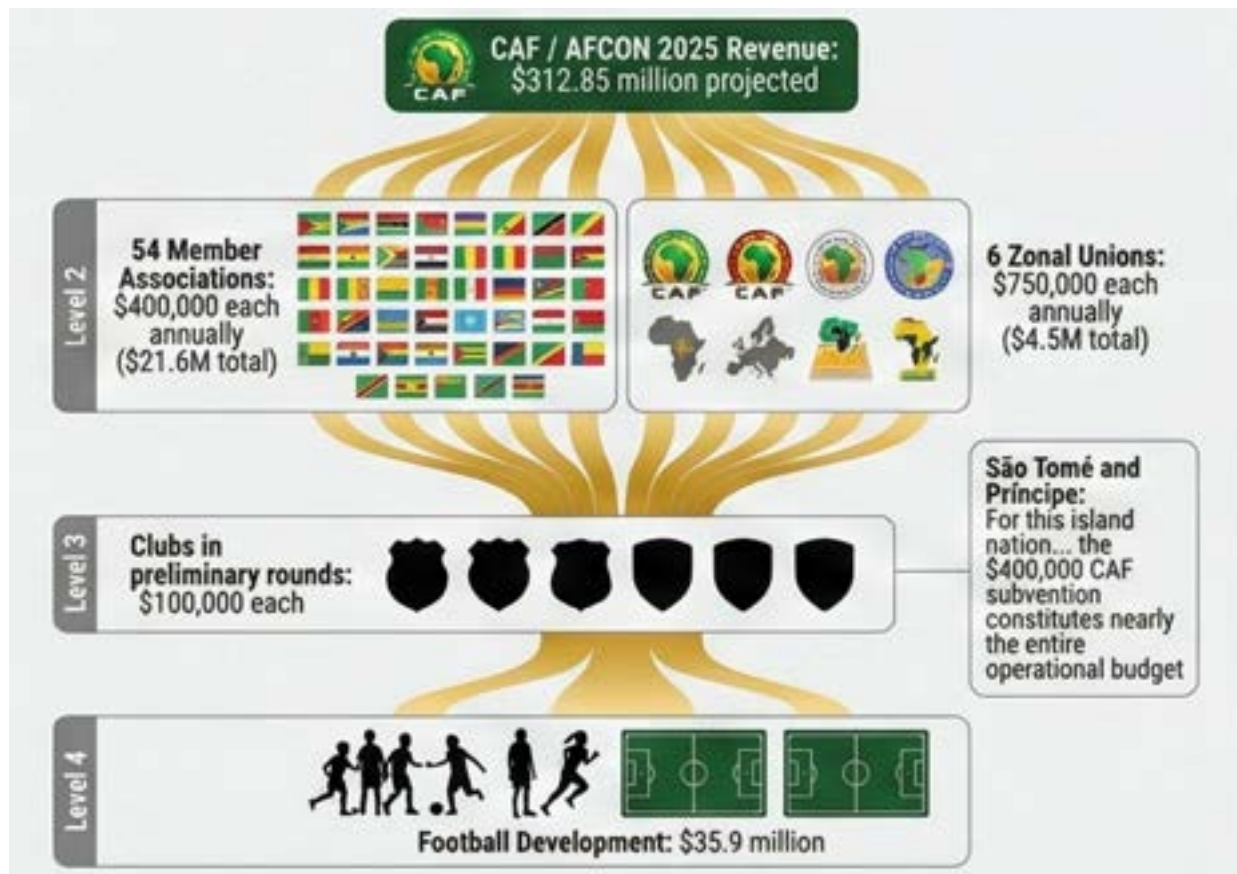
The settlement with Lagardère—\$50 million paid in late 2024—was painful but necessary. As Motsepe's team saw it, this was a "break fee" to regain control of the continent's commercial inventory. The strategic rationale was that the unencumbered rights could be sliced, diced, and sold for significantly more than the fixed annuity Lagardère provided.

The gamble paid off. According to CAF's audited financial statements, revenue from competitions surged to \$148.62 million in 2023-24, up from \$75.86 million the previous year. Commercial revenues exploded to \$125.2 million, a significant rise from the \$79.7 million generated during the 2021 edition in Cameroon. The jump from a \$4 million profit at AFCON 2019 in Egypt to more than \$80 million from AFCON 2023 in Ivory Coast represents a 1,900% increase in commercial efficiency.

The \$7 Million Carrot

Money talks. And for the 24 federations descending on Morocco, the prize money represents more than a bonus—it is often the difference between solvency and crisis. Under the Motsepe administration, CAF has aggressively inflated the prize pot. The winner of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations will take home \$7 million—a 40% increase from the \$5 million awarded at the 2021 edition in Cameroon. The total prize pot now stands at \$32 million across all 24 participating nations.

Crucially, CAF has increased payouts for the lower tiers. A team eliminated in the quarter-finals now receives \$1.3 million, while teams that finish third or fourth in their groups receive \$700,000 and \$500,000 respectively. For a nation like Cape Verde or Mauritania, the \$700,000 guaranteed prize is a windfall that can fund the federation's youth programs for an entire year.



Where CAF spends the money it makes.

The increases extend beyond AFCON. The TotalEnergies CAF Champions League winners' prize money increased by 60% to \$4 million. The CAF Women's Africa Cup of Nations (WAFCON) saw Nigeria, as champions, earn \$1 million—double the previous edition. The overall WAFCON pool rose 45% to \$3.475 million.

Context matters here. These figures, while historic for African football, still trail the riches of European competitions. The Euro 2024 winner took home €8 million (\$8.8 million), while Copa América 2024 offered \$18 million to its champion. But the trajectory is unmistakable—African football is closing the gap.

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The Commercial Pillars

Where is the money actually coming from? The CAF 2025-2026 budget provides a clear answer: sponsorship and media rights now form the twin pillars of African football's commercial architecture.

For the 2025-2026 fiscal year, CAF projects total revenue of \$312.85 million. This represents an 88% increase from the revenue for the 2023-2024

TotalEnergies: The Anchor Partner

The most critical commercial relationship in African football is with the French energy giant TotalEnergies. Initiated in 2016 and renewed in 2025 for a further four years, this partnership grants TotalEnergies title sponsorship of all major CAF competitions.

While headline reports have circulated figures as high as \$1.125 billion, conservative financial analysis suggests the direct sponsorship value is approximately \$250 million to \$300 million over the four-year cycle. Even at this level, it remains one of the most lucrative sports sponsorship deals in the Global South.

The sponsor portfolio has expanded dramatically. The number of CAF sponsors and partners grew from 10 in 2021 to 17 in 2023. Global partners now include Puma, Visa, Orange, 1xBet, Royal Air Maroc, Tecno, and the European Union. Official sponsors include QNET, Rexona, Danone, LONACI, APSONIC, Midea, AGL, and La Vache Qui Rit.

AFCON financial year: A story of diversification

- **SPONSORSHIP: \$111.24 MILLION (36% OF REVENUE)**
- **TV & MEDIA RIGHTS: \$81.16 MILLION (26%)**
- **INTERNATIONAL MARKETING AGENCY: \$77.5 MILLION (25%)**
- **TICKETING & HOSPITALITY: \$20 MILLION (6%)**



The Broadcast Revolution

If sponsorship is one pillar, broadcasting rights are the other. The 2023-2025 cycle witnessed the most dramatic upheaval in the history of African sports media. For decades, the broadcasting map of Africa was static. MultiChoice Group (via SuperSport) dominated the English and Portuguese-speaking markets, while Canal+ controlled the Francophone territories.

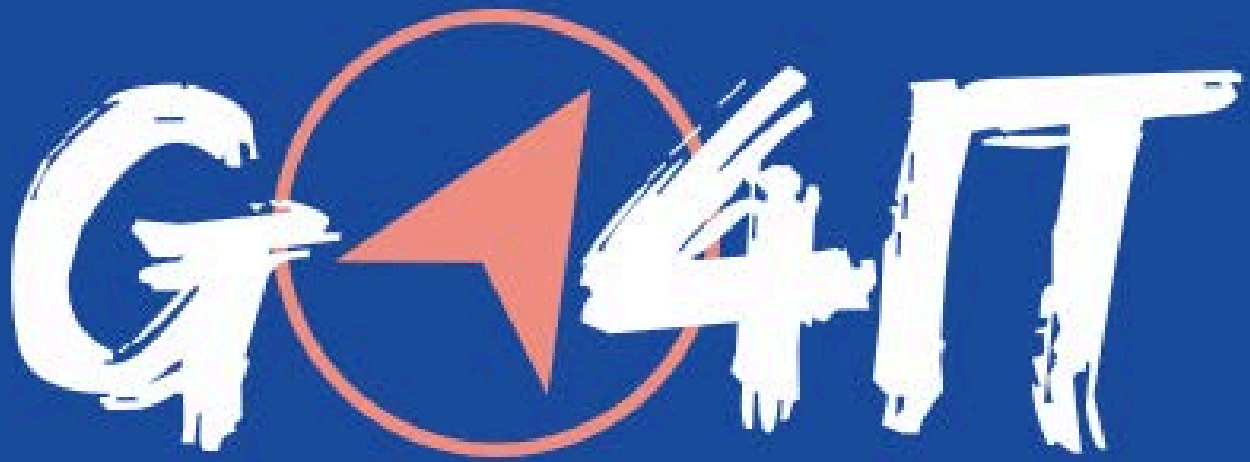
In late 2023, this duopoly was shattered when CAF announced a historic agreement with New World TV (NWTV), a Togo-based broadcaster, for exclusive rights across 46 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The strategy worked. By empowering a third player, CAF forced the incumbent giants into a competitive bidding war. AFCON 2023 was broadcast in 180 countries, with major deals secured with Sky Sports in the UK and Band TV in Brazil. The BBC aired select matches, driving the tournament into mainstream British cultural conversation.

For the 2025-2026 financial year, TV & Media revenues are projected at \$81.2 million—a 7% year-on-year growth and a 21% increase compared to the previous AFCON year. This projected revenue is from fully signed contracts, meaning it is guaranteed.



THE MOST CRITICAL COMMERCIAL RELATIONSHIP IN AFRICAN FOOTBALL IS WITH THE FRENCH ENERGY GIANT TOTALENERGIES. INITIATED IN 2016 AND RENEWED IN 2025 FOR A FURTHER FOUR YEARS, THIS PARTNERSHIP GRANTS TOTALENERGIES TITLE SPONSORSHIP OF ALL MAJOR CAF COMPETITIONS. IT IS ONE OF THE MOST LUCRATIVE SPORTS SPONSORSHIP DEALS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH.



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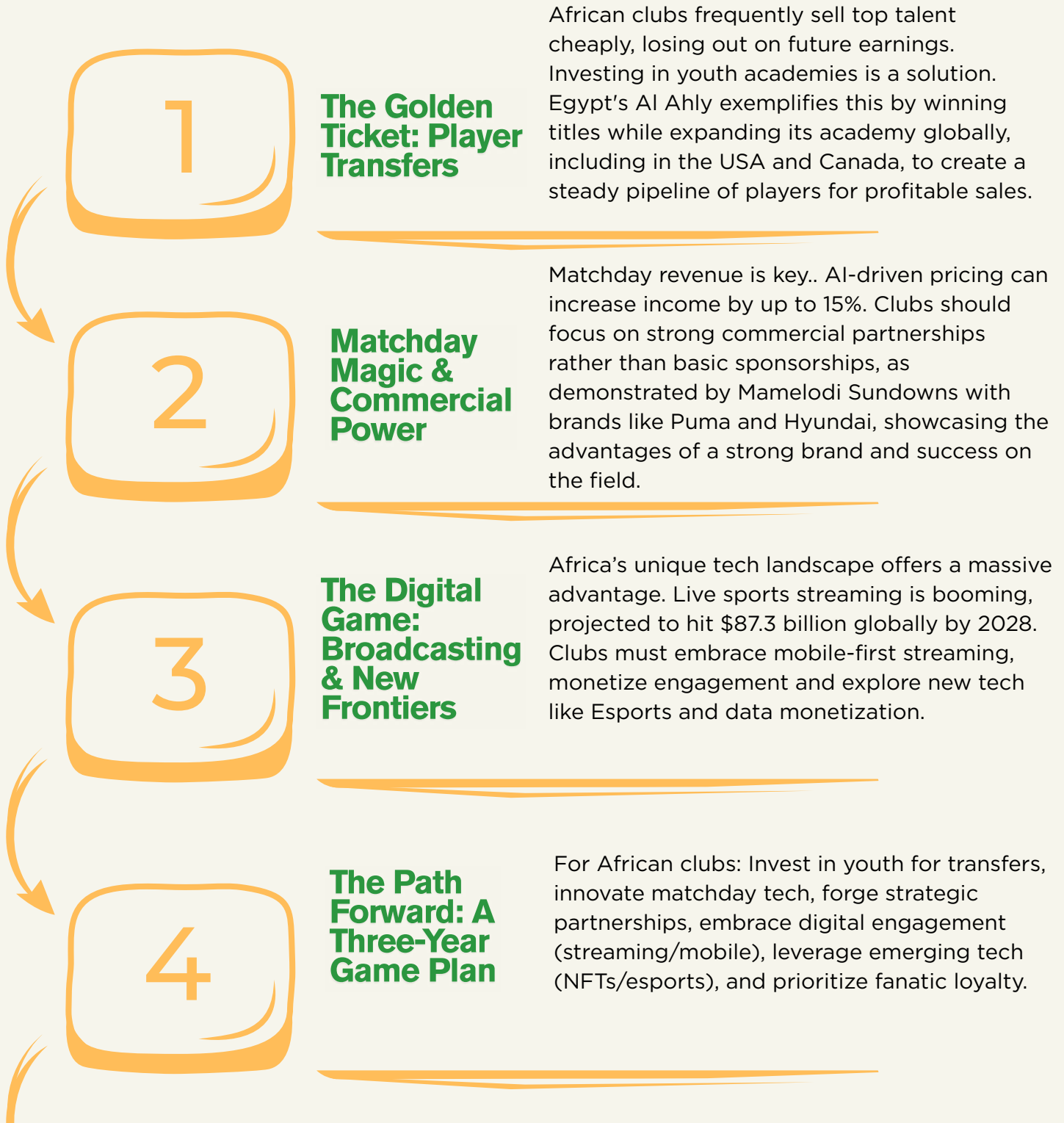
INSIGHTS

MONETIZATION.

HOW AFRICAN CLUBS CAN SCORE BIG OFF THE PITCH

WHILE THE PASSION FOR THE BEAUTIFUL GAME RUNS DEEP ACROSS AFRICA, THE WAY CLUBS MAKE MONEY IS RAPIDLY CHANGING. GONE ARE THE DAYS WHEN TICKET SALES ALONE KEPT THE LIGHTS ON. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT A MULTI-BILLION-DOLLAR GLOBAL INDUSTRY, AND AFRICAN CLUBS ARE POISED TO GRAB A BIGGER SLICE OF THAT PIE! THE GLOBAL SPORTS MARKET IS A GIANT, SET TO SWELL FROM \$403 BILLION IN 2022 TO AN EYE-WATERING \$680 BILLION BY 2028.

MONETIZING YOUR FOOTBALL CLUB IN 4 STEPS...



CASE STUDIES

ASEC Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)

The "Crown Jewel"



The Strategy: Established the famous Académie MimoSifcom in 1993 with a holistic approach, providing young players with academic education alongside elite football training.

The Result: The club has consistently produced "golden generations" of talent, including global stars like Yaya Touré, Kolo Touré, and Gervinho.

Financial Impact: The academy model has generated significant revenue over decades, with graduates accumulating over €340 million in market value wealth. They proved the model's sporting success by winning the 1999 CAF Super Cup with a team primarily composed of 17-year-olds.

Mamelodi Sundowns (South Africa)

Commercial Powerhouse



The Strategy: Leveraged on-field success and strong branding to move beyond simple sponsorship deals, building deep commercial relationships with global entities.

The Result: The club has secured major partnerships with international brands including Puma, Hyundai, MTN, and even Ferrari.

Key Insight: Chairman Tlhope Motsepe frames their approach by viewing African football not as a developing market, but as an "investment-grade opportunity".

CASE STUDIES

Al Ahly (Egypt) Global Expansion



The Strategy: Investing smartly in youth academies not just domestically, but internationally to expand their brand presence.

The Result: Beyond winning titles, they have launched new academies in markets like the USA and Canada.

The Goal: To build a consistent pipeline of players that can be sold for significant fees, securing the club's financial future.

The Benchmarks

Benfica (Portugal) & Ajax (Netherlands)



The Model: While European, these clubs are cited as the ideal financial model for African teams to emulate.

The Success: They earn hundreds of millions by selling academy graduates, a strategy African clubs are urged to replicate by negotiating "sell-on clauses" to profit from a player's future success

FOCUS

THE GOLDMINE PARADOX

HOW AFRICA FUELS FOOTBALL'S BILLIONS WHILE KEEPING NONE

AFRICA PRODUCES SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST VALUABLE FOOTBALLERS BUT CAPTURES VIRTUALLY NONE OF THE WEALTH— CREATING A SYSTEM WHERE THE CONTINENT'S BEST TALENTS GENERATE BILLIONS FOR OTHERS. IN RECENT YEARS, THIS EXTRACTION MACHINE PERFECTED ITSELF THROUGH SOPHISTICATED SCOUTING NETWORKS AND DIRECT ACADEMY-TO-EUROPE PIPELINES, LEAVING AFRICAN FOOTBALL HOLLOWED OUT. FOOTBALL BUSINESS AFRICA MAGAZINE TAKES A DEEP LOOK AT THE TROUBLING REALITY OF THE PAST 5 YEARS.



Mauritania's Sheikhia Boidiya stadium renovated with a Fifa Forward Grant.

In August in 2025, **Bryan Mbeumo** completed his €81 million transfer from Brentford to Manchester United. The Cameroonian forward's move shattered records, making headlines across Europe and the world. But Mbeumo's transfer fee—enough to fund Cameroon's entire professional league for decades—would never touch African soil. Not a single euro of that astronomical sum went to an African club. Mbeumo, like other African football players nowadays, born in France to Cameroonian parents, is a product of the French football system.

This is the story of modern African football: a continent that produces some of the world's most valuable players but captures virtually none of the wealth they generate. It's a system so efficient at extraction that it would make colonial-era commodity traders envious.

The African football transfer market from 2020 to 2025 tells a tale of two economies existing in parallel universes. In one, global transfer spending has exploded to unprecedented heights, surpassing \$9.7 billion in the 2025 mid-year window alone. In the other, African clubs operate on budgets that wouldn't cover a European star's weekly wages, selling their best talents for a fraction of their eventual worth and watching helplessly as these same players are later traded between European clubs for tens of millions.

This isn't just an economic imbalance—it's a systematic value drain that threatens the very foundation of African football. Yet within this crisis lie the seeds of transformation, as innovative academies, emerging digital markets, and a new generation of African football executives begin to challenge a system that has treated the continent as little more than a talent quarry for the world's richest leagues.

The data is stark enough to make even seasoned football economists wince. In 2022, according to a FIFA report, the total receipts earned by African clubs from international player transfers stood at \$71.2 million, some \$10 million less than Mbeumo's transfer to Manchester United.

"Africa is characterized by the loss of football added value," says an economist in Abidjan who has looked at the numbers, with the weariness of someone who's watched this movie too many times. "Africa benefits poorly or little from the added value created at the football level."

The numbers bear him out. Nigeria, now ranked fifth globally in international transfers conducted, has seen its player exports surge by 57% since 2020. The country now has 500 players scattered across 135 leagues worldwide. Yet the Nigerian Professional Football League's total market value stands at a pitiful €1.05 million—less than what a single Nigerian international like Victor Osimhen earned in a month at Napoli before moving to Turkey.

The Extraction Machine

The mechanism of this value extraction has been perfected over decades into an almost frictionless system. European clubs have built sophisticated scouting networks that penetrate deep into African youth football, identifying talents as young as 12 or 13. These players are offered opportunities that no African club can match: proper nutrition, world-class coaching, medical care, and the promise of European wages.

The most insidious part of this system is how it bypasses African professional football entirely. Generation Foot in Senegal, perhaps Africa's most famous academy, has a direct pipeline to FC Metz in France. The best graduates—players like Sadio Mané and Ismaïla Sarr—never play a professional match in Senegal. They go straight from the academy to Europe, denying local leagues the star power that could attract sponsors, broadcasters, and fans.

Right to Dream in Ghana has taken this model even further. The academy doesn't just partner with European clubs; it owns one. By acquiring FC Nordsjælland in Denmark, Right to Dream created a closed-loop system that captures the full value chain of player development. It's a brilliant business model—unless you're Ghanaian football, watching your best talents disappear into a system that enriches everyone except you.



The scenario plays out from Nigeria to Cameroon, from Kenya to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Technology was supposed to level the playing field. Streaming platforms and social media promised to help African leagues build global audiences and monetize their massive local fanbases. Tanzania's league, energized by a \$100 million broadcast deal over 10 years with Azam TV, showed what was possible.

But technology has proven to be a double-edged sword. The same digital tools that could build African football's economic independence have instead perfected the extraction machine.

European clubs now use sophisticated data analytics to identify African talents earlier and more efficiently than ever. Young players in remote academies are now just a YouTube highlight reel away from European attention.

The result is perverse: increased visibility has accelerated the talent drain rather than stemming it. African leagues find themselves competing not just with European television broadcasts but with a globalized scouting system that can pluck their best players before local fans even know their names.

The Promise of Compensation

FIFA's training compensation and solidarity payment mechanisms were designed to ensure that clubs who develop young players receive financial rewards when those players succeed. In theory, African clubs should receive 5-10% of every international transfer fee involving players they trained.

In practice, it's not that simple, many actors in Africa's football ecosystem note. An estimated 80% of training compensation owed to African clubs is never paid, said one who has requested anonymity out of fear of compromising relationships.

The reasons are depressingly predictable: African clubs lack the legal resources to pursue claims, regulatory loopholes favor wealthy European clubs, and the power imbalance makes challenging non-payment almost impossible.

Consider this: When Victor Osimhen moved from Napoli to Galatasaray for €75 million in 2025, his youth clubs in Nigeria should have received millions in solidarity payments. Most will be lucky to see anything at all.

Within Africa itself, a parallel extraction system has emerged. The continent's football economy is increasingly polarized between a handful of wealthy leagues—Egypt, Morocco, South Africa, Algeria, Tanzania, and Tunisia—and everyone else. The Egyptian Premier League's market value of €154 million dwarfs that of most other African leagues combined.



These financial powerhouses operate as regional hubs, drawing talent from neighboring countries in a miniature version of the Europe-Africa dynamic.

During the 2025 transfer window, Moroccan clubs registered 151 incoming international transfers. Most came from other African nations that couldn't match Moroccan wages or facilities.

The launch of the African Football League (AFL) two years ago, an invitation-only tournament for the continent's elite clubs, further threatens to accelerate this polarization. With its promise of \$100 million in revenue, the AFL could further concentrate wealth among Africa's football aristocracy while leaving smaller leagues even further behind.

Perhaps the most troubling trend is what researchers call the "hollowing out" of African football. While African player exports have surged, the number of foreign players in African leagues has declined by 14.4% since 2020. This means African leagues are losing their best players without attracting equivalent replacements.

The mathematics are brutal. Leagues lose their stars, quality drops, fans lose interest, sponsors withdraw, revenues decline, and clubs become even less able to retain the next generation of talent. It's a vicious cycle that threatens to reduce many African leagues to irrelevance.

FIFA's training compensation and solidarity payment mechanisms were designed to ensure that clubs who develop young players receive financial rewards when those players succeed. In practice, it's not that simple.



We need a "circular economy" where wealth generated by player exports systematically returns to develop the next generation.

Seeds of Revolution

Yet within this crisis, innovation is stirring. Some African football executives are beginning to challenge the established order with creative solutions.

Multi-club ownership models pioneered by Right to Dream offer a template for value retention. African investors are exploring regional club networks that could keep talent within African-owned structures longer, developing players to higher levels before selling them at premium prices.

The push for mandatory sell-on clauses—requiring 15-25% of future transfer fees to return to the original African club—is gaining momentum. If widely adopted, these clauses could ensure African clubs share in the massive appreciation of their players' values.

Some federations are reported to be establishing legal task forces to pursue unpaid training compensation aggressively. Funded by levies on outgoing transfers, these units could reclaim millions in owed payments that currently disappear into European coffers.

The ultimate vision, articulated by progressive voices in African football, is a "circular economy" where wealth generated by player exports systematically returns to develop the next generation. It's an ambitious dream that would transform Africa from football's quarry to its jeweler—a continent that not only produces rough diamonds but polishes them, sets them, and profits from their full value.

Achieving this vision requires fundamental changes: stronger leagues that can retain talent longer, professional academies that capture more value from player development, effective legal mechanisms to ensure compensation, and digital strategies that build global audiences for African football rather than just showcasing its talents for European consumption.

The Clock Is Ticking

The stakes couldn't be higher. Africa has the world's youngest population, with 70% of its 1.4 billion people under 30. This demographic dividend could power a football revolution—or watch its dreams dribble away to enrich foreign leagues.

The 2020-2025 period has shown that without intervention, Africa's role as football's primary supplier will only intensify. European clubs are getting better at extraction, their scouting networks deeper, their financial advantages greater. The transfer market's explosive growth—from pandemic contraction to record-breaking billions—has benefited everyone except those who produce the game's essential commodity: the players themselves.

As Bryan Mbeumo settles into Manchester, his €81 million transfer fee circulating through European bank accounts, the question isn't whether Africa can change this system. It's whether it will act before the beautiful game's ugliest economic reality becomes permanent. The talent will keep flowing—that much is certain. Whether any of the wealth flows back is a choice that Africa must make, and soon.

The continent that gives world football its rhythm, flair, and increasingly its stars, deserves more than pennies on the euro. It deserves a stake in the game it helps make beautiful. The next five years will determine whether Africa remains football's exploited gold mine or becomes its empowered partner. The clock, as they say in football, is ticking.



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THE DREAM FACTORY

HOW ONE AFRICAN ACADEMY IS BUILDING A GLOBAL FOOTBALL EMPIRE ON PURPOSE AND PROFIT

A PREMIER LEAGUE STAR AND AN IVY LEAGUE SCHOLAR. TWO DIVERGENT PATHS TO EXCELLENCE, BOTH ORIGINATING FROM THE VERY SAME SOURCE. THIS DUAL SUCCESS IS THE METICULOUSLY ENGINEERED OUTPUT OF RIGHT TO DREAM (RTD), A REVOLUTIONARY, GHANAIAN-BORN TALENT ECOSYSTEM. FOOTBALL BUSINESS AFRICA TAKES AN IN-DEPTH LOOK INTO A UNIQUE SUCCESS STORY



Dreaming of the Premier League while also preparing for Ivy League scholar. At RTD, two paths to excellence are possible.

The scene is a familiar one, broadcast to hundreds of millions. A blur of motion, a thunderous strike, and the net ripples... Mohammed Kudus, West Ham United's Ghanaian dynamo until his recent transfer to Tottenham Hotspur, wheels away in celebration, another product of Africa's rich talent seam shining on the world's biggest stage. His journey, from the dusty pitches of Ghana to the Premier League, is a story of immense talent realized.

Half a world away, another celebration is taking place, quieter but no less significant. Joy Okonye, a fellow graduate of the same academy system, steps onto the historic campus of Brown University, an Ivy League institution - an elite group of US universities reserved where some of the world's brightest are educated - ready to pursue a degree and a Division I soccer career.

A Premier League star and an Ivy League scholar. Two divergent paths to excellence, both originating from the very same source. This dual success is no accident. It is the meticulously engineered output of Right to Dream (RTD), a revolutionary, Ghanaian-born talent ecosystem that is fundamentally rewriting the rules of football development.

What began in 1999 in the Accra home of a former Manchester United scout has morphed into a global, multi-club, multi-academy network spanning four countries. Part social enterprise, part savvy international business, and fueled by a landmark \$120 million investment from the Mansour Group, RTD is mounting a powerful challenge to the extractive, high-attrition models of the past. It is proving, with every transfer fee and every scholarship earned, that investing in the whole person—the athlete, the student, and the leader—is not just good ethics, but brilliant business.

The Architect and His Doctrine

The story of Right to Dream begins with Tom Vernon. As Manchester United's head scout in Africa, he witnessed firsthand a system he came to see as "fundamentally broken". He saw the traditional European academy model as a brutal "pyramid," where a wide base of young hopefuls is progressively discarded, leaving a trail of broken dreams for the 99% who don't make it.

Vernon envisioned a different model, not a pyramid, but a “pipe, where the bottom is the same width as the top”. This philosophy became the bedrock of RTD. Instead of a high-stakes, cutthroat environment, Vernon built an institution on a long-term commitment to every child who entered.

From the thousands of children scouted annually across West Africa, only a handful are selected, but once they are in, they are guaranteed a five-year scholarship and a place in the system.

This commitment is built on three non-negotiable pillars: Football, Education, and Character. While the elite football training is undeniable—producing over 157 professional players and ranking among the world’s top academies—it is the other two pillars that create RTD’s unique value proposition.

Every student is enrolled in a world-class academic program, with RTD’s school in Ghana an accredited Cambridge International Examination center. This creates a genuine, prestigious alternative pathway. For those who excel academically, RTD facilitates scholarships to top universities in the US and UK, a program that has generated an estimated \$45 million in funding for its graduates.

The final pillar, character, is the glue that binds the model together. The curriculum is explicitly designed to cultivate leadership and a sense of social responsibility. “Don’t expect to reach your dreams if you don’t help other people reach theirs,” reads a sign in the main academy building. This isn’t just a platitude; every student is actively involved in a “give-back” project, instilling a sense of purpose that extends beyond personal gain.



Simon Adingra, from RTD to Sunderland

The Business of the Dream: A Hybrid Global Enterprise

Vernon’s vision is supported by a uniquely sophisticated and adaptable business model. RTD operates as a hybrid entity: a registered charity in Ghana, a not-for-dividend business in Denmark and Egypt, and a 501(c)(3) non-profit in the United States. This flexible structure allows it to navigate different regulatory environments and maximize funding opportunities.

For years, the model was sustained primarily by player transfer revenue. The 2015 acquisition of Danish Superliga club FC Nordsjælland was a masterstroke. It gave RTD control over a crucial European pathway, allowing it to showcase its talent and, critically, capture the full economic value of its players. In the five years leading up to 2021, FCN generated over €65 million in transfer fees, largely from academy graduates.

The model's potential attracted a game-changing partner. In 2021, the Mansour Group, an Egyptian multinational conglomerate, invested \$120 million, assuming majority ownership through a new entity, ManSports. Crucially, this was not framed as a simple CSR venture but as a strategic investment in a purpose-driven enterprise with the potential for significant social and financial returns. Mohamed Mansour became Chairman, with Vernon remaining as CEO, ensuring continuity of vision.

This capital injection is fueling a new era of global expansion and commercial diversification. With the Mansour Group's backing, RTD is actively working to reduce its reliance on the volatile transfer market and build more stable revenue streams through corporate sponsorships and brand partnerships.

Yet, the organization continues to demonstrate its commercial acumen in the transfer market. A landmark 2025 victory against FIFA at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) is a case in point. RTD successfully challenged FIFA's misallocation of solidarity payments from Ernest Nuamah's €25 million transfer from FCN to Olympique Lyonnais, securing at least €283,919 in development fees that had been incorrectly assigned.

The victory was more than financial; it exposed systemic flaws in FIFA's record-keeping for African players and positioned RTD as a formidable advocate for development academies across the continent.

An Ecosystem of Opportunity: The Multi-Club Network

The Mansour investment has accelerated the build-out of RTD's most powerful strategic asset: its vertically integrated multi-club ownership (MCO) network. Each club in the ecosystem serves a distinct purpose:



- FC Nordsjælland (Denmark): Acquired in 2015, FCN is the European proving ground. It provides the ideal environment for top African graduates to adapt to the demands of European football. The club is famously committed to youth, consistently fielding the youngest team in Europe's top-flight leagues.

- FC Masar (Egypt): Following the Mansour investment, RTD acquired an Egyptian club in 2022, rebranding it as FC Masar. This, along with a new state-of-the-art academy in West Cairo, establishes a major hub for talent in the rich North African market.

- San Diego FC (USA): The most ambitious project yet, this MLS expansion franchise, co-owned by Mohamed Mansour and the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, is set to begin play in 2025. It will feature the first fully-funded, tuition-free residential academy in MLS history, a direct challenge to the "pay-to-play" model dominant in American youth sports.



**BY PROVING THAT
PURPOSE AND PROFIT
CAN COEXIST, RIGHT TO
DREAM IS NOT JUST
BUILDING A GLOBAL
FOOTBALL BUSINESS; IT
IS REDEFINING WHAT IT
MEANS TO WIN.**

This network gives RTD unprecedented control over its players' careers, from a trial in a remote Ghanaian village to a professional debut in Europe or North America.

A New Benchmark for Africa

When benchmarked against its peers, RTD's model stands apart. While Senegal's Génération Foot has been incredibly successful in producing talent like Sadio Mané, its exclusive partnership with French club FC Metz creates a dependency. RTD's ownership model provides far greater autonomy and philosophical alignment.

Other academies across the continent operate primarily as a private, tuition-based institution. In contrast, RTD's all-scholarship model, where 70% of students come from families earning less than \$2 a day, allows it to access a vastly wider talent pool.

Even when compared to European giants, the distinction is clear.

The academies of Ajax and FC Barcelona are legendary production lines, but they are designed with a singular purpose: to produce players for their specific first-team systems and playing styles. RTD is fundamentally pathway-agnostic. Its ultimate commitment is to find the best outcome for each individual, whether that's at one of its own clubs, another professional team, or a world-class university.

As it expands into new markets, including a stated ambition to enter the UK, Right to Dream faces the challenge of scaling its unique, hands-on culture. But its impact is already undeniable. It has created a blueprint for a more sustainable, ethical, and holistic approach to talent development. By proving that purpose and profit can coexist, Right to Dream is not just building a global football business; it is redefining what it means to win.

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