

# THE **FIFA** WEEKLY

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YOUTH WORK FOR  
A GREAT FUTURE

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**FRANCE**  
LIGUE 1 AMAZED  
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# Academy sweet academy



**FRIENDLY MATCH, TEMA**

Ghana's U-17s take on Glow Lamp Academy on 26 August 2015.

European clubs are clamouring to sign players from Ghana, a West African nation where football is akin to religion. Such interest would be inconceivable without the youth work undertaken by the national association and clubs and the growing number of academies across the country, as *Elio Stamm* writes from Accra. Photos by *Francis Kokoroko*.

**ROOM-MATES**

U-17 internationals Lawrence Ofori (left) and Joseph Paintsil take a break.



**PLENTY TO CELEBRATE**

Baba Rahman poses for a photo with advisor Sascha Empacher after his sensational move to Chelsea (above); fans celebrate Dreams FC's promotion with coach Charles Akonnor (centre) and player Ben Nash Quansah (below).

These are good times for Dreams FC. The club from Madina, a vibrant neighbourhood to the north of Ghana's capital Accra, is living up to its name. After the last home match of the season, fans celebrated exuberantly on their tiny stadium's uneven pitch together with players clad in t-shirts printed especially for the occasion. Songs echoed around the ground while children guzzled soft drinks to their heart's content. The Dreams players had three reasons to celebrate: they had just won 2-1, secured promotion to Premier League for the very first time in their previous game and, above all, were now confident of realising their dreams of forging a successful career abroad, just as former team-mate Abdul Rahman Baba - better known as Baba Rahman - has done.

Not since Samuel Kuffour became a defensive stalwart and scourge of opposition attackers at Bayern Munich in the 1990s has a Ghanaian defensive specialist garnered as much attention as Baba. Thanks to his pace, technique and composure on the ball, the 21-year-old left-back made the switch from Bundesliga side FC Augsburg to English Premier League giants Chelsea in mid-August for a fee rumoured to be in the region of €20 million - ten times more than Augsburg paid to bring him to the club from league rivals Greuther Furth 12 months earlier.

Although Rahman's rapid rise to one of the world's biggest clubs is far from commonplace, it comes as less of a surprise when considering the number of Ghanaian footballers currently plying their trade overseas. Between two and seven of the country's players appear in each of the five top European leagues, while these figures are often far larger in the continent's less prominent top divisions. In Sweden, for example, Ghanaians make up the biggest foreign contingent in the championship after neighbouring Norway, with 14 representatives. Senegal are the only other African nation who can boast a comparable number of players stationed across Europe.

Baba Rahman was 14 years old when Dreams FC lured him from Tamale in northern Ghana to Accra.

**Greuther Furth quickest on the draw**

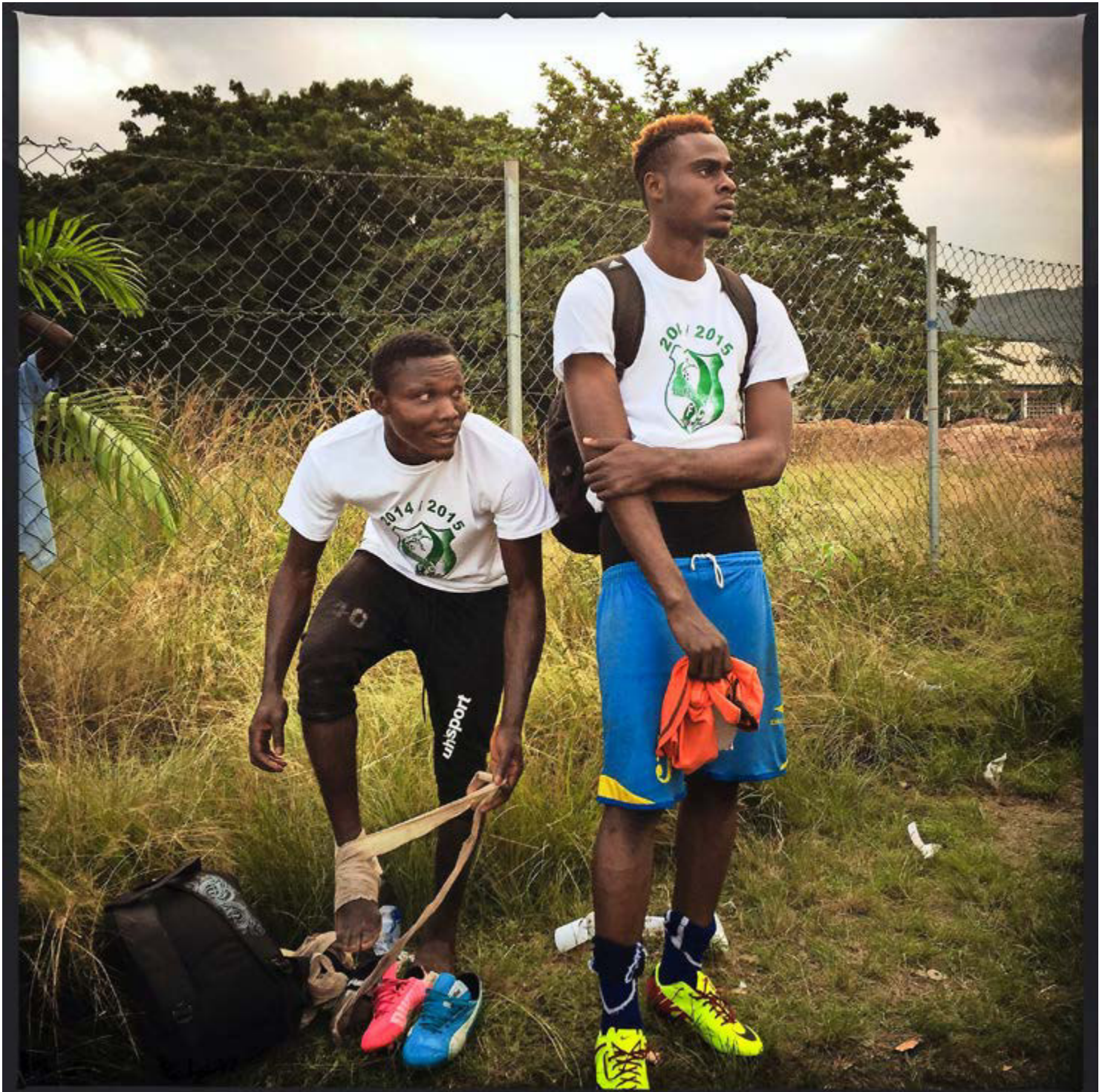
Baba Rahman was 14 years old when Dreams FC lured him from Tamale in northern Ghana to Accra on the Atlantic coast. Club president Edwin Kurt Okraku still remembers the day well: "I received a call from one of the coaches in Tamale, who said I definitely had to see this lad." Baba immediately began training with the first team, who were still playing in Ghana's third tier at that point. Although the youngster began attracting interest from European sides, particularly Anderlecht, as soon as he began making league appearances for the club a year after joining, at 16 he was still too young to make such a big move. Instead he spent a further two years gathering experience in his homeland before daring to take the leap, at which point Greuther Furth beat Anderlecht to his signature.

Okraku recently spent six weeks in Europe handling Baba's move to Chelsea. As well as discovering the talented young defender, he is also Sascha Empacher's partner at SPOCS Sports Consultants, the company that officially represents the player. The trip was an extremely successful one for Dreams FC and

Baba's management company for reasons other than the 21-year-old's Premier League move. The duo also secured a three-year deal at top-flight Belgian side Standard Liege for 18-year-old Benjamin Tetteh, an imposing striker standing almost two metres tall, and arranged for two further Dreams players to undergo trials with European clubs. The excitement and anticipation of 18-year-old Leonard Owusu, heading to Furth, and Anderlecht-bound 17-year-old Emmanuel Adjei Sowah was clear for all to see during the Accra club's promotion celebrations. Baba's management company are active not only in Ghana but also in

Egypt and Central and Eastern Europe. For chief executive Empacher, Ghana's success at developing young footballers is closely connected with the relatively high development and living standards in the sub-Saharan African nation. "Of course, passion is the foundation of football," he explains. "Many kids already have very good technique after spending so many hours playing on the streets, but talent can be found just about everywhere in Africa."

Empacher believes that Ghana's key advantages are its footballing infrastructure, the national association's training pro-



**THINKING CLEARLY**

Almost in the Ghanaian Premier League: Hours after winning promotion, two Dreams FC players appear to realise the scale of what they have achieved.

# MALI CATCHING UP

Significant progress has been made in developing young footballers in this West African country. Now the appointment of French coach Alain Giresse at the helm of the senior side suggests that even greater success may lie ahead.



**Alain Giresse**  
The Frenchman has set his sights on winning the Africa Cup of Nations with Mali.

Mali's march to the semifinals of the recent FIFA U-20 World Cup in New Zealand came as no surprise, even if the achievement came from an arid West African nation currently beset by occasional political conflict and with no past success at senior level.

A steady stream of exciting youngsters continues to emerge from the land on the fringe of the Sahara Desert and at junior level they are now regarded with the same respect and fear that almost all African countries have for teams from Ghana and Nigeria, the two countries who have dominated youth competition on the continent for decades.

Mali have yet to win a CAF African Cup of Nations title or qualify for the FIFA World Cup, but it would seem a matter of time now before one, or both, occurs.

From 1974 to 1994, Mali did not qualify for a single Nations Cup tournament and the sport stagnated to such an extent the country was regarded as something of a football lightweight.

But that all changed after a surprise run to the semi-finals at the 1994 Nations Cup in Tunisia and since then Mali has been transformed into one of the continent's heavyweights.

At the apex of this success is the large number of soccer schools, or 'centres de formation',

dotted throughout the country. Initially their proliferation threatened to get out of hand but there is now concerted co-ordination to ensure that all the players at these centres come under the microscope of national team staff.

## Ready for the U-17 World Cup

Among the more high profile schools was the Centre Salif Keita, set up by the former St Etienne striker who was the recipient of the first ever African Footballer of the Year award. The centre grew from being a youth development project to a fully-fledged club that now competes in Mali's premier division and has already competed in the African Champions League. Their honours roll includes success in the "Coupe du Mali".

Mahamadou Diarra, who went on to play for Olympique Lyonnais and Real Madrid, was among the first batch of kids to come through Keita's hands, as did the founder's nephew Seydou Keita, formerly of Barcelona and now with Roma.

Mali went to the FIFA U-20 World Cup with this generation for the first time in 1999 and finished third. Keita was the best player and Diarra ended up joint top goal scorer with five goals. Since then, the country has played at five more FIFA U-20 World Cups, making themselves regulars on the stage.

There has been a steady progression of players from this level through to professional football in Europe and also into the Mali national team, delivering a steady return on development. At under-17 level, Mali are current African champions and play next month at the FIFA U-17 World Cup in Chile.

## Scouting in France

Mali have had three past appearances at the competition, in a row between 1997 and 2001 when they got to the quarter-finals, and are hopeful their latest batch of players, drawn from development centres around the country, can also go on to shine at professional level. Mali also enjoys another source of players from a different developmental source, in that the country also calls upon a growing contingent of players who were born and grew up in France and have undergone their football education there.

Marrying the two types of footballer can sometimes be perilous but more often than not is a major advantage. Mali now hopes that at senior level it can reap rewards. Alain Giresse is the new coach as they set their sights on winning the 2017 CAF Africa Cup of Nations. Their opponents will be treating them with the due respect.

Mark Gleeson

grammes and a steadily increasing number of youth academies, of which there are currently more than ten. “Everything here is done to an international standard,” he says, adding that the high quality of basic education also helps to make the transition to life overseas easier. “Ghanaian players integrate comparatively easily,” the SPOCS chief executive says. “What’s more, scouting is relatively uncomplicated. It’s safe and easy to travel around the country, enabling club officials to gain their own impression of a player in person.” As if that was not enough, the Ghanaian Premier League can also be watched via pay TV, offering enough high-quality video footage to follow matches from a distance.

**WAFAs football boarding school success**

Dreams FC are keen to play a key role in that very championship next season, with club officials confident that coach and former Wolfsburg and Ghana captain Charles Akonnor can cement the top-flight status of a young side in which no player is older than 21. “The higher standard of the Premier League will make that leap to European football a little easier for our talented youngsters,” says Dreams president Mohammed Jiji Alifoe, who oversees the club with Okraku.

Dreams FC’s aims have already been achieved by the West African Football Academy SC, or WAFAs for short, who have been this season’s surprise package after gaining promotion the year before. With two rounds of matches remaining, Dutchman John Kila’s side currently lie sixth in the 16-team division, just two points adrift of third place.

WAFAs, who were supported by leading Dutch club Feyenoord until two years ago and are based at the Feyenoord Academy in Gomoa Fetteh, have provided a youth development model for Ghanaian football to follow. Led by experienced Ghanaian coach Sam Arday, the academy offers by far the most state-of-

the-art sporting facilities anywhere in the country, originally built by drinks giant Red Bull to house their own academy before WAFAs moved in. With its three artificial pitches and a further a natural turf pitch soon to be added, plus a modern gym, swimming pool, offices and player accommodation, the site is reminiscent of a holiday resort.

The complex is currently unusually empty. With the school holidays well underway,

most of the academy’s 75 players have returned home to families they have not seen in months. Unlike Dreams FC, where players receive an exclusively football-oriented education, WAFAs is more akin to a boarding school for the sport. Players are invited to the academy at the age of 12 after being selected by a team of three full-time scouts led by Belgian Karel Brokken. According to academy head Arday, getting a place at the school is extremely difficult, “but once you’re in, you have a unique opportunity”. The budding young footballers receive a five-year scholarship, completing their education during this time while progressing through the academy’s youth ranks under the watchful eye of its six coaches. Players regularly pit their skills against Europe’s best youth teams at tournaments; three weeks ago, the U-16s defeated sides such as Borussia Dortmund at the Next Generation Trophy in Salzburg before falling to Red Bull Salzburg in the final.

“It’s extremely difficult to get a place at the academy, but once you’re in you have a unique opportunity.”

Sam Arday, head of the WAFAs football boarding school



**WAFAs, A MODEL ACADEMY**

Sam Arday, head of the boarding school, poses with talented youngster Majeed Ashimeru (centre); the top image was taken in Arday’s office, while the bottom photo shows the first team being put through their paces at training.

Once they complete their education at around 17 – something Arday considers hugely important – the young graduates are free to decide on their future. The most talented members of the class make it into the first team, where none of the players are older than 20, or move to another club in Ghana in a bid to make it onto an even greater stage. At the very least, the remaining students leave with a formal education and the chance to succeed in another sphere of life.

The success of the Wafa model is confirmed by its list of alumni, which includes current Ghana internationals Chris-

tian Atsu – currently on loan at Bournemouth from Chelsea – and Harrison Afful, who plays for MLS side Columbus Crew. The academy also provides the national team’s youth ranks with a steady stream of players. Currently based at the national association’s technical centre in Prampram as they prepare for a tournament between West African nations in Burkina Faso, the U-17 side contains four Wafa players, including slender yet agile Lawrence Ofori, who pulls the strings in defensive midfield. Arday has a special connection with the Black Starlets, as the U-17s are known in Ghana, having coached



**TECHNICAL CENTRE, PRAMPARAM**

Thanks to FIFA funds, improvements have been made to these facilities over recent years, including the player accommodation in the background.





**HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Lawrence Ofori (top) and his U-17 team-mates (bottom) after their 2-0 win over Glow Lamp Academy; the centre image shows a plaque at association headquarters declaring the implementation of FIFA's Goal project.

them to victory in the World Cup for their age group back in 1995. Although he had eight months with the team to prepare them for that competition, he explains that this period was vital at a time when the country had yet to establish a single academy and the players were far less polished. While current U-17 national coach Paa Kwesi Fabin has just six weeks to mould his players into a unit, the fact that almost half of them have been through academies is a great help. "They've got a better tactical grounding than players from other clubs," Fabin confirms. It is no coincidence that the U-17s consistently play friendlies against academy sides; a week earlier they inflicted a 2-0 defeat on Glow Lamp Soccer Academy, led by former Anderlecht, Aston Villa and PSV Eindhoven midfielder Nii Odartey Lamptey. The game was a good test, and not just for the young internationals. "It's tough to find competitors at our level," said Lamptey.

**Encouraging 10-year-olds**

The Ghana Football Association has acknowledged this problem, as technical director Francis Oti Akenteng – a coaching legend in his own right and assistant to Sam Arday in the U-17s 1995 World Cup triumph – confirms: "We will organise special tournaments for academies in future." This move will enable promising young footballers to test themselves against players in the same age group. Ghana's FA is also keen to bolster clubs' youth departments, with every Premier League club already obliged to form an U-20 side, while FIFA's new, globally implemented Club Licensing System will require them to have two youth teams from next season onwards. Another idea is to operate a football academy for 10 to 15-year-olds at the technical centre in Prampram to reduce the FA's reliance on the work of private academies. The buildings for this school have already been built.

One of the association's first large-scale scouting initiatives in Tamale unearthed a slender youngster by the name of Abdul Rahman Baba, who benefited from its grassroots efforts long before Dreams FC brought him to Accra. As Akenteng says: "The fact that he is now playing for Chelsea has already made us feel a little proud." ❄

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"People are more receptive to pointing a mobile phone at them than they would a traditional camera. This atmosphere allows me to engage them more intimately without the awkward tensions that exists between sitter and photographer. I used the Hipstamatic app on the iPhone 6+. I maintained a consistent lens/film combination." **Francis Kokoroko**

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**GHANA**

**POPULATION:** 27 million

**CAPITAL:** Accra

**PRESIDENT:** John Dramani Mahama

**NATIONAL TEAM COACH:** Avram Grant

**WORLD CUP APPEARANCES:** 2006, 2010, 2014

**FIFA:** FIFA invested approximately \$1 million between 2009 and 2012 as part of the Goal programme. These funds enabled the improvement of facilities at the technical centre in Prampram. A football academy is also being established at the same location.