

Engen Celebrates South Africa's talented Youth

This Youth Day Engen is celebrating the beautiful game for the many bright futures that football has afforded many of the 30 000-plus players who have participated in the Engen Knockout Challenge, South Africa's most prestigious youth football initiative which celebrates its 16th anniversary this year.

Since 2003 the Engen Knockout Challenge has formed part of Engen's Youth Development Program. The tournament, which takes place in five provinces across South Africa and culminates in the Engen Champ of Champs, specifically targets players under the age of 18.

An incredible 181 Engen Knockout Challenge alumni have gone on to play professional football for top local and overseas teams, including Bafana Bafana captain, Thulani Hlatshwayo who took part in the Engen Knockout Challenge in 2005.

Rising star Sipho Mbule, who at just 20 plays for SuperSport United, is another example of the many opportunities that sport offers the young and the talented.

Sipho, who grew up in Bethlehem in the Free State, started playing football at a very young age and was immediately hooked. He played in the Engen Knockout Challenge in 2015 and has not looked back. He has this message for South Africa's youth:

"Growing up my family, who are my greatest supporters and inspiration, always told me to keep pushing. I knew that if I kept pushing, better things would come my way."

Sipho also believes that a lot can happen in one year. "If you concentrate on what you really want to do with your life and what you want to achieve, then your dreams will be realised." In his down time, Sipho visits his family home in Bethlehem where he spends time with his parents and younger brother and sister.

Looking ahead, Sipho says he would like to win the league with Supersport United. "We are in the top eight and we need to defend our position. Playing overseas is also one of my dreams." Another success story is Phakamani Mahlambi, who was spotted by the CEO of The Players Club, Glyn Binkin in 2015 at the Engen Knockout Challenge. Phakamani is now an international superstar and plays for Egyptian giants, Al Ahly.

Phakamani cannot believe that all his dreams have become a reality. His message for South Africa's youth is that education comes before anything else.

"Youngsters must understand that you won't play football for many years. You need to have something to fall back. My message to them is to keep on working hard and never give up. They must stay away from drugs and alcohol, and always stay away from negative people," says Phakamani.

Phakamani, who was born in Louwsburg, KwaZulu-Natal but grew up in Johannesburg, started playing football at the age of six. He says his football coach father helped him to stay focused on his game.

On days when he needs a bit of inspiration, Phakamani says it's his family that keeps him

going. "They inspire me to achieve even more in my career, especially my daughter". His dream for the future is to play for one of the big international teams and definitely to be part of the Bafana Bafana team for a longer period.

"What I love most about South Africans is that we have Ubuntu and our country is beautiful."

Glyn Binkin is a firm supporter of the Engen Knockout Challenge and the petroleum giant's commitment to youth development. The acclaimed soccer agent believes it gives players like Phakamani and others an opportunity to be scouted by local and international professional teams.

"The Engen Knockout Challenge and Engen Champ of Champs have a country-wide approach and ensure that players from all backgrounds are given an equal opportunity to achieve greatness. Engen is not just playing lip service about development, they are actually out there making a difference."

It seems anything is possible if you dream big enough and there is no reason why South Africa's youth should not strive to achieve the very best that life has to offer them.