



Interview: Justin Walley, Matabeleland Manager

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A lot of the participants in the ConIFA World Football Cup have had to make sacrifices and overcome various hardships to take part. Justin Walley has agreed to work for no pay for nine months and been separated from his girlfriend for months at a time.





However, the Matabeleland manager is looking to make a mark on the tournament. His plans for his side, [representing a region of Zimbabwe](#), extend far beyond the tournament: "I think we might help reshape Zimbabwean football for the better. When Premier League clubs here see us doing a better job than them with their big money and our very limited resources, it will inevitably lead to change. We are empowering young men, giving them hope for the future. Those players who are travelling to London will see their lives change for the better as a result of this experience. Some players will no doubt get signed by professional and semi-pro teams here and abroad.

"On a personal career level, I recognised the amazing opportunity to lead a football team to a global football tournament; that might be once-in-a-lifetime."

Walley whose previous football experience includes helping run Riga United, setting up their youth academy and leading their women's side to third in the Latvian Premier League. Six Riga United players have played for the national side since Walley become involved.

He has continued this level of involvement with the Matabele squad: "Preparation for us is a 24/7 thing," he begins.

"Many people probably think I am exaggerating but for our management team in Zimbabwe we are involved seven days per week: whether it is training, fundraising, negotiating with airlines, sponsors, organising transport, doing social media. Yesterday afternoon I found myself making sandwiches for the players for after their fitness session."





Over the turn of the year, Zimbabwe was rocked with the removal of Robert Mugabe from power by the military. Mugabe had orchestrated what it is considered by many as a genocide against the Matabele people in the 1980s.

I can't help but ask if this has affected the preparation: "Not really. It had an effect back in November with a week of missed training sessions but if anything the current 'more free' atmosphere in Zimbabwe makes life easier for everyone."

Walley, who may have found himself the manager of a Pacific Island national team had an official not reneged on a verbal agreement and took the job himself, admits to being scared during this period but confesses "the biggest issue was sometimes my own imagination."

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A major issue has been funding. Businesses are reticent to get involved with sponsorship as they feel the team is politically motivated, though Walley is adamant it is not. They require money to pay for equipment and transport and poor pitches are a problem for the team.

"Having portable goal posts is a luxury we take for granted in many countries but when you don't have this it can really limit some of your training drills."

Several other ConIFA members have donated money included Szekely Land, Ellan Vannin, Yorkshire and Northern Cyprus. This, in Walley's view, contributes to the beauty of the tournament: "We shan't forget this help and friendship."

"I think every region, country and de facto state has its own unique story. Football should be for all. It is as simple as that. Politically isolated regions participating in CONIFA competitions have the opportunity to not only play football but also remind the world that they exist; to share their unique culture with others and to make new friendships."

During preparation, the side has beaten teams playing the top leagues in Zimbabwe, in the week before tournament, they will be playing domestic sides in bordering South Africa. So what would constitute success for Walley?



"Giving every opponent we meet a game. Winning each opponent's respect. If everything falls into place for us and I mean all the players getting their visas, staying fit and on form and lady luck favouring us, then I see no reason why we cannot beat anybody playing at the tournament, even the likes of Panjab and Pachuca."



As for after the tournament, Walley wishes to continue the develop of Matabele football and try to conquer some personal targets if he can: "I want this team to win a major tournament, to become a football factory for successful, professionally-groomed footballers. I want the MFC to become the most respected football brand in Zimbabwe.



"Looking at my own career and life, I am not a person who ever looks very long term. I believe in the here and now. I have a list of things I want to do and achieve in life, and I try to work through them as and when they are possible. My biggest ambition in life is to see every country on the planet. So far, I am extremely fortunate to have experienced over 125 countries. That adventure continues.

"I would like to become a national team head coach for a developing nation and I will pursue this dream. But if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. Most of all it is important to be happy, spend time with family and friends, and have your health. Live each day whenever possible."





Walley, who has volunteered with the Craig Bellamy Foundation in Sierra Leone, is also optimistic about the future of Zimbabwe: "Things have improved a lot in Zimbabwe although no one knows what will happen during and after this summer's elections. Zimbabwe is at a crossroads. If things continue to change for the better here then this country has an extremely bright future. Because, in all honesty, Zimbabwe has the potential to be the very best country in all of Africa."

Matabeleland are in Group B alongside Padania, Szekely Land and Tuvalu. Their opening match against Padania in Sutton the 31st May will be featured on The National Student with live Twitter updates and a full match report after the game.

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