

Lucas Radebe

"During the Africa Cup of Nations in 1996 I was honoured to wear the green and gold jersey of our country and to see the national team and to represent our country as Captain, it was an unbelievable experience and a great achievement. I think for any soccer player you want to represent your country, you want to play against the best in the world and I was fortunate that I did." - Lucas Radebe.

The acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa has featured its thirteenth icon of its second season: Lucas Radebe, a South African soccer legend who is hailed as one of the greatest international soccer players of our nation. Playing on the streets of Soweto as a youngster inspired his passion for the game and spurred his devotion to the skill of ball playing.



21 ICONS is a showcase for the South African spirit; a tribute to the men and women who have helped to shape our country and, indeed, our world. The series is part of an annual project which features unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, one of the continent's pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers.

Steirn comments, "I've met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful - it's a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them."

Steirn's portrait of Radebe appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster. The beautiful portrait included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. Radebe has nominated a charity of his choice to be the recipient of the funds.

Strength and leadership

In recognition of his roots and heritage, the portrait features Radebe in the traditional attire of a Zulu chief and which is fitting for a man who led the teams he represented throughout his career to success and epitomises strength and leadership.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Radebe talks about his life as one of South Africa's most successful soccer exports.

A former Bafana Bafana captain and dubbed 'the Chief' of English Premier League side, Leeds United, he has achieved great acclaim on many international soccer pitches as well as here at home. The iconic Madiba once referred to Radebe as 'my hero' while visiting Leeds United on an overseas trip to England.

Born into a large family of ten siblings, Radebe grew up in Diepkloof, Soweto. As a close knit community he recollects playing a variety of games but most notably soccer, "I remember playing my first game in our street, then it grew from there and we formed teams according to the streets. The side that I first played for was Wolf Wanderers, I was about eight years old, maybe even younger, five years old when I started playing and it was about getting us together and enjoying ourselves."

He adds that he and the other guys played soccer for the love of the game. "I was really passionate about the game, never realising I would develop into a professional player learning the values that you use in the game -, respect and discipline, but I think, during those years, it carved that skill and once I grew up and developed into the sport itself and received proper coaching, you know those were the elements that formed my development, leadership qualities and success."

Start of his career

Realising his career dream in 1989 he was drafted to play for one of South Africa's most popular (and most successful) soccer teams, Kaizer Chiefs, and his prowess and agility on the field soon gained him a reputation as being a formidable defender, and the international football fraternity took notice.

"I'll tell you a secret", Radebe reveals, "I used to support the Orlando Pirates actually I do, nobody knows this, I'm a buccaneer fan."

After great success on South African soil, this intelligent, acrobatic footballer traversed the oceans in 1994 into wet, drizzly England on a transfer to Leeds United. Here he was adored and acknowledged and was appointed captain of Leeds for the 1998/99 season. Under his leadership and with a massive fan base Radebe concentrated on successfully putting Leeds on the road to victory. In 2000 he was awarded the prestigious FIFA Fair Play Award for his contribution in ridding soccer of racism as well as for his work with children in South Africa.

"When I arrived in Leeds it was amazing! I had no idea what Leeds looked like and it was the first time I left South Africa so for me it was a different era and generation. Leeds United was an eye opener and it was a great experience for me that I really appreciated."

In 2000, Radebe suffered knee and ankle injuries from which he took almost two years to recover, but by 2002 he was fit again, and after four matches in the Leeds reserve team was selected once more as Bafana Bafana's World Cup captain.

His country was never far from his mind and in between his experience overseas Radebe played with Bafana Bafana to win the African Nations Cup in 1996. "I think it was a great age where soccer wasn't only about the game, it was the time of the reconstruction of the country, we had a lot to play for, and we had role models like Madiba. Lifting the cup was one of the greatest moments in my career and it was the first time that we hosted the African Nations Cup and won it, I mean we made everybody proud and to see the rainbow nation, to see black and white together, all in the crowd was absolutely special."

Ambassador for the game

This great international hero hung up his boots and retired from professional soccer in 2005, but he went on to become an ambassador for the game on home soil in South Africa. Now a businessman, television presenter and sporting personality, he is an inspirational icon for South Africa's youth. He is active in youth development and works with various foundations and sports academies that provide young South Africans with opportunities in order to empower them with various life skills and the importance of honesty, hard work and education in order to drive social change.

He played a focal role in commenting on the FIFA 2010 World Cup, which took place in South Africa, and was part of the team that launched Brand South Africa's campaign in 2012: 'Inspiring New Ways'.

Radebe, now South Africa's most-capped soccer player has many successes on the field including his work for a number of educational, social and charitable initiatives, including the Starfish charity for HIV and Aids orphans and the "Reach for a Dream" Foundation; for which the University of Cape Town conferred an honorary Master of Social Sciences degree on him in 2005. He has also served as the FIFA ambassador for the SOS Children's Villages.

The Presidency awarded him the Order of Ikhamanga (in silver) in 2005, the same year that the universities of Cape Town and Leeds Metropolitan awarded him honorary masters and doctorate degrees.

Radebe laughs as he tells Steirn that his mother never really approved of him being a soccer player as she had great aspirations that her son would become a doctor. "When I retired, after playing for Leeds and having achieved so much with the club, I was honoured with a doctorate and I went back to my ma you know, and while I didn't have a stethoscope I was a doctor. It was wonderful you see even though I play soccer I can be a doctor and my ma was so proud of my career and since then soccer has been in our family where everybody plays the game."

In a career spanning over two decades, he has risen to the heights of his chosen occupation, enhanced the image of his home continent's soccer players, fought against racism in sport, inspired hundreds of thousands of young fellow countrymen and ploughed back the fruits of his endeavours into helping ill and deprived children, not only in South Africa, but elsewhere in the world.

Programme synopsis

Lucas Radebe takes Steirn on a journey across a soccer pitch telling stories of his 70 appearances for the South African national side Bafana Bafana and making headlines when he captained Leeds United, being the first black South African to captain an English side in the English Premier League.

About 21 Icons South Africa

21 ICONS South Africa is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.

Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.



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