

## ***A Superhero***

One Saturday, Khazamula and his friends were playing a game of football in the long grass on their rough field. Khanyisa and some of her teammates were playing with them. Khanyisa was standing between two small piles of stones that were the goalposts.

Khazamula, who had possession of the ball, was running up along the imaginary sideline with two defenders in hot pursuit but he snuck past them and was approaching the imaginary goal box.

Watching him hurtling towards her, Khanyisa was poised for the attack.

Just as her little brother drew up opposite her, she hurled herself at his feet, grabbed the ball and flung it over his head to her striker.

Khazamula stared in astonishment for a moment and then streaked off down the field to be in position for a pass.

One of the defenders passed the ball to the other goalie who kicked it high over the sideline. It landed on the road and was almost squashed by an approaching car, Papa's car.

Papa stopped alongside the field and the players saw that there was someone in the passenger seat.

Papa got out, opened the boot, pulled out a wheelchair and took it around to his passenger, Freddy Mathebula, former star of Gama Gama, FC.

'What are they doing here?' Khanyisa wondered. 'Papa has been visiting Uncle Freddy a lot in the last few months.'

Uncle Freddy rode his wheelchair into the middle of the field and Papa motioned to all the players to come up around them and sit. He said that he and Uncle Freddy had a plan that involved all of them and he wanted to know what they thought of it.

He told them that they had applied to the Dreamfields Project to help them provide proper soccer grounds and training for the children of Mangombe.

All the little soccer players cheered.

Khazamula almost jumped up to give his Papa a big hug.

Khanyisa suddenly remembered what Ma had said about dreams and dreaming and laughed to herself. Ma was a dreamer herself and never got anything right about soccer. Khanyisa put up her hand.

‘Yes, Khanyisa,’ Papa smiled.

‘What is the Dreamfields Project, Papa?’

‘It is a plan that a journalist, John Perlman, came up with to make the dreams of people like us come true. The Dreamfields people are helping communities like ours by building sports grounds and providing sports equipment and uniforms.’

Then all the players were shouting at once. ‘Are we going to get real soccer boots? Will we have jerseys?’

A proper soccer field?

Proper training?’

Papa and Uncle Freddy, who were just as excited as the youngsters, laughed heartily.

‘And will we have a proper coach?’ Khazamula who had been involved with SCORE, which brought out overseas coaches, was hoping that Ronaldinho would come to Mangombe to coach them.

‘Yes,’ Papa said. ‘ You will have a famous soccer star to train you. It took me a long time to convince him but he finally agreed.’ All the children looked eagerly at Papa but Khanyisa’s eyes were filled with suspicion.

When Papa turned to Freddy, Khanyisa knew.

Papa said, ‘Children, let me introduce you to your new coach, the fabulous Freddy Mathebula, former world-class striker, and star of Gama Gama, FC.’

The children looked at Uncle Freddy, their eyes full of uncertainty. ‘But Uncle Freddy is crippled,’ Khazamula burst out, ‘how can he coach us?’ Uncle Freddy’s face fell. He looked upset and turned his wheel chair to go.

Papa stopped him.

‘Khazamula, you apologize to Uncle Freddy at once.’

‘But Papa...’

Uncle Freddy put his hand on Papa’s arm. ‘It’s all right, Jabu. I understand. I told you it wouldn’t work.’

‘No, Freddy,’ Papa said, ‘ this project won’t work without you. You are the inspiration behind it. I would never have approached Dreamfields if it hadn’t been for you.’

Then Papa turned to Khazamula.

‘So you think that Uncle Freddy is not good enough to be your coach.

Why?

Because he is in a wheelchair?

Do you know what that is?

It’s discrimination.

It’s like saying that because you are black, you cannot be in the flag crew for the FIFA World Cup.’

Khazamula hung his head but he still couldn’t see how a person in a wheelchair could be a coach.

‘Haven’t you seen our wheelchair basketball players? Haven’t you seen Oscar Pistorius, who has no legs, running in races and winning?

Open your eyes children.

Heroes don’t let anything stand in their way.

They still take part in sport even when they lose one limb, two limbs, they don’t give up.

That is what you call heroic.

They are powerful people.

They believe in themselves and do not give up when they face tremendous challenges. But I know some people, people who have both their legs,’ he looked straight at Khazamula, ‘who give up when things are not going their way.’

Papa stopped to look at each and every child there.

‘Now, are you prepared to work with a hero who knows more about soccer than all of us put together?

Are you smart enough to take advantage of that?

Or are you going to cling to your prejudices and lose someone who can make this club, the

Mangombe Eagles, a truly great soccer club?’

Khanyisa spoke up. ‘Uncle Freddy, please forgive us for our doubts. I think you will make a wonderful coach. I want to learn from you.’

The other children were not sure but when they thought of the football fields and all the football equipment, they agreed to accept Uncle Freddy. But Uncle Freddy could see that they didn’t really want him.

Papa said quietly to Uncle Freddy, ‘Please brother, give us a chance. I am depending on you.’ Freddy looked at him uncertainly and then gave a small smile.

Papa shook his hand heartily.

‘Thank you, brother.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Your wonderful talent should not go to waste.’

In the next few weeks, after the Dreamfields people had graded the grassy plot and put up proper goalposts, the training began. Some of the children did not turn up, the ones who didn’t believe in Uncle Freddy. Those who stayed with him were put through a vigorous training programme. Uncle Freddy’s wheelchair could be seen moving swiftly over the field as he explained what he wanted, corrected mistakes and challenged them to aim higher and higher.

The children soon learned that Uncle Freddy wasn’t a useless cripple, he was a most demanding coach and as they began to feel their bodies growing stronger and their skills improving, they realised that they were very lucky to have him as a coach.

The teachers, who had coached them before, couldn’t compare.

Even Khazamula had to admit that somebody like Uncle Freddy must have trained Ronaldinho when he was a boy. And Khazamula wanted to cry with happiness. He knew now, really knew, for the first time that he was going to make it.

One of these days, people would be speaking of him as they speak of Federico Macheda and Tyroane Sandows.

He felt ashamed that he had doubted Uncle Freddy.

One afternoon, Papa took Ma to watch the Mangombe Eagles training. Ma, of course, didn't know what was going on but she could feel the joy in Papa.

And as she watched Uncle Freddy's wheel chair flying over the field, she saw again the superstar of Gama Gama, FC.

She smiled.

She had a wonderful idea for a new embroidered picture.