

The Flag Crew

The only time Khanyisa switched on the TV was to watch football matches.

Today she was going to watch Black Leopards playing in a Nedbank Cup fixture.

She had wanted to go to Venda where the match was being played but Papa didn't have time to take her.

He was visiting Freddy Mathebula, who had been involved in an accident some years before and had been confined to a wheel chair ever since.

Freddy Mathebula had been the most outstanding player of his time but the accident, which had paralyzed him from the waist down, had brought a sudden end to his runaway success.

While she was waiting for the match to begin, Khanyisa went into the kitchen to get some juice. Khazamula was sitting at the table poring over his album of soccer stars.

'Hey Khazamula, Black Leopards are playing today. Don't you want to watch.' Khazamula shook his head. **'Oh come on, you know you can pick up tips watching games.'** Today I will keep my eyes fixed on Posnet Omony, Black Leopards' goalie.

I think he's great.

You coming?'

Khazamula shook his head again. 'Oh, come on, cheer up.

Why are you moping?'

'I wish I were living in a different country. I don't have a chance here in Limpopo. Look at Federico Macheda.

He's only seventeen and he is playing for Manchester United.

In their last two matches, he scored the winning goals.

Man U discovered him and brought him from Italy to Manchester.

They brought his whole family too.'

'Khazamula you are only eleven. You are a talented player. Just work hard and you will make it. Come on, now. Come watch the game with me.' But Khazamula just sat there dejectedly paging through his album.

Khanyisa shrugged and went back to the living room.

Just as she was about to sit down, she saw that the TV commercial calling for volunteers for the Confederations Cup Flag Crew was on.

It was Khazamula's favourite commercial and she called out to him to come and watch.

He ran in from the kitchen and stood in front of the TV.

First the Confederations Cup flag came rolling out at him and then the picture widened to show children holding it.

More children came on carrying flags of different countries.

They were shown marching onto the field.

The next shot was of football stars singing a national anthem

Then came the great Brazilian footballer, Ronaldo, running, smiling and wagging his finger as he always does when he scores a goal.

But Khazamula was waiting for the last shot. He stood watching with bated breath. Then he jumped up in excitement and laughed as his hero came on the screen.

He laughed as Ronaldinho, the world's number one striker,

hoisted the Cup above his head.

‘Ah, if I could be in the flag crew, I could see Ronaldinho in person. But I am not lucky. I won’t get a chance.’

‘You will next year, when you are twelve.’

Then you can apply to be in the flag crew.’

‘It won’t make a difference.’

‘Really Khazamula, I thought you were a fighter.’

Why are giving up?’

‘Being twelve won’t make a difference.’

I know I won’t get in.’

‘You won’t if you don’t try.’

‘It won’t make any difference.’

Don’t you see, kids like me don’t stand a chance?’

‘That’s nonsense.’

Why do you say that?’

‘They don’t want Black kids. Didn’t you see?’

All the kids in the advertisement are white.’

‘Oh man.’

That’s just an advertisement.

The agency that made the advertisement chose children for the advertisement, not the flag crew.

That is not the real flag crew that you see there.’

‘But they show Black kids in other advertisements.’

Why not this one?’

White kids don’t like soccer.’

Why did they choose them?’

‘It’s just a stupid mistake.’

It does not mean you cannot apply.’

‘That’s what you say.’

Khazamula stamped off to the kitchen. Khanyisa shrugged and turned to the football match. When Papa came home that evening, Khanyisa asked him to explain to Khazamula about the flag crew.

But Khazamula did not believe him either.

‘Just watch the advertisement Papa and you will see.’

So Papa sat down with Khazamula and watched.

‘All right, my boy, you have made your point.’

‘So I’m right.’

‘It’s useless for me to apply.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

I am going to write to the sponsors and tell them what that advertisement is saying to you.

I am going to tell them that you want to know why you cannot be in the flag crew.’

‘Tell them I want to be there so I can see Ronaldinho.’

Maybe I can get his autograph.’

During the weeks that they waited for a reply from the flag crew sponsors, Papa would look impatiently through the post and then shake his head in disappointment. But Khazamula knew there would be nothing.

He just said, ‘Don’t waste your time, Papa.’

I told you they don’t take black children.’

Then one day there was a letter in the postbox with the logo of the sponsoring company.

Khanyisa, on her way back from school, was the one to find it and she flew into the house like a goalie diving for the ball.

‘Papa, Papa,’ she shouted, ‘a letter from the flag crew sponsors.’

Mani came out of the kitchen, ‘Papa hasn’t come home yet. What’s all the excitement?’

‘It’s the letter about the flag crew.’

‘Flag crew?’

What's that?

What flag?'

'Oh Ma!

Mother was just like Misaveni.

She took no interest in soccer.

She spent all her time sewing embroidered pictures of animals, trees and flowers.

Khanyisa couldn't understand how she could sit for hours stitching away, and by hand too. Khanyisa couldn't sit still like that. How could Mother and Misaveni spend so much time sitting and poring over cloth or canvas?

It would drive her crazy.

Then she saw Khazamula at the gate, and ran out to show him the letter.

'See, you didn't believe Papa and me.

But here it is, the letter about the flag crew.'

'So what does it say?'

'I didn't open it.

It's for Papa.

I wish he would come home now.'

Khazamula pushed past Khanyisa. 'I am sure the letter will tell Papa to mind his own business.

They can choose whoever they want for the flag crew.

It was getting late and Papa still wasn't home. Mother asked Khanyisa to set the table for supper.

'Papa phoned to say he will be late and we should not wait for him.' 'Where is he Mani? What's going on?'

'He went to visit his friend, Freddy Mathebula.'

'Uncle Freddy!

Oh no!

Then he won't be home for hours.'
'Your Papa is planning something with Freddy.'
'What Ma?

Mr Mathebula is a paraplegic.

What can they do together?'
'I don't know, Khanyisa.

Something about dreams.

Dreaming or something?'
'Ma, that doesn't make sense.

Never mind, Ma, you live in your own world of dreams.'

When it was time for bed, Papa still wasn't home. Khanyisa tried to wait up for him but when Mani found her fast asleep on the sofa, she sent her off to bed. In the morning, when the children went into the kitchen for breakfast, Khanyisa looked for Papa but he wasn't there.

'Mani, didn't Papa come home last night.'

'Yes, he did. But he was out again early this morning. He seems to be very excited about something.'
'Was it the letter?' 'Letter?'
What letter?'
'Oh Ma, didn't you tell him about the letter?'

She dashed into the living room and there was the letter still unopened lying on the coffee table.

Khanyisa sighed and went back into the kitchen.

After school that afternoon, Khazamula and Khanyisa were at the grassy plot that they used as their football field.

Khazamula was working with the other forwards, passing in formation. Khanyisa, at the side of the field, with two friends and a rope, was practising the high jump.

A car pulled up nearby and hooted.

When Khanyisa turned around, she saw Papa getting out of his car.

He called and waved excitedly.

He was holding the open letter in his hand.

Khanyisa started to run towards him but Papa shouted, 'Get Khazamula.

Tell him to come too.'

Khanyisa darted across the ground, grabbed hold of Khazamula and dragged him to where Papa was waiting. Papa was beaming. He took hold of Khazamula's hand and shook it vigorously. 'Congratulations, my boy, you did it. You did it.' He picked Khazamula up and gave him a big hug. Khanyisa was jumping up and down beside them.

'What happened, Papa?

What does the letter say?

Papa, Papa!

Papa set Khazamula down, took out the letter and pointing to it said, 'The sponsors say they are very sorry about the advertisement.

They did not mean to give the impression that you could not be part of the flag crew.'

'You see, Khazamula, I told you,' Khanyisa was laughing.

'But wait, that's not all.

They say they are very grateful to you for pointing out their mistake.'

'Oh, wow, Papa!

Khanyisa grabbed Khazamula and hugged him. 'You see, you see.'

'Wait Khanyisa, I haven't finished,' Papa said. 'To show you how grateful they are, they have decided that next year when you are twelve, you will be on the list for the flag crew of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.'

Khazamula's eyes opened wide.

He couldn't speak.

All he could see was the image of Ronaldinho, laughing, holding high the Confederations Cup Trophy.