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THE CALL OF THE CUP: AFRICAN AUSTRALIAN SOCCEROOS

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While politicians were arguing over the value of migrants from different countries and cultures, Tony Popovic announced the Socceroo team for the 2026 World Cup.

The final 26-member squad includes no fewer than six players of African descent, some born in Australia and others on the distant continent.

With more than 520,000 Australian citizens and residents having African descent, the story starts with local kickabouts in parks and at beaches. It moves on to African players' involvement at junior levels, followed by participation in professional clubs competing in the Men's A-League and the A-League Women. For some, their form led to overseas contracts and playing for Football Australia's national teams - the Matildas or the Socceroos.

1 A-LEAGUE PARTICIPATION

As early as 2022, 34 players of African descent had played professionally for men's A-League teams. Soccer clubs are motivated by the twin needs of being competitive on the field and financial in the board room, and not by political or social sentiment. Adelaide United, however, has long supported diversity in the world game. It has attracted and nurtured many players of African descent, who have in turn contributed to the success of this, and other, clubs.

These players' progress through Adelaide United and beyond is also facilitated by the annual African Nations Cup, which started in South Australia with four teams of African descent and now has 20 sides in both male and female competitions. The Cup has equivalents in other

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jurisdictions and recruiters from professional clubs are common observers at these events.

Players of African descent have played in many other Football Australia (FA) clubs. In the Australian Professional League's men's A-League final against Auckland FC in May 2026, Sydney FC selected Akol Akon to start. The final was played a few days after his 17th birthday and Akon, of South Sudanese descent, became the youngest player to start in a final; the self-styled 'Sudo' played a key part in his team's semi-final match.

Musa Toure, who was born in Guinea with Liberian heritage, became the youngest A-League player to score when representing Adelaide in 2020 — a few weeks short of his 16th birthday. His five siblings also play high level soccer, as did his father in both Guinea and Liberia. Nestory Irankunda was the youngest player to score a hat-trick in a 2024 A-League game.

Other players in the men's A-League have come, or are descended from, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire.

2 PLAYING ABROAD

In mid-2023, a player of African descent from Adelaide United was signed for top European club Bayern Munich for a transfer fee reputed to be worth $5.5 million. A striking feature of the transfer was the player's age of 17. International rules stipulate that the minimum age for such transfers is 18, requiring him to bide his time locally. The Tanzanian-born teenager of Burundian descent is Nestory Irankunda who had been with Adelaide for three years, scoring regularly in A-League matches, including the hat-trick referred to earlier. He is now a highly regarded striker for the Socceroos.

Brothers Alou and Garang Kuol came to Australia from Egypt as South Sudanese refugees and settled in Shepparton, a city that many migrants have made their home. Elder brother Alou, after relatively few top-level games, accepted a transfer offer from top German side, VfB Stuttgart. Alou was only 19 years of age at the time but quipped that with his itinerant background he knew what it was like to move to a new country with a different language and culture and that he should adapt more easily than those without his background. His potential had been spotted by Sven Mislintat, one of the top talent spotters in international football. Alou

played for the Stuttgart youth team and a few senior games in the Bundesliga competition. In 2023, he returned to Australia and was part of the Central Coast Mariners FC team (the 'Mariners') that won both the Australian Professional Leagues Championship and Premiership competitions. The Mariners qualified for the Asian Football Confederation's AFC Cup, Asia's secondary club competition, with Kuol scoring the only goal in the 2024 final.

Garang, a few years younger than Alou, also had a meteoric rise. As a youngster he was inspired by Socceroo players Awer Mabil and Thomas Deng. He joined his brother at the Mariners, aged 16, and scored a goal in his A-League debut. After time at the Mariners he secured a transfer to Newcastle United in the English Premier League. He has also played for teams in Scotland, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic.

Garang played alongside Alou for the Australian under-23 side and was selected for the senior Australian squad for games against New Zealand/Aotearoa. He came on as a substitute shortly after turning 18, the youngest representative player since the legendary Harry Kewell. He later scored for the Socceroos in a friendly against Ecuador. Here, he joined many other players of African descent who have represented their country.

3 REPRESENTING AUSTRALIA

In the past decade, 12 African Australians have been selected for the Socceroos. The foundations for their achievements are in the local game. Two decades previously, there had been only a single Socceroo originating from Africa within a similar period. This was Patrick Kinsobo who is of Mauritian descent. Shortly before the 2026 A-League final, Sydney FC club awarded Kinsobo, then acting coach, a three-year contract.

Thomas Deng and Awer Mabil were friends from their boyhoods, both having South Sudanese heritage. In 2018, the two made their debuts for the Socceroos in a friendly against Kuwait. In 2021, Deng captained Australia at the Tokyo Olympics. The team achieved a historic 2-0 victory over Argentina in a group game, with Deng receiving the Player of the Match award. His brother Peter has played for the South Sudanese national side.

Mo Toure aged 21, and Irankunda, then 19, went from close childhood friends to starting together for the Socceroos in their 3-1 'Ashes' victory

over New Zealand. The two provided a devastating combination in attack, particularly in the second half. Toure scored two of the goals, and was denied a hat-trick by the VAR system, while Irankunda scored the third and hit the cross bar with a penalty. A few weeks later, they combined again, with Toure's assist and Irankunda's goal giving Australia a 1-0 victory against Canada. Their celebrations after each other's goals were passionate, joyous and gravity-defying. Toure, Irankunda and Mabil were also named in a 2026 UNHCR team of former refugees, designated as the 'game-changers' in soccer.

The Toure family has provided the country with a mini-Australian soccer dynasty. The children are of Liberian descent and were born in a refugee camp in Guinea. The family moved to South Australia when the children were still young. Their father had played professionally before migrating and Al Hassan, Musa, Mohammed and sister Mariam followed his career

Some African Australians had to make a wicked choice: whether to play for their adoptive state or for one or more countries for which they also qualify. The qualifying rules for national soccer selection require Australian citizens who came from other countries to choose their sporting allegiance once, and irrevocably. The decision can present a confronting practical, emotional and strategic choice.

Bruce Kamau played for several A-League clubs and elected to represent his country of origin, Kenya, in international football. There is inevitable equivocation in these choices: Elvis Kamsoba initially turned down selection for the Burundi national team but later changed his mind, thereby precluding his becoming a Socceroo.

Bruce Djité was a star player for Adelaide United and in terms of his place of birth and national descent could have played for Togo, Côte d'Ivoire or the United States. While he played for clubs in several countries, he elected to play internationally for Australia, which he represented at junior and senior levels.

Awer Mabil earned over 35 caps for the Socceroos but would also have been eligible for South Sudan. Jason Geria played for Australia at junior levels meaning he remained eligible for the Ugandan national team — until he was selected for the Socceroos. Youthful Socceroo striker Irankunda indicated his allegiance to Australia early in his career.

4 THE WORLD CUP

The current Socceroo players of African descent are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Socceroo Players of African Descent in 2026

Player	**Country of Origin/Descent**
Nestory Irankunda	Tanzania/Burundi
Tete Yengi	Australia/South Sudan
Mohammed Toure	Guinea/Liberia
Awer Mabil	South Sudan
Jason Geria	Australia/Uganda
Lucas Herrington	Zimbabwe/Finland/Germany

The selections of Mabil, Irankunda and Toure were anticipated after their excellent form at club and international levels. The youthful Herrington is of Zimbabwean, Finnish and German descent. He was born in Brisbane and is a new cap in Popovic's squad. Tete Yengi, whose brother Kusini has also played for the Socceroos, scored Australia's only goal in the team's final practise against Switzerland. The Yengi brothers were both born in Adelaide.

Jason Geria was also born in Australia. He is of Ugandan heritage and represented the Melbourne Victory for several seasons, one of the few to have played more than 100 games for the club. He played for Australia's under-20 and under-23 teams and for the Socceroos. There was a long hiatus before his Cup recall by Tony Popovic on the basis of fine performances in recent years.

Squad inclusion does not guarantee playing time, let alone running onto the field in the starting line-up. Nonetheless there are important social and political implications for the African presence in the Socceroos. It not only provides a reinforcement for a multicultural policy currently under question but also an incentive for other players wishing to become what they now can see.

5 INCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

At face value, the African presence in the Socceroos squad suggest an inclusiveness for them and other migrants. The optics of a multicultural squad are not insignificant for Australian society.

There are also, however, bleak and even dark sides to the participation of African Australians in sport. While many have risen to top shelves in men's and women's sports, there is an unknown factor in terms of those who don't make it because of their schooling, lack of social networks, language difficulties or inability to afford costly fees for junior clubs.

Moreover, very few players of African descent have reached the ranks of coaches and referees, or administrators and commentators, all of whom have important influences in competitive sport. An exception is Bruce Djité who was born in Kenya, was a star player for Adelade, played for the Perth Glory and Wanderers in the A-League and represented Australia at various levels. He became Director of soccer at his old club.

More serious are the virulent racial slurs aimed at Africans in all sports, including soccer. At the time of writing, the AFL is investigating 'vile and racist' abuse directed at South Sudanese Hawthorn player Mabior Chol. The dreaded imperative to 'go back to where you came from' has been heard in many sporting contexts, including soccer, and in public and private spaces. The situation is exacerbated by prominent media figures and politicians suggesting that Australia 'doesn't seem like the same country anymore'. For them, the optics of multiculturalism are threatening and have implications in realms far removed from the sports field.

Perhaps a successful World Cup campaign, starting with Nestory Irnakunda's outstanding goal in the first game. will show that there are many different ways for a country to present and represent itself.