

South Africa 2010: Why Papai Joel is the right man for Bafana hot seat

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Amidst much criticism from the South African press, new national coach Joel Santana has a track record of turning losing teams into championship winners and his recent turnaround successes with Brazilian giants Flamengo suggest he's got what it takes for the hosts to succeed at the next FIFA World Cup.

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When the South African Football Association (SAFA) announced Joel Natalino Santana, the current head coach of Brazilian club Flamengo, to take over from Carlos Alberto Parreira, the local media was unanimous in questioning Santana’s credentials and discarding his track record.

Headlines screamed out “Santana’s Bonanza”, “Santana Who?”, “Joel’s C milk SA for Millions”, “Christmas comes early for jolly Joel”. Articles referred to “the appointment of Joel Santana”, his being “fired four times in two years” “some jour compared SAFA’s decision to “evacating a mansion for a RDP house”, or “downgrading from Rolls-Royce to a rickshaw”, whilst an online survey conducted by The Sowetan revealed that only 19 per cent of respondents reacted positively to Santana’s appointment.

So who is Joel Santana and, above all, is he the right man to turn Bafana Bafana into a championship team, with just 25 months to go to the World Cup in South Africa? He was born on Christmas Day 1948 in Rio de Janeiro. After a football career as a central defender in the 1970s, he became a coach, first at the United Arab Emirates for Al-Wasl (1981-86), then at the legendary Brazilian club Vasco da Gama, with whom he won the State Championship.

Thereafter he coached Al-Hilal and Al-Nasr in Saudi Arabia, before he returned to his homeland and kicked off a coaching campaign which saw him acquire the nicknames Conquistador and Salvador (The Conqueror and Saviour), in particular during his two latest spells at the world’s most supported club, Clube de Regates do Flamengo. First, in 2005, he took over a side that was playing hopelessly and staring at the unthinkable “relegation from the Brazilian Championship Serie A. He masterminded six victories and three draws from the final nine matches to keep Flamengo among the elite, before leaving for an offer “too good to refuse” to join the Japanese side Vegalta Sendai.

Returning to Flamengo in July 2007, he brought about the "miracle" of pulling the team out of the relegation zone and taking them to third place and qualification for the Copa

Libertadores (the South American Champions League) – at the same time, packing the Maracana Stadium in Rio to capacity for each of their home games (that is in excess of 88,000 spectators).

After their last home match against Atletico-PR, Papai Joel enthused: "The support we've had this season has been phenomenal. Without doubt it drove us there [into the Libertadores] –! The fans knew what we needed and they gave us that lift. Just look at how many supporters we had at the Maracana, everybody in the Flamengo colours. It's a dream to see this –! We're like a family and when the supporters unite and get behind us like they did, the team responds. All the way through they have been an inspiration and thanks to them, we've managed to achieve something which seemed impossible."

A tearful Flamengo president, Marcio Braga, concurred with Santana: "I'm in my 70s and have been involved with Flamengo for over 30 years, but I've never seen anything like this. The Flamengo support is incomparable."

To understand the man behind the brand called Joel Santana, one needs to go back to the origins of the club that runs like a golden thread throughout his coaching career and made him the only coach ever to have won Carioca State Championship crowns with Rio de Janeiro's 'big four' – and the Brazilian championship with Vasco da Gama.

Flamengo are the standard-bearers for the working class of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil as a whole, and according to former coach, J lio C sar Leal, are supported by "30 million paupers." Explains Leal: –! In Brazil, our people suffer a great deal and constantly encounter difficulties in daily life. But when you work for a club like Flamengo –! you forget day-to-day difficulties for 90 minutes. This enables us to overcome our own limitations and maintain our will to win, despite the fact that winning one football match after another is far from easy."

This is where Santana's greatest strength lies – being a true Carioca (a Rio synonym that denotes the trait of going out of your way to help others), he understands what it takes to engage an entire community in the fraternity that a winning team provides, and how to build the support of a club's extended family. It is his fatherly qualities that have endeared him so much to the Flamengo supporter base that on the announcement of his resignation, midfielder Toro said: "Joel is like a father for me and I am sad that he is leaving –! We are going to lose a great father, but we will try to win for him and to give our lives for him in the Libertadores."

Having coached a club that is described by their supporters as the –Flamengo Nation–, Santana is well aware of how big a difference the 12th man can make to a team. He is known for his emotional outbursts on the sidelines during games and was reproached last year during a game at rivals Santos for encouraging his players to get physical. He believes in the philosophy of –work hard, play hard– and is a great sport at social events, which endeared him to many fans in Brazil. Unlike the introvert Parreira, who used to shun the limelight and was seldom seen on the social scene, Santana is a people's person and is bound to make friends easily with the South African soccer community.

Maybe Parreira is right and his successor will pick up where the previous World Cup winner left off, that is commanding winning performances and taking Bafana back to the glory days of 1996. And maybe we all should heed Madiba's call to action after the announcement of the 2010 World Cup: –Few places in the world offer you that special hospitality for which the South Africans have become famous,– he said. –We invite you with open arms to our

wonderful country.â€•

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