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Rugby

# Lubega learns how to walk again...like a baby

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By Email **Dhakaba Kigongo** ([email the author](#))

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Many sportsmen in Uganda play with injuries for a large part of their careers. The need to put food on the table demands that these sportsmen momentarily forget the pain.

In more elitist disciplines like basketball and rugby, players have professional careers. So, it's



always about love and passion.

But even then, it's common to see players in the aforementioned sporting disciplines with layers of bandage. Basketball's Steven Okias (Kyambogo Warriors) and Denis Etuket, a winger with G4S Pirates, validate this.

The duo, like many of their colleagues, are not trying to re-invent fashion in the way defender Patrick Ntege did with a bandage in the early 90s while playing for Express to cover a depression on his forehead.

Felix Lubega's rugby career started in usual fairytale style. "I came off the bench for the final 10 minutes and scored two tries against (Toyota) Buffaloes in 2006. I vowed never to sit on the bench again until this injury," he states.

Three years later, Lubega limped off with torn ligaments in both his knees in a game between Pirates and Entebbe Mongers (2009). "Why me?" is the first question to cross his mind.

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### **Long history**

A player with an injury plagued past, it was Lubega's first game following a four-month absence. "People think I got injured against Mongers but I first felt the pain four months earlier in the Kitaka (floodlit) 7s. The Mongers' game just confirmed it," he says with laughter.

Lubega adds: "By the way, I first suffered the problem during an inter-class game in 2003 but opted to hide it. It came up again when playing for the U-19s in Morocco under coach (Yayiro) Musisi Kasasa later that year."

"My first fear was missing the (2011 Rugby World Cup qualifier) semi-final against Tunisia (last June).

"Like all sportsmen who get injured, you think this is my last game but I am very lucky I got operated." However, the operation didn't come so quick as Lubega was to wait another six months before a green light appeared.

"Many doctors thought it was my right knee with a problem until I met an Italian orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Walter Fajjin, working with the Comprehensive Rehabilitation Service in Uganda (Corsu) in Kisubi, (along the Kampala-Entebbe highway)," he says. Dr. Faggin examined Lubega and found his left knee needing urgent attention. "He advised me to travel to Italy to have the

surgery done but I failed to raise the money. At this point, I gave up.

“Then I travelled with the national team to Nairobi, Kenya for the Elgon Cup second leg. In Nairobi, Diana Kenyange (Pirates’ number one fan) met Denis Mwanja of Mwamba, who had suffered a similar injury, and told him about my problem.” It’s from Mwanja that Ugandan rugby got to learn about Kijabe Hospital in Limuru town, north east of the Kenyan capital. The hospital handles the Kenyan rugby team despite it’s ultra-modern facilities, it has remained underutilized by the rest of Africa.

“Mwanja assured Diana that Kijabe offered good services and was affordable so we opted to try it.” Despite national team players being insured by UAP Insurance, Uganda Rugby Union (URU) only came good on their promise in November, nine months after the injury.

“Lubega was not favoured in any way because any player can be operated when need be. Other federations should copy from our lead and follow by acquiring insurers,” URU vice-chairman Foxy Ojambo explained when asked about the selection criteria.

After extensive explanations from Dr. Robert Mendoza, Lubega, in the company of Pirates physio Dr. Dickens Akena underwent reconstructive surgery on his left knee at Kijabe, in the quiet town. Back then, Dr. Mendoza told Lubega said:

“You can only come here when you are very sick.”

“I was to walk in 10 days and use clutches for a month. I was a baby again and had to learn to how to walk; like the very first time,” the 21-year old third-year human medicine student at Makerere University elucidates.

## **Second operation**

Due to the psychological blow of the first surgery, the St. Mary’s College Kisubi old boy opted not to do the second at the 11th hour despite making the journey across the border.

“Doctors were pleased with the progress of my left knee when I went back in January but my mind was not ready to go through the things I had faced after the first surgery.”

The operation was eventually done a month later, exactly one year after that limping off. “The

hardest thing is recovery not the surgery. You need a lot of commitment because rehab is taxing. If handled poorly, one can be like someone who suffered from polio,” Lubega illuminates. During the period on the sidelines, his interaction with doctors has helped him appreciate why he studied knees in first year. “I have used my time to coach my former school too. Now I understand the game more than ever.”Lubega, often correlated with New Zealand legend Jonah Lomu for his size and fierce approach, was introduced to rugby in his senior one in 2001. “I was fat and started out on front row, through to the flanks before ending up on the wing.”

Though he will be able to run in four months, Lubega, who has eight caps scoring four tries in the process, can only rejoin the game after July to be able to play next year but remains indebted to rugby after incurring a Shs10m bill.

“The union have done so much for me and I can never pay back except playing for Uganda again. Even if I fail to play, I commit to serving rugby in whatever capacity.”

For Lubega, the long walk from childhood has just begun but many never get the opportunity.



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