



THE AFRICAN FOOTBALL FOOD CHAIN

"Come to Portugal," says the fat man, "and I'll get you the best of everything." Sitting in the bar of the Ghana team's luxurious hotel in Luanda, the injured Michael Essien looks up, listens and smiles politely. He hears this kind of offer from complete strangers a hundred times a day. After all, this is what it means to be a superstar footballer today: the fame, the fortune, the free stuff. And right now in Angola everyone is chasing those shiny baubles.

Up on the roof of the hotel, Essien's team-mates are getting their hair cut.. When the barber finishes his work, they check their reflection in a broken slither of mirror and dream of how they will look on TV when they score the winning goal against Angola in the quarter-finals on Sunday. A lucrative move to a European club and then, like Mike, the world just might know their name. In a restaurant, on Luanda's fashionable Miami Beach, PUMAFootball meets two young players who exist even further down the game's food chain. The boys arrived from England six months ago to play professional football in Angola having been spotted by an agent while on trial at Manchester United.

Junior, a Brazilian born 20-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo lookalike, admits he misses his family and friends but the money the oil-rich Angolan league offered him was just too much to resist. "It's a sacrifice," he says, "but they gave me a great signing on fee right into my hand." The pay may be good but their team's resources are terrible, explains his mate Igor in a broad Yorkshire accent. "If you break your leg they just put cold water on it and pray." Their plan is to spend a couple of seasons here and then secure a move back to Europe. Neither have given up the dream of playing for Manchester United.

A couple of miles away, on a rusty tin can strewn clay pitch, a gaggle of kids hare after a football. A few wear mismatching boots, others play in socks or just barefoot. Regardless, they tear around with a wild intensity, flying into tackles or leaping into the air to attempt bicycle kicks before landing in the dust. They dream of becoming international stars until the ball squirts under the tyre of a slow moving SUV and, with horrible inevitability, it pops. A simpler metaphor for the dreams of so many footballers you couldn't wish for but as the Cup of Nations reaches the do or die stage, one or two young players just might become superstars overnight.