

USSSA Boys Championship leaves lessons, more questions

Audit. There were also reports of teams missing lunch entirely on matchdays, forcing some schools to prepare their own meals despite a participation fee of Shs3m per team. With 64 schools contributing up to Shs190m to the championship, questions persist over adequacy of welfare provisions. Where does all this money go yet the government also provides?

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

The 2026 USSSA Boys Football Championship in Lira City delivered more than just a new winner and standout performances. Beneath the goals, upsets and individual brilliance, the tournament exposed shifting power dynamics, governance questions and welfare concerns.

Kitende's trophy drought concerning Record 11-time champions St Mary's Kitende are going through an unfamiliar spell of decline. For three consecutive editions, they have finished third, their last triumph dating back to Fort Portal in 2023.

For a side that once set the standard for dominance, this is now a worrying trend rather than a temporary dip.

Historically, Kitende never went long without silverware. Their previous longest wait came between 2009 and 2010 before Buddo SS and Bishop Nankyama interrupted their dominance. This current three-year stretch feels different.

What stands out most is not just the results, but the leadership gap.

In their peak years, Kitende had on-field generals like Noordin Bunjo and Dan Birikwalira, players who carried authority. That presence appears missing.

Head coach Hassan Zungu is now under

growing scrutiny in a system where patience is scarce. At Kitende, success is not negotiated, it is expected. And with project owner Lawrence Mulindwa known for high standards, the pressure is unmistakable.

Kyaddondo mean business

While much attention has been on Kitende's decline and Amus' rise, one of the clearest structural shifts has been Kyaddondo SS Matugga stepping into contention.

The school, rooted in a strong sporting culture, is rapidly becoming a multi-discipline powerhouse, competing strongly in football, hockey, netball, volleyball, basketball, athletics and even emerging sports like pool.

Their progress has been steady: quarter-finalists last year and now semi-finalists after eliminating defending champions Buddo, a statement result achieved in just their third major appearance.

Kyaddondo is part of the KCCA-linked schools of excellence programme, alongside Kibuli, Masaka and Old Kampala.

Head teacher Hajji Ismail Waliggo, who also doubles as a rally driver, believes the trajectory is clear.

"We are building athletes who can compete at both national and international level. This is not about participation; it is about producing winners," Waliggo said.

CHOOSING THE BEST WHEAT FROM THE GRANARY

Forward Simon Wanyama, of Bukedea Comprehensive School South, was the Most Valuable Player of the tournament.

With 12 goals to his name, Matthew Ethan Mukwhana from St Peter's College Tororo, finished as top scorer.

"I am happy to have scored the most goals in the tournament. Prior to the tournament, I trained well with the teammates and was also the top scorer at the regional level," Mukwhana, a S6 student of BCM/ICT, remarked.

Amus College goalkeeper Usama Chagamo was named the most outstanding goalkeeper in the tournament.

Chagamo was in tip-top form throughout the tournament, shining in the round of 16 contest with Jinja Progressive Academy (JIPRA), where he kept a clean sheet and saved a penalty in the shootout.



Above the rest. Individual award winners Best goalie Usama Chagamo (Amus), final's Man of the Match John Brian Otim (Amus), top scorer Matthew Mukwhana (St Peter's Tororo) and MVP Simon Wanyama (Bukedea South). PHOTOS/GEORGE KATONGOLE



Time to take notice. Players of Kyaddondo SS celebrate after eliminating Buddo SS in Lira where they made some waves for the first time at the annual event.

USSSA awards raise credibility questions

The tournament's individual awards sparked as much debate as the football itself.

USSSA came under scrutiny for decisions that left many neutrals questioning the selection criteria.

The Most Valuable Player award went to Bukedea striker Simon Wanyama, who also won the title in 2024 with St Julian. While his impact was notable, debate remains over whether he was the standout player of the tournament.

Amus midfielder John Brian Otim, who produced one of the goals of the competition and consistently dictated games, was widely tipped as the more influential figure.

Others, including Bukedea teammates Ryan Giggs Osinya and Charles Lwanga, were also cited as having more all-round impact.

The top scorer award stirred more controversy. St Peter's Tororo forward Matthew Ethan Mukwhana was credited with 12 goals, many of which came in classification matches.

The exclusion of goals from the main championship phase raised questions about the weight given to different stages of the tournament, especially given disparities in match duration and squad strength used in classification fixtures.

Capacity building is working but ...

Efforts to professionalise the tournament through capacity building in refereeing, media and administration are beginning to show results.

Student referees have improved overall match control and incidents of overt match manipulation seem limited. Results reporting and communication have also improved significantly, with more timely updates and structured pre-match briefings introduced during the final stages.

However, challenges remain in enforcement of age eligibility rules. While systems to identify ineligible players have improved, enforcement still relies heavily on team-by-team verification rather than independent audits, leaving room for inconsistencies.

There are also concerns about the growing reliance on interns across refereeing and media roles, which, while building experience, sometimes places too much pressure on inexperienced personnel in high-stakes environments. Mainstream media engagement remains limited.

Welfare is the weakest link

Despite improved organisation, player welfare continues to lag behind expectations.

Teams raised concerns about long distances between venues in Lira, with some schools commuting up to 8km for matches and struggling with scheduling that saw early kick-offs clash with meal times.

Bukedea coach Ronald Ssali also highlighted the physical strain on teams, arguing that squad depth remains a major concern in such a congested format.

"A 20-man squad is too small for a tournament where you can play up to eight matches of 80 minutes in a short period. Fatigue becomes inevitable, and recovery is not enough," Ssali noted. There were also reports of teams missing lunch entirely on matchdays, forcing some schools to prepare their own meals despite a participation fee of Shs3m per team.

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