

# Is SuperSport soccer deal under threat?

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The enthusiasm and joy that followed the signing of a multibillion rand soccer deal between the Premier Soccer League (PSL) and SuperSport seems to be fading away, as the SABC is pulling all the stops to challenge what it sees as an 'illegal' and 'unfair' deal. The two parties, SABC and PSL, convened a media briefing yesterday, Wednesday 4 July 2007, at the Westcliff Hotel in Johannesburg, to inform the media about the latest developments.

Initially planned to start at 12.30, the briefing only kicked off at 14.45, as the two parties were locked in what could only be described as 'tough', 'intense', and 'bittersweet' negotiations, which followed a range of other subsequent meetings held earlier this week.

And the media – out in full force – were prepared to wait indefinitely to hear possibly the final outcome of the affair that has spilled so much ink and saliva, and pitted the state-subsidised and politically-supported SABC against the rich-friendly SuperSport and PSL, an organisation branded by some ANC circles as 'unpatriotic'.

## Optimistic

The SABC is pinning its hopes on the arbitration case, which it firmly believes that will be in its favour. PSL Chairman Irvin Khoza said: "If the arbitration case goes in favour of the SABC, it means we will go back to square one, and we will immediately restart negotiations with them during the first three months.

"If we are not satisfied by their offer, we will then enter the market and find other bidders and later come back to them to see if they can match. Luckily the market has already told us what we are worth, so good luck..."

And when a sad-looking Imtiaz Patel, SuperSport CEO, unexpectedly burst into the hall from nowhere, he was asked by the media if he believed 'his' deal is safe. "Yes, it is," he said hesitantly and uninterestingly.

But judging by the smiling and optimistic look of SABC executives Dali Mpofu (group CEO), Muzo Mbebe (CE of content enterprises) and Kaizer Kganyago (head of communications), and the stony and silenced faces of Kaizer Motaung, Trevor Phillips and Ntambi Ravele, there was no doubt that Patel was wondering if it was only a matter of time before the SuperSport deal was 'struck off the roll'.

When asked by Bizcommunity.com if he thought the SABC could win the arbitration case, Kganyago replied: "We would not be here and taking this dispute further if that was not the case."

However, nobody knows when the arbitration 'winner' and 'loser' will be announced. "It could be tomorrow, next week or next year," Mbebe said.

## Deal 'stands'

Nevertheless, Dr Khoza insists that the SuperSport deal still stands [at least for now].

"This deal is for the betterment of soccer in South Africa, as it improves the quality of the product we are about to deliver in the near future.

"Again, I will state it clearly that this deal was signed not with the intent to prejudice and enrich anyone, but to balance the interests of all parties, including those of whom do not own decoders," Dr Khoza added.

Mpofu said: "While the arbitration case is still pending, we thought that we should meet with the PSL to resolve some 'legal and technical' issues, try to patch up our differences and find interim solutions as the soccer season approaches.

## No sharing

"However, we have to say that our wish is to (re) acquire those free-to-air broadcast rights and not share them with anyone."

According to PSL, a total of 140 games – including all cup finals – out of 275 have been made available to all free-to-air channels, but so far the SABC has refused to say how many games they intend to broadcast, let alone enter to an agreement with SuperSport.

"We will issue a public statement about this matter as soon as it has been resolved," Mpofu said.

Lawyers from the three parties, SuperSport, SABC and PSL, were still locked in an intense meeting at the Westcliff Hotel later into the night to sort out various issues pertaining to the deal.

Asked by Bizcommunity.com late last night about the outcome of the lawyers' meeting and what exactly was being sorted out, SABC's Kganyago refused to comment, saying: "I have not been part of these meetings since the beginning, so I do not know the outcome of this one and I also do not know what was being discussed."

Definitely, the public broadcaster is playing mind games, one source close to Auckland Park hinted, adding: "We should stop wasting resources and time and team up with SuperSport for the people's sake, as the battle has already been lost."

But, as far as Mpofu and his acolytes are concerned, the war is not over yet. So watch this space!

## ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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