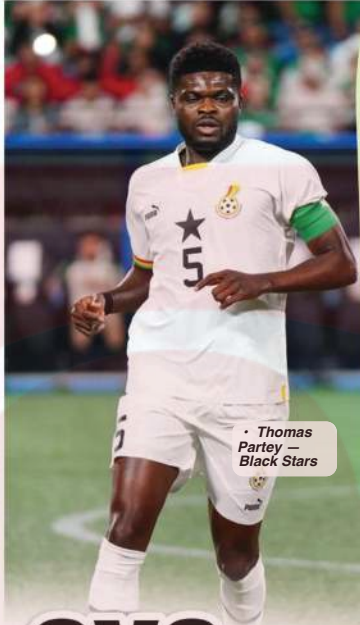


• Kudus Mohammed
— Black Stars



• Thomas Partey
— Black Stars



Inaki: I'm happy to play for Ghana

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Keep an eye on Cape Verde, Mozambique

• Paintsil cautions Black Stars on AFCON threat

Story: Peter Sarbah

A FORMER Ghana international footballer, John Paintsil, has singled out Cape Verde and Mozambique as the primary contenders challenging the Black Stars' aspirations at the

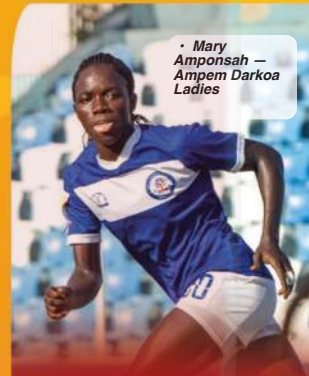
upcoming Africa Cup of Nations in Cote d'Ivoire.

Despite sharing the same group with seven-time African champions, Egypt, Paintsil believes that the underdog status of Cape Verde and Mozambique should be the main focus for Ghana rather than

the potential threat posed by the Egyptian giants.

Last week, Ghana was pooled in Group B alongside seven-time African champions Egypt, Cape Verde and Mozambique, with pundits predicting a

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• Mary Amponsah — Ampem Darkoa Ladies

Ampem Darkoa confident of Champs League title bid

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Voice of

Graphic SPORTS

MONDAY, OCTOBER 16 — 22, 2023

Hughton's tactical adjustments and Paintsil's sound AFCON counsel

As Ghana prepare for the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) in Cote d'Ivoire, the former Ghana international footballer, John Paintsil, has offered some valuable advice to the Black Stars, emphasizing the need to focus on these underdog teams rather than getting overly concerned about Egypt, a seven-time African champion.

In his analysis, Paintsil — a veteran of six AFCON tournaments between 2002 and 2013 — has singled out Cape Verde and Mozambique as the primary contenders challenging Ghana's aspirations at the upcoming tournament in Cote d'Ivoire. He highlighted Ghana's impressive recent

record, pointing out that they have not lost a match since the World Cup, making them a formidable force. He also noted Egypt's decline in recent years, further downplaying their threat to Ghana's ambitions.

The retired player's insights come from his years of experience, both as a former player and now as a coach. He has closely monitored the performances of the national team's players and acknowledged significant collective improvements and individual excellence. He praised Ghana's current coach, Chris Hughton, for his contributions in reshaping the team. Hughton's new tactical system has solidified the midfield and incorporated skilled wingers, making the Black Stars a force to be reckoned with. Paintsil highlighted the strength and speed of the wingers in the national team, which has added a new dimension to their game.

However, recent friendly matches against Mexico and the USA have revealed some areas that need fine-tuning. Despite their ambition to win, the Black Stars lost 0-2 to Mexico, with Coach Hughton admitting that injuries had forced him to experiment with new tactics and players. The setback against Mexico did not deter the coach's optimism for an improved performance in the upcoming friendly against the USA.

Coach Hughton stressed that the purpose of these away games was to assess the squad and explore new systems due to the injuries affecting key squad members. While the first half performance left some room for improvement, the coach expressed his satisfaction with their efforts under the circumstances. However, he acknowledged the struggles in the second half, where the Mexican team raised the tempo, and his team struggled to cope with the intensity of their game.

Despite the challenges, Hughton remains committed to delivering a better performance in the next friendly match against the USA. He believes that the team has learned valuable lessons from the loss to Mexico and is determined to avoid similar pitfalls in their upcoming encounters.

As Ghana heads into the AFCON, the combined wisdom of John Paintsil's caution and Chris Hughton's tactical adjustments will be crucial in navigating the tournament. With a renewed focus on underdog opponents and a resilient spirit, the Black Stars aim to make a strong impression on the continental stage and potentially secure their fifth AFCON title.

Doping, weight gain and career change

...The story of Samir Nasri?

THE story of the French national team and Samir Nasri is something of an "je t'aime, moi non plus". The Marseille-born player is one of the enfant terribles of the 1987 generation, so talented and dissipated.

Nasri has something in common with his compatriots Hatem Ben Arfa and Karim Benzema: they are extremely talented and have all experienced controversy during their careers.

Each of the three has had extra-sporting problems, and Nasri is no exception. Criticised for his lack of commitment and off-field behaviour, the former Marseille player was also banned for 18 months for doping.

Now a consultant for Canal+, Nasri is showing a new side to his personality: that of someone who is funny, calm and respectful, making a successful reconversion after a turbulent career.

The son of two parents of Algerian origin, Nasri was born in Marseille on 26 June 1987. He joined the OM youth academy at the age of 13, where he took his first steps. He won several youth team trophies and was selected for the French under-16 team.

In 2004, aged just 17, he made his professional debut for OM. The player impressed the fans, and the Vélodrome soon began calling him the 'little prince'.

The player blossomed extremely quickly



and Nasri climbed the ranks at breakneck speed, winning the Interotto Cup in 2005 with Les Phocéens. Voted Ligue 1 Young Player of the Year for the 2006/07 season, he was seen as the future of the Marseille team.

With his superb vision and undeniable

passing and dribbling skills, Nasri quickly attracted the interest of Europe's top clubs. In 2008, he signed for Arsenal for 16.8 million euros, a considerable sum at the time.

Nasri integrated very well with the Gunners, and in 2010 he was twice voted Premier League Player of the Month. His 2010 season saw him voted the best French player, ahead of Florent Malouda and Hugo Lloris. He was also included in the Premier League Team of the Year in the 2010/11 season.

However, his three years at Arsenal (2008-2011) revealed the player's strong character. Rumours of conflict with defender William Gallas soon emerged, and the player was regarded as a 'brat' by some of his teammates.

Back in 2008, the young Nasri drew attention to himself in the French national team by clashing with Thierry Henry and Gallas at the Euros: "Are you speaking to me? Who do you take yourself for? You're only 20 ... I am not your friend," the defender said.

Nasri went on to explain to the English press: "We played together at Arsenal for a year without talking to each other [with Gallas, editor's note]. There were other people who didn't talk to him either. The team came first, and we were able to put our differences aside on the pitch."

In 2011, the Marseille-born player took everyone by surprise when he left Arsenal to join Manchester City, which was still a top club in the making. He became the highest-paid French player in the world, earning 10.7 million euros a year.

After a disappointing first season, in which he nonetheless won the league, Nasri began to make his mark, winning the Community Shield in 2012. The arrival of Manuel Pellegrini on the coaching bench in 2013 enabled him to earn a starting berth.

2012 was also marked by other controversies. During the Euros, he celebrated a goal by putting his finger to his mouth before hurling insults at the French press. Then he insulted a journalist of the French news agency AFP again. This time, his image as a 'brat' spread throughout France.

The 2013/14 season was probably the most successful of Nasri's career. With the Sky Blues, he provided 12 assists and scored 12 goals in the Premier League, leading Manchester City to another title.

Unfortunately, he picked up an injury and, from 2015 onwards, began to play less and less. Despite Pep Guardiola's desire to keep the player, the Frenchman decided to move to Spain's Sevilla in 2016.

His spell with the Andalusians was a complicated one, marked by a doping scandal. On 26 February 2018, UEFA announced a six-month ban for Nasri, who was found guilty of having benefited from intravenous vitamin therapy in 2016. "This ban was later extended to 18 months."

"I was on holiday with my family. I became ill, I had a virus. I did not leave my room, I was suffering from vomiting, big headaches, I was empty," he revealed to French newspaper L'Equipe. "I called a friend and told him to find me a doctor. He couldn't. He said to me: 'There is a clinic, it will re-boost you'. Especially as I was going back to Sevilla in two days' time. I said okay. I didn't know the rules."