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# Hiddink to decide next Hearts coach

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Story: Peter Sarbah

**N**EWLY-APPOINTED technical director of Accra Hearts of Oak, Rene Hiddink, has been handed the task of appointing a new head coach for the club. As a result, he is due to name a new coach this week to occupy the position which

became vacant following exit of their Serbian gaffer, Slavko Matic, in March this year.

Sources close to the club hinted the *Graphic Sports* last Friday that the 64-year-old Dutch tactician had been handed the task of selecting the most suitable of the list of applicants interested in the club's coaching job.

"Hiddink has started work,

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## Voice of GraphicSPORTS

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### Africa's rising women's football powers and lessons for Ghana

This tournament marks a significant milestone for African women's football, with more teams than ever advancing from the group stage. The last time African teams performed so well was during the 1999 tournament in the United States of America (USA) when Nigeria's Super Falcons and the Indomitable Lionesses of Cameroon both reached the knockout rounds.

Only debutantes Zambia failed to progress beyond the group stage, but they showed a lot of promise and can take consolation from their 3-1 win over Costa Rica in their last group match.

The success of African teams can be attributed to increased strategic investment in the game, improved organisation of domestic and international competitions, and the presence of African talent in leading European and American clubs. However, despite this progress, there is still a noticeable gap between Africa's top sides and the world's best teams, similar to what we see in men's football.

In particular, Morocco's performance at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar last year and the continued success of South Africa and Senegal in women's football show that African teams can rise to the occasion. These countries have demonstrated the benefits of intentional, strategic investment, long-term planning, and better organisation of their leagues, as well as the presence of Africa's top talents in the leading clubs of Europe and the USA, which has accounted for their recent successes.

However, just as exists a gap in standards between Africa's best sides and the elite teams in the men's game, so too is a lot more work needed to bridge the gap between Africa's leading teams and the world's best. And as Morocco showed at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar last year, the African teams proved at the ongoing tournament in Australia and New Zealand that they are also capable of rising to the occasion.

Nigeria are by far Africa's most successful side in the last two decades but in recent years, countries such as South Africa, Morocco, Equatorial Guinea and Senegal are beginning to reap the dividends of increased investment in the right areas of the women's game, and long-term planning and better organisation of their leagues.

Sadly, however, Ghana appears to be losing the plot and one of the continent's early giants is struggling to hold her own even in the continent despite increased attention to the game in the last five years.

The exemplary models set by Morocco, South Africa and Senegal in football development, underpinned by intentional, strategic investment, long-term vision and patience are lessons Ghana needs to learn to ensure the Black Queens and other national teams and club sides become highly competitive once again.

By committing to comprehensive development plans, fostering grassroots talent, and providing state-of-the-

art facilities and a high-performance environment at club and national levels, Ghana can rekindle its prowess and reclaim its position as a force to be reckoned with in women's football once again.

Since the 2007 Women's World Cup in China, Ghana has failed to qualify for the world stage and the decline has seen the national team failing to qualify for the last African Championship in Morocco, having failed to go past the group stage as hosts of the 2018 Women's AFCON in Ghana.

The appointment of Swiss coach Nora Huptle to lead the Black Queens is a step in the right direction, and there are already signs of a potential turnaround in the team's fortunes.

It may take a long while for the Black Queens to dominate on the continent again, and it would need some patience by Ghanaians to see some of the young talents develop into top-class stars and a collective development of the team.

However, Ghanaians need to exercise patience, as rebuilding a competitive team will take time. South Africa's success under head coach Desiree Ellis is a testament to the benefits of long-term vision and patience, as she has been in charge of Banyana Banyana since 2015, leading them to victory in the Women's AFCON and a strong performance in the current Women's World Cup.

While it is encouraging to see the Ghana Football Association committing more resources to the women's leagues, including demanding that Premier League clubs have a women's team as a compliance condition for the Autonomous Premier League set to commence in the 2024/25 football season, further financial investment from the government and corporate bodies is crucial for long-term success.

## Is Chelsea heading towards right direction?

IT'S been just over four weeks since Mauricio Pochettino took charge of Chelsea, starting a new era at Stamford Bridge.

The Blues won the first Premier League Summer Series - a pre-season tournament featuring Fulham, Aston Villa, Brighton, Brentford and Newcastle in the United States - and also faced Wrexham and Borussia Dortmund as part of their pre-season preparations.

Pochettino's side ended their US tour undefeated and will face Liverpool at home in their opening top-flight game on Sunday, 13 August.

Here is what *BBC Sport* learned from following Chelsea, who look to get back to winning ways this season, on the tour.

### Defining the squad

Chelsea came to the USA with a squad of 29 that was mainly made up of young players. This number went up to 30 after the signing of 19-year-old Lesley Ugochukwu from Rennes.

Since the club's £4.25bn takeover by American businessman Todd Boehly's consortium and the US private equity firm Clearlake Capital, Chelsea have looked to sign up young talent with huge potential - but this also led to Pochettino calling for "more experienced" players to add to the squad.

Enzo Fernandez and Conor Gallagher are the only two senior players that Pochettino has to call on in midfield. They have been

pursuing Brighton midfielder Moises Caicedo but that deal doesn't seem close to being completed.

However, all is not negative. Andrey Santos, the Brazilian midfielder signed from Vasco da Gama in January, has impressed at the heart of midfield and started three of the five matches in the USA and could be an option for the squad.

Pochettino has said that he will cut his squad down from its enlarged size when they return to Cobham. A number of the young players will be sent on loan and there's the possibility of some — like Ugochukwu — being sent to Strasbourg, the Ligue 1 side who were purchased by the Blues' ownership group earlier this summer.

It's understood that Pochettino considers the ideal number of players in his squad to be 22 or 23, with young players from the academy stepping in to make up numbers and take their chances if and when needed.

That means with the club wanting as many as three new players — a defender, midfielder and attacker — there's going to be a lot of transfer activity at Chelsea before the window closes.

### Attacking positives in Nkunku and Jackson

Chelsea did manage two big signings before the USA tour — and they have quite possibly been the players of tour.

Christopher Nkunku, 25, a £52m signing

from RB Leipzig, and 22-year-old Nicolas Jackson from Villarreal have been brought in to try to get the goals flowing again.

The side only managed 38 goals during the last Premier League season and Pochettino will be optimistic that things can be better this time out, although there is a concern about Nkunku, who limped off with a knee injury against Borussia Dortmund.

Nkunku has scored three goals in his five pre-season appearances and has also played in a number of different positions. He has scored all of his goals while playing as a number nine and his calm finishing has been noticeable. He has seemed to take every chance that has come his way.

His

versatility and ability to play in the number 10 role or on either wing means he can be partnered with Jackson, something Pochettino tried again against Dortmund.

Senegal forward Jackson scored 13 goals in 38 appearances for Villarreal last season, including nine in their final eight league games, and was close to joining Bournemouth in January.

In the USA, he took to the

Chelsea team seamlessly, scoring two goals and getting three assists.

He is excellent at holding the ball up, good at running in behind defences and, as well as his goals, he seems able to pick the right pass in the final third. —*BBC*



• Mauricio Pochettino — Chelsea boss