

# CLAUDE MAKELELE

*Claude Makelele tells the story of his splendid career, from the perspectives of an elite player and then of a leading coach.*

*Makelele was regarded as one of the best midfielders in Premier League history. As he undeniably redefined the game of football, the position of defensive midfield became known as the “Makelele role”.*

*Highlights of his career includes being a key player of Galacticos Real Madrid, the leading heart of Chelsea FC’s and player, then assistant coach-of Paris Saint-Germain. He played a fundamental role in winning league titles in France, Spain and England.*

*Makelele’s playing career ended with Paris Saint-Germain after winning the ‘Coupe de France’ in 2010. With enthusiasm, Makelele then started on a new journey in coaching with his great personality and experience. He vowed to teach the younger generations all he had learnt throughout his outstanding playing career. He currently holds the position of Football Manager for the Belgian club K.A.S. Eupen, as he continues to aid players achieve their maximum potential. A lot of players have changed the game over the years, but it is only Makelele who has ever had a position named after him.*

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2017** Head coach of K.A.S Eupen
- 2016** Technical director of Monaco AC
- 2014** Head coach of Bastia FC
- 2010** Retired as a player and was appointed as Assistant Manager to Carlo Ancelotti in PSG
- 2008** Joined Paris Saint Germain and in 2010 won the French Cup
- 2003** Joined Chelsea FC, and in five years, won two English Premier Leagues, two English League Cups, FA Cup, FA Community Shield and the Carabao Cup
- 2000** Joined Real Madrid and in three years, won two Spanish Championships and Spanish Super Cup, Champions League, European Super Cup, Intercontinental Cup
- 1995** French Champion with FC Nantes

*Hello Claude, how are you? Are you satisfied with your stay in Aspire?*

Very well, thank you. Aspire is a great place for winter football camp. The facilities are amazing and the people are so professional and kind. I feel like it is the world’s finest relaxation and sports destination, the weather was astonishing with an eye catching ambience.

*And how did you get involved in sports?*

Just like most kids, I started playing different types of sports in school, such as karate, kayak, basketball, handball and table tennis. This allowed me the opportunity to develop different skills that



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helped me significantly at a later stage, when I started playing football.

***What's more difficult, being a football coach or a player?***

When you transition from playing to coaching, you have to completely change your perspective. As a player, you are more self-centred and only focus on your personal well-being and performance. As a coach, it is the complete opposite, as you need to move the focus from yourself to the team. A coach's job is to make sure that everything is prepared and in place; from the players to the technical and medical teams, as well as the management and media. It requires a 24-hour availability, anticipation and

adaptability. Moreover, a coach needs to understand the players, learn their strengths and weaknesses to be able to motivate them. Being a coach is very similar to being the CEO of a global enterprise. It is essential there is also open communication with the technical staff (assistant and Sports & Conditioning coaches) as well as medical staff (doctors and physiotherapists) these relationships are very important for athletes' success. A coach also needs to be fully in touch with the environment in the football federation. After all, we should always keep in mind that the players are the essence of the club.

Football is a complex sport. In the sense that you need to integrate two parts that are highly significant for the successful functioning

of the club. The first part consists of the players and the staff on the pitch, and the second part involves the administrative and logistic staff that are office based. Both parties must not only co-exist but also demonstrate a high level of cooperation. In the beginning of my coaching career, I soon realised that I was not fully prepared, and was unaware of the importance of media in the football world. Today, media consumes nearly 50% of your daily attention because journalists have a significant influence in many fields, including marketing. Therefore, it is very important to have a good relationship with the representatives of media in order to enhance feedback and reputation.

***When did you start with your specialization in football?***

At the age of 17 - after discussing with my father who was ex-professional football player - I chose the path of professional football. My dad told me that there will be great, but also tough, times to be expected but respected my choice.

***Let's talk about your opinion on early specialisation in football. So many academies for young talents are opening up globally. Do you see this as an advantage for the future stars of the new generation?***

Personally, I think that young people should try different sports at a young age and should only start specialisation at the age of 15. Otherwise you risk burning your talents and becoming disillusioned.



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**Image above:** Claude Makelele playing for Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) against Valenciennes FC at Stade Nungesser in France, 2009.

**Image left:** President of PSG Nasser Al-Khelaifi and Claude Makelele attend the French Ligue 1 match between PSG and AS Monaco at Parc des Princes stadium in Paris, France, March 2016.

**Image right:** Makelele during a Premier League match between Chelsea and Arsenal at Stamford Bridge football stadium, England, March 2008.

**What do you think the profile of the 21st century football player?**

Football players should be role models for the youth on and off the pitch and show a professional attitude and behaviour. In reality they are the CEO of their own enterprise and we should learn from individual sports like tennis on how to manage “these teams within the team”. Best examples are Messi and Ronaldo who have taken this to the next level and are true chiefs of their company.

**Let’s talk about your own career and the great clubs that you played for (Chelsea, Real Madrid, and the French National Team).**

**What should be the role of a Medical Commission in high-level clubs and teams and what is your experience with them?**

Luckily in my career I didn’t have too many encounters with medical issues, but I believe that the players themselves have a responsibility to prepare his/her body in the best way possible since we know our body best of all.

I only took medication when I was really sick; in my career I never used vitamins and supplements or iron injections. I was always worried about potential doping issues and I didn’t want to risk my career. So much effort and sacrifice are made to reach a high professional level, so I didn’t want any external factor to destroy this. Therefore, I used to avoid contact with the medical staff at the club as much as possible (laughs) but for me the most important medical encounter was to know about the severity of my injury.

I could take a lot of pain anyway and could resist well but I was

always vigilant that it would not affect the time to heal human injury and that’s where for me the medical team could really help me.

**What should be for you the ideal profile and set of qualities that a Sports Medicine Physician should have?**

First of all, he or she should be a very good medical educator and spend the time to discuss all related matters with the player first on injury prevention and treatment. The doctor is the best person to inform us on this in the best way and direct our decision making as a player on treatment options.

Players should be receptive to medical advice since most players see the doctor only when injured and then it’s already sometimes too late. However, the true champions are the ones that take the medical advice before an injury occurs.

Medical club doctors have specific confidentiality protocols and inability to discuss injuries that have to be reported, this gives the confidence to the player. Still, open discussion is helpful and the opinion of my doctor on return to play is crucial as player and coach. This allows for the player and coaching staff to fine tune an appropriate reconditioning schedule. The relationship with your club doctor is very important with mutual respect and confidence. This can bring the individual player to a higher level of performance physically and mentally. This confidence should go both ways, of course.



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**“Choosing to play at a high level is a very difficult choice, as it comes with significant risks and sacrifices. In the beginning, we don’t really know the kind of sacrifices we will have to make to play professionally, that comes with experience.”**

*The current issue of this Journal is all about injuries. Did you ever suffer from hamstring injuries during your active career?*

Yes of course, as does any great player (laughs). I was lucky to have a few mild hamstring sprains that recovered relatively fast. I believe that excessive energy accumulation due to overload is detrimental to hamstring injuries and therefore physical effort should be disseminated equally throughout match and training.

*Is overload the main reason for hamstring injury nowadays?*

There are several reasons. First of all, it is the lack of experience and knowledge of the player on these types of injury. Second, the lifestyle of the player can also affect this since professional players need enough rest and recovery to cope with the fast pace and high number of matches and training. I remember as a player, I slept a lot and I believe my body needed it to recover in the best way.

*During your long career, did you ever play, or was forced to play, while having a hamstring injury?*

-Of course if you are selected to play in a Champion’s League final, you want to play at all stakes, even if this requires specific conditions. I remember having a small hamstring injury a few days before our Champion’s League final. I discussed openly with my doctor on my body’s risk management and we evaluated the options. I took the risk, knowing I could make my injury more severe and along with that my rehabilitation time. Since it was the last game of the season, I taped up well and played. Ten minutes before the end whistle, I asked to be substituted but it worked out very well for me. This is where the value of your team doctor is essential so that the player knows what to decide and also what to avoid.

*Today, we talk a lot about the prevention of sports injuries in football. Who is the most responsible for you to prevent injury?*

The player!

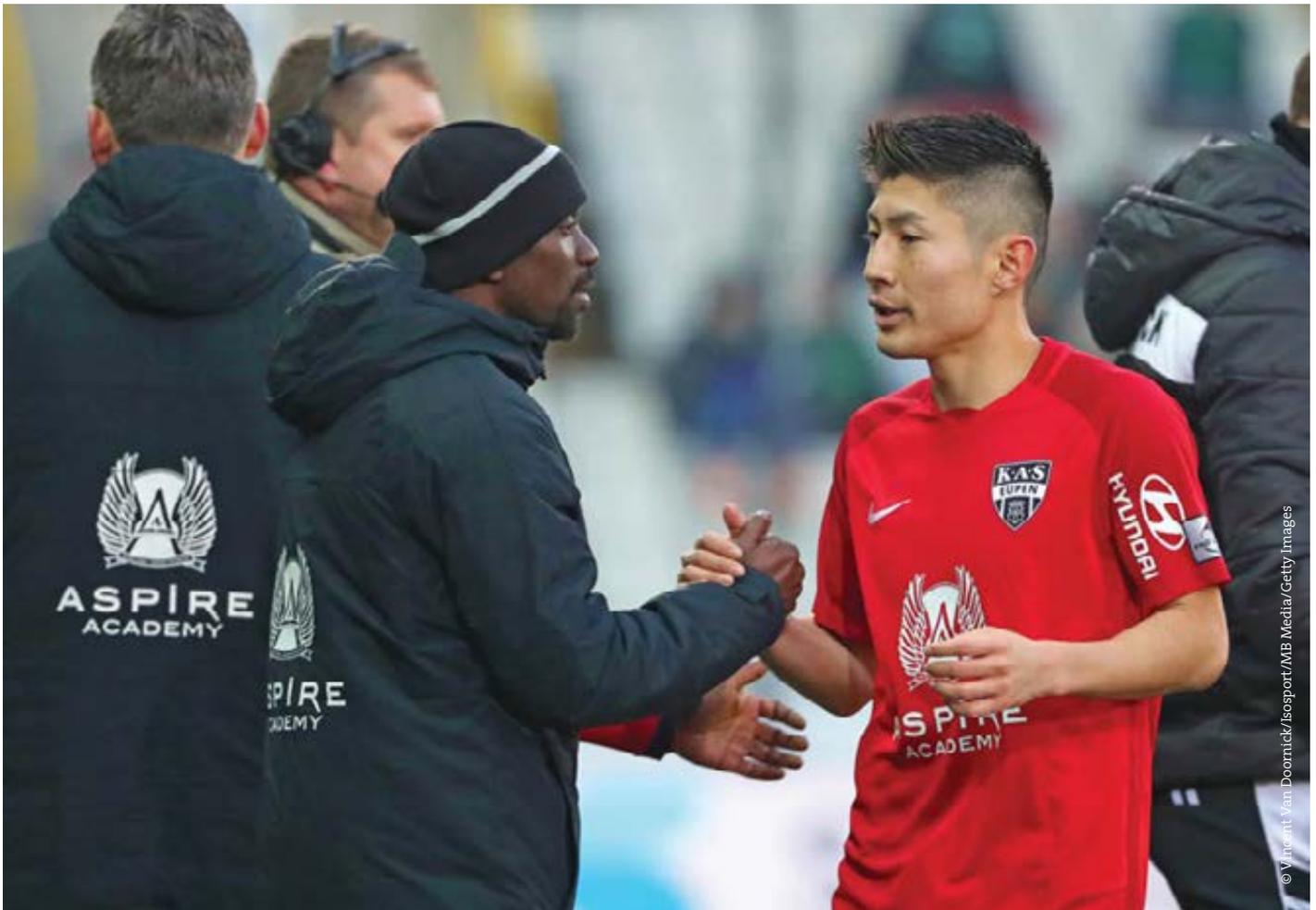
He/she should know his/her body the best. You can compare it with the maintenance and necessary checks of your car. If you diligently follow the guidelines that are put at the time you buy it, you can already avoid or minimise many issues with it.

Players should learn at early age how to protect and nourish their body in the best way to prolong the chance of a long career. Football is a contact sports where there will always be injuries that you cannot prevent. Still, injury prevention in professional football lies mainly in the minimisation of the risk to get badly injured.

This can be done through anticipation both physically, visually and mentally - since the great players are able to reduce severe contact with their opponents. Contact is necessary but requires skill to manage. Sometimes a tackle comes too late and these milliseconds



**Image:** Claude Makelele playing for French national team at Euro 2008 Championships match France vs. Romania. Zurich, Switzerland, 2008.



**Image:** Makelele as the head coach of Kas Eupen talking to Yuta Toyokawa during the Jupiler Pro League match Cercle Brugge KSV vs. KAS Eupen. Brugge, Belgium, 2018.

can decide on days versus months of recovery. I believe my anticipation and training helped me a lot to avoid severe injuries during my long career.

I was lucky, at a young age, to meet big stars who advised me on this and it's our task now to inform the next generation.

***Are you going to push your kids to be elite athletes?***

I have two kids; my daughter is a dancer and my son plays basketball. I try to encourage them into playing sport but it does not interest them. I push them because I think sports positively impacts the human body by generating energy that reflects on a person's mental health and emotional well-being. That is why more often than not I encourage them to play sport, but not at a high-level, because at the end it's their choice and only theirs. Choosing to play at a high level is a very difficult choice, as it comes with significant risks and sacrifices. In the beginning, we don't really know the kind of sacrifices we will have to make to play professionally, that comes with experience. When I made the choice to become a professional football player, I had the greatest coach - my dad. It was he who taught me everything about the game. At the time, my dad sat me down and explained to me every aspect of the game, then said: "Ok, if you think you can do it, go ahead. But if, at any stage, you feel like you're not capable anymore, you have to stop". I did not fully understand that statement until later on in my career.

***Did I miss anything? Do you have to say something that I haven't already asked you about?***

By all means send my greetings to Professor Gerard Saillant. I worked with him for four years in Paris Saint Germain and learned a lot in discussions, with him. He is one of the most excellent people I have met and worked with throughout my entire life and that is why I am ending this interview with the warmest regards to him.

*Nebojsa Popovic M.D., Ph.D.  
Myriam Mzali*