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# **From refugee camps and high crime rate neighborhoods, to the soccer field**

*Men's Soccer Team uniting diverse backgrounds to build a foundation and legacy for future teams*

(Santee, Ca) It's a rare occurrence when athletes with completely diverse backgrounds can come together to form a foundation that can leave a legacy for future teams. That's exactly what Cameron Riley, Head Coach for the San Diego Christian College Men's Soccer Team, has created. Through strategic recruitment and intentional mentorship for his players, he has formed a team of unwavering character and dedication on and off the field.

"We're a young team with ten new players, so there's definitely room for growth," Riley said. "But this team has gotten the culture 100 percent this year. We have laid the foundation for the culture we want to build this program on, and these players are the ones to do it."

The men's soccer team consists of eighteen student athletes from all over the world. Riley not only sought out to recruit men with talent and skill, but men of character with the diligence to take advantage of the opportunity to earnestly pursue an education and faith that will sustain them through life. Close to half of the team players are first-generation students whose parents did not receive a college education, and the majority with backgrounds and/or childhoods that have formed a resilience, strength and humility in them that only life can teach. Opportunity has brought these men together, and they don't take that for granted. Soccer is not only a chance to play a sport they love, but it's the bridge that will catapult them to a life they dream of.

"I'm going to meet them where they are in life and through soccer, and the community of this school, we can help these guys be who they want to become," Riley said. "They all need an opportunity and are serious about getting a degree. I want to use soccer as a tool for them to get a degree and grow in their faith."

On the field, the team exemplifies a chemistry and camaraderie that can only be birthed through the perfect timing and convergence of different lives coming together in the perfect season. There's a natural connection when it comes to communication on the field. That same connection and unity is seen off the field where they have taken ownership of each other's wellbeing. According to Riley, the team recently united, on their own, to buy a team member a pair of cleats who couldn't afford them.

"These guys have excellent camaraderie," Riley said. "All the guys are selfless individuals and actually love being together. They want to be successful as a group, so they don't position themselves in the limelight."

Off the field, all players are excellent students with a heart for their community. In addition to school, practice and work, they all complete 30 hours of community service each semester.

Riley left no stones unturned in his search for gold. His recruitment search ranged from California to Africa. On his journey he found Francois Ekyoci, Emmanuel Mahowa and William Nyambo. These are just three gentlemen that resemble the heart, excellence and men of the team.

Francois Ekyoci, freshman, is a starter and plays outside back. He was born and raised in a Tanzanian refugee camp. His parents were Congolese and came to the United States when Francois was 12 years old. He arrived not knowing any English and is now fluent in English, French and Swahili and is on his way to obtaining a degree in communications with an emphasis in marketing.

“Francois is extremely hard working and has a big personality, which you wouldn’t expect from a kid who has been in the United States for only seven years,” Riley said. “As a player he brings tons of energy, passion and personality. There’s a lightness in his character and personality when he plays.” Emmanuel Mahowa and William Nyambo are both from Malawi Africa and recruited from African Bible College. Both were raised in low income families and lived in highly populated areas with high crime rates. Riley heard of Mahowa and Nyambo through a trusted and reliable source who vouched for their soccer skills. Riley’s trust in his friend, and an inclination to take a leap of faith for these students, led him to bringing on two key personalities that contribute to the success and character of the team.

Emmanuel is a starter and plays defensive mid fielder. He is a senior and a communications major with an emphasis in biblical studies.

“Emmanuel is a very quiet person, very reserved. But when you get him on the soccer field, he is a very vocal and hard worker,” Riley said. “He drives the team; everything runs through him. He is the rock of the team and very reliable on and off the field.”

William is a starter and plays attacking midfielder. He is a junior and a communications major with an emphasis in biblical studies.

“William is extremely reserved; he lets his play really do the talking for him. He is the engine and the creative factor in the team. If we need something in a special moment, he will come up with it,” Riley said. “He is never in the way and always positions himself to assist other players to be better and have success.”

The opportunity to play soccer in the United States has also come with a cost for Mahowa and Nyambo. Both have been away from home and have not seen their families for a few years. They hold on to the hope that the legacy they are helping build for their team, will also transcend to a greater legacy for their families back home.

Coach Riley is on his third season as Head Coach for the SDCC Men’s Soccer Team. He has been affiliated with the college on and off for eleven years; as a student, soccer player and now coach. He was also a first-generation student and found the hope and healing he was looking for at San Diego Christian College as a student.

“Coming here showed me what and who I can become. I am the first person in my family to get a degree and I want to be here and give back. I know I can make an impact here,” Riley said.

Riley has very high hopes for this team and will continue to guide and push his players to becoming the best soccer players and men he knows they can be.

“This team is an example of where we are going. We’ve stayed the course and now the team is where it needs to be,” Riley said. “We are changing the stigma and looking at 2-3 years of this team being together. Our goal this year is to get to playoffs and build the confidence and experience needed to step on the field and know we can win. We have the talent to make the playoffs this year. Next, I hope to make it to the NAIA National Tournament and have a chance to compete for a Championship.”

For more information, or interview requests, please contact Karla Rivera at (619) 913-8462.