

TRIBUTE | Roy Gachuhi's eulogy of a mentor, godfather and Kenyan sports' legendary journalist

# Painting grand old Hez's life from a starry-eyed intern's perspective



During the celebrations to mark 50 years of the Nation Media Group, young television reporter, Ferdinand Omondi, asked Hezekiah Wepukhulu:

"So, Hez, when did you join the Nation?"

Hez, as we all called him, replied: "1961." Omondi gashed: "Oh! That was before my mother was born!"

I shifted in my sofa as I watched that conversation on live television. And I thought to myself: "Good Lord, have the years passed this fast? The mother of the guy conducting that interview had not been born when grand old Hez's career had long started!"

I watched that interview from beginning to end. Hez spoke haltingly – not that he ever was a motor mouth. But I thought his age was showing; he recalled dates with difficulty and paused uncomfortably long. Still, it was a joy to watch the Old Man of Kenya's sports journalism, the father of our trade, accorded his place in the sun.

It was as rare as a total solar eclipse, and I remember being happy that the organisers of the fete had thought about Hez, whose career had spanned all modern means of communication from the telegraph to the iPad.

From the day, in Form 2, when I had decided I wanted to become a sports journalist, Hezekiah Wepukhulu was my hero. In those days, he was a reporter with the *East African Standard* (today *The Standard*) and, in my school compositions, I started imitating his writing style.

Almost 40 years later, I can remember his description of a scene that so captured my imagination that I knew at once that sports writing was a lot more than what happened on the pitch, the court, the pool or the ring. Hez's narrative begun: "Away from the arguments of agitated officials and the busy pencils of sportswriters..." With that line alone, my imagination took flight.

Later, of course, I discovered other giants of Kenyan sports journalism – Polly Fernandes, Cyprian Fernandes, Norman da Costa, Monte Vienna and Peter Moll. Further afield, as I approached joining Hez in the newsroom, I explored Hugh McIlvaney, Brian Glanville, Danny Blanchflower and Arthur Walmsley.

## 'Young Roy's' Constant North

But of all these and others that I have ever admired, Hezekiah Wepukhulu was the reference point; he was my constant North. I was starry-eyed when I first joined him at *The Standard's* Likoni Road newsroom in 1977 while awaiting the results of my O-Levels. Hez took to calling me "young Roy".

Each time a correspondent phoned in a story that needed to be taken by wedging the dial-phone earpiece between the ear and the shoulder while



FILE | NATION

From left: Walter Leifer of the West Germany Embassy, Norman da Costa, Sports Editor of the *Daily Nation*, Hezekiah Wepukhulu of the *East African Standard*, and Dr Heimsoeth, in this June 20, 1974 photo.

banging the copy on the Olivetti or Facit typewriter, Hez would say: "Give it to young Roy." Or: "Let young Roy do it." It was always said with fatherly affection.

I loved Hez.

Of course, I rapidly outgrew that chore and it became something of a nuisance. I wanted to be "the ace" who wanted to be sent to cover AFC Leopards versus Gor Mahia, just like Hez himself. That was the eternal process of growth, with all its joys and pains.

That time eventually came. And one day, I covered Harambee Stars playing Tanzania's Taifa Stars. Taifa had an accomplished right winger, Zamoyoni Mogella. As I write this, I see Hez beaming broadly. Each time we mentioned Zamoyoni's name, Hez would say, "He has a very good name." Truth be said, I sometimes conjured up a topic that brought up Zamoyoni's name just so that I could get the amusement of listening to Hez say: "He has a very good name." Oftentimes, that line was his only contribution to the discussion.

In 1978, Kenya Breweries (today's Tusker) won the Kenya National Football League. AFC Leopards were long out of contention but anyone between Gor Mahia and Tusker could have taken it. Leopards' fans were desperate for Breweries to win, just to spite their archrivals. And it happened exactly like last year's Premier League; Gor failing at the tape. The entire *Standard Sports Desk* was at the 'Press Bench' at the City Stadium.

## A spring in his step

On our way back to Likoni Road, I knew better than to utter

a word to Barrack Otieno, our colleague. His eyes were bloodshot with tears. But Hez was beside himself with glee. Normally, he wasn't one given to show too much excitement. But that day was different. He even walked with a spring in his step, which is saying a lot.

"Young Roy," he said rather than asked me, "I am sure you want to have a good drink tonight!" I wondered why Hez thought I was celebrating. What made him think that I was happy with Gor Mahia's loss, I asked myself? But it was even more complicated than that: I took alcohol but Hez didn't.

For personal indulgence, he preferred something else, which I prefer not to mention here, but suffice it to say it wasn't drugs. So Hez was inviting me to celebrate Gor Mahia's defeat by Tusker with a drink at my own expense. I just looked at him in amusement.

Hez was generous. One day, I found myself having to write about witchcraft in football. Hez was the only authority I could turn to. I asked him about the story he had once written about Sheriff Abubakar Omar. I had read that story when I was in High School. Omar was a high net-worth witchdoctor. He is the man who had offered England's Sir Alf Ramsey a life line. Ramsey had coached England to victory in the 1966 World Cup but lost the Cup to Brazil in 1970.

When he faced a do-or-die qualification game against Poland for the 1974 World Cup, that's where Omar came in. He famously offered his charms to Ramsey and warned that failure to take up the offer would result in England failing to qualify. Ramsey gave Omar short shrift. And, what do you know, Poland forced a 1-1! England failed to qualify and Ramsey was sacked.

Omar was Hez's friend. He had written a lot about him. In writing this mourning piece for Hez, I am looking at the original 1974 typewritten story about Sheriff Abubakar Omar that he generously gave me so that I could write my story. I kept it in my archives and I never knew that I would one day use it to eulogise him.

My heart bleeds as I quote from it. Hez wrote: "Perhaps the best-known practitioner of the charms to help teams is Sherriff Abubakar Omar. Last year, the baby-faced soccer witchdoctor hit world headlines when he wrote to Sir Alf Ramsey and offered his services to the England team manager. Sir Alf turned down the request and England, soon afterwards, failed to qualify for the World Cup finals in West Germany in 1974. 'Had England responded to my suggestion,' Omar said, 'I would have ensured victory for them. But they ignored my offer and now they have paid dearly for it.'"

Hez quoted Omar as saying that some of the things he would have required of England players were to abstain from sex and sweet things before the match, "as demanded by the angles." I am almost

## Curtains close on the nation's sports patriarch

BY JOHN ASHIHUNDU

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Kenya's sporting fraternity was yesterday thrown into mourning when legendary writer, Hezekiah Wepukhulu, passed on at the Kenyatta National Hospital.

The veteran sports journalist had a distinguished career spanning over half a century.

Messages of condolences began pouring in following notification of his death. According to his daughter, Jean Simekha, who resides in the US, Wepukhulu, 82, arguably the oldest sports writer in East and Central Africa, was taken ill on August 11 and admitted at Nairobi Women's Hospital, Ongata Rongai, after suffering a stroke.

He was later transferred into the intensive care unit at the Kenyatta National Hospital on August 14 until his death yesterday.

Football Kenya Federation (FKF) boss, Sam Nyamweya, and Cecafa secretary-general, Nicholas Musonye, were among top football administrators who sent their condolences.

In his brief statement sent to the media, Nyamweya said: "It is with profound shock that we have learnt of the sudden death of veteran sports journalist, Hezekiah Wepukhulu, at the Kenyatta National Hospital.

"Mzee Hez was a polished writer, in a class of his own. It is a great loss not only to his family and friends from the fourth estate but to all Kenyans. On behalf of FKF, we send our sincere condolences to his family."

Wepukhulu, one of the first Kenyan journalists to cover the Olympics and the World Cup, started off as an untrained teacher in 1952, before stepping into media in 1954.

Born in 1931, in Butunde village, Bungoma County, Mzee Hez, served as a Sports Editor of the *Standard* and *Kenya Times*.

## National and village hero

As a senior reporter, Wepukhulu covered numerous events both locally and internationally. His first story was published in *Baraza*, the only Swahili paper back then. He instantly became a hero in his village. Mzee Hez will also be remembered for his column in *Saturday Nation*, 'Down Memory Lane'.

In 1957, Wepukhulu crossed over from *Baraza* to the *East African Standard*. And after the *Taifa Leo* was founded in 1960 by His Highness The Aga Khan, Wepukhulu became a regular contributor.

He would later work for Kenya News Agency and the *Standard* for 13 years, five for *Kenya Times* and for the *Nation* afterwards, beginning 1988.

His first international assignment came in 1963 during the inaugural East and Central African Challenge Cup in Kampala where Uganda edged Tanzania 1-0 in the final. Due to his writing skills, Hez became a first-choice reporter for big matches.

His first assignment outside Africa came in 1968 during the Olympic Games in Mexico where Kenya won three gold, 4 silver and 2 bronze.

Veteran journalist Emman Omari paid tribute to Wepukhulu as pioneer Luhya author with his colourful writing skills that lit up schools in Western Kenya.

Among the books he authored with Australian missionary, Appleby Eshimweyni (the ever-smiling one), are *Mundalo tsia Amanani* (Days of ares) Luhya folk tales.

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