

Thinking Outside the Penalty Box – Young Poets Network challenge

Chelsea FC footballers

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1. Didier Drogba - Ivory Coast

[Rio Ferdinand Interviews The Chelsea Legend](#)

[Didier Drogba talks about his charity](#)

[Didier Drogba on Trans World Sport](#)

[Messi, Kaka, Drogba, Lampard, Henry & Arshavin in Africa - Pepsi](#)



Early life – leaving home

Born in Abidjan on 11 March 1978, Didier Drogba spent his childhood in Ivory Coast and his adopted country, France. 'Tito', as he was known to friends and family, first left Ivory Coast at the age of five. He headed for Brest in Brittany, where his uncle, Michel Goba, was a professional footballer. Didier's parents, who were bank workers in Abidjan, hated to see him go, but Michel convinced them that the move would give their son "a real chance to succeed in life". For three seasons Didier travelled with his uncle from one club to another. As well as ensuring that Didier kept up with his schoolwork, Michel Goba also used to bring him back shirts after matches. After three years spent far from home, in Brest, Angoulême and then Dunkerque, Didier returned home at the age of eight.



He returned to his parents whom he had not seen for three long years. His homecoming also gave him a chance to see old friends in his Yopougon Sicogi district of the city. Together they would organise football matches as often as possible, turning a car park into a makeshift pitch. Three years passed and then, in 1989, the country was hit by a serious economic crisis. His parents fell victim to the economic conditions, losing their jobs, and decided for the good of their son to send him back to France to continue his education under his uncle's wing. In the meantime, his uncle, after a spell at Besançon, had returned to Dunkerque, taking Didier back to northern France once again. It was here that he was to join his first football club. Initially he played right back, a position that annoyed his uncle. "What are you doing stuck back there? Get up front! In football, people only look at the strikers," said Michel Goba. The young Didier took heed, and started playing centre-forward.

Losing the way

Abbeville, then Tourcoing, always moving on as his uncle's clubs changed. In 1991, aged 13, 'Tito' returned to Brittany, moving to Vannes. This was also the year in which his parents chose to move to France. But Didier, by now a young adolescent, lost his way somewhat and from being at the top of the class found himself having to repeat a year of school. His parents reacted immediately, banning him from football for a year and sending him to live with his cousin Kriza in Poitiers. When he returned to live with his parents, in 1993, his new home was in Antony, in the Hauts-de-Seine region near Paris, where he moved in with his six brothers and sisters. Didier was now aged 15. He signed up with Levallois, and it was here, in the suburbs of Paris, that the young Didier Drogba slowly began to make a name for himself...

Commitment and Focus

At Levallois Didier was immediately put under the charge of Srebencko Repcic, a former Yugoslavian international who was technical director of the club. Didier demonstrated his commitment from a very early stage. "He didn't go out to nightclubs on the nights before matches like his mates," remembers Repcic, "he was a very sensible lad." Talented too. The young man from Abidjan soon made the pitches of the Paris area his own. He became the star of the Under-17 team, coached by Christian Pornin. In two seasons (94-95 and 95-96), the young centre-forward notched up thirty goals. He won over the club's managers who, the following year, promoted him to the first team. This was coached by Jacques Loncar and played in the French 2nd division.

Learning Patience and Respect

Didier continued his apprenticeship as a footballer. In particular, he had to learn patience, and to respect his manager's decisions. Even though he was the "best in the team" according to Repcic, he didn't have his manager's confidence and found himself warming the bench for much of the time. He spent only ten minutes playing in the French 2nd division, but even then managed to score against Fontainebleau. Despite this lack of time on the pitch, the young attacker attracted interest, with Guingamp, Le Mans, Lens and Paris Saint-Germain following his performances very closely.

But it was also at this time that he suffered his first serious injury. He fractured his foot, during a match against Caen, tripping on a sprinkler head and ending up in plaster. This mishap was not enough to throw Le Mans off the scent, however. On the recommendation of Jacques Loncar, Marc Westerloppe, then coach of Le Mans, decided to take Drogba as an apprentice. So Didier packed his bags and moved to France's Sarthe region. He was 19 years old, and had finally become a professional footballer.

Charity work

Since 2007 the Didier Drogba Foundation has raised funds for the construction of health centres in Côte d'Ivoire, supported the fight against malaria, assisted by donations of school kits for disadvantaged youth, offered a little dreams to children, and many other specific actions. It works primarily to improve access and quality of health care and to improve education for the most vulnerable African populations, by federating energies and expertise and mobilizing resources at all levels.

Didier Drogba is also Commissioner of the Commission on Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation (CDVR) in Côte d'Ivoire, a commission set up in 2011 following the post-election crisis in the country to bring peace to all hearts.

2. Michael Essien – Ghana

[Essien talks to BCC Sports](#)

[Michael Essien on his midfield role.](#)

[Michael Essien on his early football memories](#)

[Michael Essien on moving to Chelsea and the half naked fan.](#)

[Michael Essien reveals his Tennis abilities!](#)



Inspired by his Early Life

Born in 1987 Michael Essien grew up in Ghana, in Awutu Bereku, he spent 8 seasons at Chelsea with loan periods at Real Madrid and Milan. He plays for Ghana's 'Black Stars' who reached the quarter finals of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. The memory of growing up in Accra, where he returns every summer for an extended holiday to see his mother and catch up with family and friends, burns bright. "I always spend my summer in Ghana. I don't go anywhere else. My children have to know where they come from and the way of life in Africa. They can compare both and appreciate what they have."

His journey took him from Liberty Professionals in the Accra suburb of Dansoman to a trial at Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United at 17. "I met Ferguson. It was a nice experience. I came with a friend, it was really nice for us to go there and see those big players. I just wanted to play in Europe."

Years later, when Real Madrid met Manchester United in the Champions League, he recalls being in the dressing room with Ferguson and Mourinho. They talked about how things might have turned out had there not been work permit issues surrounding his proposed move to Old Trafford.

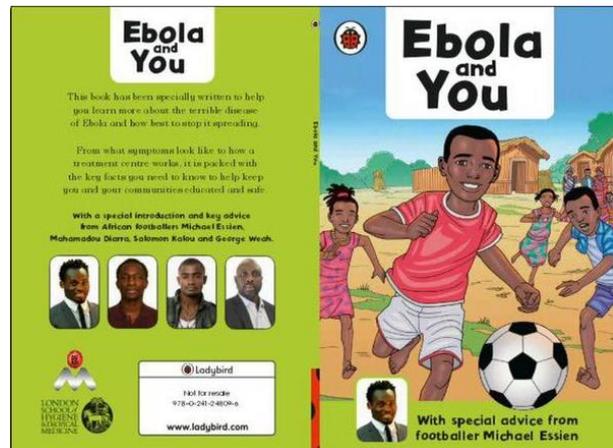
Instead of United his agent arranged a trial at Bastia and from there he progressed to Lyon and then to Chelsea in 2005 in what was then the biggest transfer involving an African player. Then, too, Mourinho would not take no for an answer. "When I was little my dream was to come and play in the Premier League. So when Chelsea came in I said yes straight away. At that time they were trying to build Chelsea back up again," he says.

"We had a great time, I gave them everything I could and I played my best football at Chelsea. I'm happy I won a lot of trophies for them and proud now to be one of those players who brought Chelsea up again." "I was the first Ghanaian to win the FA Cup and then my best friend, Sulley Muntari, won it with Portsmouth."

Charity Work

Essien, whose older brother drowned before he was born after falling down a well, says his charity foundation has focused on educating children and providing basic amenities. "Their focus is on football but we try and educate them about other things.

He is determined to give something back to his homeland through his foundation 'The Game of Hope'. Driven by his wife Akosua it has embarked on a new campaign, **United Against Ebola**. It has teamed up with Penguin and Professor Peter Piot, the man who co-discovered the virus in 1976, to distribute Ladybird books featuring Essien and other footballers delivering educational messages about how to prevent the spread of the disease.



When he was at Milan, where he managed only 22 games because of injury, an erroneous rumour spread that he had contracted the disease at the height of the outbreak. "Instead of being negative about it I decided to launch this campaign. It's a killer disease, especially in West Africa," he says. "We can only do what we can to stop this. It's really dangerous... So we have to start somewhere."

The health section of Essien's foundation is called Health International Africa. It works not only on Ebola, but also Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Infant and Maternal mortality. He also supports the Mohanini School project to build a school in Ghana.

3. John Obi Mikel – Nigeria

[Mikel's development in new mag](#)

[Preview Review: Is Mikel our best defensive midfielder at the moment](#)

[John Obi Mikel - A Good Man](#)

[John Obi Mikel interviewed by Richard Lenton on ESPN](#)



Early Life

Born in Jos, the capital of Plateau State northern Nigeria, in 1987, Mikel is the son of Michael Obi, who runs an inter-state transport company in Jos. Mikel started his official football career at the age of 12 when picked as a talented footballer from over 3000 young talents to play in Pepsi Football Academy. A team which at that time was well known for going around Nigeria to search for upcoming future stars. Obi stood out to all the scouts. He got picked to play in a top-flight team Plateau United also known for making stars from players like Celestine Babayaro, Victor Obinna, Chris Obodo and many more which moved on to playing in European teams and representing their country later on in their careers. Later known as John Obi Mikel he was gaining headlines for his country at the FIFA Under-17 World Championships held in Finland. Subsequently he went on trial to South Africa club Ajax Cape Town, before joining Lyn in Norway and being pursued by Manchester United before signing for Chelsea.

What's in a name?

As his father was a member of the Igbo ethnic group, "Nchekwube" means "hope" and "Obi" is a nickname for the Igbo name "Obinna" (meaning "*Father's heart*"). But during preparations for the 2003 FIFA Under-17 World Championships, the Nigerian Football Association mistakenly submitted "Michael" as "Mikel" for the tournament in Finland. He decided to keep the new name, saying that it had a special ring to it. In 2006, he stated that he prefers to be called Mikel John Obi instead of John Obi Mikel, as he had most commonly been called.

Playing for Nigeria

In the summer of 2005, Mikel played for Nigeria at the FIFA World Youth Championships held in the Netherlands. He had an excellent tournament until Nigeria reached the final, where they lost 2–1 to Argentina. Obi won the Silver Ball after being voted the tournament's second best player behind Lionel Messi.

A powerfully-built young man with exceptional ball skills, his standing as one of the brightest young talents in the game was confirmed at the African Cup of Nations in 2006. He trained with Chelsea for one week in the winter of 2004 and José Mourinho had seen enough to wish to sign him.

The manager said: 'Everybody was in love, not just me. The players were amazed at a young boy coming and training with us with such quality... Later we saw him in the Africa Cup of Nations playing like a giant. He was at an unbelievable level and we know what a player he can be.'

Transfer to England

In June 2006, Chelsea, Manchester United and Lyn Oslo in Norway reached a settlement to resolve the future of the 19-year-old Nigerian midfielder. In July 2006, Chelsea were granted a work permit for the midfielder after they completed the £16 million signing in June. Mikel became a squad addition the summer after Chelsea had secured a second straight league title.

Following quickly on from the purchase of Salomon Kalou in the summer of 2006, the arrival of John Mikel Obi confirmed Chelsea's determination to add exciting young talent as well as established stars to a squad that had just won back-to-back league titles.

Changing position

As a junior Mikel had played as an attacking midfielder, but upon moving to west London Jose Mourinho quickly outlined his desire to play the Nigerian in the holding midfield role, a position he has operated in ever since. A tall, strong player, Mikel is tactically astute, moving the ball quickly on to his more attacking-minded teammates, but he is also not afraid to join in further up the field when the timing is right.

Despite the presence in the Chelsea squad of arguably the greatest holding midfielder of all time, Claude Makelele, Mikel still made over 40 appearances in his first season at Stamford Bridge, and he maintained that level of consistency when it comes to playing time throughout his Chelsea career. Often saving his best performances for the big occasion – the 2012 Champions League final being a case in point – Mikel has won every major honour at club level with the Blues.

4. Papy Djilobodji – Senegal

Early Life

Djilobodji was born in Kaolack, Senegal in 1988 and, after emerging through the youth ranks at local club ASC Saloum, made the decision at 19 years old to pursue a career in football in Europe.



Kaolack (Kawlax in Wolof) is a town of 172,305 people (2002 census) on the north bank of the Saloum River and the N1 road in Senegal. It is the capital of the Kaolack Region, which borders The Gambia to the south. An important regional market town, it is Senegal's main peanut trading and processing centre and the centre of the Ibrahimiyya branch of the Tijaniyyah Sufi order founded by Ibrayima Ñas, it is also a major centre of Islamic education.

Perseverance – keep trying

Unsuccessful trials at Lille and Lazio didn't deter Djilobodji - he eventually landed a place with French fourth-division side US Sénart-Moissy in 2009. He played a good first half of the 2009–10 season in the Championnat de France amateur 2. By 2010 the defender had been snapped up by Ligue 2 Nantes, where he went on to make over 160 appearances, helping them to promotion in 2012/13.

In the summer transfer window of 2015, it was reported that he had caught the attention of many English Premier League clubs such as Sunderland and Aston Villa, neither of whom made bids for him.

On 1 September 2015, Djilobodji signed for Premier League champions Chelsea on a four-year contract, for a fee reported to be around £2.7 million.

Playing for Senegal

Djilobodji was part of the Senegal squad at the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations in Equatorial Guinea. He played two games in their elimination from Group C, being substituted at half time for Lamine Gassama in the first, a 2–1 win over eventual finalists Ghana.

5. Eniola Aluko – Nigeria

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/32051022>

[A Day In The Life Of: Eniola Aluko](#)

[Eniola Aluko supports ending Child Marriage in Malawi](#)

[Women's EURO 2013 Eniola Aluko trailer BBC Sport](#)

[Eniola Aluko on being a trailblazer for female athletes](#)

[Eniola Aluko on pay equality in women's sports](#)

[Euro 2016: Carpool talk with Eni Aluko](#)

[Eniola Aluko - #RoadToCanada](#)

[KSI Meets Chelsea FC Ladies & England Striker Eniola Aluko](#)



Early Life

Born on 21 February 1987 in Lagos Aluko moved to the UK when she was a year old. The sister of the Hull City striker Sone Aluko, Eniola has a first-class honours degree in law and is a qualified Sports and Entertainment lawyer. One day she aims to establish her own legal practice. She is the daughter of a former Nigerian politician and was the first female pundit to appear on Match of the Day. Having enjoyed a stint with Atlanta, she is well known to American audiences but chose to play professionally in the UK.

Working, studying and playing football

In 2015, for the first time in eight years, her double life as a striker and trainee solicitor was on hold. Usually it takes five or six years to qualify as a solicitor but after spending some time studying and playing in the United States, her journey has taken a little longer. Receiving her law certificate in 2014 was a very proud moment; it had taken a lot of blood, sweat and tears to achieve her qualifications. The last two years of legal training were hard work, fitting it around football was difficult, sometimes after a tough training session, the last thing you want to do is go into the office, but she was fortunate to work for two very understanding law firms. The timing was excellent. Like many other clubs in the Women's Super League, the women's team are full-time professionals at Chelsea. So once she qualified, she put law on the backburner and gave football her full attention. It coincided nicely with the biggest year of her football career so far.

Helping/Advising others

At one firm, she helped the likes of One Direction and artists from the X-factor negotiate with their record labels, and she helped represent comedian Frankie Boyle in his defamation case against the News of the World. During her time at a sports law firm, she did a lot of work with Olympic athletes such as cyclist Victoria

Pendleton and snowboarder Jenny Jones, while working on Eden Hazard's image rights too.

Women's football is still quite young so players aren't always that savvy when it comes to their contracts. You do get occasions where they have signed something that they didn't want to, but if I can offer advice it's always nice to help progress their careers. After she retires from football, representing female players is something that might appeal.

Why law?

"I've always had a natural leaning towards representing people's interests. I remember in school I used to get very irate about things if I thought they were unfair and I always used to stick up for other people. It was just an innate thing; I'm quite principled when it comes to how people are treated. When I was younger I was obsessed with the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the central character Atticus Finch; I loved law films and I was very interested in politics. My dad was a politician back in Nigeria. I just took that interest on to university and when I qualified with a first-class degree, I knew that I could practise it for real."

Real Benefits

"Having knowledge of the playing side and the legal side can be beneficial. As a lawyer, I will be able to understand my clients' needs because, as a professional footballer, I have been there."