

Blast from the past slowly falls into state of ruin

The provincial government says the stadium does not meet stipulated Fifa specifications. / TIRO RAMATLHATSE



Towering venue disintegrates

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It was once football's best-known venue, playing host to big stars of Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates. A place where careers were shaped or broken in pre-season tournaments sponsored by Vodacom and Telkom.

But now the Mmabatho Stadium's stands that came alive with the buzzing sound of vuvuzelas and welcomed fans in their colourful regalia on Saturday afternoons are lost in an eerie ruin.

The stadium in Mahikeng, North West, is unrecognisable; abandoned and left to decay.

Its once famous pitch is now worn out and bare. Outside a riot of weeds and unwanted wild plants have found a home. Some of the seats of the stadium's odd bowl stands are gone and wind whistles through the empty stands.

The plight of the 50 000-capacity stadium, which was built during the era of Lucas Mangope in Bophuthatswana, has angered some in Mahikeng, who said more should have been done to prevent it falling into its current state. It last hosted the pre-season Soweto derby a decade ago and, despite promises of a major facelift as part of a plan to transform Mahikeng into a provincial capital, nothing has happened.

Soccer fanatics said they thought their wish for the stadium to be used again was answered in 2015 when North West premier Supra Mahumapelo announced that a world-class stadium would be



In its glory days thousands of fans dressed in colourful regalia turned up at the stadium for big games like the one between Pirates and AS Vita in 2004.

/ LEE WARREN / GALLO IMAGES

built to replace Mmabatho.

Soccer fan Thabo Motloung expressed sadness that the stadium is not being utilised.

"We used to have big games played here, but now we have to travel to other cities to enjoy soccer," he said.

Another resident, Sipho Motale, wanted to know what is holding back the provincial government from renovating the stadium.

"It was working just fine and we were told that it's not going to be used again for soccer matches. Then we heard that it's going to be demolished," he said.

Mahumapelo's spokesman Brian Setswambung said the government planned to turn the venue into a world-class stadium.

"It will be refurbished in the sense that not everything from the current stadium will be thrown away," he said.

Other material from the stadium will be used to improve the small Montshioa Stadium, also in the area.

"Discussions with possible

partners are at an advanced stage," Setswambung said.

He said the stadium was prohibited from hosting soccer matches because of ageing infrastructure which is posing a risk to spectators.

Public Works spokesman Matshube Mfoloe said the skew-shaped stadium will be replaced to meet a well-balanced urban environment that hinges on convenience, attrac-

tiveness and safety.

He said a technical report was commissioned by the department for refurbishing the stadium in January last year.

"The report has issued a red card to the current state of Mmabatho Stadium and its future sustainability in its current structural form."

Mfoloe said that the continued water pounding in areas around the stadium would have an impact on its future structural integrity which does not meet the requirements of Fifa specifications.

"For example, the soccer pitch dimension is not within the specification stipulated by Fifa. The pitch-watering system has to be redesigned to meet stipulated football standards," he said.

It was further established that the water reticulation system of the stadium is dysfunctional, which has led to the dilapidation of the pitch and led to ablation and change room amenities becoming dysfunctional.

Former Orlando Pirates development coach, Junior Morake, who is coaching female soccer players in Mahikeng, said Mmabatho Stadium could alleviate the problem of congestion at the Montshioa Stadium.

He said his team was playing in the provincial Sasol league, but is struggling when they have to train and play.

"Because we don't have a big stadium, all local teams, especially those that are in local football associations, are suffering. Montshioa has an artificial turf; you can't have more than 10 games being played there because it has to be maintained every week."

He said if Mmabatho Stadium was operational again, big teams like Platinum Stars could play their games there.

The report has issued a red card to the stadium in its current state



Weeds grow around the multipurpose Mmabatho Stadium due to poor management. / TIRO RAMATLHATSE