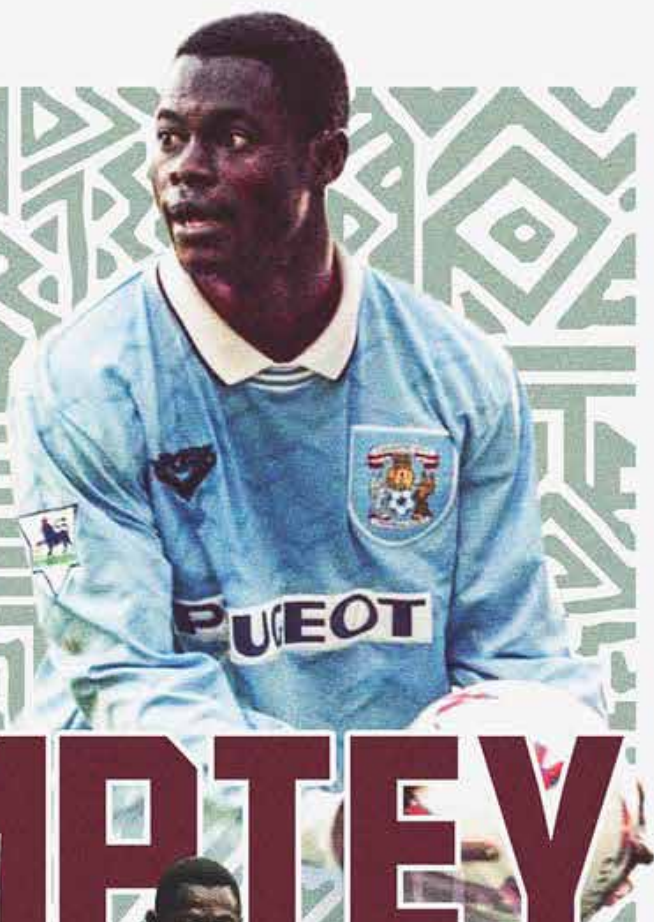


**THE  
CURSE  
OF PELÉ**



# **NII LAMPTEY**



**JORIS KAPER**

**THE  
CURSE  
OF PELÉ**

**NII  
LAMPTEY**

**JORIS KAPER**



# Contents

Foreword by Michel Verschueren	7
Foreword by Aad de Mos	11
1. Sleeping in the streets	15
2. The new Pelé	32
3. The false passport	45
4. The first steps in Belgium	58
5. Success at Anderlecht	68
6. The last season in Belgium	102
7. Top season at PSV	113
8. Aston Villa	128
9. Coventry City	135
10. To Italy, finally	147
11. Grief in Argentina	152
12. Back to Europe	161
13. Restart in Germany	169
14. Happy in China	177
15. Start of my school	187
16. End of my career	199
17. The football academy	208
18. Deceit	226
19. The future	244

## Chapter 1

# Sleeping in the streets

WHEN I think back to when I was a little boy, I see a happy and cheerful child playing football in the street. I don't remember much from the past, but I can distinctly recall that mental image. It's dear to me, it's the oldest memory I have. I often think back to that time. It was so carefree. I played football with whatever I could find on the street. Oranges from market stalls were a favourite. There were also those little footballs, which were played with a lot because they were cheaper than the game-sized balls.

I could always be found on the street; I was always playing football. Maybe I liked it a little too much. I certainly didn't let school stop me from playing football. I spent more time outside playing soccer than sitting in the classroom at my school, the Roman Catholic School in the Nima neighbourhood of Accra. There was some kind of compulsory education in Ghana but nobody enforced it.

The school teachers didn't care. If I was absent from school, my mother would not be told. She never found out that I hardly ever went. My mother didn't always have money to pay the school fees, but I didn't mind that much. I almost didn't go anyway because I was always outside playing football, even though my mother often told me that it was important to go to school.

So I was mostly outside. You could find me wherever a ball was being kicked. I did make sure to stay a distance away from my home and school most of the time. I didn't want anyone to recognise me and tell my mom I was playing truant. So I usually first went for a walk to other neighbourhoods to play football. As a little boy I would sometimes walk a few kilometres to play football somewhere, and after playing I would walk a few kilometres back home. In between I sometimes stopped at friends' houses and was given some mangos or oranges to eat.

I lived with my mother and my two brothers Odartie and Odarquaye in a family house in Accra, where three of my mother's sisters also lived with their children. Their men all worked and lived in a different city. We were with seven children in total, and I also had four nephews. My grandmother also lived in our house until she passed away one day. My grandfather lived in another city because of

his work. Such a family home is a normal phenomenon in Ghana. My mother worked at AMA, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, in the department responsible for keeping the city and the environment clean. With her job she had to take care of three children on her own. My father didn't live with us either; he lived in Kumasi. My parents divorced when I was very young.

I was born in Accra in December 1974. My brothers are a few years younger than me, but I can't remember the time my father lived with us in Accra. I don't know why my parents divorced. I also have no idea how my parents met; I never asked. So I grew up in Accra without a father. I sometimes thought about him but I can't say that I missed his presence. I didn't care that he didn't live with us, I took it for what it was. I wasn't too concerned about that sort of thing. All I cared about was football.

After all the games on the street, I often didn't feel like going home. I wasn't afraid that my mother would find out that I sometimes didn't go to school; it was for a different reason. While I was playing football outside, my brothers and cousins helped with the housework. We weren't all that far apart in age. However, my aunts also expected me to help at home. They were not happy that I often came home just to eat and did not help. Sometimes I didn't get

anything to eat because I hadn't done anything to serve the household. Later on, my aunts started beating me too. My aunts sometimes beat me with a cane, and sometimes I had to fetch water as punishment. We did have water pipes at home but that was just meant as a punishment. Then I had to walk somewhere with a big barrel, fill it with water and then walk back home with it. It was a long walk, and very hard for a little boy like me. I became afraid of being punished because of that, and I didn't dare to go home anymore. I would much rather sleep on the street. I slept under buses, in an abandoned kiosk or under a market stall. Not really a safe thing to do as a child. Of course it comes with risks, but I didn't have much of a choice. And as a child you don't think much about possible dangers.

In my memory, the danger wasn't really so bad. If I had to do the same thing now I'd think twice, because I now know the dangers. But I didn't at the time, and because of my home situation this was still the better option. I often slept in my own neighbourhood, sometimes even close to my house. That kept it somewhat familiar. My mother was afraid to say anything about it to her older sisters. That's how it often works in Ghana: people are expected to listen to and respect older people. She therefore kept her mouth shut. My mother was worried I wouldn't come home but

she reassured herself that at least I wasn't being beaten by my aunts. And she also suspected that I often slept near our house in the neighbourhood. Only when my aunts left for work in the morning did I dare to go back inside.

Unlike me, my brothers didn't play football very often. Odartie still tried. I took him to a few games to compete but he wasn't much of a runner. That was not successful! He also liked boxing and wanted to become a boxer but in his first fight he got completely beat up in the ring. From that moment on he concentrated on his schoolwork.

When I was about nine years old I signed up for Great Farcos, one of the many youth teams in Accra. That seemed like something good for me, and a boy I knew introduced me to the club. It was the first club I played at, a colts club, a well-known phenomenon in Ghana. They are youth teams put together by mostly well-to-do men. Those teams then play against other colts clubs. They are often composed of boys from certain neighbourhoods and communities. Schools also participate in that system and then play against each other. It doesn't matter where; separate accommodation and competitions don't exist, at least they didn't when I was little. You just play against each other somewhere in the city, on a playing field, a piece of undeveloped land or in a schoolyard. It was and is seen as the backbone of football in Ghana.



Sometimes I played four games a day. Usually, they were 30-minute, seven-against-seven matches. When we were done with a game we then walked to another neighbourhood to play again there. That was the only thing that interested me, playing football as much as possible. Sometimes it also happened that I slept near the place where I played my last game that day. I didn't want to sleep at home anyway, but I also didn't feel like walking back to my own neighbourhood. Those moments were especially difficult because then you were sleeping on the street in a strange neighbourhood and that just felt different from in your own neighbourhood.

I didn't always get to play much at Great Farcos. Most of the players were much bigger than me, and I was very small. I couldn't compete with them and that's why I didn't always play as much. I looked for another team and then wanted to switch to Mohammedans, another colts club in Accra. Because all teams and players had to register at a registration office, I went there together with someone from Mohammedans to sign. But there happened to be someone from Great Farcos at the station as well. He knew why we were there and didn't want me to sign with Mohammedans at all. He tried to prevent that transfer. He yelled that I belonged to Great Farcos and was not allowed to sign with Mohammedans. He kept getting angrier to the point that

both men started fighting! In the end the police had to step in to separate them. One police officer then also took me back home. When my mom saw me coming with that cop, she was scared and started crying. She thought I had done something I shouldn't have done, because I would just hang out on the street a lot. But the officer explained what had happened, that two grown men had fought over my transfer. My mother couldn't handle things like that. She thought I would become a nuisance and that was one of the reasons she decided that I should go and live with my father in Kumasi. At the same time she also tried to protect me by deciding that, because that way I would no longer be mistreated by my aunts.

When I heard that, I was especially sad. I was 10 or 11 years old and I would have to miss my mother and brothers. At the same time I also knew that I was not doing well at home. Children should not be abused and sleep on the street, so I was also relieved when I left for Kumasi. But it was strange going to my father. I didn't know him at all; I had never had contact with him in Accra, not even by telephone. So I had no memories of him either. But still I had to live with him. The only things I knew about my father I had heard from my grandfather, who sometimes spoke to me about him.

That's how I knew my father worked in a garage where he was a car mechanic.

In Accra I didn't play football for a long time at a club, at the most two years. I didn't spend a long time at Great Farcos because I didn't get to play much and therefore wanted to go to another team. I was eventually registered with Mohammedans, but I never played a match for them because pretty soon after that transfer I had to go to my father in Kumasi.

My father had remarried to another woman, and with her he had three sons: Papanii, George and Niiquaye Lamptey, my half-brothers. I didn't really bond with them when I lived there because they were much younger than me. But the relationship with my stepmother especially wasn't good right from the start and my initial period in Kumasi was tough. She had a lot of influence on my father, and she quickly let me know that I was not wanted in their house at all. Everything I did was wrong in her eyes. I always wanted to play football, but she didn't like that. She also thought that I should do chores at home and help with the household. She was always very aggressive towards me. And, unfortunately, my father often went along with that. When he came home from work my stepmother told him what I had done wrong.

My father also abused me at times like that. When he was really angry, he would sometimes hit me with his belt or his cane. At one point I couldn't even cry anymore. Apparently I had been beaten so many times that I seemed to be used to it. And because hitting apparently didn't always work anymore, my father decided that he should try new forms of punishment. Those became burning cigarette butts, which he pressed out on me. I still have a few scars from this on my stomach and back. Whether alcohol also contributed to his violent behaviour, I do not know. You don't realise that when you're young. My father was a heavy drinker. Sometimes he made me buy booze because he didn't want other people to see him do it. I had to do that very carefully so that no one noticed what I was doing. Sometimes we would have little food at home. I would get something to eat, but then there would hardly be anything left for him. He would have bought alcohol with the rest of the money he had. He gave me the food and he only drank before going to sleep. He would rather drink than eat. The fact that he also smoked made it even more unhealthy for him.

One of the first things I did when I moved to live in Kumasi was find a new club. In the neighbourhood where my father lived, Aboabo, were Kaloum Stars. Shortly after arriving in Kumasi I went to the Stars to sign up. I was

allowed to play a few times so they could test me, but I was soon told I could stay. It was the first time that I actually received training. At the colts clubs in Accra we only held matches.

In Kumasi I ended up at the Sepe Tinpom School. I remember the name, but I don't even know how to spell it correctly. But in Kumasi I didn't take school seriously either. I only went once in a while. Then when I was at school, I sometimes got strange looks because they weren't used to my attendance. A teacher would say to me, 'Hey Nii, what are you doing here at school?' At first they were angry, but at some point they just accepted it. What else were they supposed to do?

My thoughts were only on football, nothing else. The only other thing I can remember is that I did some athletics in school. I was very fast. I used to occasionally go to school for that. I also played table tennis at school, but that was about it. Boxing is very popular in Ghana but it was not for me. So I could be found at school for sports tournaments because I was very good at competing. I felt good about that and I was proud. I was even selected for a regional school football team to represent Kumasi at a national tournament. So even though I was hardly ever at school, I was chosen for those kinds of events. I remember one such tournament.

My school was supposed to play a football tournament but I wasn't allowed to participate because my father hadn't paid the school fees. However, some girls thought that I should take part anyway because I could play football well. They then all collected money to pay my school fees so that I could still participate. I was about 12 years old then.

At the end of my primary school period I had to take exams. We had an exam week that included English, mathematics and physics. I had to register for these but again my father had not paid the fees, so I wasn't allowed to take them. I don't know why the fees were not paid by my father because he wanted me to go to school, he said that often enough. It must have had something to do with money. But it didn't bother me either, because even if he paid I barely went. When I got home the first day of that exam week I lied to my father that I had taken the exams and that they had gone well. But I hadn't even been to school. The second day it went like this again, until the end of the exam week. I never took those exams and of course I didn't get a diploma.

In the meantime, due to my bad home situation, I became more and more rebellious. The more my dad said school was important the more I stayed away. And if he thought I shouldn't hang out with someone, I did. There came a point

when my stepmother was fed up. She told my father that he had to choose between her and me. She threatened to pack her things and leave if he chose me. He took her side, which meant I had to leave the house. I was no longer wanted and it was painful. My father thought I should go back to my mother in Accra. But I didn't like that idea. Going back to my aunts who abused me was not an option for me.

At Kaloum Stars I explained the situation, that my stepmother didn't want me in the house anymore so that I had to go back to Accra but didn't want to. I asked if they could do something for me. Alhaji Salifu Abubakar, the chairman, then decided to talk to my father. He was willing to offer me shelter and came to an agreement with my father. He didn't think that was a problem and I would live at home with Salifu. Although it was not nice to hear that I had to leave my father's house, I wasn't very sad. I loved football so much and at Salifu's I could play without fear of being mistreated. That was a nice prospect. Salifu's house was located in the compound of Kaloum Stars. I even slept in the same room as Salifu. Sometimes a few other people stayed on the grounds of the club, but often I was alone with Salifu. Not many other guys slept there. In the end I lasted about half a year, at the most a year, at my father and stepmother's place.

At Kaloum Stars there was one thing that was very different from what I was used to. It was an Islamic football club and they prayed five times a day. In those moments I would just kind of sit by myself. I was not a Muslim; I was raised Catholic. After a while Salifu came to me. He asked me if I wanted to become a Muslim. I decided to go along with that. After all, Salifu and his club had taken me under his wing. It wasn't a hard requirement anyway. If I had remained Catholic I think they would have accepted that too, but I thought it would be the best choice at the time. I really wanted to stay with Kaloum Stars because I didn't really have any other good options for where I could live, so at that time I did everything I could to achieve that goal, and maybe my chances would be better if I became a Muslim. So I would go through life as a Muslim for the next few years. Once I left my father's house, I didn't speak to him for six months. I didn't even stop by even though we lived in the same neighbourhood.

But one day I met him. I played a game with Kaloum Stars, where I was dribbling the ball quite a bit. As a result I was hit hard by an opponent a few times. Suddenly I heard someone whistling in a certain way. It was exactly the way my father always whistled when he called me. I was distracted for a moment and thought it was a coincidence.



But then I heard it again. I looked in the direction of where the whistling was coming from. Then I saw my father standing there. He motioned for me to come to him. He knelt and then said something I will never forget. He said, 'Nii, if you want to play football for a long time, you shouldn't dribble the ball so much.' I went back on to the field, heeded my father's advice, and scored twice. My father then went back home. I was very surprised that he came to watch. I even thought it was very funny.

The next day I visited him and spoke to him for the first time in half a year. Online I've read a lot of nonsense about my father and the period I lived in Kumasi; that he would argue with people from Kaloum Stars, that he would come over in a drunken stupor to berate me. That is not true. He didn't go there to argue. It was advice, good advice even, that my father gave me at that game. What is true is that he was not happy with the fact that I had become a Muslim. Once when I was praying in a mosque, I had just gotten on my knees to pray. Suddenly my father entered the mosque, hit me hard on the butt and then ran out again. I just went on praying but I was very surprised. Now I can laugh about it, but then I was really dumbfounded.

In the period that I lived with Salifu everything went pretty well. I could finally play football without fear of being

abused at home. At Kaloum Stars, however, I could only continue playing football until I was about 13 years old. After that I would have to make the switch to a youth team at a big club.

Most clubs had a second team, usually for boys up to the age of 17. I was happy for the moment at having to leave. I didn't really realise that I was better than my peers, but it was apparently quite well known among the people who were involved in football. During a Kaloum Stars game, a player from Cornerstones, a club from Kumasi that was playing in the Ghanaian Premier League at the time, was present. He was apparently impressed because he informed the management of the Stars and asked me if I wanted to go for a few trial training sessions with his club, which of course I wanted to. He picked me up a few days later on his bike for training at Cornerstones. The management were satisfied because after a few sessions they had seen enough. They promised me a lot of playing time, which made me decide to go to Cornerstones. At that time I was also able to go to Asante Kotoko, the most popular club in Ghana. Salifu was disappointed that I didn't choose Kotoko because he was a big fan of that club. But I wouldn't get around to playing there as much as I would at Cornerstones, so it wasn't a difficult choice for me.

With the Cornerstones youth team we often had to play football before the first-team games. So, before they played, it was our turn first. At one point I had to play for Cornerstones in Accra. It had been two and a half or three years since I had left for Kumasi. We played against Great Olympics in Accra and I was about 13 years old. I don't remember much about the game itself, but it was very important to me. After that match, a nephew of mine suddenly walked up to me. He had seen me playing. I was very surprised. I still have no idea how he knew I was playing football there and that I had signed with Cornerstones. There had been no contact. In fact, since I left for Kumasi I had no contact with my family in Accra, including my mother and brothers. Perhaps it was pure coincidence that he saw me there, of course that was possible, and he was there because he wanted to see the game between Cornerstones and Great Olympics.

I immediately asked my nephew how my mother was doing. He said she had already left the family home. She had remarried and now lived elsewhere in Accra. I asked the club for permission to stay an extra day in Accra so that I could visit my mother. That was allowed, luckily. I visited her and saw her for the first time in two and a half, maybe three years. Of course it was very nice to see her and my brothers again after such a long time. In the meantime, my

mother had married Jim Armahtey, a radio host at GBC, Ghana's first TV and radio station. So he became my stepfather, although I didn't regard him in that way. After all, he never took care of me, and we never lived together. I only met him for the first time when he was already married to my mother. But I got on quite well with him as he wasn't like my stepmother. Unfortunately I could only stay with my mother for one day. But since then we tried keeping in touch again even though that was very difficult in Ghana. Even making a phone call was sometimes difficult, and cell phones and the internet didn't exist yet. My mother and Jim would later have two more sons, Armahken and Armah, and one daughter, Ahene, my half-brothers and half-sister.

While that meeting with my family was very nice, that's not the biggest reason why that match was very important in retrospect. As a result of the game I received an invitation for the Ghana under-16 national team. Afterwards, someone from the Ghana Football Association entered the locker room and told the coach that someone from his team had been selected for Ghana under-16s. That was me. It was a dream come true. A national youth team! The following week I had to report back to Accra for a training camp. That's how my football career really started, though I didn't know that at the time.