

The Medalist caught up with Robyn Moodaly in the wake of her Olympic experience and asked her about London, the future of women's soccer, and homework.

Text: Rick de Villiers Images: Reg Caldecott and Robyn's own collection

Back to school, back to reality: a familiar refrain that holds a deep dread for children. It means stowing away the Xbox, buying new stationary, and returning to the Sisyphean horrors of school life. Luckily, for most kids, this only happens once a year (only the December holiday is substantial enough to engrain an almost-indelible lethargy in the soul). But for Robyn Moodaly, it's a different story.

Training camps, international friendlies, and a little thing called the Olympics have meant that the baby of the Banyana Banyana side has missed 41 days of school this year. For lesser mortals, this duality would be too much. But Robyn has struck a compromise between the ideal world of soccer stardom and the reality of the everyday.

"It's stressful missing so much school, but I've managed to cope," she says. "The teachers at the school and my friends – we're a close-knit group – did their best to make sure I didn't fall behind too much, and I did my bit by always taking work with me wherever we went."

Even on the flight to London, surrounded by the Oscars, Camerons and Chads of Team SA, the studious 18 year-old plugged away at her homework. But soon enough, she admits, the distractions multiplied.

"We stayed in a hotel near the soccer stadium, and it was amazing. We got to meet and mix with the other teams in the recreation room, played pool and even spent some time playing a new TV game that was released specially for the London 2012 Olympics."

But nothing, she explains, compared with the stadium. "Everything was so professional, and the atmosphere was incredible. In the locker room each player had her own little station where you'd find everything perfectly laid out. The biggest surprise was the support from the crowd. They went mad for us, even during warm-up!"

Once the carnivalesque sights and sounds had been absorbed, it was down to business. Ranked 61st in the world, the Banyana Banyana were always going to have a tough fight on their hands. Though they failed to win a single game, they held world champions Japan to a goalless draw. And despite her team's early exit, Robyn feels they have good deal to be proud of.

"I think we're all happy with the way we played, but more than that we're happy with the way we prepared for the tournament. We put in a lot of time and effort, and felt good going in. Unfortunately, the other teams have much more experience, and the players are also much bigger. But in

terms of skill we matched them all the way, and we should be proud of our performance."

She explains that the real challenge for women's soccer in South Africa is nurturing a highly competitive local league. Even in the Sasol League, which is the highest women's league in the country, there is an uneven spread of talent. According to Robyn, the women's game needs more structure and tougher competition.

But all isn't doom and gloom, and things have improved vastly over the last 18 months. "Up to 2011 there wasn't much support for the women's game. But Banyana Banyana have had a string of successes, and this has sparked interest almost overnight. Our send-off to London was fantastic! There were so many people at the airport with posters and vuvuzelas, and such great support during our matches.

"The national team is definitely going on to bigger things. Our team spirit is great, and we function like a family. I've often felt homesick, but my teammates are always there to pick me up. We are in a good place, and we've got big dreams for the future."

The Stuff of Dreams

