

# KEITA IS LIVING THE DREAM

**W**hen you have received more votes than any other midfielder in a public poll organised by the Bundesliga, driven your team to a historic second place in the league and secured a record £48m African transfer fee, you have got a few highlights of the year to look back on.

But none of the above makes the list of RB Leipzig's Guinea star Naby Keita.

Instead, his best moment of 2017 came when realising a fantasy formed as he grew up in the Guinean capital Conakry: playing in the Champions League.

"It's been a dream of mine since I was a young boy," the 22-year-old tells *BBC Sport*.

"Even back then, I had decided that one day I would play in the Champions League. Luckily we had a wonderful season last season, we worked really well and the reward was the match against Porto."

Keita missed Leipzig's inaugural Champions League group game, a 1-1 draw at home to Monaco in September, because of injury.

He made his Champions League debut in a 2-0 defeat at Besiktas before Leipzig finally won a group game, beating two-time European champions Porto 3-2 at home in October.

Two very important spectators were inside the Red Bull Arena that night.

"When I was young, I told my parents, 'I promise you I'm going to play in the Champions League and for my first match, I'll invite you to come and watch me play,'" he says.

"Luckily, I was able to do that and I was very happy. It was a moment of pride. It also greatly encourages me in everything I do."

In some ways, it represented a small payback for his mother, who could have been forgiven for having a few flashbacks during the match.

Such was her son's obsession with football that whenever he was taken shopping, Naby would endlessly look for things to kick, making life even tougher for his cash-strapped family.

"My mother always said that going shopping with me was very expensive - many things got broken," he told the Bundesliga website. "Still, I always looked forward to those trips."

There was one break that really counted, though - when his talents were spotted while playing street football, a popular pastime throughout Guinea.

Whenever he is home, his friends beseech Naby to play with them on the street - where both cars and opponents have to be negotiated - even if Africa's priciest player does not always now give his best.

"I've loved playing street football since I was very young," explains the turbo-charged midfielder.

"When I go home, my friends organise small tournaments and people come to watch us play. I also enjoy that as I get to play with people, but it's not as important to me as it is to my friends. "It makes them very happy, even if I do just a couple of minutes, because the pitch is quite dangerous so I have to be careful I don't injure my feet or legs."

That the silky Keita has graduated from navigating the traffic in Conakry to that found in a Bundesliga midfield owes plenty to former Guinea star Dianbobo Balde and, prior to that, to his talents being spotted on the tarmac.

"This nice gentleman saw me play street football and thought that if I was supported, I could become a great player," recalls Keita.

"He then took me under his wings, and spoke to my parents. He worked to find sponsors and said it would be good if I went to Europe to see if I was really good. That's how I ended up in Istres."

After trials at French sides Lorient and Le Mans failed in 2011, Keita rocked up at a talent-spotting tournament organised by Celtic legend Balde in Marseille two years later. (*BBC*)



Naby Keita (file pic)