

ACE'S RAPID RISE TO THE TOP

KING KONE'S WAY IS ESSEX!

FROM the Essex Senior League to the brink of Premier League participation, it's fair to say Richard Kone's football career has burgeoned dramatically in the last couple of years.

The 22-year-old joined Queens Park Rangers from Wycombe Wanderers on August 13 in a deal reported to be worth at least £2.75 million.

And he is up and firing already for new boss Julien Stephan having notched Championship goals in each of the last two Saturdays.

It's a remarkable story which began in truly humble surroundings. Kone originally relocated to England as a teenager six years ago after appearing for his native Ivory Coast at the Homeless World Cup.

Almost immediately, he connected with Athletic Newham courtesy of a chance encounter – firstly playing in the Eastern Counties League before the club were reassigned to Essex Senior League circles.

Perseverance

"Once I came to the UK, I tried to find a football team to play for," Kone said. "It was my dream to make a living as a footballer."

"Then I spotted the Athletic Newham squad practicing in a park. So I joined them for training and started playing matches which I thoroughly enjoyed. I learned to polish my skills in Non-League and I worked hard with dedication, perseverance and patience."

"During that period, I couldn't play professionally anywhere due to my initial visa situation. It wasn't easy mentally. In fact, I had to invent ways to stay focused in my mind and physically too. The whole experience positively shaped my football development."

"Athletic Newham were



By **TONY INCENZO**

very good to me. Especially the manager at the time, Chris Davis, and chairman Filipe Tavares. The club helped me find accommodation and I made many friends in the squad.

"I remain in contact with a lot of the Newham lads now and I go to see them play whenever I can. They were amazing for me."

Kone scored 125 goals in 148 games across four-and-a-half seasons at The Sir Bobby Moore Sports Hub – and Kone says it gave him the perfect grounding.

"I absolutely relished playing in the Essex Senior League as a teenager," he recalled. "I was playing against tough men week in, week out. It helped me discover how to overcome physical defenders."

"We had a promising FA Vase run in 2021-22 making it to the fourth round and winning 5-0 at home versus Littlehampton Town when I scored four goals. Unfortunately, we were disqualified in light of some player eligibility problems. It would've been lovely to reach Wembley!"

Unsurprisingly, Kone soon



RISE TO THE TOP: Richard Kone is already among the goals for QPR having progressed from the Non-League game, via Wycombe, inset

PICTURE: Alamy

attracted intense attention from the pro clubs and, accordingly, he signed for Wycombe Wanderers in January 2024 following an extended trial.

"To begin with I didn't know anyone was watching me at Newham," Kone revealed. "Then I was told scouts were turning up so I knew I had to be 100 per cent ready to play well in every fixture. Luckily I kept scoring and scoring and scoring."

"Actually I am really pleased I didn't move from Newham straight away as I might have struggled at the higher level and fallen back down to the Essex Senior League again. In hindsight, it was beneficial for me to continue in Non-League for four-plus years therefore ensuring I was fully prepared to undergo the step up."

"I went on trial twice

at Wycombe. The first occasion I still had visa issues and I was unable to complete the deal. But when my visa papers were close to being finalised, I returned to Wycombe and trained until I could eventually sign professional forms. By this stage I was already pumping and it was straightforward for me to settle into matches."

Optimistic

Kone rattled 25 goals in 74 outings for Wycombe and won the 2024/25 League One Player of the Season award. It precipitated his big money switch to Queens Park Rangers where his aim is to grace the Premier League and win full international caps.

He said: "It has been great for me to climb the leagues step by step. I had plenty of interest from different clubs in the summer and QPR appealed most. I liked the style of play and the project

they've launched at Loftus Road. I felt there was no better team for me."

"On the international front, I was called up by Ivory Coast Under-23's to face the Netherlands in May although I didn't travel in the end. But my country are keeping tabs on me. I just have to do my job on the pitch and hopefully they will come back."

"Whatever happens I will never forget my roots at Athletic Newham in the Essex Senior League. I prefer to stay modest since I have had a rapid rise up the ladder."

"I am aware of how I began as well as where I want to be. I am confident and always looking to improve my game. It was difficult for me to get to the Championship so I am not complacent because I don't need to start slipping now. I would love to play for Queens Park Rangers in the Premier League."