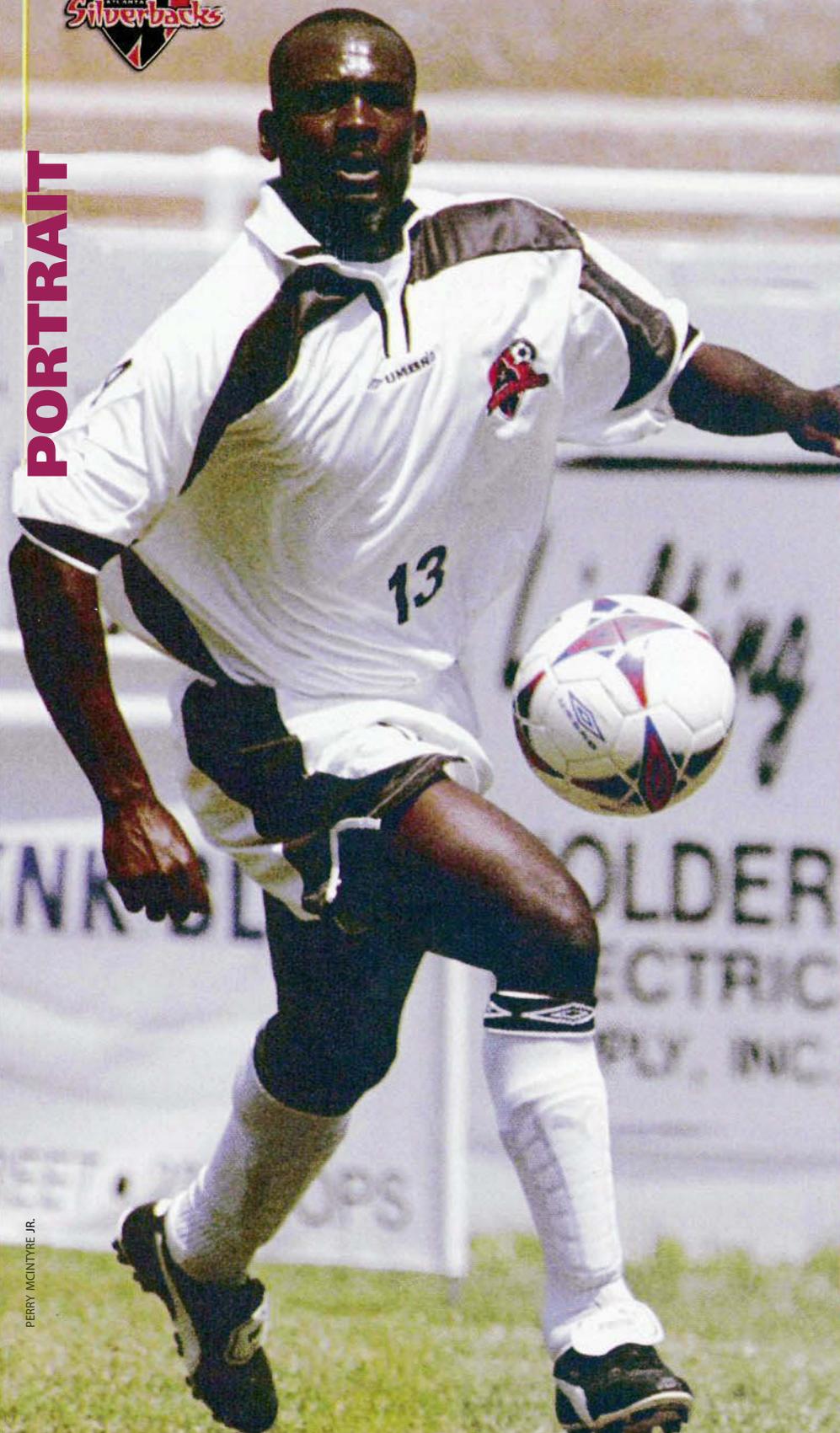


Ignace Moleka



ATLANTA SILVERBACKS

PORTRAIT



PERRY MCINTYRE JR.

AFRICA: A native of the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, Ignace Moleka, 30, earned a soccer scholarship to Florida International in 1991.

The nation's name change came after a 1997 coup overthrew dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and rebel leader Laurent Kabila appointed himself president. Kabila was assassinated in January and his son Joseph Kabila took over.

"I talk to my family just about every week," says Moleka, who has heard gunshots in the background during such calls. "They tell me things are more stable, more quiet and calm. It's always hard when you move to a foreign country and your family is miles away, and then you hear about the political turmoil. It can be hard to focus on your game, but it's not something I worry about as much anymore."

JAPAN: Moleka moved to Japan after helping FIU finish NCAA runner-up in 1996.

He helped Albirex Niigata win promotion to the Japanese Second Division, one step below the J-League.

"The Japanese are really into rules, but it was fun," Moleka says. "I did well. In the two seasons I played, I finished as the top scorer on the team, and was in the top 10 in the league."

FUTURE: His foreigner status has kept MLS teams away, but Moleka expects to receive his green card soon.

"MLS is a dream for anybody who played in college here and saw the league start up in front of them," Moleka says. "I'm really hoping that if I have a strong season, I may get a call-up — a chance to play a couple of games to see how I do."

Another call has come — from the DR Congo national team. "They gave me a call to see if I was available," he says. "That's exciting, that your national team thinks about calling you."

— Poul Swain