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28th Africa Cup of Nations (Gabon/Equatorial Guinea - 2012): Lessons for Nigeria Football

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Abstract

The paper traced the successes recorded by Nigeria in football culminating in her winning the Africa Cup of Nations in 1980. It also exposed some downward trend particularly the non – qualification of Nigeria for the 2012 London Olympics and the above competition. Some reasons adduced to be the major causes of Nigeria not qualifying include over – reliance on foreign – based players, indiscipline and the lack luster organization and administration of the Nigeria Professional League. The lessons to be learnt include the use of young home – based players who seem to be more committed and disciplined. Some recommendations were made to include “football eclipse” for a period to enable Nigeria reflect and plan for her

football and a restructuring of the Nigerian Professional League to make it more productive and attractive.

Key Words: Charlatans, Dogged determination, Landscape, Legion, Match rusty, Minnows, Tourney.

Introduction

Nigeria became an affiliate of CAF and FIFA in 1959. Since then, she has been participating in CAF and FIFA organized competitions. The 60s was a period of laying foundations and the only visible achievement was the qualification of the Green Eagles for the Mexico Olympic Games in 1968. The 1970's witnessed tremendous achievements with the Green Eagles winning the football gold in the 2nd All – Africa Games in 1973.

1976 and 1977 saw the country's victories in continental championships in club football through IICC Shooting Stars Football Club of Ibadan and Rangers International Football Club of Enugu. The country's record of achievements continued in the 1980's. The bronze medals won in 1976 and 1978 in the Africa Cup of Nations was improved upon in 1980 when the Christian Chukwu – led Green Eagles won the cup for the first time at the National Stadium in Surulere, Lagos. In 1984 and 1988, Nigeria again got to the finals of the championship but lost to Cameroon on both occasions.

In spite of these success stories, the country has suffered some setbacks. Nigeria football suffered a major blow in 1977 when a Godwin Odiye's own goal stopped the country from attending her first World Cup in 1978. Other disappointments were in 1981 and 1989 when Nigeria was stopped by Algeria and Cameroon respectively under painful circumstances (Vanguard Sports, October 1, 2011).

At the 2010 World Cup hosted by South Africa, Nigeria's outing was woeful prompting President Goodluck Jonathan to slam a ban on football appearances to enable Nigeria to re-strategize but some football charlatans utilized FIFA to threaten sanctions on Nigeria for government interference and that plan was aborted. 2012 became a year of major continental and international competitions. Nigeria failed to qualify for the 2012 London Olympics and the just concluded 28th Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) co-hosted by Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

The failure to qualify for the 2012 AFCON drew the anger of Nigerians leading to the sack of Samson Siasia less than a year as the head coach of the

Super Eagles. Criticisms were also heaped on the Nigeria Football Federation for its inability to plan well particularly in the last qualifying match against Guinea in Abuja. The failure is now history.

Reasons for failure to qualify for AFCON 2012

The author does not claim the monopoly of knowledge of what accounted for Nigeria not qualifying for the above fiesta but suffice to say that some of the reasons for failure can be predicated on the following:

(a) Unseriousness on the part of foreign – based players invited to prosecute the qualifying matches.

Foreign – based players who are invited in most cases arrived late to camp. This was a problem because it became difficult for them to blend. On the field of play, they displayed individualism instead of team spirit. Commitment and patriotism were thrown to the winds and in all these the coach had to take responsibility. It was also alleged that some of these players did not feature regularly for their clubs and Nigeria thought and felt that big names could win her matches by match rusty footballers.

(b) Lack of direction and foresight by football administrators

This was observed in the invitation of foreign – based players. The administrators were aware of FIFA calendar for the year and therefore know that FIFA cannot or may not sanction any foreign club for not releasing her players to honour their national call to duty. Instead of relying on home – based players, all efforts were geared toward foreign – based players. The technical department of the Nigeria Football Federation lacks foresight and direction. One wonders how a lawyer who has no business in football matters should head that important area of football administration. It is all politics of necessity.

(c) Indiscipline

Indiscipline was the stock in trade of some of the players. Nigerians were aware of the indiscipline shown by some of the “big boys” which brought them on collision course with coach Siasia. To stamp discipline on the team, the coach refused to specifically invite some of the players for the last and crucial qualifier against Guinea and this caused the nation’s failure to qualify. If the administrators were proactive, dialogue should have been employed with the coach and players to bury the hatchet until after qualification.

Another reason why Nigeria failed to qualify is that every Nigerian appears to be an expert in football matters. Through the media, they tend to dictate to the technical department and the coach which player to invite and which not to invite. The technical department and the coaching crew had too many listening ears.

(d) Improper organization of the Nigerian Professional League

The Nigerian Professional League is the longest in the world taking upwards of eight months to complete. The prolonged nature of the league does not encourage the local players invited to camp to prove their mettle probably as a result of tiredness. The constant squabbles between the Nigerian Football Federation (NFF) and the Nigerian Professional League (NPL) do not help matters in football administration. Players welfare is not adequately taken care of and excessive interference by club owners most of which are government – sponsored erodes the autonomy and capacity of administrators to take reasonable decisions that can move Nigerian football forward.

Lessons for Nigerian Football

The two – week fiesta in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea has brought out some lessons for Nigeria’s football which the author states as follows:

(a) Early Preparation

Nigeria is used to fire – brigade approach to pressing national issues, football inclusive. Building a successful team is not a short term affair, but a lengthy process that takes patience and hard work. Once preparations are haphazard, the players may not be psychologically strong enough to challenge opponents. It was reported in the papers that the Zambian team stayed together for between three and four years and this showed in their pattern of play as a result of hard work, total and absolute commitment to national duty and immense team unity. That perhaps explains why they have been described as one of the most unified teams of the tourney (Eno – Abasi, 2012).

(b) Reliance on home – based young players

The Chipolopolo of Zambia were peopled predominately by home – based players who churned out a display that toppled the star studded Ivorien 8 – 7 in a penalty shoot – out to claim their first ever Africa Cup of Nations. Quoting Henry Nwosu, an ex – international, Eno – Abasi (2012) wrote that

“what Zambia’s victory has taught managers of football in Nigeria is that over reliance on foreign – based footballers is not the solution to our football woes. Much as it has also showed us the importance of using younger players who are hungry for fame, it has showed clearly that determination to succeed is the key in the game of football.”

In the same vein, he quoted coach Fatai Amao as saying that the most important lesson Nigeria should learn from the Zambians is to repose a measure of faith in “our serious – minded home – based players who are willing to excel.” He suggested that Nigeria should discourage sacking coaches when good results are not instantly obtained because if Zambia had sacked Herve Renard after loosing to Nigeria 0 – 2 in the build – up to the championship, what Zambia finally achieved might not have happened.

(c) Commitment and Discipline

According to Odegbami (2012) the Chipolopolo gave the world a truly magnificent and unforgettable experience, “Young, athletic, raw and energetic, the Zambians made Africa proud with their passion, power, positive play, speed, skill, commitment, discipline, determination, attacking football and a newly discovered will to win.”

Dogged determination on the part of the players is a paramount index of success and this can be seen from the home – based players who want to attract foreign scouts for recognition to play abroad.

(d) Restructuring the Nigeria Professional Football League

The football league needs to be restructured and manned by experienced, competent and committed personnel to bring out the best from our young and energetic footballers plying their trade at home. According to Sunday Vanguard Sports (January 22, 2012), the Nations Cup exposed the low standard of the Nigerian league as home – based players dominated the teams that participated.

It was revealed in the paper that of the 368 players registered by the 16 participating teams in the tournament, 129 of them play in leagues in their countries of birth. It broke down the number of players from the local leagues as follows:

Sudan has 10 and 7 players from Al Hilal and Al – Merrikh respectively.

Botswana - 15

| | | |
|-------------------|---|----|
| Libya | - | 14 |
| Tunisia | - | 11 |
| Angola | - | 11 |
| Gabon | - | 11 |
| Equatorial Guinea | - | 7 |

There were no local players in Cote d' Ivoire and Burkina Faso

Anybody who watched the matches played by the above teams will agree with the author that they displayed very good football. It is also on record that two Nigerians were in Equatorial Guinea team. These boys were probably rejected by Nigeria. A well – organized league will produce young, energetic, technically, tactically and efficient youths as seen in the tournament.

Conclusion

Having x – rayed the probable causes of Nigeria non – qualification for the 2012 Africa Cup of Nations and the lessons for Nigeria's football, the author wishes to draw inspiration from Odegbami (2012) who said that “the new Kings of African Football, these young, brave, very hardworking, intelligent, confident and committed Zambian players, will make rapid progress in the evolution of the best version of footballers from their region and produce a new landscape for football in the continent.” There are no longer minnows in football. Hard work and commitment were the sources of Zambia's success. With a predominantly young squad tutored by youthful Herve Renard, and populated by young committed elements, many believe that their exploits should be emulated by any country, Nigeria inclusive, that wishes to bring about a turnaround in its football fortunes.

Recommendations

Having seen the causes of failure and the lessons that must be learnt by Nigerians, the following recommendations are put forward by the author:

1. There should be “football eclipse” for the next two to three years. This is necessary for Nigeria to soberly reflect and fashion out a new approach to football organization and management.
2. There is the need to restructure the Nigerian Professional League to raise the standard of the game. All hands must be on deck. Co-operation is highly needed in football administration. If the league is

well organized and managed, it can even attract foreign coaches and Nigerian football will be better for it.

3. Nigeria should have at least two standing teams from the home boys. In the event of indiscipline usually displayed mostly by the legion of foreign-based professional players, Nigeria can fall back to the services of these ready-made “foot soldiers.”
4. Coaches should see that playing abroad alone is not enough credential to be invited into the national team. Coaches need to know whether the players to be invited are regular members of their squad in Europe. Big names no longer win matches. After all, Nigeria beat Zambia 2 – 0 before the tournament with entirely home based players. She repeated the same recently in Liberia.
5. The press should also help the coaches by not stampeding them to invite their “favoured” players who are bench warmers in their foreign clubs.

It is the author’s belief that a religious adherence of the above will go a long way toward revitalizing Nigeria’s football.

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