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Sport as an Instrument for Social Cohesion in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper looked at the various roles sport could play in bringing about social cohesion in Nigeria. This was viewed from the perspective of benefits of sports to the society, schools, social significance of sports. The dark side of sport was also periscoped into. It was concluded that sport can provide opportunities to co-operate with others to achieve goals, make friends and straighten relationships with others, etc. It was recommended that governments from federal to local should encourage mass participation in sports by providing sports infrastructures nationwide. Physical and sport education should be mandatory at all levels of education.

Key words: Meritocratic, Federal character, Chauvinists, Social transformation, Over-aged, Role Learning.

Introduction

From the onset, it might seem unnecessary defining sport because through experience and intuition most people already know what the word means. For the purpose of this discourse there is the need to know the meaning of sport as seen by many scholars. Loy (1978) claimed that sport must have five characteristics. It must:

- a) be play like in nature;
- b) involve some element of competition;
- c) be based on physical prowess;
- d) involve elements of skill, strategy, and chance; and
- e) have an uncertain outcome.

Snyder and Spreitzer (1989) defined sport as competitive human physical activity that is governed by institutional rules. Vander Zwaag (1998) averred that “sport is a competitive physical activity, utilizing specialized equipment and facilities, with unique dimensions of time and space, in which the quest for records is of high significance.” Coakley (2001) on the other hand opined that “sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex skills by participants motivated by personal enjoyment and external rewards.

The broadest definition of sport was provided by Pitts, Fielding & Miller (1994) who stated that sport is any activity, experience, or business enterprise focused on fitness, recreation, athletics or leisure. They felt that sport does not have to be competitive, nor does it always require specialized equipment or rules. To them sport includes activities such as working out, running and dancing. To Park and Quarterman (2003), sport includes an expansive variety of physical activities and associated business endeavours.

From the foregoing definitions the author intends to look at how sports can be used as an instrument for social cohesion in Nigeria. The topic is discussed under:

- a) Social significance of sports;
- b) Benefits accruing from sports to the society; and

c) The dark side of sport.

At the end of the discourse a stand will be taken as to the relevance of the title which essentially comes under the terrain of sport sociology which Coakley (2001) saw as a “sub discipline of sociology that studies sports as parts of social and cultural life”.

Social Significance of Sport

Many scholars regard sport as a social institution that faithfully teaches and reinforces esteemed societal values, thereby contributing to socializing athletes into major cultural, social and behavioural patterns of the society in which they live. Eitzen and Sage (1997) said that in this way sport contributes to the development, stability and future progress of the particular society.

Sports seem to play a dominant role in almost every aspect of our daily lives. An attestation to this claim is the vast resources both financial and material invested in sports. A case in point is the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. The sport and fitness industry has an enormous economic impact on the Nigerian society with respect to discretionary spending alone. Billions of naira are spent annually on sports goods and television rights and coverages / patronage.

Sport is believed to be meritocratic because persons with talent, regardless of social background, are upwardly mobile. Irrespective of educational background we are all living witnesses to the exploits of Nigerian footballers particularly in Europe and Asia. Through sports they have become millionaires and role models (Jeroh, 2008). Sportsmen / women play a central role in our society particularly the attention they receive which shine a spotlight on many of our nation’s social ills like impatience and unforgiving spirit which was displayed by a Nigerian player who was redcarded during the group stage match between Greece and Nigeria in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. We knew what this unforgiving spirit caused Nigeria. This action of the player is a carbon copy of religious intolerance in some parts of the country. Sports can help to maintain and shape many cherished societal values such as loyalty, respect for authority, honesty, hard work, self – discipline, sacrifice and reliance and a commitment to one’s self and others.

Benefits of Sports to the Society

One of the benefits is that of a socializing agent. Sports play a significant role in the socialization process which Kane (2003) regarded as the various ways in which a society's dominant values, attitudes and beliefs are passed down from generation to generation. A major component of the socialization process is role learning which means that young children learn to think and behave in accordance with the multiplicity of social roles available to them (Greendorfer, 2001). A social role is learned when an individual is exposed to a variety of stimuli and reinforcers from meaningful people (e.g. parents, peer group, coaches, teachers and professional athletes) who influence and have meaning in their social world.

Because many of us are socialized into play, sport and physical activity at an early stage, they become an important incubator for mastering such roles as responsible neighbour, productive student and co – workers, loyal friend and companion. Many studies have revealed the positive effects of sports as a socializing agent (McPherson, Curtis & Loy, 1989).

Coakley (2001) argued that the socialization aspects of sports can be so far reaching that they affect even those individuals who do not actively participate. For instance, spectators learn about the values and attitudes the society has toward a whole host of issues ranging from respect for authority to teamwork and to notions of citizenship. With this in mind, it is easy to understand how involvement in sport – whether as participants or spectators – can influence a wide variety of individuals to think and behave in ways that enable them to contribute to the larger social agenda.

Another benefit accruing from sport is the unification of a people. Sport can bring people together by giving them a sense of personal identity, as well as feelings of group membership and social identification (Coakley, 2001). It seems apparent that few (if any) institutions have the ability to bringing people together the way sport does. Nigerians irrespective of education, occupation, tribe or religion unite to back the super eagles once there is any major competition. The quest to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa is a case in point. In spite of all the brouhaha in the country courtesy of deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil industry, the 8th All African Games “Abuja 2003” brought the nation together in unison to support Team Nigeria (Jeroh, 2008).

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Interschool sports competition is a means of unifying the entire school. Different races, social classes, fraternities, teachers and students unite for a common cause – the defeat of a common enemy outside the group. Potentially hostile segments of the school are often kept from fragmenting the school by athletics. Schools morale can also be lifted through the collective following of an athletic team, thereby serving to unify the school. Teams representing a school provide a rallying point for persons who thought otherwise by only loosely identifying with the school (Jeroh, 2008).

Sports can also be used for community development and peace building. On the international scene, President Nixon of the United States used table tennis to mend diplomatic relations with China. Back home, one of the things that contributed greatly to reconciliation after the three years civil war between Nigeria and “Biafra” was sports (football). This was evident when Enugu Rangers Football club stormed Lagos for the Nigerian Challenge Cup in 1970.

We can use sports as a vehicle for social transformation. As a matter of fact, sports can help us overcome injustice, prejudice and oppression. Structured and reinforced with appropriate social values the sport experience can instil individuals and corporate bodies with a strong desire and commitment to make significant contributions to their society. The role of GLO and MTN in the promotion and sponsorship of sports is a clear testimony.

It has been pointed out that sport, because of its enormous visibility and popularity, frequently serves as a catalyst for protesting society’s ills and bring about significant social change (Kane, 2003). An example to buttress this assertion was the “Black power salute” of Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the victory celebration at the 1968 Mexico Olympics to protest the injustices faced by African Americans which “revealed the hypocrisy of America as the land of the free”. Gettings (2002) pointed out that their protest represents not only one of the most memorable moments in Olympic history but a milestone in the civil rights movement.

Back home in Nigeria, Kadiri Ikhana, an accomplished football coach once berated club owners and managers of influencing referees to win the National League and go on to represent the country in the African Champions Cup with no visible results. Though, it did not go down well with the many Nigerians, nevertheless, it cast a gloomy image on Nigerian referees on the

international scene. How many FIFA – badged referees have been invited of recent to handle international matches? Even when Nigeria hosted WAFU competition in 2009, no Nigerian referee was at the centre in the four venues. What a shame. A former national footballer and football administrator, Adokie Amasiemaka condemned cheating in age – grade football by our football players during the 2010 under – 17 FIFA competition for boys hosted by Nigeria.

It can be inferred that the use of over – aged footballers has affected negatively the performance of our senior national team. We “do well” at the junior levels. Why can’t this translate to excellence at the senior stage?

Another way sport can bring social cohesion is the tremendous role it plays in economic empowerment. Without sport, particularly football, the army of unemployed youths nationwide would have been unbearable. Soccer has taken many youths from the labour market. There are over 40 clubs in the Nigerian professional football league and if every team has at least 25 players, that gives a total of 1000. This is just football. Other sports like basketball, hockey and track and field are there. The various Sports Commissions in Nigeria have “programmed athletes” under their employment. Through football, Nwankwo Kanu has been able to establish a Heart Foundation that has catered for the medical bills of some children with heart – related diseases in far way India and Europe.

The Dark Side of Sports

The various way sports can be used to produce highly beneficial outcomes to the society and individuals have been discussed. This does not mean that participation in sports results only in good things. It is becoming increasingly apparent that sport involvement can have a darker side as well (Kane, 2003). The dark side is discussed under:

(a) Sexism in Nigerian Sport

In the wake of the modern feminist movement begun in the early 1970s, a number of women roles expanded into the areas traditionally occupied by men; the world of sport was not exception. In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendment Act was passed in the United States. It was designed to prohibit sex discrimination in educational settings (Masteralexis, 1995; Brake, 2001). Since its passage and implementation, enormous changes in the world of

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women's sports have taken place. Many women now participate in a variety of sports in the United States.

This position is not different in the Nigerian scene as Nigeria sport does not have an admirable history in terms of equal opportunity and access for girls and women. For a very long time women did not show up in sports as they were derided that their functions should not go beyond the kitchen. There is definitely no sex equity in Nigerian sports administration. Discrimination stares all in the face. The picture of women in administrative positions is bleak. We need to count the number of women in administrative positions in sports in the country. We are yet to see a woman director of sports in our State Sports Commissions / Councils and the universities. Now that we even have a woman as the head of coach of the Super Falcons (the Nigerian Senior Female Football Team), the male chauvinists want her removed because Nigeria failed to qualify for the 2012 All African games coming up in Mozambique. Nigerians have suddenly forgotten that it was this same woman coach who led the Super Falcons to reclaim Nigerian pride in African Women Soccer in Angola in 2011. The first ever gold medal at the Olympics was won by a lady (Chioma Ajunwa) at the Atlanta Olympics of 1996 yet we continue to discriminate against the women folk.

(b) Media Coverage:

The Nigerian media has not been fair to our girls in their coverage. In spite of the remarkable achievements made by our ladies, the media portrays them with images that highlight their femininity and physical attractiveness. The media sees only the bad side. Remember how they "crucified" our ladies who tested positive to banned drugs in the last Commonwealth Games in India.

The amount and type of media coverage that sportswomen receive is not a trivial matter. Kane (2003) asserted that by creating the impression that females are largely (if not mostly) absent from the sporting scene and by treating the female athletes we do see and read about in ways that denigrate them and their athletic endeavours, the media marginalizes women's sport involvement. This in turn denies them the status, power and prestige that are routinely given to male athletes. Why are females treated in this manner?

(c) Federal Character:

Another bad aspect in Nigerian sport is that devil called “federal character.” Some shameless sports administrators had insisted on team selection based on quota system or federal character instead of proficiency or excellence. One sees nothing wrong or bad if a team in football or any other sport is picked from one or two states as long as the team produces the desired goal which is victory.

(d) Violence/Drug Usage:

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (7th ed) defines violence as a violent behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody. Violence has of recent crept into the sport scene particularly in football. There are many reported cases of supporters of clubs engaging in violence. A glaring case is that between supporters of Baylesa United Football Club and Ocean Boys Football Club all in Bayelsa State in 2010. No cogent reason was given for this detestable action. Another reason why violence persists is the win – at – all – cost syndrome in which officials cut corners to ensure victory. Some football clubs have been banished from their home bases in the Nigerian Premier League to play their home matches in other grounds.

Drug use is something that has just crept into the Nigerian sport industry. There is growing concern over the use of products called “health supplements” (containing ingredients such as ephedrine and creatine). They can enhance performance, but also carry health risks (Green, and Uryasz, 2001). Nigeria was stripped of some gold medals in the 2010 Commonwealth games in India because some of her athletes tested positive to banned drugs.

(e) Corruption

Odeyemi (2009) saw corruption as the use of public office for private gain. He said corruption comes in many shapes and forms which include bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, misappropriation, theft, forgery, age falsification, use of mercenaries, etc. All these aspects are present in the Nigerian sport scene.

Nigerians have accused the football sector of using over – aged players in age – grade football. This had earlier on been mentioned in this discourse. The cash for vote otherwise known as “Adamugate” is fresh in our memories. A Nigerian FIFA Executive Member was accused of taking bribe to influence the hosting of the World Cup in 2014. At the last World Cup finals in South

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Africa, Nigerian officials were accused of settling for a sub – standard hotel to accommodate our players. Much money was claimed to have vanished from the coffers of the Nigerian Football Federation.

The high turnover of corruption in the sport industry is capable of seriously undermining the growth, development and high performance of our athletes (Odeyemi, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Though the issues outlined under the dark side of sports represent some of the most problematic aspect of sports, it is equally true that sport can help us overcome injustice, prejudice and oppression which will eventually create a more socially cohesive nation. Sporting activities have gone beyond the simple notion of keeping the body fit and healthy and have become substantial instruments in international political issues. Sport has been a useful instrument for keeping the country together despite glaring political, religious and ethnic differences. Sport can provide opportunities to play and have fun, promote socialization by introducing rules to be followed, co-operate with others to achieve goals, make friends and strengthen relationships with others, earn an income, experience pride, learn how to respect others etc. All these are tenets of social cohesion.

It is the recommendation of the author that there is need for all governments from federal to local to encourage mass participation in sports by providing sports infrastructures in all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. Physical and sport education should be made compulsory at all levels of education because the products constitute the plural publics.

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