

AFRREV IJAH

An International Journal of Arts and Humanities

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 1 (1), February, 2012:265-276

ISSN: 2225-8590

Grassroot Sports: Conveyor Belt for Sports Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper took a look at some factors such as administration and funding that bedevil Nigeria's Sports development efforts and saw grass root sports as a veritable vehicle for the realization of our sports development objective. Grass root sport was seen as the exposure of young and old, male and female all over the country to physical activities and sports skills. The grass root approach to sports development was discussed under institutional sports, club / association sports and community based sports. Some benefits of grass root sports were highlighted to include a reservoir of sportsmen and women instead of reliance on foreign based athletes. To realize the benefits of grass root sports, some recommendations were made which include: a sound sports development at the primary and secondary schools nationwide; training of physical education teachers as coaches in their chosen sports; establishment of sports academies to train talented athletes from the primary schools and

the introduction of compulsory physical education and sports in all educational institutions in order to attract more participants from where talents can be discovered and groomed

Key Words: Grass root, Conveyor Belt, Numero uno, Stakeholders, Implementation, Reservoir

Introduction

When Nigeria won the soccer gold and women long jump gold at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, everybody thought that Nigeria has arrived in the field of world sports. The euphoria that greeted this feat was followed with Vision 2010 Sports Sub-committee Report of 1997 with a summary of objectives some of which were:

- (a) To win the World Cup in Soccer in 1998,
- (b) To be among top five in Commonwealth Games in 1998,
- (c) To host and win the World Youth Championship in 1999,
- (d) To retain the Olympic soccer gold in Sydney 2000,
- (e) To retain the Olympic gold in women long jump in Sydney 2000,
- (f) To win at least five additional gold medals in Sydney Olympics 2000,
- (g) To raise the standard achieved in all above by 100% (Vision 2010 Sport Group: Final Report (1997))

None of the above objectives was realized and nobody has ever questioned what is being done by the government. The dismal performance of the Super Eagles in the 2008 Cup of Nations Soccer fiesta in Ghana has generated a lot of questions as to the direction Nigeria's sports is going. Prior to this disgraceful outing, Nigeria has failed to defend the All-Africa Games victory of Abuja 2005 in 2007 in Algiers.

Nigeria sports have been on the decline but because soccer is the "numero uno" sport, the failure in Ghana has raised more questions than answers as to the cause of the downturn in Nigerian sports. Generally, Nigerian sports are dead in all ramifications. Using the Olympics as a barometer, Nigeria is a failure. Nigeria has participated in the Olympics in 1952-2004, a period of fifty-two years. Within thirteen Olympics, Nigeria has only won a total of thirteen medals in the following sports distributed as follows:

- (1) 1 gold in soccer,

- (2) 1 gold, 3 silver, and 2 bronze medals in track and field,
- (3) 3 silver, 3 bronze medals in boxing.

This position cannot be described as fair. Put together, Nigeria's performance at the modern Olympics is far below the individual performance of Jesse Owens of USA in 1936 Berlin Olympics with a haul of 4 gold medals. Similarly, Carl Lewis 10 gold medals present a better performance than Nigeria's total performance put together (Amuchie, 1999).

It is disgraceful that the most populous country in Africa cannot rule the continent talk less of the whole world in sports. The purpose of this paper is to periscope into some of the problems that bedevil Nigerian sports and proffer possible solutions through grass root sports development.

Problems of Nigerian sports

The reasons why Nigeria's sports is on the decline are many but for this paper, the reasons revolve around two major planks- administration and funding.

1. Administration

Nigerian Sport administrative policy can best be described as inconsistent, unstable and epileptic. One major problem is the incessant change in the sports administrative hierarchy. From 1971 to date, Nigeria has had over 20 national sports executives (Ministers of Sports and Directors of Sports). These frequent changes do not encourage the formulation and implementation of reasonable sports policies. What is happening at the centre is replicated in the states. In Nigeria, sports policies are not followed once the initiators are out of office.

A good example is the Vision 2010 Sports Sub-Committee Report of 1997. The primary objective of Vision 2010 sport development was to make Nigeria a world power in sports. The development plan identified some essential areas to include

- a) Development of infrastructure at all levels of government to include mass participation and to promote talent hunt.
- b) Continuous exposure of coaches to international sports competitions and advancements; and

- c) Increased funding of sports by the private sector relative to the funding by government.

The question that readily comes to mind is whether the above plan is being implemented by those in the corridors of sports power.

Part of the administrative malady is the constant power tussle between the Ministry of Sports/Commission and the Sports Associations. Elections into the various Associations are allegedly manipulated by Ministry officials to enthrone members loyal to them. A classical example is the tussle between the Nigerian Football Association (NFA) and the Nigerian Football League (NFL) on who should control the appointment of referees for football matches. There is no unity in the football house and this makes it difficult for policy formulation and implementation. What is true of football is also true of the other sports associations. Memberships of the various Associations are made up of strange bedfellows whose only interest is to share money and not administer sports.

One other flaw in our sports administration is the crazy urge to host competitions (national and international) by governments. It is not bad craving to host competitions because of the economic, political and social benefits accruing from such competitions but our administrators tend to mislead government into asking for hosting rights because of vested interests which is not short of crude ways of enrichment. Imagine the efforts put in to secure the hosting right of the Commonwealth Games in 2014 which was eventually won by Scotland. We did not show interest whether it would be possible for the country to produce teams for a competition of this magnitude. Our sports administrators are aware that the National Stadia in Abuja and Lagos are yawning for repairs. After colossal sums of money had been used to construct them, their maintenance was neglected by our administrators. A way out is to garner support for the hosting of competitions so that government can release money for refurbishment and construction of facilities. We are all aware where these monies go-private pockets.

2. Funding

Another problem in Nigerian sports is the cancer called fund. Presently, the chief financier and policy formulator on sports in Nigeria is the government. The government is the greatest stakeholder in the outcome of sports in Nigeria. Consequently, it must finance and monitor the progress (Amuchie, 1999). Funding of sports is sick.

The private sector is not ready to stake its hard earned money in the risky venture of sports. The current imbroglio in the National Sports Commission is not unconnected with the use funds by our sports czars. In spite of the heavy allocation by government, no meaningful result has been achieved hence some proposed sponsors are asking for the restructure of the National Sports Commission before they can invest.

It has been suggested that success in sports confers quick international recognition to a country. Czula (1978) observed that a gold medal at an international meet is a national pride and a symbol of success for the masses of the country; it is a political wedge in international relations; and it is used as a justification and/or glorification of a political revolution or system. Based on these views, government may never withdraw completely from sports administration and funding since he who pays the piper must dictate the tune. Money invested by government is not judiciously used. It had been alleged that there has not been any audit report for the National Sports Commission for upward of ten years hence those who are there fight tenaciously to remain there even for life.

As Omorodion (2008) pointed out, money is released at the zero hour and such money is not always ploughed into use for the overseas training of athletes but instead would be used to sponsor a large contingent of government functionaries who ensure that money is released for bogus assignments. Their share is guaranteed through sponsorship of family members to international functions where they constitute distractions to the real men at work. Money meant for the actors and actresses is annoyingly slashed to pay those whose main business is to shop all in the name of representing Nigeria at an international competition.

The Olympics is around the corner and money is yet to be released for overseas training of our athletes. The situation caused by non release or delay in release of funds has led our athletes to change nationality. A case in point is Obikwelu who is now a Portuguese who won silver medal in the 100 meters race at the 2004 Sydney Olympics.

The way forward

Having ex-rayed some of the problems plaguing Nigerian sports, there is thus the need to look at ways in which Nigerian sport can soar. There is, however, the need for a strong political will, dedication and accountability on the part of sport administrators. One of the ways in achieving meaningful sports

development is through grass root sports. In this discourse, grass root sports development is used to mean the exposure of young and old, male and female from all corners of the nation in physical activities and sports skills including hamlets and villages. Jaiyesimi (1978) described this approach as the principle of “catch them young”, a household expression among many Nigerian leaders anytime they have the opportunity to present address on the need to depend on the youth for sports development.

Anyanwu (1999) opined that grass root approach is the most appropriate measure to sports development in Nigeria as well as any nation struggling to find its bearing in the world of sports. Grass root approach places emphasis on the youth sport development effort.

The National Sports Policy (1989) and Vision 2010 clearly stated that grass root sport must be given proper attention if sports objective are to be achieved. Unfortunately, sport development at the grass root level is the most neglected. Anyanwu (1999) averred that it is good to have the Olympic games as a target in the effort towards sports development but it should be realized that nobody begins to build a house from the roof. A building is started from the foundation and in sports, the foundation is the grass root. The grass root approach to sports development will be discussed under institutional sports, clubs/association sports and community based sports.

Institutional sports

Anyanwu (1999) described institutional sports as sports programme organized, administered and practiced in educational institutions from primary, secondary to tertiary levels. This practice provides ample opportunities for young persons in their formative stages of development to acquire and develop the basic movement skills fundamental to performance in sports. The school anywhere in the world is looked upon as the best foundation for formal learning of all skills and knowledge for optimum development. In this paper, institutional sports are discussed under:

(a) Primary School Sports. The National Policy on Education (1981) made provision for the school curriculum and time-table for sports through the teaching of physical education. Most public primary schools in Nigeria today do not have well-organized and planned sports programmes. It is only in some private schools that haphazard inter-house sports are organized on “borrowed grounds”. Physical education used to be compulsory in primary schools but the educational policy that made the Nigeria Certificate in

Education (NCE) the minimum teaching qualification in primary schools is a cog in the wheel of progress in primary school sports. A teacher may possess the NCE certificate without an additional qualification in physical education which enabled Grade II certificated teachers to teach any class subject, physical education inclusive.

The government take over of schools has not made the situation better unlike when schools were under the control and management of voluntary agencies. In those days, adequate provision was made in every primary school for the formal teaching of physical activities and drills. It was mandatory for every class teacher, male or female, to take his or her class out for a thirty-minute vigorous physical training. It was a marvel watching teachers in teacher training colleges in practical classes because of what was expected of them. Most states have now abolished these training colleges. In schools, daily break-periods provided ample opportunities for recreation and organized sports under the watchful eyes of the class teacher or games master/mistress. These are all absent or non-existent presently. It was as a result of these approaches that the Empire Days of old became veritable avenues for the discovery and grooming of talents who later represented Nigeria in international sports competitions.

This is the pattern of running school sports and physical education in some advanced countries of the world. Bennett, Howell and Simri (1983) used India which is not a contender in world sports as an example of a nation that accepts the need to help talented pupils to improve their performances to their utmost capacity. Denying primary school pupils the opportunity of developing interest in sport amounts to offering them incomplete and inadequate education. (Musa, 1999).

(b) Secondary School Sports:

The potentiality of secondary schools sports to develop Nigerian sport is not in doubt if one gets down the memory lane of the history of school sports. Specifically soccer had its root in schools where many who represented Nigeria were products of school sports. The likes of late Sam Garba, the Atuegbus, Ismaila Mabo, Jonny Egbuonu, Haruna Ilerika, Tunde Disu, Peter Aneke, Tony Igwe, Late Daniel Okwudili, etc. are shining examples of footballers groomed from school sports. Track and field on the other hand produced the likes of Urhobo, Jeroh, Porbeni, Ehizuelen, Ebewe, Oshikoya, Agbebaku, etc, who represented the country in international sports

competitions. In spite of the inadequate and substandard facilities and equipment, secondary schools of old succeeded in producing sports heroes.

School sports today are pathetic. Many schools no longer have interest in school sports in spite of the National Policy on Education (1981) which specified the role sports should play in the education of the Nigerian child. In schools which think about sports, it is only during their haphazardly organized annual inter-house athletic meets that school heads make unnecessary and heavy demands on parents and invitees in well worded addresses. At the end of the day, whatever is realized is not ploughed into sports development.

There were series of friendly matches/contests between schools which are extinct nowadays; where such competitions exist nowadays, shameless sports organizers recourse to the use of non-bonafide students otherwise known as “mercenaries”. Stressing the need for grass root sport, a one time national triple jumper, Ajayi Agbeba opined that “it was school sports that brought so many athletes of my generation to lime-light. We must return to grassroots and school sports if we ever hope to develop our athletes”.

(c) Sports in Tertiary Institutions:

There is no doubt that tertiary institutions the world over have as their primary objective the promotion of academic excellence. Any programme that is likely to dwarf this objective was frowned at. This is exactly what obtains in nearly all the tertiary institutions as far as sport is concerned. Oduyale (1986) observed that one major problem facing sports in Nigerian universities is the uncompromising attitude of some university authorities towards sports. Some lecturers, he pointed out think of sports activities and academic work as diametrically opposed to each. Consequently, students are torn between two loves-academics and sports. Though, sports is of the moment, their educational qualification is a lasting effort which they wont forgo (Jeroh, 2005). What obtains in the universities also happens in other tertiary institutions nationwide.

Ekpenyong, (1986) opined that universities by their very nature are institutions of higher learning set up by society to prepare the needed high level manpower in different and varied professions, sports inclusive. In other countries, universities provide the bulk of talents for the national teams. Gone are the days when the universities produced the Amus, the Ekongs, the

Usorohs, the Ogans, the Ifeajunas, the Urhobos, the Shinabas, etc. to represent the country in international competitions. What was the secret?

The right caliber of human resources from whom the needed sports talents can be groomed abound in the Nigerian tertiary institutions, but because of the poor state of sports in these institutions due to poor organization and management, the realization of the cherished expectations remains elusive (Anyanwu, 1999). There is the need to go back to university/tertiary sports to produce replicas of the above-named illustrious sons of Nigeria. The tertiary institutions through NUGA (Nigerian Universities Games Association), NIPOGA (Nigerian Polytechnics Games Association), and NATCEGA (Nigerian Advanced Teachers and Colleges of Education Games Association) need to organize their games without rancor of complaints of the fielding of non-bonafide students.

(d) Club/Association and Community Based Sports: Before now, there were the Nigerian Police Games as well as the Armed Forces Games where stars like Joseph Adeola, Alfred Belleh, Edward Akika, David Ejoke, Sunday Oyarekhua, etc. were discovered to don the national colours in international sports competitions. The materials for this arm of the sports development effort abound through the existence of various sports associations and clubs. The Youth Sports Federation of Nigeria (YSFON) has done a lot in the discovery of talented footballers from the grass root. The All-Nigeria Open Athletics Championships brought the best from the Police, the Army, the Customs, and the Prisons in the late seventies. There is the need to resuscitate such competitions so as to raise standing standard teams in all sports. The present leadership of the Nigeria Police is bent on reviving the Police Games and the author calls on all other parastatals to emulate the police.

Conclusion

Nigeria is gradually becoming a sporting nation in view of its performance at international competitions especially in soccer, track and field and boxing. Despite this encouraging trend, not very much is being done in sports development particularly at the grass root level to lay a solid foundation for sports development in Nigeria. It would seem that most State Sports Councils/Commissions are losing grip of their responsibilities and functions. They exist in names without any visible sports programmes on ground. They should ensure that all Local Government Council Areas under their jurisdiction initiate well planned sports programmes for the youths and sports

clubs. Regular competitions in different sports should be organized to discover talents from whom selections are made and groomed for national teams.

Recent practices in sports circles have tended to put too much premium on elite sports and foreign based sportsmen and women. In order to take our rightful place in the world of sports, there is urgent need for a sound sports development at the grass root level. The products from grass root sport will be the standby generators for our sports instead of the current practice of recycling ageing sportsmen and women. Grass root sports will provide the reservoir of sportsmen and women for Nigeria.

Recommendations

Having outlined the importance of the grass root approach in our sports development efforts, the following recommendations are put forward to quicken the realization of the objectives of grass root sports.

- 1 For a sound sports development at the primary and secondary levels, physical education teachers should be trained as coaches in their chosen sports. The National Institute of Sports in Lagos can render this service.
- 2 Sports Academies should be set up in all the states to admit and train talented athletes identified from primary schools. These academies should in turn also run secondary education with emphasis on sports participation. The Football Academy in Ilorin is a good project in the right direction.
- 3 Professional Sports Associations like the Nigerian Football Association, the Athletics Federation of Nigeria, etc. should extend organization of sports to the institutions of learning rather than concentrating on ready made materials.
- 4 Bodies such as YSFON should be encouraged by all stakeholders in sports.
- 5 The Sports Councils should as a matter of necessity send coaches to the grass root (interiors) to scout for talents during school sports instead of being glued to the state capitals.
- 6 Private cum government partnership is urgently needed in the sponsorship of competitions at the grass root level. What the federal government does to the university hosting NUGA should also be extended to the primary and secondary school sports.

- 7 The various Sports Commissions/Councils need surgical overhaul to replace the over-used administrators (dead woods) with people who are committed to sports development.
- 8 Henceforth, professionals trained in the art of sports management (physical educators) should be appointed to head Ministries responsible for Youth Development and Sports as well as the Sports Commission/Councils. The idea of a lawyer or an engineer being made to head such bodies does not augur well for sports development.
- 9 Multinational companies should partner with federal, state and local governments to build sports infrastructure for use by the rural and urban dwellers.
- 10 There is the urgent need to revive the age old All Nigeria Junior and Senior Open Athletics Championships. This gesture should also be extended to other sports.
- 11 Physical education and sports should be made compulsory in all educational institutions in the country. This action is capable of attracting more participants from where talents can be discovered and groomed for future competitions.

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