

Neighbours, rivals and friends:

THE atmosphere was nothing less than electric. Two hundred Nigerians were crammed into one hall to watch the dream final of the 2000 African Nations Cup. Green and white was everywhere, as were drums, air horns, energy, patriotism, and nerves. All the songs and chants fans of Nigerian football have come to know were in full swing.

Was this a hotel in Lagos, Kaduna, or Port Harcourt? Far from it. It was a Portuguese sports bar in Newark, New Jersey, USA, twenty minutes outside of New York City.

Nigerians of all ages, shapes, and sizes had come from far and wide; some (like my friends and I) had traveled up to two hours to get there, just to watch the game on TV - in Arabic. Finding places to watch the African Nations Cup in the United States is not easy, and thus one has to go through a lot of effort to make it possible.

We arrived at Tio Pepe's Sportsbar in New Jersey at 8:30am, waiting out in the cold for half an hour before they opened the doors. Cameroonian and Nigerian fans had descended on Tio Pepe's in numbers, promising an exciting atmosphere.

The potential excitement was almost shattered when the management raised the entry fee to \$20 instead of the expected \$10. Nigerians and Cameroonians alike were united in their anger.

After a showdown with the owner who refused to back down, it was decided that we would all pay the \$20, but that in response no one should buy any food or drink during the entire match. Everyone united in the effort, and in the end, the bar owners made less money than they would have otherwise. One angry fan shouted that since it only cost the equivalent of \$5 to see the match live at the National Stadium, how could they expect us to pay so much just to see it on television?

Ikenna Emehelu, a Yale Law School student from Enugu, was putting his law school training to good use by trying to work out a compromise with the bar's owners. A born negotiator, Ikenna warned that what they were doing was illegal and that they would be losing a lot of business. After the negotiations broke

down, Ikenna said, "It was typical, they are always trying to exploit Africans. If it were Brazilians or Europeans who had come to watch a match, they would not have tried it."

At half time, Benin City native Frank Elaiho, the cousin of former Eagles star Friday Elaho and a radiology student at Long Island University, commented, "It would be ideal if the Nigerian Consulate in New York could get a satellite and provide a hall like this where we could all watch the matches. I really miss out having to watch these matches abroad, but in a gathering like this with all your Nigerian brothers, you don't miss it as much."

Victor Avwontom, from Doula, Cameroon, said confidently, "We're going to win. We are going home already." Avwontom, a professional footballer playing for the Long Island Rough Riders went on to say, "This is the best rivalry in Africa."

And it certainly seemed like it, especially when he was literally sweating out the final minutes, looking so stressed it appeared he was on the field playing.

The youngest fan present was four month old Seyi Ojo, who was sound asleep through most of the match in spite of all the noise. Her mother, Nike Ojo, a Lagosian now working in New York as a computer technician, hopes that little Seyi will one day hear that kind of noise while starring on the field for the Super Falcons of the future. A lofty dream for her little girl, but certainly not an impossible one considering her mother's love for soccer.

"I'm here since I love soccer," Nike said, adding, "Soccer is also for Nigerian women."

Okocha ensured that the second half started off with a bang, and for a while, he silenced the Cameroonians and woke up the Nigerians. When the Nigerians fans started chanting, "into the net," the Cameroonians began to chant similar things, as if they were not creative enough to have their own chants. When the referee seemed to keep calling everything Cameroon's way, one Nigerian fan trying to get the Cameroonian's blood boiling shouted, "Hayatou must have spoken to the ref!"

The match was certainly

Nigeria vs Cameroon



•Sunday Oliseh, Eagles skipper with the fair play trophy



•Rigobert Song, Lions skipper with the Unity Cup

Wiebe Boer
 Perspective of a Nigerian-American

an epic, and not just a little controversial, making the trip worth it. In spite of so many intense Nigerian and Cameroonian fans crowded together in one hall, the atmosphere remained cordial, even while a spirit of friendly competitiveness was in the air. By the dying minutes of the game and the beginning of the penalty shoot out, one could feel, smell, and taste the tension. In the end, the Cameroonian fans were very good winners, and the Nigerians good losers. The biggest victor of all was African soccer.

After the match, there was a mixed bag of responses. Cameroonian fans were overjoyed, and were more than willing to talk to me about their views.

Elias Wirba, an information technology consultant in Edison, New Jersey, but originally from Bamenda, Cameroon, said, "This is a good day for African football, on our day we are on par with the best in the world." He went on to admit, regard-

ing Ikpeba's 'missed' penalty, "Video evidence would have showed that it was a goal."

IBM engineer Elias Mancho, who hails from Mankou, Cameroon commented, "Cameroon has history on their side when it comes to soccer finals against Nigeria." A Cameroon fan who I had talked to before the match searched me out after and said, "See what we predicted - you were wearing the wrong jersey!"

Gbenga Subair, a computer technician with Citibank, originally from Kwara State, summed up the Nigerian response when he said, "If we lose gallantly, I will be the first to congratulate Cameroon, but not in this way. The same thing happened at Maroc '88 when Henry Nwosu scored and it was recalled."

You can take a Nigerian out of Nigeria, it seems, but their passion for the Super Eagles will be carried with them.

Other Africans had come

to enjoy the match also. Abdullah Diagne from Dakar, Senegal, said that he had come not to cheer for any of the two teams, but rather to cheer for soccer.

"African soccer has come a long way, and we are still improving." He went on to say, "It will get even better if we have continuity." Roger Levine, a Yale graduate student from Johannesburg, South Africa, was cheering for Nigeria because he felt that one has to support the team that knocks yours out.

Commenting on the match, he said, "The two best teams of the tournament were playing in the finals, and I am glad they showed the rest of the world that African teams are now world class." He added, "I wanted to enjoy the final with other Africans. It was a great experience, and even though most of the fans made it clear which side they were supporting, I could still sense a brotherhood of African football."

On our long drive back to Connecticut, Akin Adekeye, a Nigerian from Ilorin now studying at the University of Bridgeport said, "It makes it more painful that every time Cameroon has won the African Nations Cup, they beat Nigeria in the final to do it. If not for them, we would have

five cups by now!"

The goal of winning more cups is certainly not going to be easy to accomplish, but there is no reason the Super Eagles cannot do it. As Abdullah Diagne said, the key to the future of football in Africa is continuity.

Considering that they had not played in the last two tournaments, Nigeria making it to the finals was itself a great accomplishment.

I hope that rather than seeing their second place finish as a failure, the Nigerian Football Association will see it as a building block for the future. That instead of blaming all the players for failing and firing Coach Bonfrere, the present structure will be maintained. Losing is painful, but every loss at such a high level is a lesson learned and a stepping stone to future victories.

If the Nigerian Football Association can operate with that in mind, the future of Nigerian football will be bright.

I dream of that day in 2006 when Captain Sunday Oliseh, with tears of joy in his eyes, lifts the World Cup trophy in Johannesburg after an epic all-African final against Cameroon. It could happen, but wherever I will be watching it, it will not be Tio Pepe's.