

Nigeria: Sports super power?

The womb of mother Africa is a faded piece of asphalt, a playground court between dilapidated apartment buildings, a hoop beneath a pair of palms. A gym lit by florescent tubes, a floor of fitted two-by-fours where broken knots in the wood serve as gateways to subterranean ant farms. A national stadium where a broken scoreboard yields to a chalkboard and easel. In the womb of mother Africa is a sand soccer pitch, a boxing ring without canvas. In the emptiness of these moldering locales, elite athletes are born. Barefoot soccer stars who hone their tricks with a ball made of rags. Lofty basketball players with agile feet and childlike passion. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, produces world class athletes in soccer, hoops [basketball], track and field, boxing and weightlifting, athletes who beat back a legacy of senseless violence and crushing poverty with limitless optimism.

These words are from an article written by John Gustafson of *ESPN Magazine*, one of the leading sports magazines in the United States, in which he predicts that Nigeria will be the world's next great sporting nation. Nigeria certainly does have the potential to be one of the world's elite sporting nations if only the local organization of sport was improved and facilities could be resurrected to match the abundance of raw talent that exists in a wide variety of sports. Will Sydney 2000 be the time for Nigeria to finally claim her membership among the world's elite sporting nations?

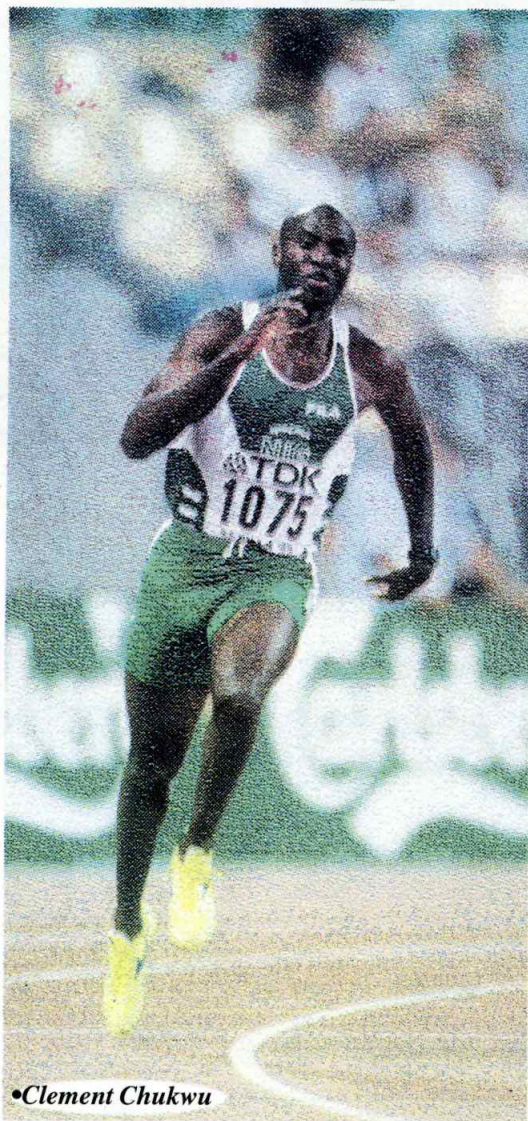
For decades already, Nigerian leaders have been promising that this will happen. At the reopening of the National Stadium late in 1972, General Gowon proclaimed, "It is correct to say that distinction in international sports competitions has become an essential ingredient of excellence, power

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and prestige...it is our intention to level up with these greats [sporting nations] and possibly overtake them within the shortest possible time." This was followed by Shehu Shagari's Minister of Sports Paulinus Amadike who, speaking just before the 1980 Nations Cup commenced, declared, "...the Federal Government has completed plans to stampede sports in Nigeria to world standard within the shortest time possible."

In spite of these and many other repeated promises, if anything the state of sports organization and facilities within Nigeria has declined. Other than Nigeria's footballing superstars and a handful of athletes in other sports who have become financially comfortable, most elite Nigerian athletes struggle to make ends meet even while they train at home and abroad to compete at the highest level. At the very least, these athletes need support and encouragement from their national sports federations. More than that, however, they also need their sporting authorities to give them their just dues from camping and international competitions, monies the athletes desperately need but rarely end up receiving.

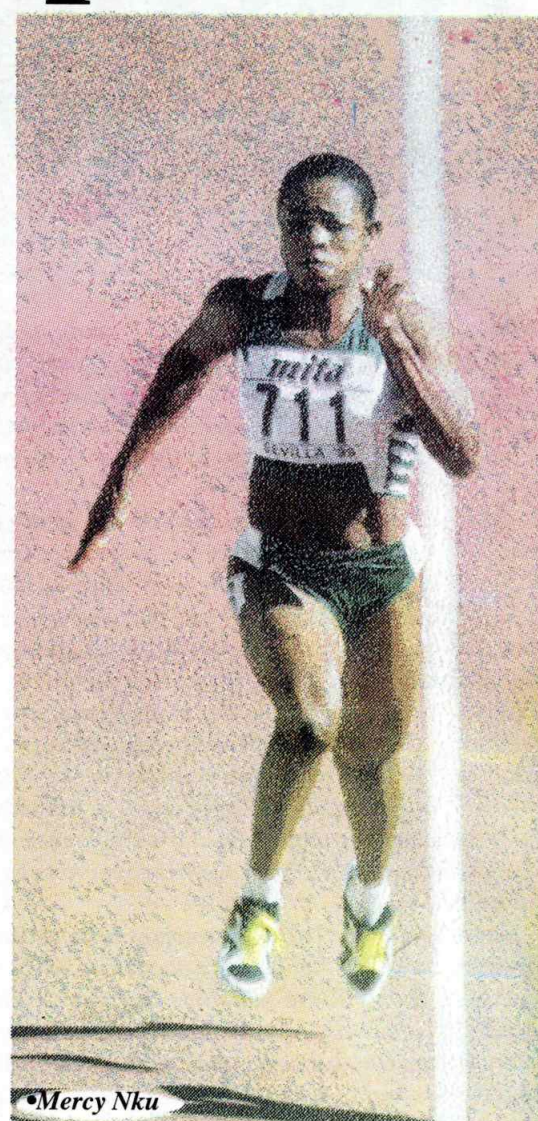
Some athletes are so frustrated with how they are treated by sports authorities that they refuse to compete for Nigeria



•Clement Chukwu



•Fatima Yusuf



•Mercy Nku

Wiebe Boer
Perspective of a Nigerian-American



any more. The most famous of these is Chioma Ajunwa, Nigeria's first Olympic gold medal winner, who recently announced her retirement from international competition. Ajunwa is an elite competitor from Nigeria's most successful Olympic sport - track and field. What do Nigerian track and field athletes training abroad have to say about their struggles to bring Nigeria to the top of the sporting world?

Life is not easy for track and field athletes training abroad, usually with no sponsorship. Daniel Madojemu, a 400m hurdler based in Florida who has refused to run for Nigeria since competing in the African championships in Dakar in 1998, said, "Nigeria used to take care of their track and field athletes, now that it is our turn to shine, they became selfish all of a sudden."

Kenny Aladefa, a California based hurdler who has enjoyed international success for Nigeria at all levels, has yet to be reimbursed for his flight tickets to the 1995, 1997, or 1999 World University Games. This is in spite of the fact that the money was made available to the relevant officials. His frustration and financial difficulties were increased when all the athletes received after a successful All-African Games was a presidential handshake. He remarked, "The same president that went on CNN preaching to the world that 'we will eliminate wasteful spending' could not reward the athletes for their effort but was quick to give legislatures money to furnish their houses."

Kenny's elder brother Ayo, a world class long jumper, when asked what support he has received from Nigerian track and field officials for his decade long effort to bring Nigeria glory, replied, "Nothing. They need to learn how to encour-

age, support and communicate with the athletes."

Clement Chukwu, one of the top 400m runners in Nigeria and Africa over the last four years, graduated last year from Eastern Michigan University where he studied Geographic Information Systems on an athletic scholarship. When he requested for assistance from the Nigerian track and field authorities for his graduate studies, they refused, even though money to develop athletes in this way is available. Chukwu continues to train on his own in Ohio without sponsorship, and in spite of all obstacles will yet again do his best for Nigeria at Sydney 2000. When I asked him of his thoughts on *ESPN Magazine's* prediction about Nigeria's sporting future, he replied, "I do agree to some extent. No doubt we have

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a lot of potential, but I am sorry to say that we need people with vision, people whose common goal is to bring Nigeria back to her former glory."

These are just a few among a large number of Nigerian athletes who face untold hardships to make it to the top of the sporting world. Sydney 2000 is only a few months away, but time has not yet run out. There is still time for reforms to be carried out within Nigeria's sporting federations to ensure that officials are actually conversant with the sports they administer and exhibit a greater concern for Nigeria's athletes than for themselves. That is for the short term.

For the long term, the Sports Ministry needs to focus on finding ways to free sporting federations from total dependence on government. International sports is now big money, and there is no reason that a country with athletes as gifted as Nigeria's should not be able to find international sponsors to promote and fund Nigeria's sports internally and externally.

If the federations are reformed and sponsors are found to relieve them from government dependence, then Nigerians can have much hope that the predictions of John Gustafson will come true. If not, sports will remain yet another arena in which mismanagement and self interest has robbed Nigeria its rightful place among the world's elite nations.