

Killing the Beautiful Game...

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On the last day of the football season anywhere in the world, there is usually some high drama. But here in Nigeria, you also witness the bizarre and the unexpected. That was exactly what happened last week Wednesday in Oron, Akwa Ibom State when the curtains fell on the 2005/2006 football season.

The match was between promotion-seeking Akwa United of Akwa Ibom, a professional Division One team and Calabar Rovers. In practical terms, for Akwa Ibom to gain promotion into the Premiership, winning their match would not just do; their competitor, Busdor United of Port Harcourt, also had to lose or at least play a draw. Because of the wide goal difference, any other result would consign Akwa United to Division One for another season. Except of course they could score 13 goals within 90 minutes!

Expecting a team that had not succeeded in putting 12 goals into the net all season to now score 13 goals in one match would be expecting a miracle which rarely happens in modern competitive football games. But this is Nigeria where anything can happen.

And in Oron, the unexpected actually happened. Within a few minutes of a most scandalous match where the referee and the 22 players on the field were acting out a macabre drama, the 'Diego Maradonas' in Akwa United scored 13 unreplied goals!

Reports available indicate that the match was bought and sold in Akwa Ibom Government House with some dubious officials as middle men. If what happened was, however, just a one-off, one would not be worried but it is not. Our football is being run by a bunch of unscrupulous men who have conspired to kill the domestic league by fixing results in boardrooms and effecting such decisions on the field of play.

Since Nigerians are no fools, it is equally no surprise that nobody watches football matches here anymore as we all become slaves

to the Spanish La Liga, English Premiership and Italian Serie A.

The reason is not far to seek. No matter how much we all love what Pele has appropriately dubbed the 'beautiful game', no sensible person will waste his time watching a match whose result had already been predetermined. What has been going well for these characters is that notwithstanding their dubious antics, we still have occasions to cheer due principally to the resilience of our players as the female national team's superlative performance against Finland yesterday demonstrated.

For those who may not be interested in football, and there are actually some strange people like that, the real message here is not about sports but the culture of dishonesty and lack of any sense of shame that permeate the entire system. What played out on the field in Oron was a parody of what is fast becoming the norm in our land where the ethics of hard work and integrity are being jettisoned for quick-fix deals on the pretext that every process could be subverted to achieve predetermined ends. No nation can develop with such a culture that tends to promote, indeed celebrate, fraud and mediocrity.

In fact, anybody who wants to have an understanding of the gradual decline of Nigeria to the present state of decay despite abundant human and material resources need only to study our football that at some point in the past held so much prospect with abundant talents.

Not too long ago, most of us who now describe ourselves as "Gunners for life" or "Red Devils" or those who are never afraid to "walk alone" used to have local teams which we were passionate about. There were Leventis United, Abiola Babes, Iwuanyanwu Nationale, Stationery Stores, Raccah Rovers, Ranchers Bees and several others but all teams bright and beautiful, the NFA killed them all!

Those who followed the recent scandal in Italian football which led to the demotion of Juventus and stripping the team of the Italian championship titles (scuddeto) won in the last two seasons would wonder how we can close our eyes to the disgrace that our domestic league has become especially when these things happen in the full glare of the public. Two years ago, for instance, also on the last day of the league, Kano Pillars and Bendel Insurance were

jostling for the third position in the League that would earn the winner a WAFU Cup qualification. Bendel Insurance Football Club was playing Lobi Stars of Makurdi in Benin while the Kano Pillars were playing Gombe United.

The two matches ordinarily ought to be played simultaneously. Indeed, the two matches started at the same time but ended almost two hours apart because in Benin, a 90-minute match was allowed to drag for four hours and at the end, the objective was achieved. First, the match was abandoned at half-time and about an hour after the one in Kano ended with the result already known, the Benin match resumed.

By a simple arithmetic, Bendel Insurance needed five goals to displace Kano Pillars from the number three slot and by the time the match, which commenced at 4p.m. finally ended at 8pm, the five goals were conjured without a single reply from their opponents!

That things are upside down in Nigeria football is all too evident but what worries me is that we are all behaving like ostriches, burying our heads in the sand. Yet this is the only aspect of our national life where all 11 national players on the field for Nigeria could come from the same Arochukwu village and we would all see them as representing the nation. It is the most unifying factor in Nigeria today yet it is also the most mismanaged. If we will not deceive ourselves, our football is rotten through and through and no cosmetic approach will work.

The reality is that the culture of corruption is so pervasive that even with our abundant talents, those who run our football do not believe matches can be won on the field of play. When Nigeria failed to qualify for last month's World Cup in Germany as a result of drawing the match in Kano which now gave Angola the advantage of head-to-head rule, I gathered from those who should know that it happened because someone who was given \$50,000 to bribe the referee decided to play smart by keeping the money to himself, obviously with the calculation that the Super Eagles in their full strength would win the match. As it turned out, the match ended in a draw and Nigeria could not secure a ticket to the World Cup.

Except we want to deceive ourselves, our football is in a serious

crisis. It is only in Nigeria that a referee would be whispering to players to "fall inside the box" so he could award dubious penalty kicks; it is only here that the International Transfer Certificates of players are traded like GSM recharge cards while officials openly auction results of matches not yet played.

I have followed the drama of the NFA election slated for next Tuesday in Abuja and if the truth be told, it is no more than an organised waste of time. At the end, Director of Sports Development and Nigerian football's one-man-Mafia, Dr. Amos Adamu, would install another crony in office and the rot would continue. Here, I need to state that I have nothing against Adamu who is perhaps Nigeria's equivalent of Luciano Moggi, one of the most controversial figures in Italian football whose unconventional methods and vice-like grip on the game earned him the nickname, "Lucky Luciano", a reference to the notorious gangster.

But while one would not ordinarily mind Adamu's stranglehold on our football administration if things were working, the fact on the ground today is that they are not. Perhaps now that he has reached the very top in the game, having been inducted into FIFA's executive committee yesterday, Adamu would leave the local turf alone and allow others to run the show but I very much doubt that.

The truth, which even FIFA must be aware of, assuming some of their men have not been compromised, is that football is sick in Nigeria. The rot will just not go away with an election whose results we already know. Sani Lulu, the man already anointed for the NFA chair, may be a good man as many have attested, he may even have the requisite pedigree for the job. But the structure on ground will not support a good administration. That is the bitter truth.

Perhaps nobody has diagnosed the ailment afflicting Nigerian football as succinctly as former Super Eagles defender, Taribo West who nobody can accuse of bad faith having played the game at the highest level in France, Italy and England.

West in a recent interview spoke with so much pain and passion about what is going wrong and I take the liberty to quote him extensively:

"In times past, I walked up to the Sharks stadium and inquired how I would become a ball boy so that I could have access to the

facilities and the players I always watched on television. The system then allowed my passion and dream to be translated into reality because the administrators at the Sharks Football Club were professionals that could read the burning desire in me. But today, what do you see?

"What we have are hawks and hungry individuals sitting in offices, stealing money without the development of the players who are the main actors in any football organisation. I still remember the products of the Nigerian league. Players like Benji Izeakor, Andrew Uwe and the rest of them who broke into the national team without travelling abroad because the organization in the league gave a healthy competition to those that were ready to learn.

"I am sad about what our league has been reduced to. Nowadays, there are no spectators to watch big teams and there are no big names in the league anymore because of the incompetent hands occupying sensitive positions in the league. I remember the first day of the current league season when I went to Port Harcourt to watch Dolphin and Bayelsa United play.

Even with the presence of Governor Peter Odili and CAF President Issa Hayatou, you could count the number of spectators that came to cheer the two teams, a sign of decay in the system. How can you tell me that it is impossible for any away team to pick the maximum points in any stadium in this country?

"Talents are waiting to be tapped in the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. But the bad system will not allow them to be discovered. I, however, foresee a greater tomorrow for them because very soon, I know that the searchlight the federal authorities are beaming on the sectors of our national life will be focused on our sports with special attention to the local league."

What else can anybody add to that?