

**SPORTS FESTIVAL: A VEHICLE FOR
PROMOTING UNITY IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Sports are physical and social activities done according to rules for competition or recreation. *It is a common thing to see individuals or a group of people at the local, state or national level brought together to watch or partake in any sports fiesta. Sports serve as an agent to bring about national unity. This paper highlight how sport effectively serves as a unifying factor in Nigeria. The paper also contained conclusion and recommendations for further studies as follows: Physical Education should be taught at all levels of Education so as to have manpower development in sports such as Coaches, Games Masters/Mistress, Sports administrators and Managers, etc. respectively.*

Introduction

Sport is a household affair of every nation throughout the world. Nigeria is not an exception. Sports are physical and social activities done according to rules for exercise, competition or recreation. This is because its influence cuts across all facets of national life. A lot of people spend precious hours and hard-earned money on sports. While various governments spend billions of naira on sports. This prompts one to look at the functions of sports. The case of the Federal government in spending over nine billion naira (₦9 billion) to host FIFA under 17 world cup in 2009 in Nigeria is an example. And the Nigerian Football Federation (NFF) presenting a budget of (₦ 8.9 billion) for football alone for 2008 budget is a clear example (New Nigeria News Papers, 2009). Sport is a symbol of national unity and cohesion in Nigeria. Akinsanmi, Ogungbenro and Oloyede (2004) opined that sport contributes to character building, discipline, economy, patriotism, education, mental development, human communication, physical fitness and health respectively.

Brief History of Sports in Nigeria

Informal competitive sports have their origin in villages and their ethnic groups. This humble beginning as entertainment and recreational past-time subsequently developed into prominent phenomenon that could no longer be ignored in the socio-political and economic life of the nation. Missionaries introduced

formal sports in Nigeria and in the course of history both formal and traditional sports have evolved to be administered by management structures such as Sports Federations, Sports Councils and at the apex, the National Sports Commission.

Formal sports organization started in Nigeria at about 1910 with the introduction of Empire Day competitions, which were organized on inter-schools' basis. The establishment of Mission schools in different parts of Nigeria assisted in the development of sports and the introduction of new ones. Though most of the sports were alien to Nigerians, they were welcomed because they served the common goal of recreation, entertainment, social mobilization and promotion of unity in diversity.

Nigeria's first participation in an international competition was in 1934, when the late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe represented Nigeria in the 440 yards (400m) at the Commonwealth Games and Empire Day competitions in London. Nigeria has since then continued to participate in these Games except the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Canada, and the 1986 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland, as well as the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia because of political reasons that were largely influenced by the Apartheid Regime in South Africa at that time. Nigeria did not participate in the 1976 Olympics and the 1986 Commonwealth Games because of the African boycott of the Games. In the same vein, Nigeria could not participate in the 1998 Commonwealth Games because she was under suspension by the Commonwealth (National Sport policy of Nigeria, 2009).

Sports in the Early Times

History revealed that certain tendencies in the early man have been responsible for their involvement and participation in sports consciously or unconsciously. Some of these are search for food to satisfy hunger, the desire for protection against enemies, worship, sexual urge or innate drives for mating and propagation, fear of the strange and unknown and the need to associate with others. Hunting, fishing, dancing and play evolved as a result of these general tendencies. These explain to some extent why the early man engaged in sporting activities (Bucher, 1999). According to Onifade (2001), the desire to escape from danger also encouraged the early man to participate in sports. Sports such as Karate, Judo and Archery are aftermaths of man's desire to avoid defeat or to subdue opponents. Some sports also evolved as a result of adapting to severe climatic conditions.

Traditional Sports

Traditional sports are pastime activities in which Nigeria engage in they also serve as play in cultural rites, rituals and initiative ceremonies, traditional sports promote community sense of belonging, group identification, group survival cooperation as well as the enhancement of social norms and ideas. (Huzinga 1998) in a similar development reports how the primitive society performed its scared rites, scarifies, consecration and mysteries. These are to ensure the well-being of the world in the spirit of play.

Every society whether primitive, developed or developing including Nigeria has much value for sports participation because it is a cultural product that function as an institution within a given social system. Professional expert such as Wohl (1988), Stevenson and Nixon (1989), and Sage (1990), identified various form of sports from different perspective and their social functions to the individual and their community at large. Objectives of these traditional sports generally include among others:-

- Ceremonial function concern with deities, festivals and cultural identifications of different groups and communities.
- Initiation and puberty rites as a demonstration of the prestige power of tribal communities.
- Means of thanks giving for successful harvest and a climax of festivals, these act as a unifying force among people.
- Serves as social security and a selecting ground for young ladies to have life partners. Victory at such contest like wrestling, Dambe (local boxing) leads to getting a wife and community respect.
- Traditional sports contributes to the promotion of health of the people and improvement of the community resources from acquisition of skill, strength, power and stamina for survival of individuals and the society at large when occasions call for it. Successful individual gain popularity and uphold the dignity of ancestors (Ladani 2000).
- Traditional sport helps to preserve the culture of the people. Frederickson (1989), Awosika (2001) and Omoruan (1998) are of the view that Nigeria is a country with various shade of culture, ideologies, philosophies and opinions, the richness and variety of these culture display informs of drumming and music, dancing acrobatic display, poetry and drama from generation to another.

Sports Today

Contemporary sports grew for the sake of excitement, amusement, strength and physical fitness. Sports has also grown in economic and political dimensions and countries now use it as a legitimate foreign policy and a vehicle to show a country's mood towards another. Sport is used as an avenue for the

appreciation of the ethical values in a country. Success in sports has some national impact such as prestige, status and respect. A country whose athlete performed well in any international sports would be granted an extensive media coverage, which normally throws such country into the world's lime light particularly if the country is relatively unknown. Nigeria experienced this when her soccer team won the Maiden edition of the Under-16 World Junior Soccer Championship in China in 1985 (Onifade, 1986). Sports have earned a lot of people a career of their choice. Such beneficiaries are Coaches, Sports Administrators / Managers and Professional Athletes, the last group today is part of the highest paid people in the world, and others produce sports materials, distribute and sell them to earn a living. The production of facilities and equipment/supplies has contributed to industrial growth in several cities throughout the world. Several people have been employed to produce these items. Sporting activities are also used to promote some products too. This has helped to improve the sales of such advertised products.

Sport serves as a safety valve to dissipate excess, tension and possible expression of hostility in the society. This gives the participants an opportunity to behave well. It has been shown that individuals who participate in sports and exercises benefits tremendously by decreasing the risk of coronary heart disease, preventing obesity, improve cardio respiratory functional capacity and physical working capacity and as a result health status and quality of life etc. (Danladi, Akinsanmi, Ogungbenro & Oloyede, 2004).

Sports as a Vehicle for National Unity

The civil war in Nigeria (Biafran war 1967-1970), almost tore the country into pieces. The then Military Head of State General Yakubu Gowon set up a committee headed by General Henry Adefowope Rtd. To seek for a possible means of bringing or uniting the country together through the means of sports. This committee come up with the idea of a National Sports Festival to be conducted bi-annually and that was compulsory for each state to participate. The first edition of the National Sports Festival took place in Lagos State in 1973 with all the twelve states of the federation. There were about five thousand (5000) athletes that participated including the South Eastern region which was the war zone.

Objectives of National Sports Festival

The acceptance of the recommendation of the panel by the military government led to the formulation of the following objectives for the festival:-

- To promote mass sports participation in amateur sports from grassroots level throughout the

country with a view to discovering hidden talents in the states of the federation.

- To promote keen competition among the competitors under an atmosphere of sportsmanship and friendly interaction with a view to enhancing improvement in standards as well as promoting and strengthening national unity.
- To promote and strengthen friendship among the sportsmen and sportswomen throughout the federation (Ladani, 2007).

Ojeme, (2009) opined that there is no doubt that as a post civil war programme, it has largely achieved the objective of creating a forum for strengthening the unity of the nation and also provided a means of identifying hidden talents that abounds in the nation, he further stated that the national sports festival provides an opportunity for National integration and National unity. Sport as an aspect of physical education aims at the development of a whole man uniformity. A man that has all round uniform development will be useful to himself, his community, and the nation at large. When the citizens are healthy, the nation too is healthy. Productivity and health will be enhanced. The all-round development will later contribute to national integration and cohesion. For example, character training is an essential function of sports. Participants learn rules and regulations of sports, put them into practice, adhere to them so much that they become part and parcel of them. Sports men are supposed to display ethical behaviours, either they are alone or in a group, seen or not seen by other people.

Sports generally entail bringing participants, officials and spectators together at the level of organization. People are therefore brought together at the community, state, national and international levels. This explains why individuals, schools, organizations, clubs, states and nations are brought together in sports to vie for honours. It may interest you to note that the Super Eagle before starting any football match usually meet and pray. In this case whether you are a Christian, Muslim or Traditional religious believer you join and pray too. Now, if I may ask, what are they praying for? Success or what? At the end of the game one team may win. Does that mean that God did not answer the prayer of the loser? The author is of the view that the prayer is just a means to show their level of unity and not really seeking a divine intervention. It takes dedication, commitment and total sacrifice to win a game. Prayers don't win matches.

The federal government of Nigeria realizes the potentiality of sports in bringing together and uniting the people, hence, sports are organized at various levels especially at national level. The various states are brought together regularly for sports in order to unite them and derive other benefits. Health is wealth. The nation needs to stay healthy. Citizens therefore needs to use sports and other avenues to remain

healthy. Sports men in the country and all over the world converge and communicate despite variation in tongue. You may be Hausa, Yoruba or Ibo, when it comes to sports you speak the same language. So sport is a major factor in bringing people and nation together (Amusa, 1984).

Abuja National Stadium was a beehive of activities when the Super Eagles, Nigerian National Football team hosted the National Football team of Tunisia. The stadium was full to capacity with Nigerians coming from various parts of the country to watch and support Super Eagles to victory as the game was a make or mar game. Spectators came from Lagos, Enugu, Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi and almost all the states of the nation to Abuja. It was that sport that brought together, regardless of their ethnic and religious background.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the various roles sports perform in uniting a nation, a number of benefits that are realized from sports were discussed and how sports have succeeded in bringing people from states or zones, religious, ethnic and social background together. Sports are pastime activities in which Nigeria engage in they also serve as play in cultural rites, rituals and initiation ceremonies and also, sports promote community sense of belonging, group identification, group survival cooperation as well as the enhancement of social norms and ideas.

Recommendations

- That individuals, institutions, establishments and various government agencies should contribute towards the development of sports participation through provision of adequate and standard facilities and equipment at the communities, grassroots, states and national levels.
- People should be encouraged to participate in sports through organized sports competitions and matches for the benefits of sportsmanship such as friendship, discipline and obedience to rules and regulations respectively.
- Physical Education should be taught at all levels of Education so as to have manpower development in sports such as Coaches, Games Masters/Mistress, Sports administrators and Managers, etc.

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