

Let's field our first eleven

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By Okey Ndibe

Twelve days ago, Nigeria's junior football team vanquished Spain in the ultimate game of the 12th FIFA Under-17 World Cup tourney. Nigeria's decisive victory – 3-0 on penalty kicks – was a fitting finale to a riveting run. On their way to earning the title of world champions, the team had dominated competitors from such traditional football powerhouses as Germany, Argentina, France and Colombia.

The team, affectionately tagged Eaglets, did more than demonstrate its superiority as a team. It also excelled in the two major departments of the game. Its defensive wall was as impregnable as its attacking arsenal was impossible to contain. It brought artistry, supreme confidence and a fluidity of movement to their games. It started the opening minute of each game with the same sense of purpose and energy as it played the last minute. The players cohered as a team. From their first game of the tournament, these young Nigerians served notice of their determination. They were not in Seoul, South Korea for a picnic, or to be also-rans. They came to town to lift the prized trophy. From the outset, then, they had their eyes on the prize.

They succeeded with a brilliance punctuated with an exclamation point. Had they won only against one or two formidable opponents, their dominance might have been ascribed to luck. But to sweep past the competition as they did,

and to remain the only undefeated team in the tournament, shows that this surpassing feat was no fluke. They – players and coaches alike – worked hard, took themselves and their opponents seriously, sweated in practice sessions, and executed their game plan with breathtaking finesse.

Thanks to their work ethic, they not only won, they also endeared themselves to many lovers of football around the world. They charmed their opponents and fans alike. They proved to be not only the best team around but the team with the best individual players as well. They gave the tournament its best offensive-minded star in the person of Macaulay Chrisantus, the leading scorer. Chrisantus dazzled opposing defenders. He feinted, bobbed and weaved his way to seven goals.

The Eaglets' success buoyed a nation in desperate need for cheerful news. Students of nationalism recognize the role of international sports in galvanizing national pride. For the 90 or so minutes that the Eaglets took to the field, they enjoyed the spiritual support of 140 million Nigerians. Their presence in the field, hoisting aloft the banner of Nigeria, helped – however fleetingly – to heal the religious, ethnic and class lines that often divide Nigerians. Yes, even if for an hour and a half, they cemented a nation. They were our proud ambassadors in whom we took pride, and we rooted for them. Their success belongs to us, as their

failure would certainly have been ours as well.

The Eaglets' triumph holds out several profound lessons for all Nigerians. For me, the central lesson is the wisdom of fielding our best talent. A nation is as great or puny as the men and women in whose hands it entrusts its important affairs. A country that wishes to soar, to seriously bid for greatness, must invite its first eleven to lead the charge.

Nigerian leaders are often seized by great accesses of grandeur. They speak of lifting Nigeria overnight from the ranks of the most economically miserable countries to the tier of one of the top twenty economies in the world. But even as they speak, they leave their audience in no doubt that their resolve is feigned. They dissipate their energy, not in working to actuate their vision, but in further pauperizing the nation they would transform. Their other actions contradict their words. They appoint mediocrities into highly critical positions. They bypass the best and settle for the second or third best.

The Eaglets won because Nigeria put its best football feet forward. How often are the best hands and minds in Nigeria asked to carry out tasks that are crucial for national development? How many ministers are recruited on the basis of their technocratic know-how? How many government officials invest time in mastering the nature of some aspect of national developmental crisis in order to be part of the solution? How many Nigerian leaders spare a serious thought in their waking hours, or keep awake at night thinking seriously about—and this is a phrase beloved of our politicians—“moving the nation forward”? If they

knew what it takes to move a nation forward, how many of them would be inclined to do it rather than have their gluttonous guts affixed to the trough?

There can be no question: Nigeria will turn the corner and begin to win the challenge of development when it embraces the culture of putting people in positions based on what, not who, they know. If the political leadership persists in its contempt for those possessed of technical knowledge, then the country has no right to expect anything but utter failure and frustration.

Nigeria is beset by myriads of crises. Its power supply deteriorates by the day. Its roads are in a ghastly state. Its health care is nothing short of scary. Its public-funded educational institutions are in terrible shape. Urban blight is a bane. Corruption still runs rampant, especially at the highest levels of the society. As the gap between the (fine) dining classes and the scavengers at trash dumps widens, the former have become greedier and more mindless. Unemployment is a deepening malaise, and one conjectures that the growing menace of armed robbery is directly tied to an explosion in the number of the unemployed. Taken together, these and other dislocations paint an undeniably grave portrait.

Even so, Nigeria has the human resources—a technically equipped and savvy pool—to tackle the nation's many travails. This talent needs to be mobilized, husbanded, and given the charge to—Go! If Ghana can dramatically cut down on power failures in its major cities, Nigeria can do even more. If Ghanaian universities have attained a reasonable degree of stability, imagine how much better Nigerian universities

can do—given the right tonic of purpose. If Sierra Leone can conduct respectable elections in which the opposition trounces the ruling party, then an Iwules Nigeria is surely capable of doing the same if not better.

The secret is not to leave it up to God, or to prepare a laundry list of excuses to justify failure. Our Eaglets did not win in Seoul because they prayed and fasted and had sleepless prayer warriors importuning heaven on their behalf. They won because they bought into the good old habit of preparing well in practice, and going at their opponents with focus and determination. If the Eaglets had stepped on the field armed, not with a strategy for victory, but with pockets bulging with post-mortem excuses, they won't today be the world champions but a pathetic, whining team. They won because they understood the value of striving for a goal. They cherished the virtue of working in unison, playing their hearts out, and setting their eyes early and consistently on the prize.

As we fete them and celebrate their dazzling performances, let us remind ourselves that the final way to make their achievement an enduring part of our experience is to glimpse what it suggests about our collective potential. When we banish frauds from steering the wheels of our nation; when we set high standards for ourselves and our fellows; when we insist on putting our best informed, best trained and morally astute in charge, then we improve our odds of taking on the world. And leaving the competition a little dazed.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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