SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF TEAM NIGERIA’S PERFORMANCE IN OLYMPIC GAMES: CAUSES, CONCERNS, AND REMEDIATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Participation and winning medals in Olympic Games have become a veritable avenue through which nations attain international visibility. It is also an opportunity for countries to make strong political statement about their advancements in sports. Nigeria performance in recent Olympics has been unimpressive. This work examined the performance of team Nigeria since its first participation in Olympics and the major causes of persistent poor performance which among other includes, politics and power use in sports, corruption, defective preparation mechanism for international sport competition, lack of state-of-the-art training facilities, Disconnect between existing sport research Institutions and ministry of sports, funding and its misappropriation in sport. Concerns were raised with respect to the implication of the continued trend of poor performance. It was therefore recommended that comprehensive review and re-design of framework for National sport development that is sport specific and clarification of diverse national sports goals be embarked upon, while efforts directed at actively engaging the services of indigenous sports scientists in this drive for sports excellence.

Introduction

Sport as one of the avenues to test individual or collective prowess, talents, skills and endurance in a competitive situation, has progressively metamorphosed into a platform for showing evidence of skill supremacy over fellow contestants either as an individual, group or country. In recent times, sport performances at the Olympics games portray similar characteristics of contemporary sports.

Olympic Games as an international mega sport event has attained the status of the World biggest sports event. More than 98% of the countries in the world participate in the games every four years. One of the ideals of the Olympics as conceived by the father of modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin was to educate through provision and encouragement of sport, the promotion of communication and understanding between nations. However, in the present-day Olympic Games, tremendous manifestation of strong political undercurrents characterized by show of supremacy, big time business endeavour, professionalism and commercialisation prevail. According to Wuest and Bucher(2006), “in recent times, Olympic games is used to further political ideologies and the line between amateurism and professionalism has disappeared, while commercialisation has reached new heights and continues to grow”. Grace (1999) had succinctly described the modern Olympic games “as becoming less an expression of ideals of Olympism than opportunity to prove that winning is ‘everything’. Getting a result for sponsors, national pride, the athletes and the IOC is what the games are about. Sporting success therefore mirrors political success; sporting achievements reflect power of country”.

As a result of this paradigm shift in the ideal of the Olympics, emphasis on winning laurels in any international mega sport events including the Olympics has become the foremost goal of any nation participating and a yard stick for assessing each country’s level of advancement in sport. Participation in Olympic Games means serious business as nations which win medal are looked upon as belonging to the class of ‘sports super powers’ in their own respect.

The persistent poor performance of the Nigeria teams at the Olympics over the years has become a source of concern to the nation. The unimpressive result of Nigeria’s performance at recent global sport events (such as the 2011 IAAF World Championship in Daegu, South Korea, where Team Nigeria placed a distant 37th position) and the recently concluded Olympics presents a serious challenge for professional sports practitioners, scientists and administrators. Therefore, identifying and examining the root causes and factors responsible for the frequent poor performances of Nigeria at such international sports meets and Olympic in particular will provide the platform for initiating the framework necessary for establishing solution-targeted programmes for national sports development projects aimed at reversing the trend. This paper therefore, reviews Nigeria’s performance at the Olympics, highlights major factors/causes responsible for the dismal performance, outlines concerns associated with persistent dismal performance and proffered solution-
targeted remediating strategies to forestall poor performances in the future.

Nigeria’s participation in Olympic Games and medal tables

Nigeria as a sporting nation participating in most of the world sporting mega-event and has occasionally sprung exciting surprises in some of the events. In addition to other few endeavours when the country has made its marks, fielding of participants and winning medals in diverse International sports meets has remained one the most veritable avenues through which Nigeria as a country has gained worldwide visibility and respect among the comity of sporting nations. Ideally, going by the number of its record participation in Olympics games, Nigeria could be said to have attained the maturity and experience deserving of a nation with huge availability of human and capital resources required for world class sports development and accomplishment.

An objective index for practically assessing the degree of sports development and advancement taking place in any nation is essentially by a scoring system of medals won in any one highly rated international competition such as the Olympics. This system reflects the relative fraction of medals won by each participating nation which earns it a position in the Olympic medal table. The medal table can then be utilized for self-analysis, objective strategic planning and future projections.

Nigeria has been participating in Olympic Games since 1952 Helsinki games till date with the exception of the 1976 Montreal games. Of all the 15 participations, it has only won medals in eight and none in seven (See Fig. 1). A cursory examination of the medal distribution table for Nigeria since participation in Olympic games some sixty years ago, shows that Nigeria has won only 23 medals (3 Gold; 8 Silver; and 12 Bronze) with most medals won in athletics, followed by football, weight lifting, and taekwondo in that order. The performance curve of Nigeria’s medals chart since 1952 Olympics clearly demonstrated that performance in terms of medals won had been epileptic and that improvements were not sustained (Fig. 1). The best performance of the Nigerian contingent to the Olympics was in 1996 Atlanta Olympics USA, where it won, two gold medals, one Silver medal and three Bronze medals. Since the 1996 Olympics, Nigeria performance has been on steady decline with the climax at the 2012 London Olympics where no medal was won. The result of performance of the Nigerian contingent at the recently concluded Summer Olympics was therefore an indication of unhealthy state of affairs in sport management and sports development processes of Nigerian nation.

Dismal performance of team Nigeria in Olympics

Many reasons abound to explain the observer consistently low performance of team Nigeria in
international sport meets. However, the following factors are contributory to this observed trend, namely politics and power use in sports; Defective preparation mechanism for international sports competitions; incessant allegations and accusations of suspected mismanagement of dedicated resources for sports development; Funding and its misappropriation in sport; Corruption; Lack of state-of-the-art training facilities; Hijack of sports administration in Nigeria by unprofessional administrators; Disconnect between existing sport research institutions and ministry of sports.

The politics and power use in sport

‘Playing politics’ is a slang that has crept into the vocabulary of the Nigerian society to connote inordinate use of authority or position to circumvent due process in policy and decision making processes and in project execution to favour selfish interest. ‘Playing politics’ and power use in sports have greatly accounted for the root cause of dismal performance of Nigerian teams in sports competitions. They give rise to favouritism, nepotism, preferential treatment in all aspects of sports management requiring systematic and objective approach and negatively impinge on every aspect of sport policy initiative, programmes and processes. They are further characterized by display of emotional attachments rather than objectivity in considering key issues of sports organisation and administration such as planning, recruitment, training and welfare, selection of athletes, coaching crews, venues for tours, provision of training facilities and equipment and so on. For example, it was ‘playing politics’ with sport development that brought about the leadership tussle in the Nigeria Olympic committee in the late 2010 and early 2011 that nearly brought the NOC down; it was politics that led to the change of venue of the training camps for Team Nigeria from Loughborough University in January 2011 to University of Surrey in June 2011. These two incidences played major roles in the performance of team Nigeria in the 2012 Olympic Games. ‘Playing politics’ is unfortunately rooted in the misapplication of the constitutional provision of federal character clause which emphasises the need for policy makers and implementers to adhere to zonal representation in all appointments and allocation of resources (Nigerian Constitution,1999).

Defective preparation mechanism for international sports competitions

Sound athletic preparation usually entails a high level of sustained commitment and transparency in the planning and conduct of tactical, technical, Behavioural and Psychological aspects of training. Unfortunately, the situation in the national Sport Ministry has been a consistent adoption of short-term approach to athletes’ preparation for international competitions, an attitude best characterized as “peaking by Friday,” or “the fire brigade approach” yet with an overemphasis on immediate positive results.

Specifically, other related issues to defective preparation include:

a) Lack of sustainable Olympic cycle programme. For example, serious preparation of Team Nigeria for the 2012 Olympic Games only began in January, 2011 (Nation, newspaper, Jan, 2011).

b) Lack of mechanism for early identification of budding Olympic athletes (such as non involvement of training experts in early identification, nurture, follow-up and selection of prospective national athletes).

Incessant allegations and accusations of suspected mismanagement of dedicated resources for sports development

Embarrassing allegations, counter allegations, accusations and counter accusations suggesting mismanagement, embezzlement and maladministration of dedicated resources in sport sector, have bedevilled effective administration of sport and organisation of the Nigerian contingents in various sporting meets. This trend has directly resulted to delays in execution of sports programmes. For example, allegations result to wastage of training preparation time because until such allegations and accusations are officially addressed, no meaningful sports training programmes will take off.

Funding and its misappropriation in sport

Lack of funds has always been regarded as a major factor affecting sports development and consequently unsuccessful performance. However, in Nigeria, the issue of funding sponsorship and participation in big time sports fiesta is compounded by fund mismanagement, wilful embezzlement, misapplication and lack of accountability.

For example, mismanagement and misapplication of funds was clearly evident in the perceived rationale for spending $220,000.00 directly on 11 athletes supposed to be potential gold winners at the 2012 Olympic Games (Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, 2012). The NOC believed that the goal of winning 11 gold medals could be achieved by simply selectively inducing 11 ‘special’ athletes with money. According to the president of Nigeria Olympic Committee, each of the 11 athletes
would receive $4,000 every three months in the lead up to the games. The athletes were not named, but were drawn from athletics, weightlifting, canoeing and taekwondo. Another instance was the report according to Ojo (2012) of the inability of NOC officials to account for $100,000 International Olympic Committee grant meant for preparation of the nation’s athletes for the London 2012 Olympics. Shortly before games, the sum of 2.3billion Naira was released for Nigerian Contingent. The release of such huge sums of money weeks before the game was an instance of misapplication of funds which would have been used to ensure proper training arrangements for the athletes, had it been released much earlier. Nigeria was represented in the London Olympic Games with a total of 55 athletes in eight sports, 12 coaches, 29 administrative officials and nine medical personnel.

**Corruption**

Corruption has been regarded as official misuse of resources for personal enrichment. Nigeria is ranked 143 out of 182 countries in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index. This ranking shows that corruption has eating deep into the fabrics of various aspects of our society including sport. Sports development in Nigeria has been negatively affected as a result of corrupt practices in sports industry. Corruption in sporting industry does not only reflect mismanagement of funds it also include certain unwholesome practices which tend to undermine the fundamental principles of sports practice and engagement. Examples abound of corrupt practices evidenced in Nigerian Sports industry. They include Receiving of bribe to influence outcome of decision; Diversion and embezzlement of funds set out for sports development; Recruitment of athletes, coaches or referees by officials based on reasons, other than performance; Fielding of over-aged players.

**Lack of state-of-the-art training facilities**

Lack of state of the art training facilities and deteriorating sate of existing facilities have contributed immensely to the declining performance of our national athletes in international sporting competitions. Achieving high level performance in sports depends on sustained preparations linked to the availability, accessibility and proper utilization of State-of -the-art training facilities. It was evident that during the preparation for the 2012 Olympics, there were concealed grumbling among athletes and technical crew for various teams over poor training facilities, forcing the NOC to hastily organize some training programmes abroad for home-based athletes.

**Hijack of sports administration in Nigeria by unprofessional administrators**

Various organs of Nigeria Sports machinery are being administered by all-comers other than trained experts. Sports administration in Nigeria has for long been hijacked by unprofessional administrators with far reaching negative implications and according to Adedoja (2012) has constituted a systemic problem to general sports development in Nigeria.

Consequently, the deficiency of expert knowledge among these high ranking unprofessional administrators had resulted to haphazard initiation of questionable strategic planning and implementation of unsustainable developmental sports policies with their attendant catastrophic effects such as is being experienced in the present.

**Disconnect between existing sport research institutions and ministry of sports**

Scientific and successful advancement in sports performance is a comprehensive phenomenon that mirrors dynamic combination of multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Regrettably, there is disconnect between indigenous based Sport Research Institutions (such as the Department of Physical and Health Education in universities and Sports Institutes) and Ministry of sports with respect to addressing the critical needs of sport and translating sport research outputs into tangible services and products that will improve the standard of sport development programmes in the country.

Additionally, no formal synchronised mechanisms for promoting and transferring research results from laboratories of research Institutions such as University to the end-users such as the Ministry of sports or Sport federations where such findings may be ultimately needed. Locally based research result in sports science are either treated with disdain or not utilized by sports administrators.

**Lack of direct synergy in the area of training and manpower development between sports scientists and governmental agencies**

Manpower development has not been taking seriously and that has been impinging on the quality of athletes that are produce to represent Nigeria in international events. Training and retraining of coaches and other allied professional in ultra modern sports facilities and research centres is bedrock of providing qualitative training of athletes and subsequent successful sports performance.
Unfortunately, there is a shortage of world class sports-specific research facilities and platforms in Nigeria where indigenous sports scientists could share results of research findings, cross-fertilize and incubate novel ideas. Testing out research findings and experiments with new postulations of the view to improving the performance of locally-based athletes in various sports. In addition, non-sponsored research and non-sponsorship of locally-based scientifically-oriented sport scientists to travel short advanced courses abroad and acquire the latest technical skills required for training national athletes at home is also another cause of poor performance of Nigeria sportsmen and women.

Concerns

The outline of the major causes of the dismal performance of Nigeria teams in the Olympics has raised a number of concerns and uneasiness. The concerns relate to short-term, medium-term, and long-term implication of persistent failure at future Olympics. The major short-term implication of this trend include: Disruption in administrative and organisational focus of our national sport development strategy with resultant negative impact on sport nationally. Another implication may concern with government’s reconsideration of reviewing its policy on sponsorship and active participation in international sport event, if it perceives such endeavours as a source of fund wastage. Another short-term concern would be the phenomenon of brain drain of athletes and coaches. When talented athletes are not provided with what it takes to become world champions the tendency would be for them to quickly seek for fulfilment in another country. Experience has shown that many athletes of Nigerian origin competed for other countries in the just concluded Olympics.

The medium and long-term concerns deal with the psychological wellbeing of athletes and coaches who are persistently experiencing failure. The psychological trauma that associates with poor performance resulting from inadequate preparation and exposure could be so great on the athletes that it will affect future performance negatively throughout his/her athletic career. Other concerns include eventual loss of sport visibility and image among other nations. There will be probable decline of economic fortunes that usually accrue from marketing and sponsorship by multinationals and other corporate organizations within and outside country. Finally, persistent failure has the potentials of setting off a societal syndrome of ‘sport related anomie’ among athletes and fans. A condition characterized by unresponsiveness, indifference and lack of interest in sport and all its associated activities.

Remediation strategies

In the words of the director general of Nigeria Sports Commission (NSC), Dr. Ekeji. “We have already started out late in the preparations for the Rio 2016 Olympics, but right now we need the political will to develop and transform sports. Winning medals these days at international meets has become more challenging with the emerging technological innovations,” (Vanguard Newspaper). This shows the appreciation of the work ahead for athletes’ discovery and development for the 2016 Olympics.

Sustained success comes from detailed and implemented preparation programme that spans well over the long-term rather than winning in the short-term. Prospective national athletes must be identified earlier, nurtured through long period of training, gradually exposed through controlled competition experiences and followed through in his/her career ladder. According to Ericsson and Charness, (1994), it takes eight-to-twelve years of training for a talented player/athlete to reach elite levels. This is called the ten-year or 10,000 hour rule, which translates to slightly more than three hours of practice daily for ten years.

Accordingly, the following assumptions that will guide the strategies include that a distinction must be clearly made between the Sport-for-All programme and the Elite Athlete programme and that efforts be geared towards narrowing of the gap between research findings and the application of such finding in local context (field testing).

Specifically, the following remediation strategies are proffered. These are organised into short term, medium term and long term strategies:

Short term remediation strategies

Government’s role: Through the machinery of the Sports Ministry and National Sports Commission there should be:

a. A comprehensive review and re-design of framework for National sport development that is sport specific and classification of different national sports objectives.

b. Designing the programme of Olympic cycle into periodization (macro and Micro) for immediate commencement of implementation.

c. Formulating a policy driven framework for integrated sports development
approach (synergy between Govt. and Sports Assoc.).

d. The national sporting Agency should understudy the American and Chinese sporting programmes model for Olympic preparation and take cues from them.

e. Programme for sustainable Grass root sports supported with technical experts to oversee the implementation.

f. Providing a mechanism for comprehensive welfare of Athletes including the active, the retired and the injured.

g. Ensuring that sport is managed by professional sports administrators. As Adedoja (2012) explains, “In other areas of our human endeavours, only professional take up responsibility of managing the affairs. In health, only qualified doctors are always in charge. It is the same in accounting, education and justice, but the situation is entirely different in sports”.

Medium term remediation strategies

a. Developing an effective and workable registry for Sports scientists and managers that are research oriented.

b. Initiating sponsored or collaborative research by the Sport Commission

c. Establishment of Centres of Sports excellence laboratories for designated sports in Research institutions and Universities with the required manpower and technical expertise.

Long term remediation strategies

a. Programme for advance training for manpower development both locally and abroad.

b. Establishment of integrated state-of-the-art sports training facilities for indigenous sport scientists.

Conclusions

The performance of Nigerian sports teams at international sports meets with special reference to Olympics has been examined and found to be on a downward trend. The root causes of the performance setback were identified as politics and power use in sports, corruption, defective preparation mechanism for international sport competition, lack of state-of-the-art training facilities, disconnect between existing sport research Institutions and ministry of sports, funding and its misappropriation in sport, hijack of sports administration in Nigeria by unprofessional administrators and lack of direct synergy in the area of training and manpower development between sports scientists and governmental agencies. The implications of the identified causes of the performance setback were examined as major concerns of sport development in Nigeria if the trend persists. Finally, remediation strategies were suggested based on modern trend of sport conduct and engagement. It was therefore concluded that unless government and the sports ministry act swiftly in checkmating this ugly trend, a bleak future awaits the Nigerian sports industry.

References


