

Unpopular Essays

BASSEY EKPO BASSEY



A SPORTS writer once observed about international competitions involving the Nigerian national team, that in every encounter, the question was not whether the Green Eagles would lose, but by how many goals.

The prospect for the team in question, up till the end of the last decade, was so grim that nobody could put a single kobo on Nigeria winning any football match.

All the "Josy lads," Onyeawunas, Uwalakas, Achebes, Joe Basseys, Bobo Mordis, and wonder Boy," Paul Hamilton, were local idols who would perform magic at home but fail to click internationally. They could, for instance, be counted upon to lose to the Black Stars of Ghana (their so called rivals) any day, be it in Lagos or at Accra.

But by general consent, all that belongs to the past. The Green Eagles have come a long way from those lack-lustre days, when their "glories" were counted in taking part and not in winning.

Starting from the turn of the present decade, the Eagles have planted themselves firmly on the African Soccer map as a winning side. But even where the continent acknowledges our formidable arrival in soccer, our fortunes have fluctuated perilously.

After putting aside the fortuitous challenges of Guinea, Egypt, Ghana, etc., in 1973, to capture the gold medal in soccer at the 1973 All Africa Games in Lagos, the Eagles started floundering. They lost to Ghana in a subsequent encounter as the nation was still celebrating their Africa

Games victory!

Similarly, on account of the team's remarkable performance in 1976 when they went close to winning the African Nation's Cup at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and subse-

neracy of the Green Eagles. Given the good quality of human material available within and outside the national football camp, given a tolerable level of motivation, the reason for the recent

Ilerika from the inside — left position on the curious excuse that he plays with only one leg, he has continued to field substitutes that are a poor shadow of the master himself in that position.

the team very many months ago in a match against Ivory Coast.

Nigerian Sports writers do not appear to have come to terms with this crucial factor of goal-scoring (or lack of it) in

Why Coach Tiko

Must Go

quent wide — margin victories, the national team came to be regarded in the continent as the best team around. It was therefore taken for granted that they would represent Africa in the 1978 World Cup finals at Argentina.

But just as the team was about achieving that feat, the Tunisians came to Lagos and firmly put Nigeria out of the way. And in Lagos too!

The nation's sports writers were unanimous in their evaluation of the sordid Lagos affair. It was the preceding Rangers/I.C.C. controversy that put the pep out of the Eagles and exposed them to defeat!

Those who argued this thesis appeared to have put their money on the Green Eagles winning the African Nations Cup, which competition has just ended in Ghana. The presumption was that despite their poor showing in the World Cup series, the team was still the best in Africa.

I was not so sure. You see, such a conclusion could only be based on a faulty evaluation of the team, Green Eagles — why they were considered the continent's best (until recently); what infact, made the Eagles tick; the present components of the team; and the quality of coaching.

I hold the coaching element as the supreme explanation for the dege-

failures of the national team is only discoverable in the inability of coaching to achieve results through a proper deployment of personnel.

If the tactics employed

"THE truth is that we are out of that race because we failed to score. Finish ! What did the Rangers/IICC controversy have to do with the fact that John Nwadioha shot wide FOUR times in front of the Tunisian goal with only the goal-keeper to beat ? Or was he a member of the IICC or Rangers team ?"

by the national chief coach, Mr Tiko, for the Green Eagles have been inadequate, his selection of players for the team's forwardline could best be described as an irritation.

The Green Eagles won their reputation through goal-scoring. As a high-scoring side, they could be relied upon to defeat any side, any day irrespective of how fluent the other side had been.

And the simple explanation for this is that the Eagles forwardline (which Tiko stumbled on at Addis Ababa when the team's regular players refused to play), was studied with scorers. Scorers and a master schemer who made scoring into a constant prospect. But Coach Tiko's stubbornness has since denied the Eagles of these rare treasures.

Ever since he permanently removed the master-dribbler Haruna

The result is that Tiko has found no answer to stubborn defences, he has not been able to field a forwardliner who could be trusted to open up (through dribbling) the most hardened defences

like Ilerika used to do. He has found nobody to draw attention from the Eagles scorers, and leave them free to score. Nobody!

Coach Tiko's greatest disservice to Nigerian soccer is that he has continued to field a forwardline with only one scorer (Odegbami) who also happens to be one of the only two dribblers up-front (the other is Adokiye). Every defence has learnt to assign at least two defenders to poor Odegbami to mark him out of the game. And where Odegbami does not score, the Eagles are defeated!

All the people Tiko has been fielding in the centre forward and inside-left positions do not see it as part of their business to score goals.

At the inside-right position, Aloysius Atuegbu has been an unrepentant holiday maker. He scored his last goal for

the Green Eagles. Which is why it has been possible for them to hold the Rangers/IICC controversy responsible for our removal from the World Cup race.

The truth is that we are out of that race because we failed to score. Finish! What did the Rangers/IICC controversy have to do with the fact that John Nwadioha shot wide FOUR times in front of the Tunisian goal with only the goal-keeper to beat? Or was he a member of the I.I.C.C. or Rangers teams?

Similarly, we failed to win against Ghana in the recent African Nations Cup competition because we had only one scorer who was constantly being marked (He scored our only goal of the match). And we failed to go on and win the cup for the same reason. When Uganda beat us by two goals to nothing, it was because they were the only side scoring!

Until he left the country for studies in the United states last year, Thompson Usiyan was regarded as the biggest goal merchant on the national team. The general public had expected that for crucial encounters like the World Cup play-offs and the African Cup competitions, the maestro would have been flown in to help pivot the Eagles to victory.

It is probably a tribute to the rugged arrogance of Coach Tiko that this

player never was brought in for any of those competitions.

And it is not as if he had found an answer to the No.9 position. There is no evidence that he has tried hard enough either. For someone with that type of problem, one would have expected him to be all over the country scouting for talents, and not wait for the next national games festival to provide an answer.

It was through such nation-wide scouting that Chris Ohiri was discovered for the Nigerian team in the late 1950's and he turned out to be an exceptional out-side right. Before that, Chris was a poor teacher at Orlu who had probably never visited Lagos.

Team Manager, Alf Ramsey lost his job when England failed to qualify for the 1974 World Cup finals. Football history is replete with instances of managers and coaches who were taken off the field because their teams lost where they should have won.

This is why Coach Tiko should not be allowed to continue handling the Eagles. His failures have become a crippling disadvantage. Those who have been enthusiastic about Mr. Tiko must have lost interest in the man by now.

On the other hand, some of us were never impressed by his style. As late as July last year, Dr. Sam Akpabot, a former sports editor of the Daily Times, recorded his pessimism about the coach in a eulogy he wrote for the late Dan Anyiam: "I have only seen Coach Tiko from afar, but anyone who thought that bringing this foreigner to coach the Green Eagles was a better bet than handing the job to Dan was day-dreaming."

The statement might count as the sentiments of a nationalist, but it was also the rational disapproval of a perceptive sports expert. As things are, the verdict of the experts must fuse with the observation of us lay writers. And it is that, Tiko must go!