

HD Again, Poor Preparations, Mediocrity Underscore Nigeria's Poor Outing

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Aug 15, 2014 (The Guardian/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX) -- Nigeria finished eight at the just concluded 20th Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, Scotland, winning a total of 36 medals. ENO-ABASI SUNDAY, who covered the multi-sports fiesta, writes on the positive side and the oddities that thrived in the Team Nigeria camp.

AUSTRALIAN songstress, Kylie Minogue, penultimate Sunday, delivered a stunning performance to bring the 20th Commonwealth Games, which the head of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth of England had opened on July 23 in Glasgow, Scotland, to a close.

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During the spectacular performance, which was characterised by a seven-song set-list, a costume change, naked dancing men and a peacock headdress, all termed "a typical Glasgow night out," the pop star kept her 40,000 strong audience in Glasgow's Hampden Park, and several others on Twitter quite busy.

From her collection, Minogue reeled out seven of her top hits - including Spinning Around, Into The Blue, Love At First Sight, All The Lovers, Step Back In Time, Beautiful and Can't Get You Out Of My Head.

The Commonwealth Games, a multi-sports fiesta, in which former British colonies joust for prized diadems in about 20 sporting disciplines, is one of the most colourful and prestigious sports festival in the world, second only to the Olympic Games.

This year's edition, the largest multi-sport event ever held in Scotland, involved athletes from 71 nations and territories, competing in 18 different sports, outranking the 1970 and 1986 versions.

To a large extent, the games brought about notable successes for home nations of the United Kingdom, especially England Wales and hosts Scotland, as they all recorded their largest ever **gold** and overall medals haul.

England finished top of the medal table for the first time since the 1986 edition that was also held in Scotland. Kiribati also won its first ever medal, a **gold**, in the 105 kg men's weightlifting segment. Kiribati is a group of islands encircled by the Pacific Ocean, with a population of a little over 100,000. Scientists believe that the rising sea could submerge the beautiful, but disappearing Kiribati, within the next 30 years.

Back in 2004, Scotland was the first country to consider hosting the 2014 Games. Scottish cities were invited by the Commonwealth Games Council for Scotland (CGCS), to make a bid. In March 2006, when the bidding process began, the Glasgow Bid team presented its case to the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) at the 2006 edition held in Melbourne, Australia, along with the other confirmed candidate cities; which included Nigerian capital, Abuja and Canada's Halifax.

The first voting delegates arrived in Glasgow on October 2006, where they inspected the city's existing and proposed facilities. Barely four months later, Glasgow announced, on 16 January 2007, the 17 sports to be included, should its bid becomes successful.

Halifax's withdrawal of its bid on March 8, 2007, following the withdrawal of funding from its municipal government, left Abuja and Glasgow as the remaining bidders. For a while, Abuja was seen as a likely favourite, due to the basis of its campaign that an African nation had never hosted the Games.

The Commonwealth Games Evaluation Commission concluded that: "Glasgow has shown it has the ability to stage the 2014 Commonwealth Games to a standard, which would continue to enhance the image and prestige of the Games."

The final decision was taken in Colombo, Sri Lanka on November 9, 2007 at the Commonwealth Games Federation General Assembly, attended by all 71 Commonwealth member associations. After the Glasgow and Nigerian teams, led by Louise Martin and former Head of State, Gen. Yakubu Gowon (rtd) respectively, had made their presentations, Glasgow eventually won.

While Nigeria's poster girl, Blessing Okagbare became the first person to win both the 100 and 200 metres race, fastest man in the world, Jamaica's Usain Bolt, earned his first Commonwealth **gold** medal, when he led his country's team to outclass others, in the 4X100 metres race, that saw Nigerian flag bearers sliding woefully to the sixth place.

A last ditch push by the para-athletes, helped Team Nigeria to finish 8th, with a total of 36 medals. The country rose to the 8th position barely four days before the end of the games.

Team Nigeria's medals were only three shy of the 39 that South Africa amassed, to finish as Africa's leading light, in the 7th place, with 13 **gold**, 10 silver and 16 bronze medals.

England, Australia, Canada and hosts, Scotland, finished first, second, third and fourth respectively. Scotland recorded a haul of 19 **gold** medals and a best-ever tally of 53 medals.

A breakdown of Nigeria's medals haul in Glasgow, which is largely the handiwork of the female athletes, consisted of 11 **gold**, 11 silver and 14 bronze medals. That no male athlete earned a **gold** medal in any of the events stills remain a talking point till today.

Two days to the end of the games, Nigeria was placed 11th, but amazing last minute displays by the athletes, changed the tide. The resurgence, led by para-athletes, gave the country nine additional medals -- four **gold** and five silver.

At the frontline, on that windy Saturday night, were Loveline Obiji, who competed in the women's heavyweight category, and Esther Oyema (women's lightweight). Both set world records respectively, winning **gold** medals in their various events.

While Oyema lifted 126kg to set a new world record; while 23-year-old Obiji recorded a best lift of 144.0kg to set a record in her weight category, Bose Omolayo finished second behind Obiji, ahead of third-placed Kenya's Joyce Wambui Njuguna.

Abdulazeez Ibrahim also won **gold** in the men's heavyweight Group A, lifting a total weight of 197.0kg, to overcome opponents from India and Malaysia.

In the men's lightweight Group A category, 26-year-old Paul Kehinde emerged victorious ahead of compatriot, Rolland Ezuruike, who settled for a silver medal.

An Okagbare inspired quartet held their nerves to claim silver in the 4x400m event in a time of 3:24.71 at the Hampden Park Stadium. Jamaica won the race with a new record of 3:23.82 and England were third in 3:27.24 seconds.

Interestingly, only a few athletes, who won medals in Delhi, repeated the feat in Glasgow. Additionally, while some like Odunayo Adekuoroye and Maryam Usman improved on their Delhi performance, others like former team captain, Sinivie Boltic fumbled. He got a bronze this time, unlike the **gold** he won in India. Tosin Oke, who won a **gold** medal in Delhi, settled for silver in the triple jump event in Glasgow. Blessing Oborodudu, who won silver in Delhi, settled for a bronze medal this time.

Nigeria's first **gold** medal came through weightlifter Chika Amalaha, in the 53-kilogram competition on Friday, July 25, barely 48 hours after the games got underway. But after her A and B samples contained prohibited diuretics- Amiloride and masking agent-Hydrochlorothiazide, she was disqualified and stripped of the medal for violating doping rules. Her medal was awarded to Dika Toua from Papua New Guinea.

If Amalaha's tainted feat failed to announce the gradual coming of age of the next generation of home-grown Nigerian athletes, that of 18-year-old Ese Brume did just that. Same applies to the feats recorded by Adekuoroye, Aminat Adeniyi and Adesanmi Oluwatoyin, who all won **gold** medals in their events.

Nigeria's poster girl, in no uncertain terms, showed that she was now in a class of her own with as she topped the chart with her two **gold** and silver medals to show for her efforts.

The sorest point of Nigeria's participation remains the dope test, which teenage lifter Amalaha failed. Sadly, since the incidence occurred, the teenager has been at the centre of a vitriolic harangue by, even, those who might have been the unseen hands behind the drug saga.

Sports Minister and Chairman of the National Sports Commission (NSC), Mr. Tammy Danagogo was clearly perturbed. However, not many were convinced that the minister's fury would find expression in the number of heads likely to roll over the scandal.

"My heart bleeds for this 16-year-old schoolgirl," the Minister fumed. "She looks too innocent to commit such an offence. She is naive. We must get to the root of this. The coaches and our anti-doping officials have questions to answer. Why didn't they do their jobs before coming here to disgrace Nigeria."

Informed that the teenager could not have ingested just anything to shed weight all on her own without the active connivance of her coach, medical and sundry personnel, the minister promised to carry out an elaborate investigation.

He said: "The fact that she is naive; the fact that those around her did not monitor her to ensure that she does the right thing, is so painful to me. We won't interfere in whatever punishment that would be meted out on her by relevant bodies, but the coaching crew and our own doping officials would be investigated to determine their own level of involvement. Her coach has denied knowledge of whatever she took, but I am still of the opinion that our own anti-doping department in the Sports Ministry should have spotted this before we get to this point of embarrassing ourselves internationally. We will punish any coach, ministry official found to be involved in this to serve as a deterrent to others. We want a situation where, if we win one **gold**, the world should be convinced that we won on merit."

It is common knowledge that all but one athlete that won a **gold** medal for Nigeria at the games ply their trade in Nigeria. This scenario makes it worrisome to comprehend a situation where, with over 170 **million** Nigerians, **millions** of naira was deployed to facilitate the change of nationality for some Americans athletes, who were said to have been approached by the Solomon Ogba-led Athletics Federation of Nigeria (AFN), to switch allegiance to Nigeria.

Curiously, some of the athletes, who never won anything tangible for America, were at a point, drug cheats.

While the ex-internationals accuse Ogba and his team of suffering from lack of positive initiatives and creative ways of bailing the country out of the woods, the Delta State-born politician recently fired back, claiming that, "if not for anything, the coming of these athletes has changed the usual lacklustre attitude of some of our athletes, who believe they can always make the team." Ogba added, "now the competition has become stiffer and this development would make everyone sit up and develop more seriousness in training and preparation in subsequent competitions. The athletes might not be the best in the world, but they cannot be denied an opportunity to compete for a country like Nigeria, just like our athletes do for other countries. There is something that they have seen in Nigeria that most of us might not be seeing."

A summary of the new Nigerian athletes' scorecard shows that one of them, Amaju Mark Jelks, came 5th in the 100m finals with a time of 10.17seconds, which, according to Chairman of the AFN Technical Committee, Captain Omatseye Nesiama, should automatically qualify him for next year's world championships in **China**.

The duo of Tuoyo Mozavous Edwards and Dominique Duncan got to the semifinals of the men's 100m and women's 200m respectively. Ogba added: "They returned better time than any of our home-based athletes in the same events and we should commend their efforts instead of castigating them back home."

The AFN president also wants Nigerians to clap their hands for Robert Simmons, who could not show class in the men's 400m event due to injury because "he helped the 4x400m team to the finals of the event and that is commendable."

He said: "What I want people to understand is that if our home-based athletes prove themselves better than the foreign ones, we take them to international competitions. If not, we would not have "risked" using junior athletes in a competition of this magnitude. The use of these foreign-based athletes for now is a stop-gap, pending when the AFN development programme churns out more elite athletes and which should not be too far any longer, with the likes of Ese Brume, Divine Oduduru and Akerele Omeiza already coming into the elite pack."

While Ogba sees AFN's recruitment of the foreign athletes as a step in the right direction, especially in the short-term, Sports Minister Danagogo seems to see a different picture altogether.

"It was in the papers that I knew about foreign coaches and foreign athletes particularly in the AFN. The AFN President, Solomon Ogba told me that the coach was hired before I arrived. I told him of my preference for local coaches, which we will train to match their foreign counterparts.

"On the issue of foreign athletes, they told me that they (athletes) were Nigerians resident abroad. I had not seen them or heard of their names until they went for their foreign camping. However, one of the girls that did long jump, her name was purely American, and I asked the Director General of the NSC, Gbenga Elegbeleye, 'are you sure this is a Nigerian?' The DG responded by saying he also saw one Onuoha and Okoro competing for England. But the truth is that, it is a bit confusing because they are blacks though with foreign accent. I am also aware that there is the possibility that some of them have either Nigerian parent. It is left for us to investigate well. Whereas, some of them may be Nigerians, I know that all of them are not.

"Having said that, I have to add that our salvation does not lie in these imports. And that is the lesson we are learning here (in Glasgow). All those that have given us medals are either local breeds or local breeds that have gotten further exposure. So, what I think this episode re-emphasises is that, there is the need for us to spend more on our local talents because it is common knowledge that if these athletes were the best in America, their country would never leave them to come and compete for Nigeria because America can pay them far better than we can. So, it is most likely that they are not the best wherever they were, that is why they are competing for us."

Countries begin skeletal preparations for international sports competition including the Commonwealth games long before the events get underway. These preparations include seeking out and grooming athletes they intend to unleash on the rest of the world; **acquisition** of kits and equipment, implementing training programmes and ensuring that timelines are met.

The recently concluded games, however, for the umpteenth time, provided an opportunity for Nigerians to behold the blunders that their sports administrators are adept at, due to their inability to learn from past mistakes and work ahead of time. High-level mediocrity and clumsy administrative procedures manifested in the persistent disputes over allowances that rocked most African sporting teams, even at the FIFA World Cup.

Secondly, the Nigeria's shooting team also departed for the games without their firearms, due to the officials' failure to apply for and get relevant approvals on time. When they were ready to do so, the then Inspector General of Police, **M. D. Abubakar**, was out of town and could not give authorization.

Nigeria's para-athletes, for some strange reasons, departed Nigeria 24 hours to the commencement of the games. Miraculously, they still recorded a splendid outing. Their late departure was blamed largely on the challenges the federation encountered in the build-up to the games, principal among which was the late release of funds.

Another blunder recorded within the period under review was Team Nigeria's inability to take delivery of complete official kits for the games until about 72 hours to the end of the sports fiesta. Even when the delivery was made, it was reliably gathered that not everything was supplied.

Consequently, some Nigerian athletes ended up competing in a range of kits made by Adidas, Nike, Mizuno and sundry brands, which they personally owned or used in past championships. In fact, some weightlifters wore the recognisable green and white kits while others were in diverse colours, ranging from blue to black and brilliant green.

Danagogo told The Guardian: "What happened regarding the kits is certainly not excusable. Order for the **purchase** of the kits had been made before I assumed office as Sports Minister. I only came to see the bills I had to pay, and you know how dicey it is to handle situations like that when it is barely one month to the competition.

"But between the Austrian **firm**, which produced the kits and their Nigeria representatives, something went wrong and the **firm** was being paid in bits. This unfortunate and inexcusable development led to the delay of the production and delivery of the kits, which were to come in three sets- the one for the opening ceremony, the sports-specific kits and the general kits. Of all of these, only the general kits that were delayed. So, there was no reason for our athletes to compete in unofficial kits.

On the Nigerian shooting team leaving Nigeria without their firearms, he said: "It was the Tuesday that I was leaving for Glasgow that I learnt that the arms that the team was supposed to make use of had not been approved by the Inspector General of Police. It was after this was brought to my notice that I started

making calls on how the situation could be remedied. In fact, it was after I got here that the Director General of the Department of State Services informed me that he could have been of assistance."

Speaking specifically on the level of organisation of the Games, Danagogo said: "The level of organisation of this Commonwealth Games, is also showing us what to do as we prepare for our National Sports Festival, and how to prepare as we try to bid for one of these games in the very near future. What has happened here is a display of excellence in sports as well as in organisation of events of this nature."

Asked for his insights on how the country can make better impact in subsequent international sporting events, President of Nigeria Wrestling Federation (NWF) and Olympic **gold** medalist, Daniel Igali said, a lot must change in the scheme of things in order for sports to move forward in the country.

Igali, who won a **gold** medal in the Men's 74 kg freestyle wrestling at the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, England, a **gold** medal in the men's 69 kg freestyle wrestling at the Sydney, Australia Olympic Games, said funds must, as a matter of necessity, be made available to respective sports federations, if they must compete well with their peers in other limes.

His words: "India has a \$3m vote for wrestling alone. We do not have that. The Canadian women wrestling team has a \$1.5m budget and the Nigerian wrestling team does not have a budget. We move from tournament to tournament. So, the non-availability of funds essentially means that you cannot plan, and that needs to change. If you look at our wrestlers, it is not that we are lagging behind too much. But we need to plan and we also need the exposure. If we are to make any serious impact, for instance, at an Olympic Games coming up in two years, we need to be out of the country training for at least six months."

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