



UNIVERSALITY AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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THE FLIGHT OF AFRICAN ATHLETES

Described as a form of international worker exchange, the flight of African athletes “towards more clement skies” is, ultimately, nothing more than sport’s version of the consequences of the unequal relations that exist between African and more developed countries. Presented at grassroots level as “muscle drain”, at Olympic level it is described as “Olympic mercenariness” and concerns the exodus of great African champions. It has significant consequences for the African continent’s medal haul in the Olympic Games and even World Championships, the major sports events at global level.

The way things are going at the moment is like robbing Peter to pay Paul. Africa is still lagging behind all the other continents, despite the improvement registered at the last Olympic Games in Beijing (China), where the black continent amassed 40 medals, including 12 golds. If we also remember that 958 medals were awarded in total at the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, we soon realise that Africa is still falling a long way short.

1. AFRICAN ATHLETES IN THE WAVE OF OLYMPIC MERCENARINESS

The 1990s produced a great 800m champion. This matchless champion from Kenya, a certain Wilson Kipketer, ended up as a naturalised citizen of Denmark.

In the 1500m, the United States has been counting on former Kenyan champion, Bernard Lagat, who became an American citizen in 2004. Lopez Lomang runs the same distance in American colours, even though Sudan remains his native country. Rashid Ramzi, Olympic 1500m champion, decided to swap his Moroccan nationality for that of Bahrain, his adoptive homeland.

Athletes who switch countries are also now changing their names. Kenyans Stephen Cherono and Albert Chepkurui, who now compete for Qatar, have changed their names to Saed Saif Shaheen and Ahmad

Hassan Abdullah respectively. Liegel Huber, a member of the American Olympic tennis team, is of South African origin.

At the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad in Athens, Nigerian Obikwelu wore the colours of Portugal. Mebrahton Keflezigui (Eritrea) represented the USA, while Ethiopian Elvan Abecylegesse adopted Turkish nationality.

We know today that these great African champions, who strut about on the Olympic stage, wearing the colours of other continents, are only the tip of the iceberg. Under the footlights, or under the cover of certain anonymity, the presence of African athletes representing Asian, European or American clubs has ended up going unnoticed and becoming the norm. But what goes on behind the scenes, when these same players are transferred from their African clubs to elsewhere, is sometimes anecdotal. At all levels of sports competition, right down to the juniors, African athletes are enticed away from Africa and sent to western clubs where the various stakeholders hope to make good money out of them. Nobody today can measure the negative impact of the raids that are carried out on training centres for young African tennis players, footballers or basketball players.

2. THE REASONS FOR THE TALENT EXODUS

The reasons are cultural, socio-economic and sports-related.

a) Cultural reasons

Although some trends are being demolished by the new reality, it is clear that, in Africa, the former colonising countries continue to hold a certain fascination for citizens of the countries that were once colonised. Another factor is the ease with which entry visas can be obtained in many cases, as well as the availability of low airfares for routes to these countries.

b) Socio-economic reasons

The talent scouts are able to move around so easily because the environment is a favourable one, in which the athletes’ home federations, as well as their families, are extremely accommodating where offers of better facilities are concerned. Too often, young African athletes become lifelines to which all their family members hope to cling in an economic climate that has become more difficult by the year.

It is possible to see, through national planning, the meagre share that is granted to sport compared to other, more sensitive sectors such as education, health, transport, etc.

c) Sports-related reasons

Boxing provided us with an appropriate example for discussion after the Olympic Games. Sixty athletes represented the African continent, with Mauritian Bruno Julie being the only one to win a bronze medal. And, in the experts’ opinion, African boxing is in crisis. On average, it has always won between two and five medals at each Olympic Games since 1960.

The lack of infrastructure and low financial resources are the main causes of this decline. In the case of boxing, it is clear that Africans have difficulty arranging many fights each year and therefore lack the type of experience that is so valuable in high-level competitions.



As far as funding is concerned, most countries devote a very modest 0.8% of their national budgets to sport. Other experts believe – and I agree – that Africa is one of the few continents in which (medium and long-term) objectives are not fixed.

However, it is both necessary and pleasing to note a growing awareness of the fact that we are lagging behind in terms of sports infrastructure. In recent years, new projects have been springing up like mushrooms in virtually every country.

A crystal ball is not necessary to understand that, if grassroots sport is to be successful, states need to develop a wise policy for the construction of sports infrastructure.

3. TURNING THE GLOBALISATION OF SPORT TO GOOD USE

At the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa (ANOCA), we are not opposed to the movement of athletes around the world. But it is important that this movement be closely regulated so that it brings economic and sports-related benefits for African countries. In particular, it is necessary to avoid scare tactics, which remind us of the “boat people” phenomenon of its day, where the term which immediately springs to mind can only be that of panic. And in my view, such panic benefits nobody, not even the countries in which the athletes settle. African countries must improve conditions for athletes on their own territory in order to give as many as possible the chance to remain in Africa. And to make them more competitive, they must encourage African athletes to rub shoulders with others so that ours do not continue to lag behind. ANOCA is willing to play its part in this process.

It is a question of promoting the development of a true status for top-level athletes in Africa, as well as creating a series of events on the African continent that, at any moment, enable athletes, even those living outside Africa, to return to their roots. Africans must think more about what athletes should do after their careers in sport, in order to strengthen their status and give them a secure future in Africa.

They must continue to work with the African confederations to search for ways and means to better regulate the transfer market on the continent.

In this regard, the measure adopted by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), banning financial transactions for young footballers under 18, is to be welcomed. Similar efforts are being undertaken by the European Union.

ANOCA, which is linked to several international sports organisations, including the rugby authorities, the Confédération Africaine d’Athlétisme (CAA) and the Conférence des Ministres de la Jeunesse et des Sports des États et gouvernements ayant le français en partage (CONFESJES), hopes to use these platforms to find appropriate solutions to these problems.

CONCLUSION

Keeping closer control over the movement of athletes may be an important factor for development. It should be remembered that sport remains an excellent tool for education, health and social cohesion. But the “muscle drain” is sport’s equivalent of “brain drain”. Such practices cannot be good for the development of the African continent.

Although we are in favour of mutually beneficial sports exchanges, we are opposed to the frantic, uncoordinated flight of African athletes to the West. We must continue to put our efforts into regulating this sector. So far, nobody has found any answers to this problem. Quite simply because the problem is not solely dependent on the world of sport.