

Mistakes Etim Esin Made

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Like a prodigal son, Etim Esin, a former Nigerian International soccer star, is full of regrets over some of the things he did that created problems for his football career

Etim Esin, a former Nigerian international footballer, was at the height of his soccer career in the 1990s. He was even nicknamed Maradona of Nigeria's soccer by Ernest Okonkwo, the late iconic sport commentator with Radio Nigeria. He was so named because of his ingenious playing style which was similar to that of Diego Maradona, the Argentine super star. Esin was also referred to as a "super brat" at the peak of his soccer career. But the enormously talented footballer's soccer career was cut short as a result of a rape incident involving a Belgian girl. Esin was sent back to Nigeria by Belgium's immigration officials as a result of the incident. That incident brought his promising soccer career to an end. He did not allow this setback to dampen his morale. He looked for something else to do to ensure his survival and that of his family. But unlike many footballers who would settle for coaching and other jobs related to the management of soccer teams, Esin towed a different line by taking to television broadcasting. He is today making a mark in his new endeavour as a commentator on a pay television company, HITV, a station that devotes much of its airtime to football matches played in Europe, especially the Premiership. What motivated the former international player to take uncommon path? Esin told Newswatch that running commentaries and analysing sports on television was another means of contributing to the development of the sport. He explained that what he is doing is not different from the practice in other parts of the world where former boxers, for example, are engaged to analyse the game, while former basket ball players are similarly brought in to run commentaries on the game, among others. "My working on the television station is another opportunity for me to inspire the young footballers and other sportsmen in the country that at the end of their career, they can have something else doing," he said. Running commentaries requires a lot from those involved in it, and Esin would want those aspiring to become commentators to prepare themselves adequately for its challenges. In that regards, he wants those who want to make a career in running commentaries to have a deep knowledge of the game to enable them analyse it in a manner that will make them earn the respect of their viewers and listeners alike. Above all, he wants them to be well educated. Esin notes with concern that "most of our footballers today, including those in Europe cannot speak good English. They speak the language awfully, and they need to do something about it, especially if they want to become commentators like me." Esin's duty requires him going to the studios mostly at weekends to comment on the matches played in the Premiership and La Liga, as well as other leagues in Europe. On the day he analyses the game, he is expected in the studio from about 12 noon, depending on when the games would kick off. On some days, Esin could stay all day long at the studio depending on the number of matches the station broadcasts. Esin is delighted that his efforts are not in vain as so many listeners and viewers call into the programme to express their appreciation of the quality of his analyses. The former Nigerian international is not indifferent to the country's efforts at getting the sole ticket in its 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign where the Super Eagles have Tunisia, Kenya, and Mozambique to contend with in group B. He said one of the best things to have happened to the team was Shaibu Amodu, the team's chief coach's decision to invite new players to the team, instead of leaving only the regulars to play the country's World Cup qualifying matches. He advised Amodu not to compromise on discipline of the players, otherwise the team cannot make the desired progress. He advised him to take a cue from Clemens Westerhof, whom he said did not compromise on discipline, a factor that made his team the most successful side in Nigeria's soccer history. He recounted that those of them that were professionals based in Europe threatened not to play for the country over a disagreement on allowances and flight tickets with the Nigeria Football Association, NFA, in the 1990s and today, they are regretting their action. "When some of us threatened not to play for our country, Westerhof took the bold step in dropping about 50 percent of the players of the national team including myself. In our place, he brought in Findi George, Daniel Amokachi and a number of others. The team he hurriedly assembled went on to beat Burkina Faso 7-0 in a Cup of Nations qualifier, and from that time, the door of the national team was shut to us." Esin is confident that if Amodu applies discipline and the players develop the right attitude, Nigeria will make it to the 2010 World Cup finals holding in South Africa. Football, like life itself, has its ups and downs. Esin had his saddest and happiest moments in the game. That he told Newswatch his happiest moment was when he led Nigeria to qualify for the World Youth Championship in Chile, South America, in 1987 He explained that the Flying Eagles were the toast of the nation by then as the senior national team was always noted more for bringing sorrow to its fans with lack-lustre performances. His saddest moment? "When I was playing at the National Stadium in Surulere, Lagos in a World Cup qualifying match against Angola in 1989 and my great friend, Samuel Okwaraji, slumped and died on the field of play. I could not stand it because we were too close. He was fond of calling me Maradona and I used to call him Ruud Gullit. We shared in the dream of taking Nigeria to the World Cup in 1990, but his death shattered the dream." Esin is not happy that the society he served so much with his invaluable entertainment in the field of play has not really appreciated his contributions. He said having played soccer at the highest level, his country should have rewarded him with soccer-related job since he still has a lot to offer. "Even if the entire country does not appreciate my contribution, Akwa-Ibom, my state of birth, should have given me a sport appointment. I am sad that this is not so, but I believe in God's time." Esin was born about 40 years ago into a famous aristocratic family with many of his siblings being lawyers and successful businessmen in Europe. His late father was an adviser to Clement Isong, governor of the old Cross River State. Esin was regarded as a rebel for taking to football in a family that loved education with a passion. He started his soccer career in the 1980s with Calabar Rovers from where he moved to the defunct Flash

Flamingos before moving to Iwuayanwu Nationale, now Heartland of Owerri in 1987. Before going to Chile to play for Nigeria in the World Youth Championship, he was engaged by AK Ghent of Belgium, where he joined the league of very few Nigerian players to play in Europe. He later moved to Lokeren and Lierse in Belgium. The road to Belgium opened when AK Ghent came to play friendly matches in Nigeria. The club poached him and Augustine Eguavoen who were members of the Flying Eagles team preparing to play at the Chile '87 Junior World Cup. He was also a central figure in the team that failed to qualify for the 1990 World Cup. "My last game for the National team was the 0-0 draw against Ghana in Lagos in 1991," he said. What about his many problems that worked against his soccer career? He was shot by armed robbers during the preparation for the Junior World Cup. He said he was going to park his new 505 saloon car given to him by Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, when armed robbers pounced on him and shot him in Surulere. He told Newswatch that the robbers that attacked him later sent an apology note to him while he was being treated at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, LUTH. "They said they did not know that it was Etim Esin and they asked me for forgiveness and as a Christian, I have forgiven them." He also recounted the rape case he had in Belgium in the early '90s. "It was a racial treatment. My girlfriend framed me up. She was pregnant and the kid turned out to be white. She knew I wouldn't marry her," Esin said. The late MKO. Abiola was bent on getting him out of trouble. He sent lawyers from Edewor Chambers to defend him and paid their fees. "At that time, he was in the middle of his presidential campaign so, he told us we should be patient. That was how I waited and waited until I couldn't see my MKO, my godfather again," he said. Esin, who sees his travails as a lesson to other Nigerian footballers, thinks it is important for sport administration to be run by former sportsmen for progress to be achieved. "Look at UEFA. It is run by Michel Platini. Pele has been sport minister in Brazil. But as long as career politicians run sport in Nigeria, there will always be problems," he said. He also decries how past sportsmen in Nigeria are treated. A lot of them died in poverty, he said. This is because they are offered limited opportunities. "People pre-empt you in this country. They don't want to give you a chance. They will say he can't do it. Why don't you try me first and see if I can deliver? I don't see why Nduka Ugbade should not be given a chance as the coach of U-17 team. After all, he was the captain of the Nigerian team that won the maiden edition of the competition," Esin said. Esin is married to Mariam, a Fulani from Mali and the marriage is blessed with a daughter.