

Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

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Onyekachi Apam: The Conquest of Fear

Friends of the Apam family used to think that Ifeanyi, elder brother of Onyekachi, would be the professional football player among the four boys and one girl in the family. It was not an idle speculation. Although Ifeanyi and Onyekachi were good at football as teenagers, Ifeanyi was the more brilliant footballer. Everyone thought that Onyekachi, a gentle boy, would make a different career choice. The story turned out differently. Onyekachi became the professional footballer. The 22-year-old now wears number 25 jersey for OGC Nice, one of the top football clubs in the French league. The OGC Nice-Sochaux match October 4, which ended 1-1, featured Onyekachi. He has also been spectacular in the green-white-green jersey of the Nigerian junior and senior teams. He attracted Samson Siasia's attention from his days with Enugu Rangers. Siasia chose him for the African and World Youth Championship in 2005. He was a core defender in the team during both tournaments. Nigeria eventually won gold at the African Youth Championship, AYC, hosted by Benin Republic and silver at the World Youth Championship in Netherlands the same year. At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Onyekachi was also an anchor of the Nigerian U-23 team that won silver in the male football event. Nigeria lost the final 0-1 to Argentina. But, Onyekachi stopped Argentina from increasing the tally towards the end of the match. With 13 minutes to the end of the match, he brilliantly tackled Lionel Messi, the Argentine forward, that saved Nigeria a two-nil defeat. Onyekachi was not this fearless early in his football career. At Hospital Road Primary School and All Saints Primary School where he underwent his elementary education, he was often afraid of the crude and rough tackles at football matches in the school. "I feared they could break my legs, so I opted out," he recalled. But his passion for football did not leave him. So, he played with his friends on the streets of Aba. He did not play a specific position. He just played any position available. He even tried his hands at goalkeeping. By the time he entered Nelson Commercial Secondary School, he was no longer afraid of getting his legs broken so he played his heart out with other schoolmates. His soccer brilliance earned him a place in the school football squad. By 2000, young Apam was a member of Abia State football team. And he knew his future was in professional soccer. Talents scouts from Enugu Rangers soon found him. After completing his secondary education, he signed for the club in 2004. His mother, Nnenna Apam, was unhappy at this development. She felt Onyekachi's gentle nature was not suited for the abrasive nature of the game. She wanted him to pursue his dream of becoming a medical doctor. But his father supported him. He urged Onyekachi to follow his heart and pursue a football career. His father, Justice Apam, was a professional football player with Aba Giant Killers FC. A bad injury forced him to retire early. "So when my brothers and myself started exhibiting a flair for football, he was thrilled and encouraged us," Onyekachi said. His best teammates are fellow Nigerian players - John Mikel Obi, who plays for Chelsea in the English Premiership and Obinna Nsofor, the Chievo striker. Onyekachi likes Mikel because of his gentle nature which he said is often misunderstood as arrogance. Nsofor is his buddy because he is talented and has an understanding spirit. Onyekachi has a number of unforgettable moments. He cherishes the days he signed on for professional clubs both at Enugu Rangers and OGC Nice. "Apart from that, the first day I wore Nigerian colours, I felt as if I was floating on the pitch out of happiness," he said. The moments he got the medals of his career: Gold at AYC, silver at WYC and 2008 Olympics silver, were also times that would remain indelible in his memory. And there are bad memories too. Onyekachi was robbed at gunpoint as he was returning from church on New Year's eve December 31, 2007. The armed robbers took away his sports car. "That occurred a few days after my arrival in the country. God only knows what other Nigerians living permanently in the country go through daily. Government should improve the security situation in Nigeria." He described his experience as a lucky escape because the robbers did not know him. If they did, they would have demanded for foreign currency. He was then worth five million pounds sterling. Onyekachi was born on December 30, 1986 in Aba, Abia State. But, he is Ijaw from Bayelsa State. His favourite colour is blue. Onyekachi loves eating rice "whether fried, jollof, coconut, steamed or white rice with a good stew." He loves watching movies and listening to music.