

## We Need Magic to Qualify

Contributed by Administrator  
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The Tunisians played like people who wanted to win. The Nigerians played like those who wanted to lose, like people who never knew what was at stake. Twice Nigeria took the lead, twice it squandered it. Now, we are back to the same mathematics class we were in four years ago before we played Angola. We missed our flight to Germany and the fun, the thrills of the 2006 World Cup. Even the most incurable optimist knows that we are out of contention but they have asked us to be optimistic, that it is not over until it is over, that anything can happen in football, that Tunisia can tumble and we may be able to call Arik and ask the airline to book our flight to South Africa. All of this is sweet nonsense. We are out of it and we'd better believe it. We need magic to qualify. What we can do is to begin now to work for a trip to Brazil in 2014.

Now, if you insist, we can look at the facts and see if we can kick them away. Tunisia is leading the group with 8 points while Nigeria has 6 and Mozambique 4. The (Super) Eagles will play the Mambas of Mozambique in Abuja on October 11, the same day Tunisia will host Kenya in Tunis. The only hope of qualifying lies in Nigeria thrashing Kenya in Kenya and Mozambique in Abuja and hoping that Mozambique will defeat Tunisia, a very tall order. What is the hope of Nigeria defeating Mozambique, a football toddler that nearly disgraced us in the first encounter? At present, Tunisia leads not only in points but also in goal advantage: six goals for and three against, Nigeria five goals for two against. Both teams have a +3 goal difference but Tunisia has scored more away goals and when the crunch comes the away goals count more. And there again Tunisia is superior. So the permutationists have something to worry about. Coach Shuaibu Amodu said after the encounter that we can still qualify for the World Cup but we have to pray that the Tunisians slip along the way. Can somebody tell him that God does not answer prayers of the indolent? When you work hard and pray, God comes into your corner. If you rely on prayers only God teaches you a lesson. God favours the brave. The coach blames his players for overcelebrating when they scored. He says: "My boys overjubilated twice and the Tunisians capitalised on our mistakes." How can a pot be calling a kettle black? Didn't someone carry Amodu sky-high when one of the goals was scored, when it was obvious he needed concentration rather than exuberant celebration? That was the time for a good coach to tell his boys to stay focused till the end. He didn't. He lost concentration just as his boys. I am not a football coach but as an enthusiastic follower of football, I can see four things wrong with the team. The midfield which ought to provide the team with thunder and lightning was whimpering aimlessly. The Olofinjana - Mikel - Kalu combination was confusion confounded; it just didn't work as flawlessly as expected. When Nigerians said a few weeks ago that the midfield was wobbly and that was why our opponents were often able to cut off our supply line, Amodu derisively said that the midfield was only the link between the defence and the attack, nothing more. That bridge was broken down routinely by the sprinting Tunisians thus making our defence, especially the left side, the chink in our armour. The left side was as porous as Nigerian borders and the coach did nothing about it but the Tunisians did, to our regret. The commitment of the players seemed minimal. Except for three or four of them, the rest of them didn't offer the gritty show of professionalism and excellence that a match of that magnitude called for. I don't know whether they were bitten by the bug of the Nigerian malaise because they do better in their clubs or whether they don't respect the technical tactical expertise of their coach. I can see the disrespect for the coach and the disconnect between them. Obafemi Martins even ignored his calls and refused to see his emissary. What could be responsible? Does the coach ask them for dollars or do they dash him some? The technical depth of the coaching crew is questionable. Before the match started, I told the people watching it with me what changes the coach would make in the second half: Nwankwo Kanu and Michael Eneramo. When he made those changes late in the second half, my friends erupted: 'How did you know?' I knew because the coach lacks creativity. What he has is predictability. If the two players, especially Kanu, the best thinker on that pitch, changed the complexion of that game in Tunisia, why couldn't he start the match in Abuja? If intimate knowledge of the Tunisians was likely to be an asset, why did he keep the highest goal scorer in the Tunisian league, Eneramo, endlessly on the bench? Couldn't he have been introduced into the match earlier? Dead balls are very important in modern football. If you have an Okocha who can curve it or Beckham who can bend it with pin point accuracy, you are a real danger to your opponents. In our team, Taye Taiwo takes most of the dead balls. I admire the ferocity of his shots but your shots must provide the razor-sharpness and must provide the ball with the uncanny zing to navigate its way beyond human obstacles and land at its desired destination. Our failure is a tragedy unmitigated for a football fanatic like Nigeria. This time we didn't have to bicker about how to raise money to support the team. The team was even paid a winning bonus for not winning. The coaches and players asked for prayers. They got them. They asked that the stadium be filled to the rafters. It was. They requested that the players be cheered non-stop. They got it. We did more. The field was packed; there was a forest of hands holding green white green flags; men and women painted their faces green, appealing to the gods of fertility to give us a good harvest of goals. Now we are inconsolable. The world cup is coming to Africa for the first time and Nigeria will not be there. We kicked our chances away. We will have to stay home to mark our 50th independence anniversary with the shame of being a big nation with the feet of clay, even in football, our unifying religion.