Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

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Julius Aghahowa: Giving Up Football Was Not an Option

He has over the years built a reputation as one of Nigeria’s most prolific strikers. Indeed, Julius Aghahowa left a lasting impression in the minds of his football-loving countrymen and women with his spectacular goals and trademarks somersaults. That was shortly after he made his international debut for the Nigerian soccer team at the 2000 African Cup of Nations which was co-hosted by Ghana and Nigeria. His landmark goals for the Super Eagles in the quarter-final’s encounter of the big match against Senegal at the National Stadium in Surulere, Lagos saved the Super Eagles from embarrassing defeat that would have led to Super Eagles’ elimination from the competition. Senegal scored the first goal of the encounter barely seven minutes into the game inside the main bowl of the National Stadium. The Super Eagles could not equalise even after more than 80 minutes of the match and Nigeria appeared set for elimination from the competition. Joe Bonfrere, the team’s coach, took the risk that eventually paid off handsomely when he brought in Aghahowa, just five minutes to the end of the dramatic encounter. With defeat starring the Super Eagles in the face, Aghahowa, considered to be a neophyte in international soccer at the time, proved the saving grace for his country when he equalised for the home team within a minute of his coming into the match, sending more than 40,000 fans at the stadium into wild jubilation. The match ended 1-1 at regulation time and went into 30 minutes extra time to allow a winner to emerge for the semi-final. Aghahowa, the Nigerian prodigy, re-enacted his goal-scoring form by providing Nigeria the winning goal in extra time, thus enabling the home team to claim a 2-1 victory. The player, who was just 19 years old then and was playing for Esperance Sportive of Tunisia, became an instant hero, both within Nigeria and throughout the continent with his two remarkable goals. Aghahowa and Chukwu Ndukwe were the only players playing for clubs on the African continent who could make it into the star-studded Nigerian team for the 2000 edition of the Africa Cup of Nations. Star players like Austin Jay Jay Okocha, Godwin Okpara, Nwankwo Kanu, Taribo West, Tijani Babangida, Finidi George, Ike Shorunmu, and many others, in the squad were all playing for various club sides in Europe. Aghahowa’s sterling performances at the tournament opened new doors for him. Many club sides thereafter sought for the services of the Nigerian star, but the Ukrainian club side, Shaktar Donesk eventually landed him from Esperance in a deal worth over $5 million. Before he left Tunisia for Ukraine, Aghahowa had helped the North African side to win their domestic title as well as to reach the final of the CAF Champions League. The Nigerian player spent several years with the Ukrainian club side helping his team to win many leagues titles and national cups. Aghahowa remarkably won the game for Shakhtar in the 2006 Ukrainian Championship against Dynamo Kyiev, heading in the winner in extra-time and was voted “Man of the Match.” His performance in that final was widely seen as the “saving grace” for his career at Shakhtar, particularly because his future at the club looked bleak earlier that season. It was while he was in Ukraine that he also made the Nigerian squad for the 2002 Africa Cup of Nations held in Mali. Although Nigeria’s performance was lack luster, the team won a bronze, and Aghahowa entered the record book as one of the highest goal scorers of the competition. His three goals were enough to make him joint-top-scorer of the championship with Patrick Mboma and Salomen Olembe both of Cameroon, and his compatriot, Yakubu Aiyegbeni. Aghahowa went on to make the Nigerian team that participated in the 2002 World Cup final that was jointly hosted by Korea and Japan under the guidance of Adegboye Onigbinde, the team’s chief coach. Nigerian Super Eagles were in the same Group F with Argentina, Sweden and England. The Eagles lost two matches in the championship 0-1 to Argentina and 1-2 to Sweden. It was Aghahowa who scored the only goal the Nigerians recorded at the tournament. But the international footballer who has so far scored 14 goals for Nigeria in about 60 games and currently plays in the Turkish Super League with Kayserispor had a difficult journey to the top of his career. The player who was born on February 12, 1982 in Benin City, Edo State, in the South-South region of Nigeria has faced the good and the bad sides of life. He told Newswatch that he lost his father, who was an adviser to the Oba of Benin, when he was just nine years old. The loss of the family’s bread winner made life difficult for him and his four other siblings - one boy and three girls. Aghahowa will however remain grateful to his mother, Comfort, who as a petty trader in Benin City worked assiduously to take care of the family after the demise of their bread winner, the senior Aghahowa. He started playing street soccer in Benin City like many of his mates. But it was not easy for him as his elder brother, Osareti, did not take it kindly to his taking to the game. He wanted him to concentrate on his studies which he thought would give the boy a better future than football. Aghahowa told Newswatch: “My elder brother, Osareti, who now works with the Power Holding Company of Nigeria PLC, was always flogging me for going to play the game. He wanted me to face my studies and abandon football. But I persisted, and when he found out that I was not ready to give up, he left me alone. I am happy that my persistence paid off eventually, and the whole family is happy with me today.” He was a promising talent at his primary school, Oliha, as well as at his secondary school in Ehogbe College, all in Benin-City. He was a regular of an amateur side, Sanco Stars FC. It was while he was playing for this amateur side, that the Police Machines, a local police team, engaged him. From there he was drafted to Insurance FC “which noticed me when I scored a goal against them in an FA Cup final.” He was still at Insurance when Tunde Disu, the coach of Nigeria’s Under-20 team invited him to the nation’s FIFA World Youth Championship team which the country hosted in 1999. Although the Nigerian team was eliminated in the quarter-final of the competition, the young player won the admiration of many of his compatriots with his spectacular goals for the junior national team. FIFA technical officials who covered the event rated the Nigerian among the stars that would shape the game in future. To a great extent, Aghahowa achieved this with his splendid goals and his somersaults whenever he scores goals. He was a member of the Nigerian team to the Sydney 2002 Olympics games that reached the quarter-final of the event. But it has

not been all sweetness and light for the Nigeria’s international. The low point of his career came when he signed for Wigan Athletics in the English Premiership in January 2007. Aghahowa spent two seasons without a goal for his team. But he has started scoring at his new Turkish club, which he joined this season. He scored a hat-trick recently against giants Fenerbache Istanbul. He is particularly happy with his three goals which he says have come when he needed to prove his mettle in Turkish football and improve his chances of a return to the national team once more. “But the national team is not a do or die affair; I want to concentrate on doing well for my club instead of distracting myself with the national team. I’m very happy for the people there in the national team and I think they are doing well. If invitation to the national team comes, fine, if not, I have a job to do for my present club, Kayserispor,” he told Newswatch.