

## Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

Contributed by Modupe Ogunbayo  
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### Obinna Nsofor: Born to Play football

The road to stardom for most Nigerian soccer stars is always very tough. Their initial difficulties lie in surmounting their parents' initial objections to pursuing a football career. In some instances, where one parent is encouraging, the challenge often lies in convincing the other parent on the viability of a career in football. However, Obinna Nsofor's parents were different. Both Grace and Christopher, his parents, supported and encouraged him to pursue a football career. Not that it would have mattered if his parents didn't support him. Obinna was bent on being a footballer of world repute with or without his parents' support. But, he admits that their encouragement has been immeasurable and is the catalyst for his success today. By Grace's accounts, Obinna, the last child among four sisters and three brothers, started playing football "from the womb." She recalled that his kicks in her womb were much stronger than his "siblings" and that she used to jokingly tell her husband that the baby she was carrying must definitely be a talented footballer. Obinna recalls that her mother said her suspicions were confirmed when, as a six-month-old baby, he grabbed any round object to play with. His fascination for round objects grew stronger. Immediately he started walking, he kicked everything in sight that resembles a football. His mother then bought football for him to play with his friends who grew up with him on Apata Street in Jos, Plateau State. If they do not gather to play football there, he and his friends went to Saint Paul's Primary School, a popular football field in Jos, for football sessions. By the time he enrolled at Salama Private School, Jos, he had become a renowned football player in his neighbourhood. His father was his greatest fan, and he led the cheering section for him from the sidelines whenever he was able to get away from work. At other times, he gave him tips on how to play better "next time." Eventually, Obinna became part of his primary school's football team, although he was also good in the sprints. This trend continued during his secondary school years at St. Murumba College, also in Jos, where he was nicknamed "Santana" after the Volkswagen car "Santana" for his speed on the football pitch. After his secondary education, he commenced playing amateur football with Golden Boys FC, Jos and Eleven Stars FC, also based in Jos. But Obinna started his professional career with the Mighty Jets, Jos, and later Plateau United and Kwara United. He was about to join Enyimba in 2004, but was released to play for Chievo in Italy. People like Rickler Del Marc and Rosi Aleandro made his stay in Chievo memorable because they were his good buddies. In the Super Eagles, his best mates are Apam Onyekachi and Isaac Promise. Onyekachi is specially dear to him because "he is a brother and a friend." Today, Obinna plays top-flight football at Inter Milan in the Italian Serie A. Inter Milan is coached by Jose Mourinho, the former Chelsea manager and Obinna rubs shoulders with soccer greats like Adriano, the Brazilian football star; Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Hernan Crespo, the Argentinian and Luis Figo, a former FIFA Footballer of the Year. While at Chievo, the 21-year old would forever remember the first time he appeared in the starting line-up against Sampdoria in a Serie A game in November 2005. His outing was all the more impressive because he scored a goal. Infact, he scored 11 goals in two seasons for the club. In the last season, his goal tally was eight. His impressive form at Chievo drew interest in him from many popular European clubs. One of the clubs was the English Premiership side, Everton. Arrangements had been completed for his move to the club before a hitch prevented him from moving to England. The British Home Office rejected his work permit application because he had not played the required number of matches for Nigeria. Failure to actualise his dream of playing with the team is one of the setbacks he has experienced in his career. However, according to Obinna, "It is not a disappointment. Rather, I see the development as not being God's plan for me at that moment. As the world can see, I have moved on from the Everton episode. It is not the first hurdle I have scaled successfully in my career," he added. Truly, Obinna has risen over many obstacles in the course of his career. He was left out of the squad to the World Youth Championship, WYC, in 2005, but three years later, his game had improved so much that he is a professional player in Europe. He was also the anchor of the Nigerian strike force during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Obinna was born on March 25, 1987 to a carpenter father and a mother who is a petty trader. Apart from speaking Igbo, he speaks Hausa fluently. The Nigerian striker hails from Anambra East Local Government area of Anambra state. His favourite European club is Manchester United because of its abundance of talents and ability to deliver results. Nsofor's clothings and accessories mostly always have a shade of blue because his best colour is blue. "It is a very serene colour," he said. Nsofor's favourite meal is pounded yam with Oha soup. Outside football, he loves relaxing by listening to music, watching movies and shopping for anything from clothing to food ingredients. He also loves talking to his parents a lot. As a token of his love and appreciation for their encouragement, Obinna stopped them from working because already, they have suffered enough to bring he and his other siblings up properly. "I just want them to put their feet up and just enjoy life now," he said. It is a deserving reward for his supportive parents.