Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

Contributed by Anthony Akaeze Wednesday, 24 December 2008

Abayomi Adebayo: Dreaming of the Super Eagles

If a survey is conducted on Nigeria&rsquo:s most successful footballers in South Africa in the last ten years. Abayomi Adebayo would easily rank among the front runners. Not only would be come up for mention for his staying power, but also for his accomplishments that have translated into good fortune for him. He owns two houses in Johannesburg, which, at any rate, stand out as eloquent testimony to and fruit of his eight years stint in that country, having arrived South Africa in 2000. And he is still going strong and eager to achieve more for himself and his current club, Bay United of Port Elizabeth. But his success today is a complete opposite of the situation eight years ago, when he arrived in the country in search of soccer glory. He was, in a way, an unhappy man at the time. This was because of an earlier failed attempt to secure a professional contract in Egypt. In 1999, the player had travelled to Egypt for trials with Ismaili, one of the top teams in that country. He impressed the officials and was on the verge of signing a contract with the club, when one of the Ismaili officials decided to play the ' spoil sport. ' The man came up with his own contract papers, different from what the club was willing to offer and asked Adebayo to sign. The player refused. " It was a slave contract," says Adebayo. Rather than sign, he opted to return to Nigeria. Now back to Nigeria, his then manager decided to take him to South Africa where he signed for Thembisa Classic, a premiership club. Since then, Adebayo featured for some clubs such as City Sharks and Benoni Premier United before joining Bay United in 2007. The club was then in the lower division. &Idquo; I joined Bay United last season, from where we gained promotion to the Premier Soccer League, PSL, this season. I have two years contract, &rdguo; he says. As newcomers in the elite division, Bay United would need to work hard to make an impression in the league. So far, it's not been easy, as the team is still battling to secure a place in the top cadre. But Adebayo does not consider this unusual, saying that the club can still go on to challenge for honours. & Idguo: Considering that we are new in the premier league, it may take sometime to make an impact. Agreed that our league's position is not encouraging, but it could get better. PSL is a different ball game, it's not like the first division. We will just keep on pushing and see where our effort takes us but we believe we will be in a comfortable position before the league ends. I believe so, " he says. So far, the 27-year-old has scored three goals in the ten weeks old league, even though he was initially sidelined by injury that kept him out of action for some weeks. Now that he's fully back, the player intends to repay in full, the club management's confidence in him. He is happy, he says, being a member of Bay United, and is even happier with his progress on and off the pitch. According to Adebayo, South Africa has been good to him because, apart from his success as a footballer, that was where he met his wife, Xolisiwe, a South African. He loves her very much, he confesses. " The happiest moment of my life was my wedding day. This was because I got married to a woman I love and who also loves me. I'm very, very happy, and I would just say I'm lucky and blessed to have met her. We met in the church and she's a black South African, and a good christian. She has been very good to me and we have a daughter called Funmilayo." Xolisiwe is a quality analyst at one of South Africa's leading telecommunication companies. She has been to Nigeria, and loves the country as much as her husband loves South Africa. Although a native of Odoeri in Koqi State, Adebayo was born and bred in Kaduna, the cosmopolitan Northern Nigerian town that, to this day, remains a melting pot of different ethnic groups. For that reason, the footballer considers himself first a &ldguo; Kaduna boy&rdguo; because &ldguo; that was where I was born and bred. &rdguo; It was also in Kaduna that his soccer prowess manifested. He started playing football, he says, when he was about four years old, alongside his mates, at the time. And so obsessed was he with the game that it soon became a source of worry for his dad. He feared that his son was gradually derailing from the path he had charted for him. He wanted his son to become a medical doctor. And seeing that his boy was increasingly becoming crazy about football, the man decided to teach him a lesson. One day, he got hold of his son's football kit and set it ablaze. That was enough to make any young boy quit the game, but not Adebayo. He carried on with his passion. And although his father did not support his aspiration, his mother did, but not without still emphasising the need for him to take his school work seriously, as his father wanted. In that sense, father and mother wanted their son to make a mark in academics. But support would come from a man called Tele Ibrahim, who was Adebayo's coach at City Rollers Football Club, Kaduna. It was Ibrahim who bought the youngster another kit, as replacement for the burnt one, to enable him continue with the game he loves so much. At a time, Adebayo even went to live with him, just to be able to have the chance to play football. From City Rollers, Adebayo moved to Abuja to play for " Foreign Affairs, " a club managed by the foreign affairs ministry at the time. This was in 1995. Then he returned to Kaduna and was on the verge of signing for Ranchers Bees, before an agent, Abdul who had watched him play, took him to Nigerdock Football Club of Lagos where he played for three years, 1995–1998. For the help and influence people like Ibrahim wielded in his life, Abayomi remains grateful. But he is sad that his parents have since passed on. &ldguo; If not for football, I believe I could have gone on to realise my parents' dream of seeing me become a medical doctor, as I was not doing badly in my studies. But I'm happy I followed my mind. " Apart from his success on the field and off it, football, he says, has taken him to many parts of the world, like Poland, Cyprus and Switzerland, apart from Egypt and South Africa. He once went on football trial at Polonia Warsaw, a Polish team, while he was still in Nigeria. But even as he has come a long way so far, the player says he does not intend to end his career in South Africa. Like many ambitious players, he would want to take his talent to Europe someday and make his mark there. The last child in a family of seven, and a product of Constitution Road Primary School and Rimi College, both in Kaduna, Abayomi says the secret of his success and longetivity is &ldguo; hardwork, discipline and dedication. &rdguo; He is not the kind who derives pleasure from &ldguo; alcoholism,

womanising or keeping late nights.&rdguo: Heric Vladislav, who was until recently his coach at Bay United, described the Nigerian as a very good player: &ldguo:Bayo is very skillful, fast, and gives pressure to defenders. Although he' s not good in the air, but tactically, he is sound, and in between defenders as well, he' good. He's very tricky also." Jani Simulambo, a Zambian national and assistant coach at Bay United who still has memories of his playing days, when, as a player for Green Buffaloes of Zambia, his team visited Nigeria to play against Rangers International in the 70s, also holds Adebayo in high esteem: " Adebayo is powerful, fast and gives defenders trouble. Soccer is practical. If someone is good, we say it. We don't praise something for nothing. If a player is good, he's good. If he's bad, he's bad. If you evaluate wrongly, others will have their own say and that will cast doubt on your professional competence or judgement. &rdguo; Such high rating shows that the player is in a class of his own. That explains why Mohammed Lawal, his current manager, is at a loss why Adebayo is not part of the current Super Eagles team. Although Adebayo had once been invited to the Flying Eagles team in 1999, he has not had the opportunity of playing for the nation's top team. Says Mohammed: "Adebayo has long been overlooked by the Nigerian team selectors. I'm so surprised that to date, an invitation has not been extended to him. He deserves a place in the team because he has been consistent in recent years. He was top goal scorer for his team for two seasons and has made his mark in the top flight of South African football. His inclusion will signal positive change for the team because he has speed and is aggressive, just like Julius Aghahowa." The player himself says he would want to represent his country, like any patriotic player. " I don' t have anything to prove to anybody except to say that I would be pleased to have the chance to represent my country. That way, people will see the stuff l'm made of. The national team selectors should give people like us the opportunity to show what we can do," says Abayomi.