## Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

Contributed by Kazeem Akintunde Saturday, 04 October 2008

Obafemi Martins: The Ten Tonnes of Dynamite

Obafemi Martins: The Ten Tonnes of Dynamite In Lagos, Nigeria's largest city and Obafemi Martins' hometown, he used to play street football on tight and dusty pitches at a very young age. Martins and his mates met daily and divided themselves into two teams of either five-a-side or six-a-side, depending on their number at that particular point in time. Every day, it was the same set of boys and they played with no shoes before and after school hours. At times, they completely skipped classes when the game got the better of them. Because they could not form a complete team of 11 players each, they usually made "monkey posts" for their goalpost. Monkey post is a smaller non-standard goal post made with two objects which could be slippers of two small plastic cones. A tiny target to aim at for goals. "It was hard to score. You have to pass and pass," Martins acknowledged. That was how Obafemi Akinwunmi Martins began his romance with football, which has today, turned him into a household name in the game. Anytime he returned home dirty and tired, his mum would suspect, and rightly too, that the young lad has been out playing football and she would urge him to face his school work. The mum, popularly known as Alhaja, has been a formidable presence in his life. Alhaja had a store in Lagos as Martins grew up. The family was not wealthy, but neither did it struggle. One day, when Martins was 14, he was spotted playing street football by Churchill Oliseh, the elder brother of Sunday Oliseh, a former Nigerian international. An impressed Oliseh called Martins over and asked him if he wanted to play for a local team, FC Ebedei. "And he said they will pay me money!" Which made Martins laugh. Life became a whirlwind. Martins was in the youth team, but not for long. Soon Oliseh called him over again and told him that he was ready to play professional football in Italy. "I went home and told my parents. I was only 15. I knew I had to go. It wasn't a difficult decision, but it was a big thing too. My parents gave me the permission to go but my mum cried. They prayed a lot that I would make it," he said. Martins went for a two-month trial with Reggiana, then in Serie C. It was the club where Sunday Oliseh had started his career. "It was difficult and different. And very cold," he recalled. He was with three other Nigerian boys. One day all four were called into a room and told that the club could afford to keep only two of them. Martins and Stephen Makinwa, now a midfielder with Lazio, were chosen. The other boys returned to Nigeria. Training was hard and Martins felt bewildered. "They touched the ball, one-two and we just seemed to be running around trying to catch them," he said of the Italian players. The language was also a barrier, but he continued to impress and, following a breakthrough season, Perugia and then Inter Milan came calling. "I didn't know much about Inter Milan," he says. "One of my friends from the Nigerian youth team was there so I thought that was where I should go." Once he was at San Siro, the scale of his task and the size of the club hit him as well as the calibre of the players in the team. His hero, Ronaldo was also there. "I was just in the youth team and I used to watch him play. I just said to myself, 'Oba, you have to work hard. That's all.' I saw Christian Vieri, too, and I loved him. I saw these players and thought, 'How can I get into this team?' They were all top strikers." One day he was called in, on the eve of a Champions League tie. Inter were crippled by injuries and Martins had had only a handful of minutes of first-team experience. "We were due to play Bayer Leverkusen," Martins said. "And we needed to win. If we didn't, we were out, I was really scared but the coach called me and had me alone in the dressing room and told me, "You are starting tomorrow. Just play as if you are in training. I know you can do it, you are a good player. Just relax.' The team supported me and I realised I could do it. I scored and we won 2-0." Inter made it through to the semi-finals, facing city rivals Milan. Martins came off the bench to score again, but his team was eliminated on away goals after a 1-1 draw. He, however, was on a roll now. The following October 2000, he devastated Arsenal in the same competition, 3-0 at Highbury in London, and one of the spectators was Glenn Roeder, who would later be the manager to take Martins to Newcastle. He had a good life in Italy, a home by Lake Como, 15 minutes from the training ground, and a contract that ran until 2010. The language never came easily to him, but he thrived. Genuinely two-footed, and with terrific pace as well as being surprisingly strong in the air, despite being 5ft 7in, he scored 37 goals in 105 domestic games. But Inter are a difficult club, with a high turnover of coaches as well as players, and Martins found himself out of the team more than he was in it as more strikers arrived. "There were seven, eight," he said. "And Inter said they needed more. I couldn't believe it. When Zlatan Ibrahimovic arrived I thought, 'I can sort this out because he's different from me'. And then they signed Hernan Crespo and I thought, 'OK, the coach is thinking differently now'. He wasn't looking for young players and so I made my decision to go. I had always wanted to come to England. My team-mates in the Nigeria team - Kanu Nwankwo and Joseph Yobo were there and they called me and said, 'Oba, you have to come here. You'll be happier than in Italy'." Again, however, the first year was tough. Martins was injured, Newcastle struggled and he felt under "pressure" to perform, not least because Michael Owen was out with injury too. "It's faster and more physical but you get ready for it," he says. "You have to know that when the goalkeeper gets the ball you are going to attack straight away. It's not like that in Italy." But it was in Italy that he made his name, and that name is now well known across Nigeria. He's always ready to give back. He used to donate money anonymously, to help raise orphan children and Martins is in the process of setting up his own charity, through London-based Nigerian, Chris Nathaniel, who handles his business affairs. "Nigeria is a wonderful country," he says. "And it's my country, a happy place. The best place in the world." Much was made, about last year's incident when a car owned by Martins was shot at while at a petrol station in Lagos. He claimed that it was an assassination attempt and vowed never to play for Nigeria again. The police poured scorn on his story insisting that he was not in the car when it was attacked. He is back in the team and the issue is forgotten. What is not forgotten is just how important he has become to Nigerians. He has the usual celebrity endorsements, the fame and money, but still blushes at the thought of the giant billboards showing his face. "Yes," he says. "But it's all down to God. I worked hard as well to get here and it wasn't easy. But it's God's

will." He was named Confederation of African	Football, CAF, Young Player of the Year in 2003 and 2004.	