

Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

Contributed by Kazeem Akintunde
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Osaze Odemwingie: It's Football over Medicine

At a very tender age, Osaze Odemwingie knew he had two career paths to choose from. He would either become a medical doctor or a footballer. And the reason had to do with his parents, both of them medical doctors. They wanted the young lad to take after his parents, but luckily his romance with soccer also came about through his father, who was a medical doctor for the defunct Bendel Insurance Football Club of Benin. He exposed the young Osaze to the world of football at a very early age. The young boy was always with his dad at Ogbe Stadium in Benin whenever the team has a match at home. "My father was then working as a doctor with Bendel Insurance, and I often sat on the team bench with my dad at the club's Ogbe Stadium in Benin City and that gave me the desire to become one of them," he said. That constant exposure to the game gave him the push to make a career out of the game.

His parents were, however, not happy with his choice of profession. But they allowed him a few years after completing his secondary school education to pursue his first love, hoping that after two or three years, his love for football would wane. But when they discovered that Osaze was determined to make a career out of playing football, they then gave him their blessing. "I remember the question was posed to me. What are you going to do? "So, they gave me two to three years after secondary school to see what is going on in football, but all I wanted was to play football. And so far they have given me all the encouragement, but I know if not for football I would have been a doctor," Osaze said. Despite a huge library of medical books at home, Osaze followed his heart and today is a prominent member of the national team, the Super Eagles.

His first match for the nation in 2002 came with a bang. During the 2002 Nations Cup, Osaze was introduced in the match against Bafana Bafana of South Africa after Kanu Nwankwo sustained an injury. And within a short period, the fair complexioned Osaze scored twice. "I least expected to be part of the team and I was happy for being with the big boys. The two goals in my first match were, however, the icing on the cake for me that day," he said. The Super Eagles went on to beat the South African team by 4-0 and Kanu described Osaze as the "new kid on the block" for the team. Unknown to Kanu, the trio of Kanu, Jay-Jay Okocha and Julius Aghahowa were the role models for the young lad.

"I can say that I learnt from Kanu, who I often see being calm in front of goal and in the 18 yard box. I learnt to see, look round the field and motivate the players like Okocha, and I learnt the attitude of being tough from Julius Aghahowa. So, these three great players are my role models in the Super Eagles. Most times when I play in my team I remember Julius and it pushes me to be tough. So I want to combine the three attributes of these great players," Osaze said.

Born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to a Nigerian father and Russian mother in 1981, Osaze moved to Nigeria as a two-year-old. After spending his early years in Nigeria, he returned to the former Soviet Union to complete his secondary education and subsequently joined the youth football academy of CSKA Moscow.

His three-year stint at CSKA, between the age of 15 and 17 years, instilled the required discipline and knowledge that helped him to achieve the dream of having a European club football career. "It was a very good place for me to be and they taught me a lot," he said. Osaze had to return to Nigeria to begin his club career with Bendel Insurance in 2000, and played alongside one of his heroes Aghahowa, before moving to Belgium in 2002. His first season in Belgium was with La Louviere, where he had fellow Nigerian, Manasseh Ishiaku as team-mate. "It was a great period for me then because the club achieved what they had never done before - winning the FA Cup," he said.

At La Louviere, Osaze made his mark scoring nine goals in 44 appearances. He soon received the attention of the French side, Lille and before long, he was in the starting line up of the team. Famous for his technique and pace, the Nigerian player was being watched by some of the prestigious European clubs. But in the 2002-2003 session, Osaze decided to stay at Lille and help the club fight for league honours the following session. He remained at the club until the 2006-2007 session, scoring fantastic goals for the team, including two against AC Milan at the San Siro, which took the club Lille to the UEFA Champions League knockout stages. The club could however not resist a €17 million offer for Osaze from Lokomotiv Moscow in the build up to the 2007-2008 session.

Now, there are reports that Premiership side - Liverpool is chasing the signature of Osaze Odemwingie following his impressive performance at the recently concluded Africa Nations' Cup finals. It was reported that Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has been so impressed with the player that he sent scouts to Moscow to monitor the player, despite the presence of a number of well known strikers in his team.

A young player with dual nationality, there are those who believe that it would have been better for Osaze to play for the Russian national team, but he said that his goal had always been to play for the Super Eagles. "My heart has always been with the Nigerian team, and my father has always wanted me to play for Nigeria. I see myself more Nigerian than

Russian and I am sure my mom would understand this," he said. Osaze has 23 caps and five goals to his name with the Nigeria national team. He was in the Nigeria team in the 2004 Africa Cup of Nations, scoring three goals in five games and the 2006 Africa Cup of Nations where he played in the semi-final 0-1 loss to Ivory Coast. At the just concluded 26th edition of the Nations Cup in Ghana, Osaze complained bitterly that many of his colleagues in the team were not 100 percent committed to the national team.