

Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

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Yakubu Aiyegbeni: Controversy Is His Middle Name

Yakubu Aiyegbeni: Controversy Is His Middle Name Yakubu Aiyegbeni is one footballer some coaches hate to love. Those of them who have handled him in the past were always pained by his disregard for camp rules and regulations. He has been suspended, pardoned and suspended again by the handlers of the national team, the Super Eagles. Many of the coaches who quickly pardon the enfant terrible of the national team do so because of Aiyegbeni's dependability and knack for scoring goals. And in the game of football, goals matters. Aiyegbeni plays hard, but at the same time he loves to party hard too. And like most successful football stars, he loves the limelight too. He was sent home from the 2004 Nations Cup in Tunisia for breaking camp rules and was not called up for Nigeria's friendlies against Mexico in September and Australia and Switzerland matches recently. When Augustine Eguavoen was Eagles chief coach, he vowed never to invite him to the national team again because of his antics. Aiyegbeni equally vowed never to play for the country under an indigenous coach. But those differences have since been resolved. At the end of the 26th edition of the Africa Cup of Nations which took place in Ghana earlier this year, many of Aiyegbeni's team mates returned to their various club in Europe immediately the Eagles were knocked out of the tournament by host nation -Ghana - in the quarter-final stage of the tournament, but the "Yak" as he's fondly referred to decided to add three more days to his holiday before going back to his English Premiership team, Everton. For reporting late to camp, Aiyegbeni was dropped from the match against Reading and fined two weeks wages. David Moyes, the manager of the team was furious at his £11million striker's behaviour for reporting late. He, however allowed Aiyegbeni to rejoin the team after he apologised to his team mates. "I came back late and I have apologised to everyone for that and the supporters too. It happened for personal reasons, but I promise it won't happen again. I am so pleased to be back again now and playing again," Aiyegbeni said. After being pardoned, Aiyegbeni went on to score a hat-trick for his team but his performance in that game, created another round of controversy for the player. Moyes, happy with his player's performance, described him as a wonderful Nigerian 25-year-old player after Everton's 6-1 win over SK Brann in a UEFA cup match. "What people don't appreciate is that he's only 25, albeit a Nigerian 25, and so if that is his age, he's still got a good few years ahead of him," Moyes said. It was a remark that incensed Nigerian officials and the NFA was quick to react. Demola Olajire, NFA spokesman said the NFA would "not take kindly to snide remarks about our players, or our nation." The NFA in a strongly worded protest letter to the football association in London, a copy of which was sent to Everton, condemned the snide remarks and demanded an unreserved apology to the player and the Nigerian nation. "On a night that Aiyegbeni scored a hat-trick to become the first Everton player to score a hat-trick in Europe in 23 years, Moyes said, inter alia: 'What people don't appreciate is that he's only 25, albeit a Nigerian 25, and so if that is his age he's still got a good few years ahead of him.' "This statement is an unambiguous insult on a whole nation, and the biggest black nation in the world for that matter, and we demand an unreserved apology from Moyes. "Moyes' statement is capable of not only exposing our player, Aiyegbeni to ridicule but also capable of reducing his market value as a professional footballer and at the same time, capable of undermining the bargaining power of other Nigerian professional players," Olajire added. When Aiyegbeni arrived in the English game in January 2003 joining a First Division side, not many people would have predicted that he would become one of the hottest properties in the Premiership. Within two years, he had become a much sought after player. It cost Middlesbrough £7.5million to sign him on from Portsmouth for the 2005-2006 season. He scored his first Boro goal in the 2-1 win over Arsenal in 2005 and finished the season as the club's top scorer with 19 league and cup goals. In the 2006-2007 season Aiyegbeni hit 16 goals but endured a lean spell in the first five months of 2007 and was eventually relegated to the bench. Aiyegbeni made his way to Everton in August 2007 for a fee of £11.25 million, after being granted a work permit. Though he was initially offered the number nine shirt, he nevertheless asked for number 20. With the number already given to another player, he was eventually given jersey number 22 and he said he would aim to get 22 goals in his first season. He missed that target by a goal as he ended the season with 21 goals. He scored 10 minutes into his debut for the club, in a 2-1 win against Bolton Wanderers, at the Reebok Stadium on September 1, 2007. He scored his second Premier League goal for Everton against Derby County at Pride Park. He then scored the opening goal following a slick team passing move early in the match against Birmingham City that finished in a 3-1 victory. Aiyegbeni quickly became a favourite with Everton's fans, who will chant "Feed the Yak And He Will Score!" the chant having travelled with him from Middlesbrough. His double against Newcastle United in the 3-1 win at Goodison Park on the last day of the 2007-08 season helped the Toffees clinch 5th place in the Premiership and a place in the 2008-09 UEFA Cup competition. He finished his first season with 15 Premier League goals to his name, and 21 goals in all competitions for Everton. Aiyegbeni was born on November 22, 1982 in Benin, Edo State. He played for Julius Berger in the Nigeria league in 1998 before jetting out to Europe in search of greener pasture in the more lucrative European league. He told Newswatch in Ghana that he would continue to score goals for the Super Eagles and Everton but pleaded for understanding from his fans because of his below average performance during the 26th edition of the Africa Cup of Nations. "I did my best in the tournament but it was not good enough to move us pass the quarter-final stage," he said.