

Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

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Saturday, 04 October 2008

Rafiu Afolabi: The Winning Ways of a Family Man

Rafiu Afolabi: The Winning Ways of a Family Man HE IS one of Nigeria's most successful players currently playing in Europe. Rafiu Afolabi plays for one of the best club sides in France — FC Sochaux — a leading division one side, where he has been a regular since he joined the team in 2005/6 season. The strong and lanky defender is noted for his strength aerially as well as his thunderous shots. Those who are close to him respect him for his simplicity and modesty. But most importantly, he is a player who has seen the thick and the thin of the game he loves: football. He was born on April 18, 1980, in Oshogbo, Osun State in the South-West region of Nigeria, into a polygamous family headed by his father, Ahmed Afolabi, now late. His mother, Hussainat, engaged in petty trading. For the young Afolabi, polygamy did not have any adverse effects on him or his other siblings as they grew up without experiencing discrimination of any sort. He relishes his family. “My family is a unique one as 10 of us, the children of one father from two mothers, did things together and never discriminated against one another.” However, it was not easy for the young Afolabi when he decided very early in life to start playing football on the streets of Oshogbo. His main obstacle was his father. “The old man did not want any of his children to play football. At that time, there was no money in it and as such the interest in it was low,” said Afolabi. His mother, whom he said has very poor knowledge of the game, was indifferent to his decision to play soccer. With the determination to excel uppermost in his mind, he would sneak out of his father's surveillance to play the game with the other children in his neighborhood. His talents were gradually noticed and the young player started playing, at amateur level for a local side, Water Corporation of Oshogbo, before he joined NEPA FC, also of Oshogbo. According to him, “I started playing football like other Nigerian kids. I started on the streets, just like the rest of them. I went on to develop my interest in the game even though I had an obstacle in my father, who is now late. He did not like football a bit by then.” Afolabi was noticed as a player with great promise while he was attending Muslim schools in Oshogbo. He was invited to the nation's Under-17 team by Fanny Amun, their chief coach and his brief stint with the national team in 1993 changed his soccer career and indeed his life as a whole. He revealed, “I was the youngest player in the team; the squad that went to Japan in 1993. I was so young and was still in secondary school, and because I was considered too young I was dropped from that team that went to Japan and won the Under-17 World Cup for Nigeria. The team had players like Nwankwo Kanu, Karibe Ojigwe and others who were playing with professional sides in the country. I was then just a school boy.” That setback did not deter him as Afolabi made the Nigerian team that featured in the 1979 Meridian Cup tie between European and African teams held in Turkey. It was there the scouts of Standard Liege of Belgium noticed him and eventually signed him. Afolabi came to national prominence during the 1999 Africa Youth Championship held in Ghana when he came from defence to score two goals against perennial rivals, Cameroon, in the semi-final match. The two goals sealed the fate of Cameroon in the competition. Nigeria eventually finished second in the tournament after losing 0-1 to the hosts. Afolabi went on to captain the Nigeria's Under-20 team to the 1999 10th FIFA World Youth Championship in Nigeria. The team, however, did not progress beyond the quarter-final stage. But he progressed professionally to make his full international debut against Sierra Leone on June 17, 2000, in a World Cup qualifier match in Lagos. Impressed with his quality as a player he was signed by Belgian first division side, Standard Liege in 1997. By the 2000/01 season, he went on loan to Italian side, Napoli. He returned to Liege, from where, after three seasons, he moved to Austria Vienna where he played from 2003 to 2005. At the end of 2005, he moved to his present club, FC Sochaux. Afolabi is spending his third year in France. Unlike the previous seasons, Afolabi and his colleagues started the season that just ended (2007/2008) poorly, losing vital matches they should have won. At a point fear of relegation starred him and his colleagues in the face. He threw light on the precarious situation they found themselves at a point last season. “For the season that just ended, we actually started badly. It was in the second segment that we started picking up necessary points. “There were several reasons why this was so. The departure of our coach for Lyon, and the movement of some players to other clubs adversely affected us. The coach left us just too early for us to consolidate. Two other important players left us as well. Sochaux had to contract a new coach and new players and this affected our stability. It took us the players, in particular a long time to adapt to our new coach's pattern of play. “Later things started getting better for us and we ended up in the 14th position in the League.” Having survived the challenges of the season with his teammates, what are Afolabi, and his colleagues, expecting for the new season? The Super Eagles central defender responded this way: “In football, you cannot say what tomorrow will bring, especially the French League that is quite dynamic. In the French League, there is no small or big club; there is no superior club or an inferior one. All the clubs have equal ability and chance.” Afolabi is a player with unique characteristics. Although he is a Muslim, he is married to a Christian. Apart from that, as an African, he is married to an Asian — an Indian. He said he derives tremendous joy both from his nuclear and extended families. On his extended family, he said: “I am always happy to see them whenever I come home, and they are also happy to see me as well. I do not joke with them and they equally take me seriously.” He met his heartthrob, Sheela, while he was playing for Standard Liege in Belgium, Afolabi described his wife this way: “She is very creative, very versatile. We have been together since I met her in Standard Liege. Our marriage is blessed with two children, Alicia, my daughter and a boy Adams.” The Nigerian international added that he has been such a liberal Muslim that he has never made an attempt to convert his wife to his faith. He throws more light on his disposition towards his wife and other faiths; “She is a Christian and I do not discriminate whether you are a Buddhist or whatever. I won't say because she is not a Muslim, I should force her

to be a Muslim. She respects me as a Muslim, and more importantly she knows everything about me. She always reminds me about my prayer times. She is a very good Christian. She is very good at cooking, and she prepares Indian food - a lot of Asian food for me.” Afolabi is quite delighted with the progress made so far by the Super Eagles in their quest to earn a ticket to the 2010 World Cup Finals and the Cup of Nations. “So far the Super Eagles have been quite impressive in their 2010 Cup of Nations and World Cup qualifying matches. We need the support of all Nigerians to ensure that we make it to the 2010 World Cup Finals in particular. We cannot afford to miss out this time around,” said Afolabi.