

Nigerian Soccer Stars Abroad

Contributed by Modupe Ogunbayo
Saturday, 04 October 2008

Olufemi Oladapo: Grabbing his Opportunity with Both Hands

Olufemi Oladapo: Grabbing his Opportunity with Both Hands Before August 2008, Oladapo Olufemi was not a familiar name to many Nigerian soccer lovers. This changed when he replaced Taye Taiwo after Olympic Marseille's refused to release him for the 2008 Olympics. Olufemi has now become a known face. He cemented his place on the Under-23 team with his display of strong defensive skills especially in Nigeria's first game against the Netherlands during the tournament, August 7. At one point during the match when all the other defenders had disappeared, it was Olufemi who stopped the Dutch from scoring and winning the game. He ran like a cheetah to keep up with a Dutch attacker and dispossessed him of the ball. It could have been a late winner for the Dutch. As the tournament progressed, his impressive form did not drop and sports commentators now believe he is a good substitute for Taiwo in the senior team. This recognition did not come for Olufemi easily. He has been playing with Boavista FC in the Portuguese league for a while without drawing the attention of Nigerians. It's not that he has not been doing well at his club. In fact, he is on the starting line-up of the clubside. However, it was not until Samson Siasia invited him to the U-23 Olympics squad that his name registered in Nigerians' consciousness. After featuring in the team's qualifying and preparatory matches, he was not included in the final 18-man squad that Siasia finally named for the Nigeria's football event at the Olympics. Rather, he was one of the four players put on stand-by pending any unforeseen circumstance. When Taiwo did not turn up eventually, he was then substituted for him. When he started playing football at Alapere Primary School, Ketu in Lagos, he was always among the top choice footballers in the school's team. This trend continued at Ikosi High School where he attended his secondary education. He was a member of his school's team that got to the quarter-finals of the Shell Cup in 2005. The Shell Cup is a national football tournament held among secondary schools in Nigeria and sponsored by Shell Oil and Exploration Company Limited. However, his good soccer skills worried Modupe and Oloyi, his parents, immensely. Their dream was for him to get the best education and rank among the best in his chosen career, not playing football. Despite their disapproval, Olufemi devised ways of continuing with the game without his parents' knowledge. Tunde, Dele, Kunle and Demola, his siblings, became the accomplices who covered his tracks for him when he embarked on any of his football engagements. During this time, he enrolled at Crystal Soccer Academy, Lagos, owned by Dosu Joseph, a former Super Eagles' top goalkeeper, who retired early from the game due to injury. He remembers with nostalgia how he continued playing street football with Gani Adekola, Tajudeen Raimi, fondly called Alagbomeji, Biola Sanusi and Sheriff Quadri, who were his friends at the academy, after the end of their training at the soccer academy. He still maintains regular contact with them, particularly whenever he is in the country. His skills impressed Sunday Oliseh, former Super Eagles captain and Dosu's friend, on one of his visits to the academy that he told Dosu to take Olufemi for trials with some European clubs because he had great potentials. In 2005, he went for trials with Ajax Cape Town FC in South Africa, but the venture was unsuccessful. Thereafter, he was signed by a Belgian club in 2006. He cherished his time with the Belgian clubside because it smoothened the rough edges in his game and gave him exposure to professional football. In 2007, he moved to Boavista, a club he still plays for. "But, I love Portugal because I am able to hone my skills better because the Portuguese league is quite tough. I have also been able to play against eminent clubs like FC Porto and players like Rui Costa and Nani," he said. In the near future, he eyes a move to Barcelona FC in the Spanish liga. Barcelona is Olufemi's dream club because it plays stylish and entertaining football. So far, his memorable moments are the day he got his first European professional contract and the moment when he first appeared in the green and white jersey of the Nigerian team at the 2005 U-17 FIFA World Youth Championship in Netherlands. Lately, he was elated over his inclusion in the 2008 Olympics squad. In the squad, his best team mate is Efe Ambrose, a Nigerian home-based player. He has been Ambrose's close friend for three years now, because Ambrose is a good mature person who is very focused. When news of Ambrose's purported heart condition broke, Olufemi felt the pain keenly. "My sorrow was total. Ambrose himself could not tell me for the first few days after that verdict because he knew how I would feel. At a point, he was even the one telling me not to let it affect my game, but I could not bear it. It felt so painful and unfair somehow to reach his moment of breakthrough and have something like that stop him from what he is good at such a young age," adding, "When it finally blew over and he was finally certified alright in South Korea, I was nearly delirious with happiness. We had a long thanksgiving prayer to God that night," Olufemi said. At Boavista however, Olufemi's best friend is Sammie John, a Cameroonian, who helped to stabilise him at the club. He also taught him the Portuguese language. Born on November 8, 1988, Olufemi relaxes by watching movies and listening to music. His favourite colour is blue and his best food is amala with ewedu.