

Imoke's Quiet Sports Revolution

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Governor Liyel Imoke of Cross River

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Alice Ugo Bassey, a former Nigerian judoka, is a beneficiary of the on-going sports revolution in Cross River State. Bassey had resigned to fate after endless search for funds to treat the knee injury she copped at a pre 2007 All Africa Games camp produced no result. She was no longer talking about Judo that was her first love any more. Instead, she was beginning to feel used and abandoned. The worst of all was the manner of walking she suddenly picked up from the injury was unladylike.

Then out of the blues, Bassey's plight was brought to the knowledge of Governor Liyel Imoke. The former member of the upper legislative chamber of the National Assembly did not say he won't help because she got injured during a national assignment. Imoke approved funds for the surgery to correct the knee at an Indian hospital in New Delhi.

Today, Bassey is not only grateful to the governor for turning around her misfortune in sport, she is also gainfully employed now as a coach in the Cross River State Sports Council as a judo coach. This story is not a fiction.

Anybody interested in Bassey's case can verify this from her at the sports council. This is just one out of the many cases of rehabilitation of sports persons by the Imoke government.

However, Bassey's story is not the topic of discussion here today. I have only digressed to show that the on-going transformation of sports sector in the state also has a human face. While several other states in the country are falling over each other in the scramble for ready-made 'mercenary' athletes to help them win gold medals at the next National Sports Festival scheduled to hold in Lagos, Cross River State has refused to join the bandwagon.

Instead, the state has continued her policy of grooming her own athletes. It does not matter to the Imoke administration if the state did not finish in the top bracket at the Eko 2012 sports fiesta. With ex-international athlete, Bruce Ijirigho, as consultant, nobody expects anything less than the success of the 'Old Bendel' of which he was a part as an athlete.

The governor appears to have bought into the idea of grooming from the grassroots as way out of the current decay in sports in the country. He knows like every other person in sports that poaching ready-made athletes brings nothing but temporal relief: a pyrrhic victory that will pass away with time as the mercenaries are ever on the look-out for better suitors, just like cheap whores.

So, it was not surprising to read somewhere in the dailies that the state had invested N200m on the acquisition of state of the art sports equipment. It gladdens my heart to see Imoke commit so much to the development of sports at the grassroots when every other persons in chasing momentary victory. It is pertinent to say here that what Imoke is doing now may not bring immediate reward but posterity will judge him for doing his best to help nurture talents that would not otherwise have been realised.

Like Samuel Ogbemudia did it in the 'Old Bendel', (pardon my constant reference to the state as history of sports can never be complete without a mention of the Ogbemudia example), Imoke too is on the way to creating a pool of talents for the country. It is essential that this effort is recognised and applauded now than wait till we begin to see the dividend after his leaving office.

When he took the decision not to allow the U.J. Esuene Stadium pitch turned into an artificial turf, many of his critics thought he was been miserly with fund. At least, nearly 95 per cent of all the states in the country had caught the artificial turf bug then.

Imoke's insistence on leaving the Calabar stadium grass and that the state was in a rain belt zone, almost all through the year, was sneered at. He stood his ground. Today, Calabar pitch remains the saving grace for all the national football teams now that the Abuja National Stadium is closed for repair works.

All of Nigeria's 2013 African Cup of Nations qualifiers and the 2014 World Cup home games next month are to be played at that venue. Our Europe based professionals have put a lie on the rush to turn our pitches to synthetic; thank God we now know that such turfs are very prone to injuring players.

Still on sports in Cross River, the Obudu International Mountain Race and the African Mountain Challenge remain benchmark in Africa. Apart from paying the highest winning prize in the world, it has put the state in global focus as a veritable sports and tourism destination.

A mere mention of mountain race anywhere in the world today, puts Obudu back into memory. It is refreshing to see how Imoke has sustained this legacy he inherited from the Donald Duke administration and equally built on it with the introduction of the African Challenge.

How about the five-year contract the state has entered with the Athletics Federation of Nigeria, (AFN) for the hosting of the All Nigeria Athletics Championships in Calabar? The awareness and interest it has further created will all add up to ensure that many more Mercy Nkus emerge from the state.

It is against this background of silent turn around currently going on in the state that one can begin to have a different view of the future of sports in the country. If Imoke's drive is not prompted by any deliberate Federal Government policy, is it not time those states living falsely at the summit of Nigeria sports take a cue and begin to groom their own talents?

I will continue to maintain my stand on the National Sports Festival even at the point of been branded any name: It is no longer a breeding ground for talent discovery. Let's turn it into an open affair for all manners of athletes to compete in without cheating others grooming their local athletes.

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