

Nigerian Football System: Examining Meso-Level Practices against a Global Model for Integrated Development of Mass and Elite Sport

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Abstract—This study was designed to examine mass participation and elite football performance in Nigeria with reference to advance international football management practices. Over 200 sources of literature on sport delivery systems were analyzed to construct a globally applicable model of elite football integrated with mass participation, comprising of the following three levels: macro- (socio-economic, cultural, legislative, and organizational), meso- (infrastructures, personnel, and services enabling sport programs) and micro-level (operations, processes, and methodologies for development of individual athletes). The model has received scholarly validation and showed to be a framework for program analysis that is not culturally bound. The Smolianov and Zakus model has been employed for further understanding of sport systems such as US soccer, US Rugby, swimming, tennis, and volleyball as well as Russian and Dutch swimming. A questionnaire was developed using the above-mentioned model. Survey questions were validated by 12 experts including academicians, executives from sport governing bodies, football coaches, and administrators. To identify best practices and determine areas for improvement of football in Nigeria, 120 coaches completed the questionnaire. Useful exemplars and possible improvements were further identified through semi-structured discussions with 10 Nigerian football administrators and experts. Finally, content analysis of Nigeria Football Federation's website and organizational documentation was conducted. This paper focuses on the meso-level of Nigerian football delivery, particularly infrastructures, personnel, and services enabling sport programs. This includes training centers, competition systems, and intellectual services. Results identified remarkable achievements coupled with great potential to further develop football in different types of public and private organizations in Nigeria. These include: assimilating football competitions with other cultural and educational activities, providing favorable conditions for employees of all possible organizations to partake and help in managing football programs and events, providing football coaching integrated with counseling for prevention of antisocial conduct, and improving cooperation between

football programs and organizations for peace-making and advancement of international relations, tourism, and socio-economic development. Accurate reporting of the sports programs from the media should be encouraged through staff training for better awareness of various events. The systematic integration of these meso-level practices into the balanced development of mass and high-performance football will contribute to international sport success as well as national health, education, and social harmony.

Keywords—Football, high performance, mass participation, Nigeria, sport development.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN Nigeria, there has been an increase in football participation at the grassroots level primarily due to the emerging efforts of governments, educational institutions, and corporations. For instance, a Coca-Cola grassroots sport initiative in Nigeria attracted 100,000 children to take part in football competition. The 2017 tournament of the competition included 5,000 schools, up from 3,000 schools in 2016 [1]. The Nigeria Football Federation, in partnership with Zenith Bank, introduced U-13 and U-15 football tournaments in 2016, with entries from across the country [2]. These initiatives have helped to increase football participation in Nigeria, but opportunities to further advance the game of football at a grassroots level still exist. These opportunities are capable of growing the fan base for football clubs and in return, an increment in revenue from the club sponsors. Nigeria football fans love to watch games at TV viewing centers where there is relational connectedness [3] as most clubs in Nigeria play football in half-empty stadiums. There are few teams in Nigeria that attract more than 15,000 fans on game days [4]. Innovative fan activities, as suggested in this study, are particularly relevant given the growing power of passive unhealthy viewership and digital media technologies, considering how football clubs are appropriating social media and web technologies in Nigeria [5].

A challenge that faces football management in Nigeria is lack of conceptual and practical frameworks focused on maximizing the number of participants and providing for their gradual progression to the highest desired level of performance [6] While Nigerian objectives aimed at the systematic advancement of sport have been stated by the national sports development policy of 1989 and vision 2010 sports development initiative [7], corresponding actions have not fully been implemented. The Nigerian Vision 2010 sport group final report of 1997 [8] concluded that inconsistency,

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instability, and unclear philosophy of policies have been the bane of sports in Nigeria. This perhaps explains the gap between intended sports development goals and actual achievements. Therefore, the objective of this research is to assess the meso-level practices of football management in Nigeria against a global model for integrated development of mass and high-performance sport [9]-[11]. By referencing domestic and global practices, the following research question will be answered: what might be implemented as “best meso-level football practice” across Nigeria for both elite athlete preparation as well as mass participation structures, processes and programs [12]. The ultimate goals are to further advance Nigeria’s international football performance and improve the well-being of Nigerian society through football.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Smolianov and Zakus model [9] which served as a theoretical framework for this study incorporated tools for comparative analysis of elite sport systems [13]-[16]. The model has been previously validated [10], [11] and shown to be a framework for program analysis that is not culturally bound. It is accepted as a model for further understanding different sport systems including US rugby, tennis, and soccer [17], swimming [18] ice hockey [19], volleyball [20] and Dutch swimming [21]. As part of these studies, over 60 coaches who also served as administrators, including leaders of national sport organizations, analyzed and revised the model. The updated newer version and supporting research data are proposed as a heuristic typology for comparison and improvements at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of sport systems. This model adds new “best practices” at each level of sport development, including practices not stressed by

previous models such as competent well-educated coaches affordable for all, high quality facilities and events for both mass and elite participants, as well as nurturing all sport participants based on multi-stage scientifically developed methodologies [22]-[25].

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the model shared by [9]-[11], [14], [23], [25]-[27] and that mass participation that is properly organized will lead to outstanding athletic performances. The development of participants from first steps in sport to HP involves macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of support (see Fig. 1), as adapted from [14], [28], and [29]. In our model, the macro-level refers to socio-economic, cultural, legislative, and organizational support for a national sport system. The meso-level includes infrastructures, personnel, and services for sport programs. The micro-level comprises of processes, operations, and methodologies for development of individual athletes. This research focusses on the meso-level elements of football development. However, HP elements overlap at different levels [14] supporting and influencing each other.

With the incorporation of well-planned recreational, physical education and specific fitness programs aimed at preparing athletes for various national and international competitions, the goals of supporting agencies such as fitness for everyone in the community, competition successes and commercial benefits of those competitive successes are simultaneously achieved [9]-[11], [23]. The suggested model proposes a globally applicable theory of how to collectively improve HP sport as well as mass participation.

The significant challenges facing sport developers are due to insufficient conceptual and practical frameworks, resulting in poorly functioning sport systems [28].

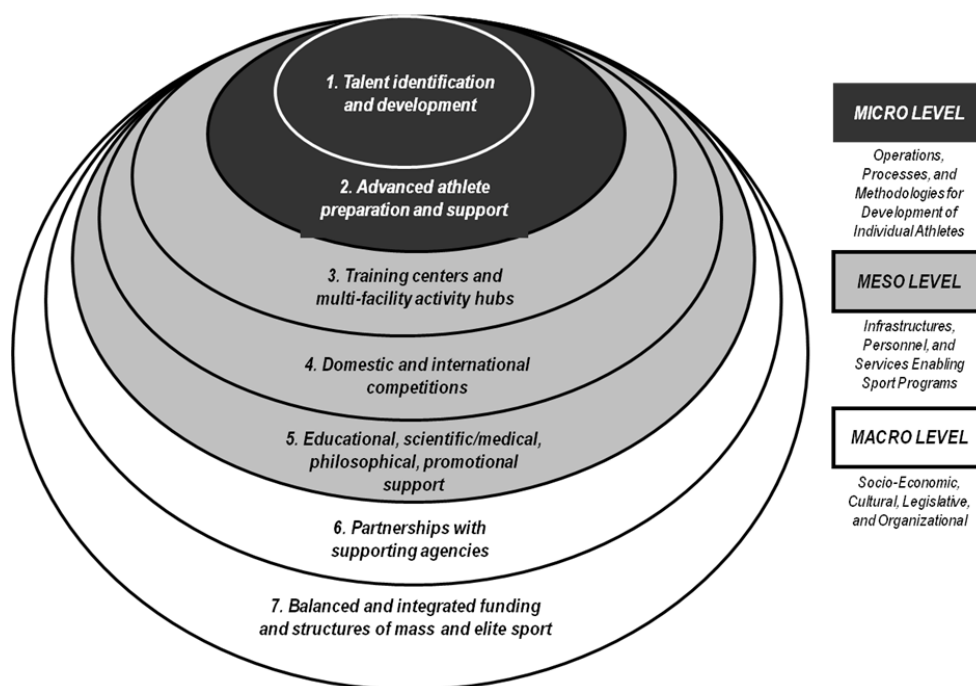


Fig. 1 Ideal-type Model of Integrated High Performance and Mass Sport Development

Details of the model are based on the literature mentioned above as well more than 200 sources detailed by [17] showing a wide range of interests in understanding sport development, particularly successful sport systems [12], [16], [30]. The model is summarized below.

Fig. 1 suggests that successful sport systems, including Nigerian football, should do their best to identify talent and develop participants into high performers. The micro-level elements one and two detail hierarchical pools of athletes, who are having increased access to scientifically based multidisciplinary performance, career, and lifestyle support, as well as financial rewards at the top of the hierarchy.

Element three in Fig. 1 requires easily accessible, excellent facilities, equipment, and coaching for all participant ages and levels. In all communities, football could be part of centers where different sports join forces to provide participants access to closely located training, education, medical and cultural venues. Element four demands sufficient, well-organized competitions integrated at all levels to gradually prepare athletes for major events. This element also needs educational, scientific, medical, philosophical, and promotional support (element five) at each level of participation.

Provision of the meso-level services results from multiple partnerships (element six in Fig. 1). For a concerted functioning of all the elements, funding and structures of mass and elite sport systems must be balanced and integrated (element seven).

The following macro-level structures are particularly important: mass and HP programs and facilities developed cooperatively by governments, Olympic Committees, None Governmental Bodies (NGBs), and clubs; PE and sport integrated at childcare facilities, schools, and universities; sport clubs for each participation level; uniform rewards for fitness and elite performance; a large number of professional well-trained coaches at all levels; and subsidized mass and elite sport programs which are diverse and affordable for all.

If mass and elite sports are linked on the above points of development, they can have positive effect levels on fitness and community development, success in global competitions, and national pride. Therefore, it is beneficial to examine the practices of Nigerian football against the proposed model. Many Nigerian and international practices discussed below provide opportunities to positively influence both sport achievements and well-being of every community.

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to identify the needs of Nigerian football to propel them towards best international standards. By referencing best meso-element practices, sport programs may be able to concentrate on development of individual athletes coinciding with determining areas for improvement in Nigerian football, national health, education and crime control.

The exploration was based on the model of integrated high performance (HP) and mass sport development and focuses on the practices of elements in the meso-level.

To explore and identify needs, this study utilizes a mixed research method, providing strengths that balance weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research methods: Three modes of data collection were conducted during this study; (1) questionnaire, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) analysis of documents.

A. Questionnaire

Previous theoretical framework and a comprehensive literature review were used for the development of a questionnaire (Tables I and II). The adopted questionnaire was developed to measure the management practices of sports based on the model of integrated HP and mass sport development to identify the needs of a sport ecosystem. The questionnaire was validated by six international experts including academicians, executives from sport governing bodies, administrators and coaches who have previously played football and have coached to a World Cup level at various FIFA youth categories.

In distributing the questionnaires, a stratified sampling technique was used. The questionnaires were delivered to football coaches from six key geopolitical zones of Nigeria: The North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South and the South West. Survey instructions asked respondents to think about Nigerian football's current systems and structures and to indicate how often the practices were evident, from 'never' (1) to 'always' (5), on a five-point Likert-type scale. Football coaches were also asked to elaborate on each of the seven elements of the model through open comments. The questionnaires were collected for analysis using Excel software.

Cronbach's alpha analysis was conducted to measure the internal reliability of the questionnaire from 120 responses. The total inventory was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.92$, 54 items), confirming similar reliability levels of the model's survey questions indicated by previous studies [20].

B. Semi-Structured Interviews

The aim of conducting semi-structured interviews was to combine a pre-determined and uniform set of open-ended questions that prompted discussion with follow-up inquiries to explore possible themes emerging from the context of respondents' experiences.

Interviews were conducted with 10 Nigerian football administrators and experts including; three ex-Nigerian national team coaches that participated at various youth World Cups, a state sports council director, a state government football marketing consultant, a Nigerian FIFA badged assistant referee, an international football journalist and football commentator veteran of over 20 years, a Nigerian professional league football club chairman, and a university professor in sport management and special adviser to the Nigerian government on sports. Also interviewed was the former director of grassroots sports development department and former general director of the now defunct Nigerian National Sports Commission and a former board member of the Nigerian Football League Management Company.

The football administrators were selected through purposive sampling and the coaches' survey results were shown to them and asked to give comments on the statements/practices which received high and low scores and also recommend on how to increase the scores those low practices which coaches indicated to be performed 'rarely' and 'never'. The interviews were based on the seven elements of the model.

C. Document Analysis

Content analysis was done on Nigeria Football Federation's website, organizational documentations (books & newspaper articles), and literature review of Nigerian football management, administration, and policies.

D. Interview Analysis

Inductive coding techniques were followed by researcher interviews and discussions, which lead to refinement of themes. The coding process was used to convert the qualitative data to quantitative data for interpretation. Triangulation of the findings was achieved by comparing the three types of data (survey, interview, and literature/documents).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaires delivered in person to 120 coaches resulted in 102 fully completed surveys for a response rate of 85%. Of these respondents, 11% were female, 89% male (a strong indicator of the need to attract more females to coaching). The sample represents Nigerian football coaches from different ethnic groups; 22% were Hausa-Fulani, 20% were Igbo, 21% were Yoruba and 37% did not indicate their ethnicity. Majority of the coaches (60%) were full-time paid coaches who were employed by either the government or various football clubs in Nigeria; 25% were part-time coaches and 15% were volunteer coaches who were mostly involved with grassroots. The analysis shows that most sampled coaches worked with players at colleges, universities, and professional clubs, which means that respondents from the survey were well informed about practices and dynamics of mass and elite

football systems.

Most of the surveyed coaches in Nigeria had coaching training. However, 9% of the respondents had no identified coaching qualification. That implies that 91% of the surveyed coaches were certified. About 9% of the coaches indicated to have the highest level of football/soccer qualification/certificate.

Most (64%) of the responding Nigerian coaches were involved with HP athletes, 29% with intermediate and 7% with beginner level participants. Survey responses are presented as average scores and percentages of perceived practices. Percentages of responses allow appreciation of the distribution of coach responses.

A. Training Centers

Table I shows that more respondents (25%) were negative than positive (18%) about football facilities, particularly those who indicated that football training centers are not located close to other sports facilities (44%) and are difficult to afford (30%), making it the weakest element. On this element, coaches had indicated some of the issues affecting football development in the open responses as being; improper town planning, no research on current trends in football, insufficient equipment, lack of funds, poor facilities and bad maintenance culture. 36% of coaches' open responses for this element mentioned shortage of facilities and equipment, stressing that poor maintenance of the available football facilities is affecting youth development and that more training centers should be established, including more professionals employed to manage those facilities. 24% of the open responses mentioned lack of funds. According to Coach 95 (30th May 2017), "Training facilities are not enough. There is no access and availability for everyone. More facilities need to be established." Administrator B (10th July 2017) stressed the accessibility issue for developing athletes: "The town planning isn't great as the parks which are supposed to be recreational centers are not built. We need to inject more money into football to develop sports centers."

TABLE I
TRAINING CENTERS

Desired Practices	Distribution of Responses			
	Average Score	Negative Perceptions * (%)	Neutral Perceptions * (%)	Positive Perceptions * (%)
1. High performance athletes are provided with priority access to specific high-quality equipment and facilities.	2.9	20	69	12
2. Training centers/clubs provide specialized facilities and equipment for each age and level of participation.	3.0	19	62	19
3. All national, regional and local training centers are available to athletes at affordable costs.	2.8	30	54	16
4. Travel from home to training facilities takes little time for Nigerian football players of all levels and types.	3.0	19	63	18
5. Training facilities are close to all facilities for athlete support (e.g., school/college, medical, room & board, leisure/entertainment).	3.0	24	55	21
6. An organized network of training centers is used to prepare Nigerian football players in different environments/socioclimates.	3.0	16	66	16
7. Football training centers are located close to other sport facilities so that players participate in and learn from other sports.	2.8	44	32	24
Across all items in element (N=102)	2.8	25	57	18

*Note. Negative Perceptions is a sum of '1 = never' and '2 = rarely' responses. Neutral Perceptions is a sum of '3 = sometimes' and 'Do not know' responses. Positive Perceptions is a sum of '4 = often' and '5 = always' responses.

The most negatively scored statement in this element of Nigerian survey is "Football training centers being located

close to other sports facilities so that players participate in and learn from other sports.”

B. Competition Systems

This is a weak element, with 44% of negative and only 22% of positive perceptions, as summarized in Table II. The competitive opportunities provided in Nigeria play a less dominant role in football development. Some of the challenges within the Nigerian sports system are stressed in the open responses under this element as; poor funding from the government, poor tournament structures, lack of sponsorship for local and national events, corruption of football

administrators, and government interference with football administration. 29% of coaches who provided open responses on this element mentioned lack of corporate sponsorship and 24% mentioned corruption. The main concern in this element according to 69% of coaches’ survey was that event sponsorship incomes are not well used to develop competitions for all participants, while 8% were happy with this practice. Administrator B (10th July 2017) was critical: “We have little event sponsors in Nigeria. These companies are not encouraged when their sponsorship monies end up in the pockets of some of the politicians.”

TABLE II
 COMPETITION SYSTEMS

Desired Practices	Average Score	Distribution of Responses		
		Negative Perceptions * (%)	Neutral Perceptions * (%)	Positive Perceptions * (%)
1. Hosted international events and international opportunities are sufficient for all athletes with potential to represent the country.	2.7	54	30	16
2. Competitions are well structured at all levels (e.g., club/training center, regional, and national	3.0	19	67	14
3. Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) and their support mechanism sufficiently assist in local and developmental events.	2.5	61	29	10
4. NFF attempts to integrate professional and amateur tournaments into a progressive plan of competitions gradually preparing athletes for peak performance at "Majors" (i.e., World and African football tournaments, Paralympic and Olympic Games).	3.5	13	28	59
5. NFF tries to coordinate all domestic and international competitions for all ages and levels, between and within all possible organizations.	2.8	51	27	23
6. Event sponsorship incomes are used to develop competitions for all participation levels.	1.9	69	23	8
Across all items in element (N=102)	2.7	44	34	22

*Note. Negative Perceptions is a sum of ‘1 = never’ and ‘2 = rarely’ responses. Neutral Perceptions is a sum of ‘3 = sometimes’ and ‘Do not know’ responses. Positive Perceptions is a sum of ‘4 = often’ and ‘5 = always’ responses.

According to 61% of surveyed coaches, NFF and their support mechanisms never or rarely assist in local and developmental events sufficiently. Administrator A (7th July 2017) agreed, “Football needs funds to coordinate and with corruption in the game, the little allocations that may be provided to football are not well used.” On the issue of integrating professional and amateur tournaments, only 13% of coaches had negative responses while 59% of the respondents accepted that NFF attempts to integrate professional and amateur tournaments to gradually prepare athletes for peak performance at “majors” and primarily citing on the FA cup as a reference. The most negative rating was on “Event sponsorship incomes being used to develop competitions for all participation levels.” Respondents scored the item with 69% negative.

Intellectual Services

Overall, this element was viewed with average optimism as 39% of coaches’ responses were negative and 22% were positive. Some of the challenges within the Nigerian football system are revealed through the scores in Table III and stressed in open responses, namely; lack of adequate staff in football clubs, no communication to clubs on football research results, lack of expertise at club level and inadequate funding. 31% of coaches who provided open responses on this element mentioned lack of professionalism and 25% mentioned poor funding.

Low ratings were given to the “leadership and research by the federal ministry of youth and sports” as well as to “education of specialists engaged in the development of Nigerian football.” Majority of respondents (67%) perceived that research is not being fostered on all-important aspects of football development (item two in Table III). One-third of 16 coaches who provided open responses on this element mentioned lack of proper training of football administrators or managers in Nigeria in line with the current sports management practices as one of the problems affecting the provision of intellectual services in Nigerian football. Coach 82 (19th June 2017) believed that “New research and findings are not adequately shared.” According to Administrator J (26th September 2017), “We took some statistics a few years ago and discovered that only three coaches in the league were graduates. They mostly have basic education but no advance qualifications.” Administrator B (10th July 2017) also noted the problem of Nigerian sports administrators: “We employ in Nigeria based on connections. These people are not qualified for their roles. These initiatives have to be made into rules for the situation to improve.”

“Principles of sportsmanship” returned the best score in this element with 68% positive responses. The most negatively scored statement for this element had 67%, which was in “federal ministry of youth and sports fostering research on all important aspects of football development.”

TABLE III
INTELLECTUAL SERVICES

Desired Practices	Average Score	Distribution of Responses		
		Negative Perceptions * (%)	Neutral Perceptions * (%)	Positive Perceptions * (%)
1. All specialists engaged in the development of football are well educated for their roles - from grass roots volunteer instructors to high performance managers, coaches, referees, physicians, nutritionists, psychologists, etc.	2.5	58	31	11
2. The Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports fosters research on all important aspects of football development.	2.5	67	22	11
3. Principles of sportsmanship such as good conduct and Olympism are communicated well (e.g., through mass media, school education, and through the arts as part of hockey events).	3.9	9	23	68
4. Research results on football are well communicated to coaches (e.g., by research institutes, universities).	2.9	27	58	15
5. Communication by the National Sports Commission (NIS) contributes to national values and identity by inspiring participants to strive for excellence, to show the best results and character in the world.	3.0	16	68	16
6. The Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports provides vision and leadership in improving all aspects of the participants' well-being through football (e.g., physical, social, emotional, mental, spiritual, and environmental /ecological).	2.5	55	34	11
Across all items in element (N=102)	2.9	39	39	22

*Note. Negative Perceptions is a sum of '1 = never' and '2 = rarely' responses. Neutral Perceptions is a sum of '3 = sometimes' and 'Do not know' responses. Positive Perceptions is a sum of '4 = often' and '5 = always' responses.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In Nigeria, financial obstacles affect the funding of important initiatives, as well as the accessibility of excellent training. Improved event marketing should maximize resources for Nigerian HP and mass participation initiatives. All schools in Nigeria are expected to have football facilities, which most of the public schools are compliant with, but many private schools are not. Both national health and football talent development can benefit if all schools for all ages continue to develop football facilities, training programs and competitions. Some of the private schools in Nigeria are unable to develop their sporting facilities due to lack of funds. Nigeria could consider the practices of such countries as Ireland where secondary schools that are privately owned and managed, are state funded, thereby ensuring standard facilities at all the institutions.

In England, the grassroots football facilities had received £17 million from the premier league and the FA facilities fund for grassroots football development in 2015 [31]. The funds were used to develop new and upgrade existing community sports facilities. The premier league had contributed £5.6 million while the FA partnership funding of £12.1 million was generated to support the grassroots initiative. The funds were aimed at providing high quality facilities as well as best possible age appropriate coaching. The amount was invested into 80 grassroots football projects. The investment was a follow-up from two previous trenches of funding in 2014, which yielded £44.8 million in investment and saw 235 grassroots facilities projects benefit. The newly developed or refurbished sites were used as hubs for their communities, schools and local teams for the development of grassroots football talents.

In 2013, the Nigerian football league had secured a television rights deal worth US\$34 million with satellite broadcaster, super sports [32]. The deal, which saw all premier league clubs receiving a share of the money, was supposed to also help in the development of grassroots football. Unlike what is obtainable in England and other advanced football

countries, the premier league clubs had not invested much in their grassroots development programs, as most of the clubs do not have feeder teams or academies. Among other football sponsors, in 2012, MTN group had paid \$17 million to sponsor the Nigerian premier league for 4 years [33]. In 2016, Globacom Nigeria had signed a contract to sponsor the Nigerian professional football league for the sum of US\$5,250,473 over a 3-year period [34]. With the money generated by clubs through sponsorships, it would have been beneficial for the clubs to invest in grassroots development with assistance from the Nigerian FA to complement the efforts of government and corporate organizations, which are already influencing positively on mass football participation. However, the grassroots programs are yet to have noticeable direct funding from the premier league clubs.

In 2017, Aiteo Group had signed a sponsorship deal with NFF reportedly worth US\$7 million (₦2.5 billion) for five years [35]. The Nigerian premier league clubs are still to develop their feeder teams and academies as done in England and other successful football nations. In addition, Nigerian press is in dire need of being educated on how to brand leagues through social media, websites and other means of marketing. The European football leagues' domination of the Nigerian football market and media's interpretation of Europe as center of modern football [36] as well as Nigerian fans' identification with European football teams and football players [37] should be used to emulate the best from Europe in order to be more successful.

There are remarkable achievements and great potential to further develop football in different types of public and private organizations in Nigeria. These include; assimilating football competitions with other cultural and educational activities, providing favorable conditions for all employees to partake and help in organizing football programs and events, providing football coaching integrated with counseling for prevention of antisocial conducts, while improving cooperation between football programs and organizations for peace-making and advancement of international relations,

tourism, and socio-economic development. Accurate reporting of the sports programs from the media should be encouraged through staff training for better awareness of the events [38]. A tournament for fans held in 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia brought together 200 football supporters from 16 countries that played and lived together. This unique Fan World Cup with a draw, group stage and elimination round, united rivals, and encouraged healthy mass football participation [39].

Education of Nigerian coaches and administrators should address a situation of marginalization and domination caused by practices of withholding athlete wages and bonuses and denial of free agency, which leads to player flight and threatens of league sustainability [40]. The situation could be improved by the integration of some of the best practices such as adequate training of coaches and the integration of frequent counseling sessions with coaching and players training as mentioned above.

The methodical integration of the aforementioned meso-element practices (training centers, competition systems, intellectual services) into the balanced development of mass and HP football will help contribute to international sports success as well as national health, education, and social harmony in Nigeria.

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