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Sports News

Comment: Africa's Reminiscences On Their World Cup Dream

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By Ibrahim Dabo

Africa underwent another test when they participated in the 2006 World Cup and there were hopes that surprises could emerge with one of its five candidates reaching the quarter-finals for the third time, but while the teams battled to achieve that feat, the ugly face of defeat overshadowed their efforts.

The continent is now left to ponder what went wrong and how that could be fixed as they prepare to host the next edition of the premier sporting event in four years' time.

At this year's finals, Africa had four debutants in the name of Angola, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Togo, as well as one experienced side, Tunisia, who made their fourth appearance.

Initially, there was a lot speculation on how well the debutants would fare, and with the Ivory Coast and Ghana paired in the toughest groups, little hope was in their favor in terms of progressing to the next round.

However, things just did not happen as many expected. These teams played very well in their group matches, showing that there is indeed talent in the continent. Though they have bowed out, one thing these sides need to do is maintain their squads and keep building on their achievements instead of going down the drain again and having to start all over again with fresh preparations when a major tournament is looming.

The Ivory Coast were unable to make it from a group that included Argentina, Holland and Serbia & Montenegro as they lost their two opening matches 2-1 against the first two teams but left the tournament with some pride as they knocked down Serbia & Montenegro 3-2. The players need to be commended for displaying a good performance, though experience could have been an advantage. The important thing now is that they remain composed, as they prepare for the 2008 African Nations Cup and subsequently work towards qualifying for the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa.

The same applies to Ghana. Many thought they could have made a first round exit but they defied the odds as they progressed to the next stage with Italy from their group, leaving the Czech Republic and the USA to return home early. Ghana were a little nervous in their opening match against Italy, which they lost 2-0, but played well in subsequent matches where they seemed to have gained some confidence.

Their hopes of reaching the quarter-final were dashed by the Samba boys of Brazil who defeated the West Africans 3-0. Ghana were really impressive against the South Americans and one could hardly believe this was a debutant playing against a defending World Champion. However, Brazil had good chances that they capitalized on, a result which meant Africa's only hope of reaching the quarter-final again was over. Ghana will host the 2008 African Nations Cup and should they maintain a formidable squad and work on further improvements, stand a chance of winning that tournament, though they will also face stiff competition from other rising teams.

Many people knew little about Angola on the world stage but they made some impression after they drew 0-0 with Mexico and 1-1 with Iran during the group stage, results which followed a 1-0 defeat against Portugal in their group opener. The Palancas Negras showed that they were up for something in the tournament but favorable results did not come their way. However, they did impress for a team that were making their debut and do not have many players playing at a top level for their clubs. Their goalkeeper Joao Ricardo is unattached but displayed one of the best performances with some incredible saves when his team played their

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opponents during the group stage.

Tunisia were the only experienced African side but they failed to live up to expectations as many may have touted them to qualify from their group. They could have made it to the second round but though some poor officiating may have affected their chances, should have done better.

Poor Preparations:

Togo seem to have been accustomed to poor preparations when it comes to participating in major competitions. In 2002 when the Hawks failed to progress to the second round of the African Nations Cup, Tchanile Bana was sacked as coach for the team's poor performance. Bana then blamed the team's poor performance in the tournament on the Togo Football Federations' inability to provide adequate preparation before the tournament started.

The same thing happened in Egypt this year when they again failed to get past the first round of the Nations Cup. Consequently, Stephen Keshi who guided the team to their first ever World Cup was sacked, poor results being one of the reasons. Keshi again blamed the Togo Football Federation for poor preparations as the team went into camp less than a week before the tournament kicked off.

The Federation still failed to learn from their mistakes. A dispute over the players' wages erupted before Togo played their opening World Cup match against South Korea with the Federation showing lack of competence to adequately handle the situation. The team's German coach Otto Pfister resigned briefly following the dispute between the players and the Federation but returned to guide his team through their group matches.

It all started when the players asked for unreasonable bonuses of a \$200,000 payment for reaching the finals, in addition to \$38,000 each per win and \$19,000 for a draw during the group stages. However, if the Federation had started early preparations for the tournament, this problem might have been dealt with well ahead of time instead of allowing FIFA to intervene in a move to resolve the dispute when the World Cup was already underway.

Last Words:

There are indeed lots of football talents in Africa but until players, officials and the Football Associations in general realize their mistakes, learn from them and work in the interest of developing the game in their respective countries, little success will be achieved.

Africa will host the 2010 World Cup for the first time and the countries should start planning now, as much will be expected from eventual participants to raise the continent's profile on home soil.

Whatever the case, we must commend the African players who displayed some brilliant performances in Germany with the hope of achieving the best not only for their country but also for Africa as a whole. It will be good if these teams stay as a unit and gear up preparations for upcoming tournaments.



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