



Businessday, Nigeria – 20 July 2010

This time for Africa!

By K Jayshankar

Africa has proved that they are no less when it comes to hosting a major sporting event. The South Africans provided their own unique celebration of the world's greatest sporting festival over a month of frenetic football. The game was not always exciting but it did reach great heights at times & we also witnessed the macho men from losing nations weeping copiously, staring at the depths of despair. Besides, there was always Oracle Paul's multiple tentacles and Shakira's shaking hips to keep us engrossed if the action ever got dull.

And when the show ended, all of us have been left breathless at the unique, unifying and glorious event called FIFA World Cup Football with a reported 700 million glued to the television for live action on the day of the final. An event like this can provide only one winner but for 31 others there was no shame in having lost. Some old heroes proved to have feet of clay and the pursuit of mammon had clearly taken its toll of some other celebrated poster boys, as many celebrated warriors were crushed in the battle field of the soccer pitch, but a new generation of heroes has emerged. However, unlike in the past, this time there was another winner too - off the field. Yes, this time Africa was also the winner. One can quibble and say it was a South African show but make no mistake, in K'naan's words, clearly they were 'waving the flag' for all Africa.

Looking back at the month there are a few thoughts that come to mind, and I offer them to you.

"Talent alone can't achieve sustainable victory. The presence of a host of talented footballers with artistic ball skills from across the nations of Africa was abundantly visible and who can forget these stars? The Indomitable Lions from Cameroon had it, the Les Éléphants from Côte d'Ivoire displayed it, the Super Eagles from Nigeria showed it in patches, the Bafana Bafana from South Africa won the hearts of people with some stunning shots (and made a mockery of FIFA rankings in the process) and The Black Stars from Ghana missed out by a whisker. But sustaining this excellence over weeks in a global competition is another matter. No one can doubt that Africa has the talent to win the FIFA World Cup but the key question is 'Can the national football federations stop bickering among themselves and build grass root structures to channelize talent into winning sporting combinations?' We all know that you cannot buy a readymade team.

Teams are built over a period of time and this evolution is fashioned under the guidance and careful eye of a seasoned coach who fuses complimentary forces into one committed fighting unit with the singular objective of hoisting the Cup to the sky, come D-Day. Expecting journeymen footballers to turn up 3-4 weeks before a major competition to wear the national colors, feel the passion and carry the burden of expectation of a large nation, is not easy. The stars from Africa shine brightly in the leagues of Europe, and so cannot provide luster for their own national teams. The feeling of 'Oh, so near yet so far,' will continue to be repeated unless African nations address this with careful long term planning, build from the grass roots and nurture a deep desire to succeed.

"Success is a journey not a destination: The triumph of Spain is an object lesson in why long term vision and planning is essential for success. It is commonly recognized that the Spanish victory owes to the careful work started over the last 5 years and was begun by the earlier coach, Luis Aragones, who evoked the fury in La Furia Roja, challenging them to rise above their history as under-achievers. He is acknowledged as the one who toughened a bunch of talented youngsters and groomed them over the years through competitions leading up to the UEFA European Football Championship. He then handed over to his successor, Vicente del Bosque, a team which had great camaraderie and self-belief having come through tough challenges. In other words, to reach the pinnacle they had to labour over years and all these battles together led to the crafting of a never-say-die fighting spirit which enabled them to take the first match setback (against Switzerland) in their stride. Is Africa willing to build with patience in this manner - and not get angry at fallen heroes?

"Over paid stars have limited value: Teams that were over dependent on big brands came to grief. Be it Rooney, Kaka, Messi, Ronaldo or Henry, they all failed to deliver. It is instructive to note that over a period, players begin to get larger than life and become obsessed with their marketing image which has been fuelled by brand advisors. While it is understandable that in the limited life span of a sportsman he should generate maximum personal value, there is a point beyond which they begin to self-destruct by falling prey to their own public relations hype. The true value of the player gets exaggerated and these 'brand items' can be useful for merchandising the wares of the club but in national colours the truth of football gets highlighted. Football always was, and will remain, a team game and those who fail to get this suffer soon as an individual alone, however talented he may be, cannot succeed. So too in building a nation. Can we broad base opportunities and create winners at all levels rather than create oligopolies?

And a final thought: Sports has been described as war in another form and events like the World Cup reflects this. It is amazing how the fortunes of a nation are dependent on the performance of 11 men on a football field for 90 minutes! Should one ever invest so much energy into this ritual? This moot question needs deeper contemplation as arguments can be offered on either side. The fact is nationalism is an easy refuge when you choose to run away from the grind of daily life. We see ourselves through the eyes of the heroes that we create in the sporting arena and they in turn help us forget the drudgery that daily life offers. Scores can be settled and superiority can be vicariously insisted upon, but the truth is, life does go on after the World Cup. Yes, Africa waits for the trophy, but in the meantime, how can we return to the much needed governance that is missing in all this action?

*Jayshankar is a certified Management Consultant and managing Director of Empowered Learning Systems Pvt. Ltd., India.
jay@empoweredindia.com*