

Eritrea: Bright Young Hope of Africa

Amanuel Biedemariam

On August 13, 2010, the fifth Central and Eastern Confederation of African Football Association (CECAFA) Cup under the age of 20 was officially opened in Asmara Stadium gloriously under the theme: “Friendship and Development Cup”. According to CECAFA, the organization is the oldest football tournament in Africa.” It is a tournament of FIFA and the Council of East and Central Africa Football Associations (CECAFA), and includes national teams from Central and East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Zanzibar, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and Djibouti.” CECAFA is and will remain a significant tournament. However, relative to the African cup or other major global tournaments; it could appear small. This year Eritrea hosted the event for the first time. The tournament was significant event for Eritrea, the region and for Africa for many reasons.

The Eritrean Football Federation established in 1936 during the Italian colonial rule with teams from the localities formed and run independently under scrutiny by Italian colonial power. From 1952-1962, during the federation with Ethiopia, Eritrean Football Federation flourished independently until Ethiopia illegally annexed Eritrea. Eritrea is full of colorful football history, one of the first; most organized and well run organizations in Africa at the time. Eritrea had teams and players that played at a high level based on international standards. In fact, many nations came to play friendly matches with Eritrea and Eritrea always fared well. In 1956, Admiral and Austrian team that won international championship lost to the Eritrean team 1-0 in Asmara and this was amongst the first if not the first time an African team hosted a European club. In 1965, CR Vasco Dagama a premier Brazilian team played and defeated the Eritrean team 3-1 as well as Baku from Russia.

Ethiopia dissolved The Eritrean Football Federation (EFF) immediately after the annexation of Eritrea. After that period, the head of Ethiopian football federation Yidnekachew Tessema deliberately and systematically disallowed Eritrea from playing independent international matches. In other words, the dissolution of EFF was a reflection of the freedoms that Ethiopia peeled off from every aspect of Eritrean life. Football in Eritrea was a highly developed sport. Even after Yidnekachew dissolved the Federation, the teams flourished and the players were incredibly talented. Moreover, contrary to Ethiopia’s intent to disintegrate the Eritrean team, the Eritrean players, as many Eritreans, were strong nationalists and used football as a covert tool of Eritrean national expression. In 1963 when Ethiopia won the Third African Nations Football competition, eight of the players namely Gila, Berhe, Ahdego, Tesfai, Luciano, Tekle, Kiflai and Berhe. Those players actually believed the cup belongs to Eritrea.

Eritrea had several popular clubs that had members that were engaged and proactive. They supported their teams financially and they loved and cared for the players like they were their own kids. The standard and the quality of the players in Eritrea were high even by international standards. Eritrean teams and players dominated the Ethiopian football scene winning multiple championships from 1964 until 1974.

The Eritrean football was a family affair for me. My older brother Tesfaghiorghis AKA Qoqah was one of the premium median players (number six) for Ganta (team) Hamasien for a long time. Campo Cicero was a treat on Sundays because my father took me to every game to see my brother play. Therefore, I grew up watching football regularly and watched like most of the fans with intense emotions. I sat alongside my father and watched many dramas unfold in front of my eyes. It was fun, exhilarating and the games were never dull. The competition was world class. Campo Cicero was always full to capacity. While the teams were always competitive, Hamasien, Akeleguzai, Serai and Tele were amongst the premiere teams as were Mar Rosso and Adulis.

The players knew where they were in terms of their standard relative to the international levels. These players competed at a high level around the world. They played in Africa parts of the Middle East and actually attended world cup games as observers so they can learn from and gauge how they might stack up. I remember pictures of my brother, with two Eritrean players and the Brazilian Pele during the world cup in Germany. The teams and some fans sent many Eritrean players to watch the international games. Therefore, to say the fans were engaged is doing them a disservice. These players were celebrities and classy group of individuals that cared deep about their fans; and the people, in turn, treated them as celebrities with a great deal of love.

However, for me, those players were part of my family. They congregated together and were great friends of each other. I attended their wedding and celebrated their honeymoon (hitsinot) with them. I grew up listening to their jokes, laughed when they kidded each other and enjoyed hearing their funny stories about their experiences everywhere. Their families, wives, brothers and sisters were a close part of our lives. What was fascinating was the friendship amongst the opposing players. It was humbling to see competitors from team Akele, Tele and Hama as friends as Jamil, Ahmed, Ele, and Qoqah were best friends. Actually, all these players treated me like their own little brother and allowed me to grow up with fond memories that carry me to this day.

Growing up, that was what I aspired to be. I played soccer from dawn to dusk and in school during break I run to the field to play. I imitated Ismail, Pace, Abraham and at times Yemane. My dream was to play professional football and I felt that I was a shoo-in with a spot in the team I adored, Hamasien. I dreamt that I was going to be better than my brother Qoqah. After the Sunday games, in school, for the entire week, all we talked about was the games. We analyzed and dissected every play with unparalleled passion. With photographic memories, we replayed the plays. They were the best moments of my life and the fondest memories as a kid growing up in Asmara. In other words I was intimately familiar with Eritrean football and I know many of the players.

One day, that entire dream disappeared, poof and gone without any hope. All the teams stopped their operations. The entire Team-Eritrea including my brother joined the struggle for Eritrean liberation and, after military training were sent to play friendly matches representing Eritrea to Middle East countries that were friendly and supportive to the Eritrean cause such as Syria and Iraq. However, some players opted to stay and

fight like Ele and Seyoum Kidane who was married to my sister and left a child behind. Not long after they joined were both martyred. For a long time after that, I lost interest on football and I only watched the world cup with little interest. Cicero or Asmara Stadium became a place where I enjoy watching Eritrean national celebratory activities. I have long forgotten what Cicero meant to me as a kid. All those beautiful memories were conveniently set aside so as not to arouse embedded emotions.

With the coming of a military Junta, after 1974, the infrastructure of Eritrean football ceased to exist. The clubs closed doors and the personalities that run the clubs and the fun base that supported the teams disbursed. The only thing left is the memory. In a short time span, Asmara went from one of the best football cities in Africa and the Middle East to below rock bottom. Therefore, when Eritrea won independence in 1991 everything was bare, as was everything else. As a result, victorious Eritrea needed to prioritize and, football ranked in the bottom. It started from a scratch because there was no football or any other sports programs to speak of. Imagine; this is a new country in Africa, with no structure, money, resources, limited expertise, fatigued public and dilapidated infrastructures. There was no talent, no way to identify talent even if existed. In addition, Eritrean people have to deal with mixed emotions while in one hand joyous for the victory the other was dealing with colossal loses. Moreover, once the program started it was-beset with obstacles. Eritrea was-engaged militarily due to a war of aggression the TPLF waged tying down thousands of youth at the war front. That also minimized the appetite for sports. In addition, there was a deliberate attempt to demoralize Eritreans and discourage them from resuming all nation-building activities in every turn including football and other sports. That is all history now; Passé!

New Day

With all these adversities, Eritrea is overcoming by doing the right things. Eritrea focused on the basics. Eritrea kept the dream alive no matter what. Eritrea is building a nation and rearing citizens with vision and purpose. Eritrea provided the vision of a country that is purposeful based on selflessness, for the sake of the good of the country, Africa and the greater good. Eritrea is complimenting that vision with efforts to build skills and talents; with a mission showing Africa there is another way.

Eritrea allowed her children to be free and play in their neighborhoods, as it was when I was a kid. Eritrea availed facilities for kids everywhere even in remote areas and established administrative bodies to give it structure. Eritrea is making the investments necessary to build a national sport programs with a holistic approach and doing all she can to promote sports. To that end and, as part of the ministry of information, Eritrea developed very professional sports journalists that report using their indigenous languages. They report all types of local and international sports, with a great deal of depth and detail. By turning to ERiTV, one can enjoy track and field, bicycle races and other sports broadcasted with a great deal of fanfare.

Moreover, ever since independence in 1991, Eritrea has been celebrating year after year in a grand scale. These organized and public celebrations performed by the youth are-based on culture, history, arts, tradition and the nine ethnic groups in Eritrea. They are

colorful, fun, and carnival-like and they have become an expression of what Eritrea is all about; consistent, hard working, focused, sweet, expressive, and artistic and, every year it gets better and better. This is when new songs that set the mood are displayed, talents exposed and, in a sense; it is a public display of the nation's mood. In addition, the weather in Eritrea is nice year around; Eritreans are hospitable and Eritrea is a very peaceful nation. Moreover, the government of Eritrea is keen on making sure that Eritrean sports are developing based on high standards and to the end, all pertinent ministries are-engaged at the highest level. For the above combination of reasons, it was about time for Eritrea to host an international event and begin to display the hidden gem of Africa. Eritreans were ready and hungry.

Shikamo CECAFA Under 20 “Development and Friendship” Cup

For the very first time Eritrea hosted international tournament, in this case CECAFA U-20 calling it, “Development and Friendship” Cup. It was fitting that Eritrea hosted the tournament at a key and transitional moment in the history Africa and particularly the Horn of Africa. The region needed the event and it needed it to be hosted in Eritrea a country that has been a focus of slanderous campaign under false pretenses for a long time.

All the preparation and the combination of factors mentioned above jump started the tournament with a bang with EriArtists singing “Shikamo” a Swahili for welcome. Eritrea showed her true African colors by showcasing the various ethnic groups that are the very embodiments of Africa with all the cultural adornments, traditional dances and songs that electrified the opening. It brought back memories of my childhood when I heard first, a song originally sung by Osman Abdulrahim “Ane-Ye Sport” meaning “I am Sport” and ended the beautifully organized ceremonies with Taniko singing “Sport” originally sung by Younis Ibrahim of Asmara-Police-Orchestra. They highlighted the positive aspect of sports by stating how it could serve the greater good for unity.

As a kid, I watched Younis Ibrahim sing this very song in the middle of Asmara Stadium with the crowd going crazy as he stood with one leg while resting the other on a black-and-white football ball with his red sports jump suit. I still remember the lyrics and I was ecstatic to hear it again. It is fitting that Eritrea went back to those moments because the heydays of football ceased at that moment. Therefore, while it is a new beginning it is also a sign of continuity. It is a renewal of the spirit that reigned then and a good beginning as we look for better future.

While this event marked a beginning, it meant a lot on many levels. Firstly, it affirmed to the world that Eritrea is like no other. It showed what Eritreans believed all along that Eritrea could do anything including host major events such as the African cup. Most importantly, Eritrea showed Africa that Eritrea is committed to use sports as a tool to help Africa get to know each other and to bring people and nations together because the people of the region and Africa need it. And the trend is encouraging. Just few months ago Eritrea hosted a tour of Eritrea bicycle race and, in it, many nations participated that included national cycling teams of Sudan, Morocco, Kenya, Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia.

Concluding Remarks

This event was a continuation in line with good news that is piling up on Eritrea. Eritreans have been working hard to establish their country as a nation in ways no other African nation has to endure. Yet, that only sharpened Eritrean resolve and helped Eritrea persevere to see the light. Hence, the fruits are just in the offing stages and Eritrea is poised to take Africa by storm because Eritrea has all the right ingredients to make it happen. This is precisely what Africa needs. Africa needs to establish its own sports events that can develop and help a continent that desperately needs it. It is about time for Africans to be envious of the “Tour de France”, “Wimbledon”, “US Open” and many other sports events that the West enjoyed while they fan the flames of war in Africa. In addition that is the only way to stop the brain/talent drain. It is also a great opportunity to shut up hate mongering PR-reporters such as Jeffrey Gettleman from New York Times and others that chose to ignore a grand regional event after years of reporting nonsensical articles regarding Eritrean youth.

Sports have a way of bringing nations and people together. Sports tend to help establish trust amongst people of different countries. It was incredibly brilliant to witness the Ugandan players covering themselves with Eritrean flag even as they hoisted their hard won CECAFA cup. At that moment they told the disappointed Eritrean fans, we are all Eritreans at this moment. That meant a great deal not only to those who were in the stadium but also to the people of Uganda in Uganda. They deserve kudos for a brilliant sportsmanship. This was a historic moment that the players developed a newfound respect for the people of Eritrea. It was also a stark example of how Africa has been disillusioned and out of focus when the coaches spoke of their experiences in other countries and praised Eritrea for the new standard of hosting and hospitality. “I have participated in many CAF and CECAFA tournaments and, to my surprise, I have never seen such high quality healthy facilities before, I congratulate Eritrea on the good beginning it has made” Somali Coach, Mohamed Abdulle Farayare told reporters.

The Chairman of CECAFA, Mr. Liegar Tanga, expressed his appreciation for the “warm hospitality, admired Eritrea’s excellent preparations, and stated that the tournaments would not only serve as a steppingstone in developing football in the region but also in promoting socio-economic progress.” That is precisely the spirit that Africans and sports loving people should espouse.

I congratulate the Eritrean team for a brilliant showing and for making it to the finals. While it is hard to swallow such a loss in the finals, at the end of the day, it is going to serve the Eritrean team well. Praise goes to all those who participated, the organizers and kudos to CECAFA. Most of all “Go Eritrea” for shining brighter! On many interviews, the players expressed their satisfaction and said, coming to Eritrea changed how they feel about the nation and the people. These players are lifelong witnesses for Eritrea.

Awetnayu@hotmail.com