

Sports, Clubbing and Wellbeing!

I have always believed in the power of sport to influence a lot of things in the world.

Here in Nigeria we often experience the unifying influence of sport whenever our national football teams are playing. Beyond that there is little else, demonstrably.

As an active practitioner of sport, however, I know that its potential as a change-agent is yet to be fully understood, and that's why it is not exploited enough in our country.

Around the world there is an exciting voyage of discovery of the awesome power of sport.

Nelson Mandela captured it aptly and beautifully. I do not know the occasion but he said: '**With sports, we can change the world**'.

This is coming from one of the most respected humans alive, a man credited with the fertility of wisdom and humanity, whose words are never flimsy.

But sport to change the world? That's a massive statement to make. It surely requires some intellectual inquiry.

I am just an ordinary former-football player. That is my limited credential and my humble claim to fame. Even as a sports practitioner over the past 4 decades I admit that the authority with which I speak even here tonight derives only from my personal experiences as a former football player, an unqualified intruder into the world of sports business, sports media, sports education, sports health and sports administration. I never went to an institution to study any of these things. So, the words and stories I shall share with you now are really just the extracts from a deep well full of my life's experiences.

Gratitude

Before that, however, permit me to express, on behalf of all inductees tonight, our combined gratitude to the President, Management Council and members of Lagos Country Club, Ikeja, for giving us the privilege and the honour of becoming members of this great club. For me, in particular, it means the world. I thank you all.

Let me assure you that by being one of you here I shall seize the opportunity with both hands, put my hands firmly on the plough, apply some of the mathematical theatrics many of you may be familiar with from my days in football, and add some value to this club.

The scope of sport

For many years I have been on a personal journey around the world of sport. My first realization is that sport covers a very wide and diverse spectrum of life. Permit me to state just a few of them here, even if only for its information value.

There is 'sport for *mass participation*' of young people (mostly in school) for the purpose of establishing 'a sound mind in a sound body'. This promotes general good health, lasting friendships, teamwork, collective responsibility, leadership, the competitive spirit. It also provides the platform for identifying gifted children in different organised physical activities available.

There is 'sport for *competition*'. This is a world where the talented are trained to their optimum and made to compete against one another at various levels - school, club, national, international and even at social level. Some become champions, many win medals and laurels for self, club, state and even the country. A few compete professionally and become rich and famous. The vast majority take part for the pleasure and the prospects.

There is 'sport for *education*'. This is very important, so I will elaborate a little.

Sport and education have a very special relationship.

Let me bore you with some statistics on the state of our education. There are an estimated 10 million out-of-school children in Nigeria. The actual figure could be up to 16 million. Of the 180 million illiterate adults in Africa a conservative 60 million are from Nigeria. By the way there are about 793 illiterates in the world and Ethiopia and Nigeria in Africa rank amongst the top ten. Check out the other countries in the group and you will be faced with a stark realisation. These are the same countries with religious and political insurgences and terrorism, similar to the *Boko Haram* phenomenon under which we now find ourselves imprisoned. Where else can terrorists recruit people that are prepared to be commit suicide in anticipation of some unseen virgins in paradise but from this army of the ignorant? This speaks to one of our greatest threats to our nationhood in Nigeria today.

There is also 'sport for economic and national infrastructural development'.

Countries have been using sports events to drive major economic and national infrastructural development agenda. One example will suffice. I believe that many of us here are regular visitors to the capital city of the world - London. East London used to be notorious for its underdevelopment. It was the forbidden and forgotten part of London. Then came the bid for the 2012 Olympics and London won it. In 7 years the world witnessed one of the greatest urban transformations in history. A visitor to East London will now would find the legacies of the Olympic in the most developed environments in the world that sprung up in the same East London,

adding immeasurable capital to London's status as the world's foremost tourist destination.

Such is the impact already and the further vision into the future that the Organisers of the London Olympics revealed two weeks ago, a new plan to bid for 70 new international sports events using the infrastructure and facilities of the London Olympics. This objective is to drive tourism and economic activities in the UK for the next 15 years! Through London 2012 every aspect of life has been impacted - power, the environment, transportation, health, security, etc.

There is 'sport for business' covering merchandising, manufacturing, architecture, construction, media, tourism, photography, sports science and medicine, athletes management, facilities management, coaching, scouting, organising, consultancy, groundsmanship, facilities and events management, maintenance, law, sports schools and academies, sponsorships and marketing, etc.....! It is a whole new global experience and odyssey!

There is 'sport as a diplomatic and political tool'.

There is 'sport as a tool for global peace, unity, friendship and resolution of crisis'.

Then, there is 'sport for health', which brings home to Lagos Country Club and its members the topic of our conversation here today.

Let me tell you about a few interesting things that have happened to me this year relevant to this discourse.

In April, I was invited to Ethiopia for the 13th World Congress on Public Health. I believe there are a few medical personnel in our midst here who would either have been there or heard of it. For three days I was part of brainstorming sessions with about 4000 medical personnel from health institutions in over 150 countries around the world.

Last month, I was again invited to the Jomo Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya, as a part of another research team of intellectuals from Canada, Mozambique, Kenya and Nigeria to design a proposal on Active Transport and Physical Activity in Africa. For three days we deliberated, planned and budgeted for the 3-year research project.

Both events in Ethiopia and Kenya centred around the theme of the role and impact of sports and physical activity on health.

Before you start to wonder what a footballer was doing in such places, let me explain.

For some reason known only to a few people that know about my activities in sports, I was considered a resource person with first-hand experiences in sports, education and the youths, that would better illustrate and illuminate the theories propounded

by professors and other direct health practitioners. I found that every time I opened my mouth to speak at all the various sessions everyone listened with rapt attention. You cannot beat experience on the field can you?

There is a growing global concern about the state of some health conditions in both developed and developing countries. Non-Communicable Diseases have become a major health problem - a silent killers on the prowl devastating whole populations including Nigeria. There are over 34 million Nigerians with one heart-related problem or the other including diabetes, obesity, high-blood pressure, hypertension, some types of cancer, etc. Our life expectancy has fallen to one of the lowest in the world - between 47! With a young population below 25, making up about 60 % of our entire population our children and grandchildren are in a particularly precarious situation.

All that I have said so far is not to frighten anyone here, but to bring to the fore the true situation, and happily provide information on the simple things we can do, and, surprisingly, the simple and practical things we are doing already to be a part of dealing with the situation.

One of the most effective ways of reducing the tendency for non-communicable disease, apart from eating healthily, worrying less, living a stress-free life in a clean environment and avoiding smoking, is to be engaged in reasonable physical activity. Ideally the prescription would have been that all humans should engage in one sport or the other. We all know this will be impracticable because we just do not have the natural discipline to do so. The rule does not apply to us. No one here, I believe, does not know that reasonable amount of sport can help in catalyse good health for people. What we lack is the strength and the will to forsake the struggle for survival and give that time to some sport.

The way to deal with this is for us to put in place structures and facilities that will make us involuntarily undertake levels of physical activity. One of such means is through active transport.

Active transport is a term for the measurement of the distance covered over a specific period of time in a physical activity that is **non-motorised**. For example, walking to and fro school, or work place, cycling, swimming, tread-milling, (even pounding yam, working on the farm etc). Do not let me bore you with the intricate details, but I hope you get the point. So important is the matter of active transport to the international community of researchers that in drawing up a list of local researchers that must work on our project in each of the case study countries, the funders of the project in Canada have insisted that every team must include an urban planner!

For those familiar with developments in urban European cities, you will notice a growing number of jogging paths, cycling lanes and cycle depots in different parts of these cities. The bicycle is now considered a very important means of active transport. Its benefits are tremendous.

So, a major cause of the upsurge in Non-Communicable Diseases is lifestyle - sedentary living with little or no physical activity; sitting and working in front of computers; driving around from home to office and back; driving our children to and from school, poor food (fast foods), environmental pollution from cars and generator fumes, etc. In short, silently and steadily, we are killing ourselves through our lifestyles and the environment. That is mainly why our life expectancy continues to drop; why we have many young men slump and die without being visibly sick; why our newspapers are filled with obituary pages of young people. We must realize our truth; that we are steadily creating a whole new world of unfit and unhealthy people, aided with the absence of active transport and lack of any physical activity.

A lot of these can be drastically reduced through simple active transportation and physical activity. Is the message sinking in? Is the relevance of a place like the Lagos Country Club becoming clearer?

I referred to urban planners earlier on. They are very relevant in this project because to impact on a large segment of society, facilities for active transport and physical activities must be built into the architecture of villages, towns and cities. All over European cities now, there is an expansion programme going on with side lanes created for active transportation: lanes where people can walk, jog, or cycle safely. Laws to protect them are also being enacted. There are places now where you can go, pay a small amount of money, take a bicycle and ride to your destination where you can simply just park it in a designated area. Our ongoing research work is the collation of data in Nigeria, Kenya and Mozambique measuring the level of active transport and the effect of its absence amongst a particular group in those countries.

Now where do we fit into this whole conundrum?

Look at me. Like everyone here I drive to and fro work through the mad traffic of Lagos. I do not eat right often. My children have become computer addicts, sitting at home after being driven to and from school in a car, working on computers, video games or the internet. My wife is even worse. Her own physical activity after work is restricted to the four walls of our kitchen. I am like most ordinary folk. And that what makes it worrisome, because I should know better.

Look I have gone to this length to explain where we all are in our game of life and the dangerous games we play within it. Again, this is not to frighten anyone. Instead I bring some good news.

I am not making me the classic example, but listen. I am in relatively good health for my age. I am maintaining a health regimen through my clubbing activities. Before this great opportunity I belonged to a small social club, one-hundredth the population and size of Lagos Country Club, and with a tenth of its activities, programmes and facilities. In Nigeria, in the total absence of sports facilities in schools, public social parks and clubs, no space or lanes for active transport, a social club like Lagos Country Club has become not only invaluable relevant but 'God-sent'!

The social club has now become a very important institution not only for socialising but also for implementing the needs of some active transport and physical activity. People in these social clubs have the environment and the facilities to achieve the essential components of good health and well being through simple physical activity. That's what clubbing is about really, not just the eating and drinking that many misinformed persons think. Clubbing fills the void that schools and towns no longer provide that can make the difference between living long and well, and dying prematurely and silently.

So, what we do here every day matters. The socialization eases the mental stress. The sports - the tennis, or squash, or table tennis, or golf, swim, or even the long walks around the club premises or to and from the club for those living not too far away - constitute an essential ingredient in the well being of members. We must extend this to our wives and children. It is a simple exercise, but the benefits are tremendous.

In closing let me say the following: I have not said anything here that is new to you all. What I must have simply done is remind you to take what you already have and know a little more seriously. What Lagos Country Club provides us is the platform and opportunity not just for recreational pastime but for essential ingredients for our health and general well being.

The formula is very simple. Use the club and its facilities more and well. Take them seriously. Come often with the family. Walk to the club if you can. Invite more people to come here too and be a part of the life-extension activities. Engage in one sports activity or the other on a regular basis. And then, you can eat, drink and be merry, for you will live longer!

I thank you for listening!

Chief Segun Odegbami, MON, *fnim*
November 27, 2012.
Lagos Country Club, Ikeja.
Lagos Ng