Do We Need More African Sports at the Olympics?

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For the first time in over a decade, the Olympics were held without Usain Bolt. The track king, Usain Bolt, had been the headliner in the past three editions. Without him electrifying the track, and without fans cheering in the stands, the Tokyo Olympics, pushed one year later than its original date because of the pandemic, naturally demanded a new show-stealer.

And they got one, like a bolt out of the blues, from skateboarding. 13-year-old British-Japanese skateboarder, Sky Brown, who won bronze in the park skateboarding event making her the youngest-ever medalist for Great Britain. It is not so much about her win, but the manner with which she won that earned her a place under the spotlight. She had attempted a kickflip indy twice and failed, but in what could pass off as a modernist retelling of the famed tale of King Robert Bruce's spider encounter in the cave, she tried again and was third-time lucky.

Plugged into many sporting news outlets, I got to read backstories about this teen skateboarder, Sky Brown, whose name alone — a brown sky — felt like defiance of the natural order. Her name, with its reference to a heavenly body, the sky, much like the lightning bolt in Usain Bolt's name , would seem like a quiet conspiracy perfecting her candidacy as a new superstar Olympian to watch out for in the future.

Amidst the praises in one of those many sporting forums, a user, who I presume to be British, called on his government to defund the rowing federation and divert the money to skateboarding. Rowing is a sport that is often considered elitist. But the man's passionate call for a restructuring of budgetary allocation isn't the point that caught my eye. It was his follow-up claim. According to him, skateboarding felt like a more democratic sport and that just about anybody could afford a deck.

It is indeed true that the barriers of entry into skateboarding are less compared to rowing, but his

statement is an echo of Western ethos. In over two decades of my life in Nigeria, I have only seen a skateboard once and that skateboard was owned by a man who has been labeled as eccentric by his neighbors. Amongst his many exotic collections includes a well-fed pet monkey, a parrot, a Chihuahua, and a hoverboard. On some evenings, he would skate inexpertly around the neighborhood much to the delight of kids. I say 'inexpertly' not because I can do better, but because my benchmarks for expertise are Hollywood high-schoolers cruising smoothly to school or evading vehicles on a busy highway.

Besides the fact that it is not the cheapest of items (and may be considered by some to be a luxury), a skateboard would find its utility limited in Nigeria with the best roads in town being the highways. Skateboarding is one of the five new sports at the Tokyo Olympics, and one cannot help but wonder whether the admission of these alien sports has not sidelined Africa on the medals' table.

However, it would be unfair to cast the International Olympic Committee as villains. It appears, from certain policies, that the Committee realizes the need for inclusion in sports. As one of its criteria for admitting a sport into the Olympics, the Committee advises that the prospective sport should be practiced by, at least, 75 of the world's countries, and across four continents. But this net of opportunity, this grace, is not large enough. There are nearly 70 countries that make up the Western bloc; add a couple of Asian countries and the criteria would be fulfilled. This means that Africans can conveniently be excluded and may not factor in the grand scheme of things.

Should we then call for sports like skateboarding to be scrapped? That would be in bad taste. Perhaps what would be best is to advocate sporting activities peculiar to African cultures to be made an Olympic sport. As reasonable as it sounds, this is not feasible.

There are very few indigenous African games that can fit the IOC's criteria: *Ayo*, for instance, wouldn't, because it is a mental exercise, just like chess. The others, like *Ten-ten*, are either not practiced on a global scale, or already have equivalents in standardized Western sports. *Laamb* has a twin in wrestling, *Nguni* is not very different from fencing, and *Dembe* is basically boxing. As it would turn out, the most practiced sport in Africa is football.

Although of English origin (and perhaps for that very reason), football has been adopted as a culture in Nigeria. It is not difficult to figure out why. It is the sport with the lowest barrier of entry — at least, at the amateur level. Leather balls are cheap, and even if quality grass turfs are hard to come by, one could enjoy a good game of football on a level field. The conditions, of course, are a far cry from what pro football aspires to, but it suffices. That sport is rooted into the Nigerian consciousness, and it is thus no surprise that the first gold medal Nigeria ever won at the Olympics in a team sport was football — soccer, as the Americans call it.

And it was on a sweltering day in America, in front of over 80,000 supporters at Sanford Stadium in Atlanta, that Nigeria won gold at the Olympics. Nigeria's victory came on the back of extraordinary circumstances: a Kanu-inspired comeback in the semis against football powerhouse, Brazil, and an equally stunning display in the final against another superpower, Argentina. The Olympic team following the victory was dubbed the Dream Team I, and there could hardly be a more appropriate name. Not just because they played dreamy football, but because football is one of those sports young Nigerians can dream of winning. It is, as the famous Peak Milk ad of the early 2000s put it, The *Papilo* dream.

And if one considered such a feat to be fluke, they were disappointed as fellow Africans, Cameroon, repeated it in Sydney 2000; Dream Team IV won silver in Beijing 2008; Dream Team VI won bronze in Rio 2016. This pattern is not random. At the youth level, Nigeria has the most successful football teams in the world. If anything, it proves that countries, even with minimal funding, stand a better

chance when the sport is widely practiced in their locale. In their silver-winning campaign in the Beijing Olympics, there were claims that the Dream Team had to wash their kit for re-use after each game. It is comical yet disgraceful, and in Tokyo, we relived the disgrace when Nigeria's shot put finalist, Chukwuebuka Enekwechi, posted a picture of himself on Instagram washing his kit before the final.

The picture was the crown on what was a poor display at the Tokyo Olympics for Team Nigeria. Clad in fashionable white brocade and waving green flags, Team Nigeria made their entrance onto the scene and that, asides from the podium presentation of the two medals we won in wrestling and long jump, was the best picture from the Olympics. The other pictures on the Internet show Nigerian athletes in various stages of despair: a picture of speedster Blessing Okagbare looking solemnly upwards following her disqualification, Enoch Adegoke holding his hamstring, and gnashing his teeth, 19-year-old Adijat Idris getting slammed, etc. Not to mention the shameful disqualification of Nigeria's 4x400m relay team after officials failed to place cones on the track at the Lagos Open Athletics Championship.

With administrative failures such as this one, it would seem hypocritical to blame the IOC solely for the exclusion of African sports from the Olympics. Introducing African sports to the Olympics may not improve the standings of African teams against big guns like the USA and China at the Olympics. The countries in the Global North might still dominate Sports that are distinctively African because they would invest more money in it. For instance, out of the 113 medals Americans won at the Games, 70 were in traditional sports. A whopping 30 of those came from swimming; 26 from Athletics; 9 from wrestling, and other medals in soccer, basketball, and weightlifting. Despite the stereotype about the African physique, we have found little success in wrestling and one can only wonder whether the famed *Amalinze,* Achebe's legendary wrestler, exists. Or perhaps the issue is in arbitration. Olympic wrestling, for example, has two branches: freestyle and Greco-Roman. The rulings of the Greco-Roman event are a little different, and, as the name implies, has techniques that are heavily rooted in Grecian and Roman tradition. Perhaps, the IOC could create another variant that takes a leaf from the Senegalese *Laamb*. We could say all of these, but what excuse can we provide for our failures in weightlifting or athletics?

This gives some credence to the counterargument provided by naysayers who insist that funding and administration are at the core of our Olympic failures. There is still a leisurely outlook on sports in Africa. Except for football where people now talk, albeit jocularly, of enrolling their kids in academies, the teeth of capitalism have yet to sink into our sports psyche. The government does little about its sporting facilities; parents would scoff if their child expresses a desire to be a pro skateboarder.

This is the chasm between both realities. It is thus no surprise that the US and China who heavily fund sports and have well-established varsity sports programs continue to lead. China sports authorities are looking to make sports a $770 billion industry by 2025. In 2019, China spent over a billion dollars on sports as part of the preparation for the Tokyo Olympics. And these spendings reflect positively on the economy and the sporting performances. Until the Tokyo Olympics, no Asian had reached the 100m final – a sport traditionally dominated by the Americans and Jamaicans – but Su Bingtian, a Chinese, became the first to do so.

The US finished top with 39 gold medals and was officially announced as the winners of the Olympics, and perhaps there is no better proof of the Games being capitalists arm-wrestling. Interestingly, the US' biggest economic rival, The People's Republic of China has contested the official result and announced themselves winners. They had finished one gold medal shy of America's gold haul, but they, through their state-controlled media, combined the medals of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan to take their tally to 42.

Do we need more sports in the Olympics? Perhaps. But admitting a sport into the Olympics is not a cakewalk. It requires funding and administrative rigor, and not just periodic outrage. As popular as the Japanese martial art Karate, it only made its debut at the Tokyo Olympics. Interestingly, it made its first-ever bid as far back as 1970. If we, as Africans, desire this inclusion, then we must set realistic targets and start by introducing indigenous sports to the All African Games. The next step would be to market these sports to the globe. We could take a leaf from the Korean Wave (or *Hallyu* as it is popularly called). The *Hallyu* is the term for the boom of Korea's cultural economy and is the consequence of the country's determination to become the leading exporter of popular culture. Like *Hallyu*, the Olympics continue to show that it takes money to fund culture on a global scale. Until we invest in our culture, any dream of having an African sport at the Olympics would remain a dream.

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