



Rebranding Nigeria's Medal-Winning International Sports Participation: A Case for Systematic School Sports

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ABSTRACT

The disappointing performance of Nigeria's contingent at the 2024 Olympics has sparked a renewed discussion about the importance of systematic school sports development as a foundation for future success in international competitions. This would involve not just the inclusion of sports in the school curriculum, but also establishing a nationwide school sports programme, investing in modern sports infrastructure, providing training and certification programs for coaches, and sports administrators, and partnering with international sports organizations. Systematic school sports development is a proven strategy in countries that consistently perform well in international sports. Nigeria as a country possesses the three components that enables development in sports terrain which are the pool of talent, wealth, and political structure with the best structure of sports development model just like that of the United States' National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). Efforts must be made towards rebranding the school sports model in operation in Nigeria to produce the results expected and also the establishment of sports academy in each state by the government and through public-private-partnership which will promote talent discovery and nurturing as early as possible.

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Introduction

Nigeria's performance in international sports has been a subject of concern for decades. Despite the country's vast talent pool and passion for sports, Nigeria has consistently underperformed on the global stage. Rebranding Nigeria's approach to international sports participation, particularly in the context of winning medals, is an urgent necessity. The nation's performance in global competitions, such as the Olympics, has been lackluster, with results that do not reflect the country's potential. The 2024 Olympics in Paris was a stark reminder of this reality, with Nigeria failing to win a single medal. There is a compelling case for systematic school sports development, particularly through grassroots and university sports programs. Such programs can serve as incubators for talent, offering a structured pathway from grassroots participation to elite performance, and ultimately reshaping Nigeria's international sports reputation. Nigeria has a rich history in sports, with a few shining moments on the global stage, such as the success of the Nigerian football team at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics (Ugochukwu & Chidiobi, 2024) and individual successes in athletics (Yazid, 2014), boxing (Efebeh, 2021), and para-sports (Slater, 2024).

However, these victories have been sporadic and largely the result of individual talent rather than a result of systematic development. The current state of Nigerian sports is characterized by inadequate funding, poor facilities, and a lack of a coherent national sports policy that prioritizes talent development from an early age. This has resulted in missed opportunities to harness the potential of young athletes and develop them into world-class competitors. The nation's sports infrastructure, particularly at the grassroots level, is underdeveloped, leading to a lack of consistent success in international competitions. Without a structured pathway from school sports to elite international competition, many talented

individuals fall through the cracks, unable to reach their full potential.

Nigeria's sports system is plagued by a lack of investment in grassroots development, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient training for athletes, and lack of the presence of a sport psychologist in the coaching crew. The country's focus on elite and foreign-based athletes has neglected the development of young talent, resulting in a shallow talent pool. This approach has yielded minimal success, with Nigeria's Olympic performance being a prime example. School sports play a crucial role in developing young athletes and laying the foundation for future success. A well-structured school sports program can identify and nurture talent from an early age, provide access to quality coaching and training facilities, foster a competitive spirit and teamwork, and develop essential life skills, such as discipline and perseverance (Jaiyeoba, & Oguntuase, 2019).

Systematic school sports development is a proven strategy in countries that consistently perform well in international sports. It involves creating a structured environment where sports are an integral part of the education system, from primary school through to university (De Bosscher et al., 2009; Green & Oakley, 2001). In this system, students are encouraged to participate in a variety of sports, and those with exceptional talent are identified and nurtured from an early age. For Nigeria, implementing a systematic approach to school sports could transform its international sports fortunes. This would involve not just the inclusion of sports in the school curriculum, but also establishing a nationwide school sports programme, investing in modern sports infrastructure, providing training and certification programs for coaches, and sports administrators, and partnering with international sports organizations. These will play a crucial role in nurturing young athletes, fostering social cohesion, and promoting a culture of health and wellness



(Kang, Meng, & Su, 2024). Nigeria can build a strong foundation for future success on the international stage.

One of the primary benefits of systematic school sports development is the early identification and nurturing of athletic talent (Lloyd et al., 2015). Beyond athletic success, systematic sports programs in schools contribute significantly to the physical and mental health of students (Habyarimana, Tugirumukiza, & Zhou, 2022). Students who participate in sports learn important life skills such as collaboration, communication, and leadership (Karstensen et al., 2024; Bruner et al., 2014). The long-term benefit of systematic school sports development is the enhancement of national pride through international success.

Countries that have invested in grassroots sports development often see their athletes excel on the global stage, bringing home medals and elevating the nation's status (Coutinho, Mesquita, & Fonseca, 2016). Nigeria's underperformance at the 2024 Olympics highlights the need for a more strategic approach to sports development, starting from the grassroots level in schools. By building a robust school sports system, Nigeria can create a pipeline of talent that will not only improve the country's prospects in future Olympics but also instill a sense of national pride and achievement. Grassroots and university sports programs have the potential to play a pivotal role in rebranding Nigeria's international sports participation. Universities are uniquely positioned to serve as incubators for sports talent, offering the necessary infrastructure, coaching, and competitive opportunities that are often lacking at lower levels of the education system. In many countries, grassroots and university sports programs are integral to the development of elite athletes (Holl, & Burnett, 2016; Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008).

From the case of Olympic competitions, from 2008 to 2024, the five foremost countries that won medals using student-athletes were the United States, China, Great Britain, Russia and Australia stood tall. This is because of the sports development models adopted by these countries. The School sports model, SPLISS model, Long-term athlete development model, and Community-based model of sports development and many more are implemented by these countries. Although, all the countries have adopted a combination of sports development models, only the US has the strongest school sports model of sports development and the result is evident in the number of students-athletes they have presented from 2008 Beijing Olympics to 2024 Paris Olympics through their National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), a division of their school sports model of sports development.

The school sports model in the US has several advantages, including early identification and development of talent, access to quality coaching and facilities, competition against top-level opponents, opportunities for scholarships and education, and a strong pipeline to Olympic and professional sports. The United States has a well-established system where university sports serve as a critical step between high school athletics and professional or Olympic competition (Ridpath, 2018). Student-athletes receive scholarships, access to top-tier coaching, and the opportunity to compete at a high level while also pursuing their academic goals. This dual approach ensures that athletes are well-rounded individuals who can succeed both on and off the field. While other countries have adopted different models, the US school sports model has been a key factor in their success. The US school sports model has produced many Olympic champions and medalists, and it continues to be a key part of their sports development system.



It is worth noting that Nigeria also has a school sports model known as Nigeria School Sports Federation (NSSF) including Nigeria University games (NUGA), Nigeria Polytechnic Games (NIPOGA), and Nigeria College of Education Games (NACEGA), but they are not result oriented as that of the US. Nigeria possesses a pool of talent, wealth, and a sports development model which are the major comparisons factors between the two great countries in terms of sports participation and performance. While these factors yields result for US, they produce adverse result for Nigeria in Olympic Games. The reasons for such discrepancies in results include lapse in funding, infrastructure, coaching and expertise, competition and exposure, governance and administration, cultural emphasis on sports, support systems, and long-term planning. These factors combined create a significant gap between the US and Nigeria in terms of Olympic performance. However, Nigeria has the potential to improve with investment, planning, and support.

Specifically, Usain Bolt is a leading figure of a product of school sports models who have risen to the highest pinnacle in sports. The legendary Jamaican sprinter, is a shining example of the school sports model's success. Born on August 21, 1986, in Trelawny, Jamaica, Bolt's journey to becoming the world's fastest man began in his school days. Bolt attended William Knibb Memorial High School, where he was encouraged to pursue athletics by his cricket coach, Pablo McNeil. McNeil recognized Bolt's speed and potential, and introduced him to the school's track and field program. Under the guidance of Coach Glen Mills, Bolt honed his skills, and his talent flourished. He won his first medal, a silver, in the 200 meters at the 2002 World Junior Championships (Eurosport, 2020). This early success fueled his passion for sprinting.

After high school, Bolt transitioned to the senior ranks, and his career skyrocketed in the World Junior Champion (2002), World Champion (2009,

2011, 2013), Olympic Champion (2008, 2012, 2016), and he is still the World Record Holder in 100m and 200m events. Bolt's success is a testament to the school sports model's effectiveness. His story highlights the importance of early talent identification and development, access to quality coaching and facilities, competition and exposure, and Support systems and guidance (Eurosport, 2020). The school sports model provided Bolt with a solid foundation, allowing him to reach unprecedented heights. His legacy continues to inspire young athletes worldwide, demonstrating the potential for greatness when nurtured through school sports programmes.

Tobi Amusan, a Nigerian sprint hurdler who has made a name for herself in the athletic world was also discovered in a secondary school in Nigeria. She attended Our Lady of Apostles Secondary School in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, where her athletic talent was identified and nurtured. Her journey to becoming a world-class athlete began in her school days, where she was encouraged to participate in sports. She started out as a 200m and 400m runner before switching to the 100m hurdles, which became her specialty (Afolayan, 2023). Amusan's discovery and development in a Nigerian secondary school highlights the importance of grassroots sports development programs and the role of schools in identifying and nurturing young talent (Olusola, 2024; Afolayan, 2023).

She currently holds the world record in the 100 meters hurdles with a time of 12.12 seconds ². Amusan's journey to success began at a young age, and she has worked her way up to become a world champion and record holder ¹. She is also the current Commonwealth and African champion in the 100 meters hurdles and has won several gold medals in the event ². Amusan's achievements have made her a trailblazer for Nigerian athletes, and she continues to inspire young athletes around the world showing that with hard work, dedication, and



the right support, greater achievements are eminent in sports (Olusola, 2024; Afolayan, 2023).

These are evidences of efforts made through school sports in identifying and nurturing talents from the grassroots in Africa. For Nigeria, investing in university sports programs such as that of the NCAA in the US could have a similar impact. Universities could become centers of excellence for various sports, attracting top talent from across the country (Ferguson, 2022). By providing athletes with the resources they need to succeed, including state-of-the-art facilities, experienced coaches, and the opportunity to compete against top-tier competition, Nigerian universities could help to develop a new generation of world-class athletes. Moreover, university sports programs can serve as a bridge between grassroots sports and international competition. Talented athletes who excel in university sports can be scouted and developed for national teams, ensuring a continuous pipeline of talent. This would address one of the key issues currently facing Nigerian sports – the lack of a structured pathway from grassroots participation to elite competition.

While the benefits of systematic school sports development are clear, there are challenges that must be addressed to make this vision a reality in Nigeria. These challenges include funding, the need for qualified coaches and sports administrators and scientists, and there is a need for a coherent national sports policy that prioritizes talent development from an early age and provides a clear pathway from grassroots participation to international competition. These are possible considering the country's wealth and political practice.

Nigeria and the US share similarities in their federal system of government, which could facilitate the adoption of similar school sports development models. Implementing a well-structured school sports program in Nigeria could lead to early talent identification and development, improved infrastructure and facilities, enhanced

coaching and training, increased participation and competition, and better support systems for athletes. Nigeria can develop a comprehensive school sports policy, establish partnerships between schools, government, and private organizations, provide resources and funding for school sports programs, train and certify coaches and officials, and create a competitive and supportive environment for young athletes by learning from the US model of school sports for the sports development.

The poor outcome of Nigeria's contingent in the 2024 Olympics underscores the urgent need for systematic school sports development. Such a system would not only enhance talent identification and athletic success but also promote physical and mental health, social cohesion, and national pride. Rebranding Nigeria's medal-winning international sports participation requires a systematic approach to school sports development. Nigeria can identify and nurture young talent, leading to improved performance on the global stage by investing in grassroots programs, infrastructure, and training. With the outcome of the 2024 Olympics in Paris serving as a wake-up call for the nation to revamp its sports system and prioritize school sports development, the time for change is now, and Nigeria must prioritize school sports development to reclaim its rightful place among the world's sporting nations.

Conclusion

Rebranding Nigeria's international sports participation requires a fundamental shift in the way the country approaches sports development. To make tangible effort towards it, there is need to implement a nationwide school sports programme, focusing on talent identification and development, invest in modern sports infrastructure, including facilities and equipment, provide training and certification programs for coaches and sports administrators, employ the services of sports psychologists, establish partnerships with



international sports organizations to access best practices and resources.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided towards the rebranding.

1. The Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (FMYSD) should re-establish structured school leagues for various sports disciplines, starting at the primary and secondary school levels and create regional sports talent centers to serve as hubs for nurturing young athletes and integrating them into national-level programmes.
2. The National Sports Commission (NSC) should upgrade existing sports facilities in schools, universities, and local communities with modern equipment, build multi-sport centers in rural areas to promote equitable access to sports development across the country, and adopt public-private partnerships to attract investments in sports facilities and infrastructure, ensuring sustainable development.
3. The Nigerian School Sports federation should rebrand school sports competition focusing on underserved regions to discover hidden talents and collaborate with scouting networks both within and outside the country to ensure promising athletes receive scholarships and opportunities for further development.

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