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Intrigues and Poor Play Make for Disappointing African ations' Cup 2000

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The African Nations' Cup currently taking place in Ghana and Nigeria (Zimbabwe was found to be too under-prepared to host the event) has thus far been a disappointment. Except for an enthralling Nigeria-Tunisia clash, the first week of Africa's biggest soccer tournament will be recalled more for a string of lackluster matches, logistical blunders, and unruly fan behavior, than for the dazzling display of African talent that millions of viewers were expecting.

Days before the opening match, bureaucratic bickering between the Cameroonian president of the African Football Confederation (CAF), Issa Hayatou, and his challenger, Angolan Armando Machado, ultimately ended in Hayatou's reelection, but dampened the carnivalesque spirit the biennial showcase usually promises. Add to that the sacking of the president of Nigeria's Football Association on January 21, and the rancorous public disputes between Morocco and South Africa over the candidacy to host World Cup 2006, and you have an ambiance low in sportsmanship and high in acrimony.

Nonetheless, a colorful inaugural ceremony featuring drummers and dancers decked in red, gold, and green and traditional Asante horsemen set a festive tone for the opening match between Cameroon and co-host Ghana at Accra's National Stadium. Ghanaian president Jerry Rawlings was on hand to watch his Black Stars snatch a 1:1 draw from a clearly superior Cameroonian side.

A header from Marc Vivien Poy (who plays for West Ham in the English Premier League) put Cameroon ahead in the 19th minute. The Black Stars equalized with a goal from Portugal-based Sporting Lisbon striker Kwame Ayew, the younger brother of now-retired superstar Abedi "Pele" Ayew, after a delightful set-piece from Bayern Munich defender, Samuel Kuffour.

The Lions split the Ghanaian defense repeatedly with speedy counterattacks and piercing forays down the flanks, but Cameroon's Indomitable Lions, champions in 1984 and 1988, missed several chances to win three points in a group which also includes Togo and Cote d'Ivoire. Patrick Mboma, who plays in Italy for Cagliari, had the miss of the match, managing to boot the ball over an empty goal at point-blank range. More Cameroon misses spared the Black Stars an embarrassing defeat in front of a home crowd of 40,000. In the meantime, also in Group A, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire drew 1:1.

Nigeria's resounding 4:2 victory over Tunisia last Sunday was the opening match in Group D -- the "Group of Death," which also includes Morocco and the Congo Republic. The match between the star-studded Nigerian squad and Tunisia was evenly balanced for the first half hour, but the rest of the game saw the Tunisians trapped in their half desperately trying to fend off the Super Eagles.

Nwankwo Kanu, Arsenal striker and African Footballer of the Year, led a galaxy of Nigerian stars who play professionally for some of the best clubs in Europe, including Paris St. Germain's Augustine "Jay-Jay" Okocha, Borussia Dortmund's Victor Ikpeba, Inter Milan's Taribo West, Real Betis' Georges Finidi, and Chelsea's Celestine Babaya. Okocha and Ikpeba scored two goals each. A 13th-minute drive by Ikpeba sent the ball through the legs of seasoned Tunisian goalkeeper Chokri al-Ouaer, while a beautiful flick from Kanu animated the 60,000 spectators, who roared as Ikpeba fired the ball home. Tunisian goals by Zoubeir Baya and Adel Sellimi shocked but did not stop the Eagles. The Nigerians' impressive debut, watched by Issa Hayatou and French soccer legend Michel Platini, eliminated many doubts about the preparedness and unity of the Nigerian players, who last played together in a disappointing 1998 World Cup campaign.

Lagos erupted in jubilation after the victory, with Nigerians celebrating their country's return to the African tournament after politically-motivated suspensions prevented their participation in the '96 and '98 finals in South Africa and Burkina Faso. This year Nigeria views the African Nations' Cup as an opportunity to restore the newly democratic country's international football standing. To that end, Coca Cola Nigeria has promised the Eagles one million naira (\$10,000) each if the team wins the cup, a 100,000 naira (\$1000) bonus for every goal scored in regulation time in winning games, 200,000 naira (\$2000) each for reaching the semi-finals and 300,000 naira (\$3000) each for reaching the final on February 13th.

Morocco's start in the tournament was not as stirring. Ranked number one in Africa by FIFA, the international soccer federation, for over a year, the Lions of the Atlas began their campaign against the Congo Republic, the lowest ranked of the tournament's 15 participants. Morocco's squad, which boasts names like Deportivo's Naybet and Bassir and Coventry City's Hadil and Chippo, beat Congo's Red Devils 1:0 with a late second-half goal by Bassir. But the Congolese team, essentially a crop of unknowns from second division teams in France and Germany, still managed to give the Atlas Lions a run for their money in a languid, slow-paced game whose highlight was the 20-minute electricity blackout in the first half.

Last Friday, lowly Congo also held Nigeria to a nil-nil draw in another boring, lackadaisical match. And Saturday saw an equally disappointing no-score draw between Morocco and Tunisia, through which Morocco joined Nigeria at the top of Group D. Brilliant passes from Hadda were wasted by Holland-based striker Ramzi's clumsy last touches. The much-anticipated clash between the two North African giants was a letdown, and fans are now looking for compensation in February 3rd's Morocco-Nigeria

match, a clash that features what many see as the tournament's top two teams.

In Group B, Gabon's 16-year-old France-based midfielder Chira Star Nzigou, the youngest player in the competition's history, scored Gabon's first goal against South Africa. The lead, however, lasted just twenty minutes with Dumisa Ngobe equalizing for South Africa and two consecutive goals from Swiss-based Shawn Bartlett winning the game for Bafana Bafana ("The Boys"), as the South African squad is affectionately known. Group B also saw a bland 0-0 draw between the Democratic Republic of Congo, the former Zaire (the team's nickname is "Simba," which means "lion," making the squad one of three Cup teams named after the king of beasts), and Algeria.

In Group C, the title-defenders, Egypt, managed an easy 2:0 win over Zambia. The Pharaohs' 20-year-old Stuttgart-based midfielder, Ahmed Salah Hosni helped create numerous chances, one clinically finished by Hassan Hassan, who in 1998 shared the goal-scoring title with South Africa's Benny McCarthy. Also in Group C, Senegal beat Burkina Faso 3:1.

After the tournament's first week, in terms of caliber and talent, it seems that Nigeria are the strongest contenders for the title. Since the first African Nations' Cup, which was hosted by Sudan in 1957, the Super Eagles have only lifted the trophy twice – in 1980 and 1994. This year, the talent and ambition are present, but as usual the West African powerhouse is beset by financial wrangling and internecine conflict. The Nigerian Football Association (NFA) triggered a major row after refusing to pay players their promised \$3000 bonuses following their 4:2 drubbing of Tunisia. The players refused the \$ 2500 offered, and their resentment showed in their uninspired play against the Congo Republic. Fans, outraged that Nigeria's dismal 0:0 performance against the Congo may have been a deliberate ruse by disgruntled players, threw bottles onto the pitch and besieged the Eagles' locker-room until riot police dispersed them with tear gas. On Saturday, the CAP penalized Nigeria with a \$ 2000 fine and warned that the team's future matches could be played behind closed doors. And Sunday, after an emergency meeting, the NFA finally paid the Eagles \$3000 apiece; many hope the belated bonus payment will improve the players' performance in their next match.

Despite widespread disappointment at the poor level of play and accompanying intrigues, fan enthusiasm remains high. In New York last week, for example, an Egyptian cab driver exchanged comments on the tournament with some African passengers, clearly captivated by the ongoing competition. "My wife tapes the games every day and I watch them after work. When I come home I tell her, 'Don't tell me the result, I want to see it myself,'" he explained enthusiastically. "Of course, when Egypt plays, I take the day off."

For more information on the African Nations' Cup, visit the [official tournament website](#).

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