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The Indomitable Lions Roar to Victory

Photo: Cameroon's Pierre Wome runs off the field after kicking the winning penalty shot in the gold medal football match between Spain and Cameroon at the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Sept. 30, 2000. AP Photo/Adam Butler

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African athletes earned medals in a number of track and field races at the Sydney Olympics. But Africans may forever remember the 2000 Games for Cameroon's thrilling victory in the men's soccer tournament, a Cinderella story that perhaps heralds a new era of African dominance in the world's most popular sport.

"To win the Olympic gold medal is absolutely wonderful," said the Cameroonian coach Jean-Paul Akono after the September 30 victory. "We have won the African Nations' Cup, but this is an excellent result. I think this is a motivational development, not just for Cameroon but for African soccer. I don't think we are very far from a World Cup in a few years from now. African countries need more organization and more seriousness in their approach so that Africa can one day win the World Cup."

In front of a capacity crowd of 100,000, many of whom shouted "Cameroon! Cameroon!" in support of the underdogs, the Africans captured the gold by beating Spain 5-3 in a penalty shoot-out after 120 minutes of play -- which included two red cards, a saved penalty, and riveting end-to-end action -- ended with a 2-2 draw.

It was a fitting conclusion to a campaign in which it often seemed that the "Indomitable Lions" would be eliminated. Cameroon's attacking style and never-say-die spirit brought them back from the brink of defeat in the quarterfinal, semifinal and final matches against favored opponents Brazil, Chile, and Spain.

In the quarterfinal against Brazil (which had crushed Colombia 9-0 in the qualifying rounds), the Lions took the lead in the 17th minute when Patrick Mboma, the cornerstone of the talented Cameroonian squad, slotted in a beautiful free kick. Although leading 1-0 in the second half, the Lions soon found their side reduced to nine men when Geremi Njitap and defender Aaron Nguimbat were ejected. Brazilian striker Ronaldinho leveled the score at 1-1 with a free kick twelve seconds from the end of regulation, forcing the game into sudden death extra time.

Although many observers counted them out, the Lions managed to neutralize the Brazilian attack with just nine men, mounting a rapid counterattack in which Modeste Mbami split the Brazilian defense and rifled home the winning "golden" goal.

In the semifinals, the Lions faced Chile, which, led by 33-year-old star Ivan "Bam-Bam" Zamorano, had won its group by beating Spain 3-1 and eliminating both Morocco (4-1) and Nigeria (4-1). The Chilean drubbing of Nigeria, one of Africa's most powerful sides, came as a surprise to many, but the Nigerian Super Eagles were not at full strength, missing the scoring talents of star striker Nwankwo Kanu, team captain Celestine Babayaro and defender Azuibuike Oliseh. (South Africa, the fourth team representing the African continent in Sydney, was edged out by Brazil).

The Cameroonians found themselves trailing after an unfortunate own goal by Patrice Abanda. But the Lions came back from the 1-0 deficit, scoring twice in the last six minutes of the game. Mboma equalized in the 83rd minute, and drew a penalty call with a darting foray into the box. The penalty, taken in the 89th minute by Lauren "Etame" Mayer, saw the Lions through to the final against Spain.

Spain, which won the Olympic tournament in 1992 and is the current world youth champion, made the final by trouncing the United States 3-1. (The Americans would go on to lose the bronze medal game against Chile, with Zamorano scoring twice to become the tournament's highest scorer with six goals.)

The Spaniards got off to a promising start in the final, scoring in the first minute when Xavi curled a free kick into the net of 16-year-old Cameroonian goalkeeper Carlos Idriss Kamani. In the fourth minute, the referee awarded the Spaniards a penalty kick when Nguimbat tackled striker Jose Mari in the penalty box by. The poor penalty shot was saved by the 16-year-old sensation, but Spain scored again in the dying minutes of the first half when Spanish forward Gabri beat the Cameroonians' offside trap, increasing Spain's lead to 2-0.

In the second half the lion-hearted Africans staged a dramatic comeback. The Cameroonians scored a lucky goal when Mboma's shot deflected off

Ivan Amaya and ended up in Spanish goalkeeper Aranzubia's net. Cameroonian forward Samuel Eto'o then equalized in a classic counterattack, controlling an excellent pass to beat the oncoming Spanish goalie. In an odd twist of irony mirroring Cameroon's predicament in its quarterfinal match, Spain was reduced to nine men after striker Gabri was sent off for a dangerous tackle in the 71st minute and Jose Mari was issued a red card for diving in the penalty area in the 90th minute.

Matched eleven against nine during extra time, Cameroon lunged forward repeatedly, relentlessly attacking the Spanish goal. Both teams had close calls during the thirty-minute extra time period, but neither was able to score. In the tense penalty shoot-out, Cameroon scored all five spotkicks, while Amaya of Spain failed to convert, bouncing the ball off the crossbar. A calmly collected Pierre Wome took the final, decisive penalty kick, and his goal set off wild celebrations in Sydney's Olympic stadium. Back in Yaounde, the Cameroonian capital, where millions had stayed up until daybreak to support their national team, people happily poured into the streets when the match was finally won. President Paul Biya declared the following Monday a national holiday in celebration of Cameroon's first Olympic medal.

Cameroon's Olympic victory comes on the heels of Nigeria's 1996 gold medal in men's soccer. And the fact that back to back soccer gold medals have been won by African teams is seen by many to indicate that African soccer, long expected to rise to international distinction but perennially plagued by disappointing results, has finally come of age.

Whether Cameroon's stirring victory is but a prelude to further international soccer success remains to be seen. But for now, Cameroon and Africa will be content to celebrate a hard earned and inspiring triumph, and to eagerly anticipate the promise of future conquests.

"If this team can stay together and play top quality opposition, there is nothing they might not achieve at the 2002 World Cup," wrote one commentator in *African Soccer* magazine after the Lions' victory. "The spirit of the African side lives again. Long live Cameroon! Long live the Lions with the golden manes!"

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