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Cameroon Wins African Cup of Nations 2000

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### Indomitable Lions are Kings of Africa: Cameroon Wins African Cup of Nations 2000

Photo: Nigeria's Nwankwo Kanu, right, and Cameroon's Rigobert Song fight for the ball during the final of the African Cup of Nations between Cameroon and Nigeria in Lagos, Nigeria on Sunday Feb. 13, 2000. Cameroon won 4-3 after a penalty shootout when the game ended 2-2 after extra time.

Sources: AP Photo

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Deafening silence enveloped the Surulere National Stadium in Lagos, Nigeria on Sunday, February 13 as 40,000 stunned fans saw their Super Eagles defeated by Cameroon after two hours of play and a controversial penalty shoot-out. Millions of dumb-founded viewers watched as the Nigerian stars Nwankwo Kanu, African Footballer of the Year in 1996 and 1999, and Victor Ikpeba, who won the distinction in 1997, missed their penalty kicks, and as the sobbing team captain, Sunday Oliseh (who plays professionally for the Italian Serie A powerhouse Juventus), accepted his silver medal. With Sunday's victory, Cameroon's Indomitable Lions, who also won the tournament in 1984 and 1988, lifted the trophy for the third time. And in all three victories, the Lions beat Nigeria's Super Eagles.

The final match of the African Cup of Nations, which had been characterized by lackluster play in its first week, was a blistering, action-packed affair. Cameroon went ahead in the 26th minute with an angled drive from Samuel Eto, Spanish club Real Madrid's 19-year-old striker. Cameroon scored again just minutes later, with striker Patrick Mboma craftily slipping the ball through the Nigerian keeper's legs. Despite falling behind 2:0, the Eagles staged a dramatic comeback. The Eagles scored their first goal in injury time in the 45<sup>th</sup> minute with a sweet flick-on from Kanu to Raphael Chukwu, who sent the ball past Cameroonian goalkeeper

Boukar Alioum. And the score was leveled in the second minute of the second half by an astonishing 25-meter volley from Jay-Jay Okocha, who tamed a high ball with his chest and then fired a scorcher that curved wickedly before dipping into the top left-hand corner of Cameroon's net -- without a doubt the best goal of the tournament.

Throughout the match, the physically imposing Cameroonian side dominated the Super Eagles, piercing the Nigerian midfield and defense repeatedly. The defensive steel of Taribo West and Oliseh melted in face of Cameroonian striker Samuel Eto's darting forays into the penalty area, one in which he hit the post with a vicious right-footed shot. The Nigerian side squandered possession and was a far cry from the attacking machine that handily defeated the estimable Moroccan, Tunisian and South African sides.

The Cameroonian victory was an impressive upset of the Super Eagles, who were the tournament favorites, not least because their team boasts some of the best-known names in international soccer, including Kanu, who plays for Arsenal in the English Premiere League, and Okocha, who plays for France's Paris St. Germaine. Despite the presence of such recognizable soccer celebrities, in the semi- and quarterfinals it was young "unknowns" who emerged as stars. In the semi-final showdown against South Africa (which was attended by Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was in Nigeria on a diplomatic visit), it was the youthful Nigerian sensation Tijani Babangida who scored twice against Bafana Bafana ("The Boys"), as the South African team is fondly known. The headline of *The Comet*, a Nigerian newspaper, later read "Eagles Ride Bafana Bafana to Final," and fans all over the country launched a raucous celebration.

One elderly man who watched the match in a Kano hotel room leaped to his feet as the game ended, and suffered a heart attack. And 20-year-old Aishat Oyerinde was so excited by the victory that she went into labor, giving birth three weeks prematurely to a boy she named Julius, after one of the rising Nigerian stars. Passions ran high during the game as well, with fans in Ilorin, central Nigeria, taking to the streets in anger instead of joy; when a blackout interrupted TV broadcasts of the match, rioters burnt down the home of Felix Oketunji, an employee of the national electric company.

After vanquishing South Africa, Nigeria went on to face Senegal in an exhausting quarterfinal match. The Senegalese underdogs, whose team has no players of international renown, came close to being the first team in 19 years to defeat Nigeria in Lagos. Senegalese striker Kalilou Fadiga scored an early goal but the Eagles staged another comeback. This time it was 18-year-old Julius Aghaowa who was Nigeria's hero. He scored twice, with his second goal, in extra-time, sparking a pitch invasion that disrupted the match for 12 minutes (and cost the Nigerians a \$10,000 fine) while mounted policemen dispersed the ecstatic fans. Aghaowa, who currently plays professionally for the Tunisian club Esperance, first appeared in the tournament three weeks ago as a substitute in the Eagles' match against Morocco, scoring shortly after entering the game by outrunning several Moroccan defenders and calmly lobbing the ball over the onrushing keeper. Although largely unknown in international soccer circles before the tournament, Aghaowa will be remembered for his predatory instincts as well as his spectacular post-goal acrobatics: he celebrated each goal with four consecutive back-flips.

Cameroon's odyssey to the final was less colorful, but equally impressive. After edging Algeria out in the quarterfinals, the Lions defeated Tunisia, who had eliminated Egypt, the defending champions. The match, which was even-sided for the first half, eventually saw the Tunisian defense

crumble as the Cameroonians attacked relentlessly, scoring thrice against veteran Tunisian keeper Choukri al-Ouaer, who, despite several sublime full-stretch saves, could not contain the hungry Lions.

Although in the final the Lions were clearly the better team, their victory was tinged by controversy. None could dispute the fact that Cameroon's Marc-Vivien Foe shot his penalty kick wide, but Nigerian fans protested that the Cameroonian goalkeeper Boukar Alioum had moved before the whistle when he saved a penalty kick by Nigeria's Kanu, who collapsed in tears when his shot was stopped. Most observers later conceded that Alioum's save was legitimate, but Tunisian referee Mourad Daami's decision to disallow another Nigeria penalty kick, this one by Victor Ikpeba, will no doubt generate controversy and debates about competent refereeing and video-aided officiating for years to come. Ikpeba's shot rattled the crossbar, hit the ground, trickled out of the goal mouth and was ruled a miss, but television replays showed that the ball had bounced across the goal line. At the time, Ikpeba believed he had missed and expressed his frustration by placing both hands on his head. Later, however, he claimed that he had been robbed by a hostile referee. "I could not see. There was no line in the grass," he fumed afterwards in a BBC interview, accusing the Tunisian referee of trying to please African Football Confederation (CAF) president Issa Hayatou, who is from Cameroon. "It's a shame...the referee and his assistant had their own agenda...That's African politics for you."

Despite Ikpeba's complaints, overall Nigerians have taken the defeat gracefully. Contrary to expectations, Lagos did not explode in riots. Victory, many "experts" had argued, was necessary to unify this ethnically divided nation, yet Nigerians seemed unified in their pride for their unlucky players, who themselves represent the nation's ethnic diversity. Okocha and Kanu are members of the Ibo tribe, Aghaowa is Bini, Babangida is Hausa and midfielder Mutiu Adepoju and keeper Ike Shorunmu are Yoruba. As British ex-Super Eagles coach Paul Hamilton put it, "In Nigeria, football is a unifying factor. Whenever an organized match is being played anywhere in this country, people from different groups come together."

Although in Nigeria the Nations Cup did not have negative political echoes, it was a different matter in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire. When the Ivoirian national team was eliminated from the tournament in the first round and returned home in disgrace, military ruler Robert Guei, who took power in a coup d'etat in December 1999, detained the players in a military camp, confiscating their cell-phones and withholding part of their allowances. The players were made to march to Guei's office in three rows while soldiers shouted, "Left, left, left!" Military strongman Guei then launched into a diatribe on patriotism: "Watch yourselves! This is your first warning. If you disgrace the country again, you will stay [in the camp] for an entire term of military service," he said. "You have asked for allowances for this and that. There is no money left in Cote d'Ivoire, but we agreed to give you some anyway. It was an enormous sacrifice. Now you had better learn to seriously love your country. When you play, it's all of Cote d'Ivoire that plays." The players were then ordered to sing the national anthem.

This disgraceful incident, which FIFA, the international soccer federation, called a "serious concern," was an embarrassment for Africa and African soccer and could hamper South Africa and Morocco's bids to host World Cup 2006. Fifteen of the twenty-two members of the Ivoirian national team play for professional clubs outside of Cote d'Ivoire, and many seemed eager to return abroad after being detained for losing a match. According to Agence France Presse, Ibrahima Bakayoko, who plays for the French side Olympique Marseilles, said, "I don't know what to say. I think that it's better I go back to my club quickly and start making a living again." Many of the

Ivoirian players refused to comment on whether they would again play for their national team.

The fact that so many of the players featured in the African Nation's Cup play professionally for teams in Europe underscored another aspect of the tournament's growing significance. Almost all of the Cup matches were swarming with European scouts looking for young African talent to add to club rosters abroad, but the widespread practice of signing African youths, often as young as 14, has come under increasing criticism. Last year Dutch club Ajax Amsterdam bought 51 percent of a club in South Africa to establish a direct official channel to African talent. The plan was to have Dutch coaches and scouts train promising youngsters in Africa, who will then be whisked off to play in Europe. Aside from the ugly colonial precedent of Europeans plundering African resources, critics say this practice also weakens domestic leagues, both financially and in terms of talent. Referring to a case in which a 15-year-old French youth was bought by a British team for 1million francs, a French official recently denounced the international "traffic" in teenage soccer stars as a "new slave trade."

Critics have also complained that African players who are recruited by European teams are often prevented from returning to Africa to participate in tournaments like the African Cup of Nations. For example, Cameroon's Marc-Vivien Foe claims he was only able to persuade his British club West Ham to permit him to play in the tournament when he told team officials that his family would be killed if he did not participate. And Kanu, the Nigerian star, struggled to gain permission to play in the African tournament from Arsenal, his professional team, because his absence meant that he would miss some important English league matches. (Incidentally, Arsenal was defeated by Liverpool in a match played on the same day as the Nigeria-Cameroon final.)

Polemics and politics aside, Nigeria and Ghana deserve plaudits for organizing a successful and entertaining tournament. The scoreless stalemates of the first round gave way to action-filled quarter- and semi-final matches, which showcased to the world the quality of African soccer, with its mix of individual flamboyance and team play, and physical strength and artistry.

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