



The Role of Nigeria Football Federation in the Denouement of Premier League Seasonal Disputes: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

The stability of football seasons in Nigeria is consistently threatened by various factors. Leadership of the football federation witnessed management changes and transformations at different periods, including a change of name from Nigeria Football Association to Nigeria Football Federation (NFF). The commencement of the league seasons suffers setbacks and unnecessary delays due to various factors at the detriment of sports development in the country. This is a case study analysis on the Nigeria Premier League, using non-participant observation and secondary sources of literature relevant to the denouement of premier league seasonal disputes, including data from media reports and social media group discussions. The paper adopts a qualitative document analysis, and also explores the conflict management approach usually adopted by NFF on the commencement and completion of the Premier League annually. Findings show that issues on match venues, transfer of players, match-fixing, home team mentality, refusal by losing teams to play until the 90th minute or the abandonment of matches, and match bonuses are some of the sources of dispute that cause delays in the commencement of league seasons. One dispute transformation that NFF can bring about is to take drastic steps to mitigate disputes in the league. This would make the management of seasonal disputes go beyond boardroom disciplinary actions such as awarding teams three points at the expense of others, and address the sources of delay and disputes in the league. Politicisation of football administration, dispute or controversy over sponsorship, ethnicity and hostility perceptions of the 'other' result in non-transparency. Therefore, transparency is highly needed, especially in the area of rethinking home team vs. visiting team mentality if Nigeria is to succeed in having stable football seasons.

Keywords: Clubs, Nigeria Football Federation, Premier League, Football Season, Time

Introduction

Time is a crucial determinant in every human endeavour because it sets the pace to ascertain when and how events would be organised (Martínková & Parry, 2011; Hassard, 1991; Mughal, 2008, 2014). Of course, accurate time management is one of the ingredients of success in life endeavours (Bednář, 2014; Martínková & Parry, 2011). It is equally significant in discussing Nigerian football given that time is an important and critical aspect of football and sports in general. This is because there is a season for every football league, creating the opportunity for not only time to ‘blow the whistle’ and time to end the game, but also time to start and end the annual football season. Even when matches are rescheduled due to international engagements or accidents involving one of the teams scheduled to play at a particular venue, they are expected to play at a convenient date acceptable to them. This means that time is crucial in fulfilling the objectives of clubs and football administrators who are the key actors in every football season. This article aims to present the involvement of the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) in managing seasonal disputes in Nigeria Premier League. The article offers conceptual and theoretical explanations of seasonal aspect of time that concern football in Nigeria. Furthermore, other relevant themes discussed here are the denouement of premier league seasonal disputes and the politics of time in Nigerian football.

According to the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, the practice of sport is vital to the development of youths and the enhancement of social integration, having the capacity to build social connections (Okolie-Osemene, 2012). Similarly, football is not only popular in Africa, but is also part of the continent’s social fabric (Chiweshe, 2014). The importance of sports cannot be underplayed in any society, especially in a multi-ethnic nation such as Nigeria, where football serves as a unifying factor among people. Sports undoubtedly play a profound role in enhancing socioeconomic and intergroup relations and also promote tranquillity in society. Nigeria has various football or league divisions that are managed by the government and individuals at different levels. The Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) remains the sole regulator of football matters in the country, with headquarters at glass house in Abuja. Disputes over timeframe in the commencement of the football season have scarred the Nigeria Premier League since 2000, which made the league experience an inconsistent calendar. There are over twenty teams in the Nigeria Premier League, but it appears that not all these teams are usually prepared for every season due to problems associated with poor management and preparations. Sports, according to the National Sports Policy of Nigeria (2009), are physical and social activities done according to rules for exercise, competition or recreation. The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace stated that sports:

...enhance social integration and foster tolerance, helping to reduce tension and generate dialogue, especially when applied effectively; and also vital to the holistic development of young people, fostering their physical and emotional health and building valuable social connections (United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, 2005, p. 14).

In addition, as a unifying factor of intergroup dialogue, football has also become an instrument of peace building and conflict transformation in many multilingual or multicultural and post-conflict societies. This has become achievable given the capacity of football to bring players and fans together into the field of play, while those who are not able to go to the stadium decide to follow events through the print, social and electronic media. Iwuala (2014) has this to say about the 'hierarchy of football administration':

Football competitions are organized and regulated at the global level by Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), at the continental level by the Confederations such as Confederation of African Football (CAF), Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and Asia Football Confederation (AFC) etc., while at the national level by the Federations such as the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) in Nigeria. They make and adopt rules which are enforced to conform to acceptable global, continental and national standards (Iwuala, 2014, p. 1).

Playing and viewing football have assumed a global sport, which enjoys considerable popularity across all continents of the world, given its potency in breaking various linguistic and geographical barriers to the extent that players usually travel beyond their cultural and geographical locations to play for clubs that require their services and skills. Football is one of the major sports that offer youths the opportunity to be actively engaged in productive venture in Nigeria. Apart from the leisure it generates or offers participants, football makes it possible for people to develop their skills, careers and also help others to succeed. Through football, many young Nigerians have been able to find their ways to various countries in Europe, America, Asia and other African countries, where they now play for foreign teams. Most of them never imagined touring the whole world in the past, but involvement in football has made it possible as they now earn foreign exchange. According to Chiweshe (2014), good African players are taken to Europe at a young age due to the commercialisation of football and global reach of European clubs. No doubt, sport has become a big commercial enterprise, which heightens disputes and litigations as a result of associated competition and regulation (Chiweshe, 2014; Razano, 2014).

Pannenberg (2010) emphatically observed that considering the fact that sports are closely related to development issues, individuals, organisations and companies are using sports, especially football, to achieve various development goals that seem to address their personal needs. It is crucial to add here that such personal needs and search for means of livelihood motivate players to travel to other countries. There is obviously economic attachment to these annual football competitions in Nigeria. For instance, the welfare of players involved is given high priority by some communication and beverage companies that agree to sponsor the teams. There is usually a hike in the rate of demand for certain products during every football season, especially at stadia across the country. Football playing and management have automatically transformed most Nigerians from poverty to prosperity and a life loaded with hope. This trend has become manifested since the 1990s, when football became commercialised and more lucrative with appreciable impact on intergroup relations due to its unifying nature in the polity.

According to Nigeria National League, the historical antecedents of football in Nigeria are traceable to the early days of the twentieth century, and were introduced by Baron Mulford, a Briton, who organised weekly matches between European and Nigerian youths in Lagos. Regional football associations existed in Calabar, Port Harcourt, and other coastal cities before 1945. It was highly remarkable when Pa Mulford emerged as the first chairman of the

then league regulator Nigeria Football Association (NFA) in 1945. However, professional league was introduced in 1990 when Air Vice Marshal Bayo Lawal, who was the Honourable Minister of Social Development, Youth and Sports at that time, appointed some experts on 8 February 1989 to work out modalities for the introduction of professional soccer in the country (National Sports Policy of Nigeria, 2009; Nigeria National League, undated). According to the National Sports Policy of Nigeria (2009, p. 3), “Decree 101 of 1991 gave legal backing to the Nigeria Football Association (NFA) and the status of a parastatal under the Federal Ministry of Youth, Sports and Social Development” at that time. It is remarkable that there was a period when Decree 101 generated controversies both within and outside Nigeria, especially in the first decade of the 21st century, when the global football governing body, FIFA, cautioned Nigeria over the implementation of the decree and threatened to sanction the country for failing to abrogate Decree 101 at the right time. The decree gave federal government legal backing to regulate football in the country. This led to the transformation of football in the country, including the rebranding of the NFA to the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF).

Players who participate in the league and registered by clubs are popularly called ‘home-based players’. This is mainly because they live and play in Nigeria. Unfortunately, such nomenclature impedes the recognition that these players desire. One noteworthy legacy of Nigeria Premier League is that it has been able to facilitate the movement of indigenous players from various clubs in the country to foreign clubs in Europe, the Americas, Asia and other African countries. The league serves as a training ground for international participation. The National Sports Policy of Nigeria highlights the obligations of the federal government in sports, including football, with an emphasis on the administration, management and sponsorship:

Providing enabling Legislation for Sports; formulation and review of the National Sports Policy; development and maintenance of Federal Government sports facilities, creation of conducive environment for participation in sports, identification, nurturing and development of talents through a national elite development programme; monitoring and coordination of programmes on sports; providing at least 5% of its total budget for sports for the maintenance of sports facilities and infrastructure (National Sports Policy of Nigeria, 2009, p. 6).

Most Nigerians continue to question government’s involvement in sports matters that they believe should be left for the private sector.

This study uses non-participant observation and secondary qualitative sources, including official reports and press statements of the Nigeria Football Federation, blogs written by football analysts, books and journals. The authors’ use of observation was aimed at enhancing their understanding by visiting various stadia to watch the Premier League and also monitored events during and after the matches by watching live matches at stadia and on television. This is apt considering the fact that observation enhances the generation of new data through the process of watching behaviour, actions, responses, events, and taking of notes on attributes relevant to the study. Such attributes are either positive or hostile behaviours. The authors tracked the activities of some clubs in the league that include: Dolphins, Kano Pillars, Giwa, Enyimba, Akwa United, Sharks, Lobi Stars, Heartland, Enugu Rangers, El-Kanemi Warriors, Abia Warriors, Nasarawa United, Sunshine Stars, Nembe City, FC Taraba, Gombe United, Warri Wolves and Kaduna United. This was achieved by visiting some match venues and also studying media reports concerning the league.

The main argument in this study is that NFF should be able to take drastic steps and develop a time-saving approach in addressing issues to mitigate disputes in the league. Managing seasonal disputes must go beyond the boardroom's disciplinary actions such as awarding teams three points at the expense of others, and should address the sources of delay and disputes in the league. In other words, eradicating 'home team against visiting team' mentality among players, officials and fans would be a ground-breaking achievement of football administrators. In addition, the politicisation of football administration, dispute or controversy over sponsorship, ethnicity and hostility perceptions of the 'other' must be eradicated for Nigeria to succeed in having stable football seasons.

In terms of the structure, this article begins with conceptual and theoretical explanation of relevant concepts, examines the involvement of NFF in seasonal disputes with qualitative data and case studies, and discusses the politics of time in Nigerian football. In addition, with an emphasis on the causal links between time and football, the article adopts an analytical explanation of NFF's management of football disputes in Nigeria. The main lessons about time and sports are based on the position of Nigeria's professor of history, Adesina (2012, p. 58) that history and events of the past are expected to draw out abiding lessons.

Conceptual and theoretical explanations

This section offers conceptual and theoretical dimensions of football in Nigeria with an emphasis on issues, parties and how they influence the growth and activities of premier league clubs over time. The seasonal aspect of time describes a particular time in a year when events or remarkable programmes take place. It is also known as a period of the year marked by special events or activities in some fields or sectors of the economy just like football that offers various teams the opportunity to compete in the premier league. Season refers to a period of the year marked by a particular activity, event, or festivity; a fixed time in the year when a particular sporting activity is pursued, and seasonal refers to something when it happens during a particular season or time in a year (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries, 2000, p. 1060). Seasonal disputes occur during the time of the league called the Nigeria Premier Football League season. In Nigeria, seasonal disputes within the context of football refers to those issues that manifest between clubs, administrators and also supporters, which they strategise on ways of resolving disputes for stability and transparency in the league.

Seasonal disputes are premised on the assumption that conflict is a factor in every society as long as interpersonal and intergroup relations are concerned. This is based on a biological explanation of conflicts (Faleti, 2006). By biological explanation, we mean that conflict is part of every human being, but what matters is how well people control those traits of conflict. For instance, Albert (2001) writes on the need for third party intervention in community conflicts given that conflict is an attribute of humans. The human relations school of thought adopts the notion that conflict is a natural experience (Akpuru-Aja, 2007). That is why some scholars contend that conflict has an ontological basis in human needs (Adeyeri, 2012, p. 98). In fact, it is an inevitable aspect of human relationships to the extent that no society exists without social, economic and ideological differences (Zartman, 1997, 1989). This explains why there are always disputes in Nigeria Premier League considering the involvement of different teams, managers and players from various ethnic groups across the country. In addition, the primordial theory links various conflicts with ethnicity considering the way it traces the identity of individuals to their 'roots' or origin.

According to Geertz (1963), “states are abnormally susceptible to serious disaffection based on primordial attachment that citizens have.” In Nigeria’s situation, the incompatible socio-economic goals inspire people to create ethnic identity in football. This is obvious because Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with various clubs in the league. These clubs are from the six geopolitical zones, namely South East, South West, South South, North East, North Central and North West. Some of the clubs include the Enyimba football club of Aba, Rangers of Enugu, Heartland of Owerri, Ocean Boys, Niger Tornados, Kano Pillars, and Sharks. Given that disputes are usually endemic in social organisations, players and managers strategise on ways of protecting the interest of their teams. That is why the group conflict theory propounded by Marx sees social class as the most basic division in every society or group (Investopedia, undated), such as clubs competing in the premier league whose supporters sometimes exhibit anti-social behaviour.

In the premier league, citizens often have primordial attachment to the clubs they identify with. Within the context of football in the country, most people are always interested in knowing where a particular team, victorious club or visiting team is based or the club’s ethnic group of origin. Sometimes, the disputes that scar the premier league are linked to primordial sentiments exhibited by administrators, players and supporters, both in terms of recruitment/transfer of players and operational oversight, intervention frameworks and funding.

Time is inextricably linked to the normative environment of social life (Hassard, 1991; Cairns, McInnes & Roberts, 2003). This is applicable to football administration in Nigeria, which is regulated by NFF based on events in every football season. The relevance of time to NFF’s management of football disputes cannot be underplayed. Football season is a particular time in a year when the premier league takes place. Because time is required for clubs to achieve their goals, they adopt different strategies to facilitate their success during the seasons, which usually ends between October and December every year. It is through this process of trying to win home and away matches by all means in order to win the trophy, qualify for continental competitions or escape relegation, thereby generating disputes within the season. In the words of Vansina (1985, p. 130) “historical causality is a complex notion involving a link between phenomena over time.” This is because there is always a source of every event with resultant effects. Examples are match-fixing, violence against visiting teams that occasions sanctions, suspension and paying of fines by teams indicted by NFF Disciplinary Committee.

Nigeria Football Federation and the Denouement of Premier League Seasonal Disputes

Globally, football is one of those sports that require timely regulation to create order in every competition and enhance the actualisation of the visions or goals of both the clubs and organisers. Of course, there is hardly any football season that does not end without some disputes or confrontations by players, clubs, and also between clubs and referees. Football in Nigeria has become synonymous with the Nigeria Football Federation. Nigeria Football Federation is the government’s agency responsible for the management of football affairs in the country. In fact, it plays a regulatory role in the country’s football. According to Iwuala (2014), participating in any sport demands that people, especially fans and players, adhere to the standards and rules set by the organising body.

As earlier stated, the NFF is the umpire saddled with the responsibility of setting up committees to look into matters or petitions brought before it by aggrieved parties. However,

the fact that NFF is highly politicised cannot be overemphasised. This manifests both in terms of appointment of executive members and sometimes the choice of players. Premier league in the country is sustained by not only the government, which sponsors some clubs, but also attracts some level of involvement by individuals and corporate organisations, especially those in the communication sector. It is argued that government's involvement in football administration in Nigeria is responsible for the unsuccessful efforts designed and aimed at repositioning clubs. According to Christain Chukwu, who was the former coach of the Super Eagles and the first Nigerian captain to lift the Africa Cup of Nations, "the continuous management of football clubs predominantly by state governments hamper the creative and sustainable administration of the clubs" (Eno-Abasi, 2012, p. 59). The Federal Ministry of Sports regulates football in the country through the NFF, which has a unit called the Nigeria Premier League, while state governments manage their clubs through the ministries of sports at the state level.

Some of the factors that cause delays are: match-fixing, boardroom politics that promote corruption, distance to match venues, insecurity, especially in volatile states, financial crises in some clubs leading to inability of managers to pay players' allowances or match bonuses, failure of football administrators to control supporters of clubs, as well as delays by NFF in taking disciplinary action against clubs that are not hospitable to visiting teams despite petitions. Such hostility against visiting teams is undoubtedly a catalyst for instability during league matches, as it hampers the team spirit of visiting clubs. The Nation Sport (2011, p. 36) reported that Super Eagles Legend, Mutiu Adegboye embraced the 1-Game initiative founded by Philip Obaji to discourage violence and promote a culture of peace in football across the country. This would curb 'inauthentic behaviour and disrespectful relation to people' in sports (Bednář, 2014, p. 204), especially football.

In terms of match-fixing, we found out that after many months of investigation by NFF's Disciplinary Committee to unravel the circumstances surrounding the match-fixing case involving Dolphins of Port Harcourt and Sunshine Stars of Akure, the committee ruled in February 2012 that both teams should pay a fine of N10m and N20m, respectively, while the Dolphins coach, two club officials and the two referees indicted in the case were banned for five years (Ngobua, 2012). It is noteworthy that the act of 'match-fixing' occurs within the 90 minutes of play between two teams, but only realistic when both teams reach an agreement before the match to allow one of them to score a higher number of goals to earn more points or prevent relegation. Secondly, on 22 July 2013, the NFF banned some players and officials from four teams, Plateau United Feeders FC, Police Machine FC of Adamawa, Akurba FC of Lafia and Bubayaro FC of Gombe, who were implicated in the 146-goal scandal in two separate matches. The ban would be implemented with the reports of the NFF investigative committee, which recommended the provision of a comprehensive list of the players, officials and referees involved for proper documentation (Nzeh, 2013, p. 91). In a related development, Nigeria's Minister of Sports, Bolaji Abdullahi, suggested the institution of criminal prosecutions against those culpable acts of match-fixing (Egbe, 2013).

Allegations of match-fixing are based on what football analysts refer to as 'scandalous score lines' at some league venues. For instance, when visiting teams are intimidated by officials and fans of the hosting teams, they are demoralised to give them the opportunity to score as many goals as possible at the detriment of visiting teams (Njoku, 2007, p. 55). Clubs do these not only to avoid dropping points at home, but also to escape relegation from the premier league to a lower league. However, this strategy of avoiding relegation affects the professionalism of every club and also the standard of Nigeria league. Evidence adduced

from this study indicates that the act of match-fixing usually compounds football-related challenges in every season with its concomitant multiplier effects on the ability of clubs and football administrators to focus on more relevant issues that would enhance peaceful football season annually.

Apart from various ethnicity-related issues that threaten visiting clubs, matters of match-fixing scar the league due to lopsided clamour for 'home team' victories. Lopsided clamour for home team and visiting team victories is one of the sources of disputes in the premier league across the country, which is experienced most times towards the end of the league, usually between September and November annually, especially from week thirty.

Bad officiating is also a major source of dispute between clubs in Nigeria. Given the truism that timing of every match is 90 minutes, whatever happens in the field of play is taken to the NFF/NPL boardroom or committees set up and mandated to discuss issues and petitions brought to panels set up to address the problems. Some referees who are found culpable are usually sanctioned either in the form of suspension, dismissal or cautioned to be mindful of their actions in the field of play. It was observed during some matches that while some referees are accused of unnecessarily adding extra time after 90 minutes, others are blamed for awarding penalties or free-kicks to home/hosting teams to enable them to emerge victorious at the expense of visiting teams. League committees are responsible for managing the conflicts caused by the aforementioned actions. The problem with third party intervention in managing seasonal disputes is that it does not always come with a win-win outcome.

The league faces seasonal challenges usually occasioned by unresolved issues that require the attention of stakeholders. The end of every season offers club owners or managers the opportunity to re-examine the leadership of every team and check for loopholes or areas that demand timely improvement for better performance /results ahead of next football season. This situation renders some club administrators jobless if fired and replaced as a result of unsatisfactory performance. This forces them into the labour market as they search for teams to coach.

Similarly, two clubs that had already planned to actively participate in the league, Giwa football club of Jos and Nembe United, were denied registration prior to the commencement of the 2013/2014 Glo Premier League by the League Management Company (LMC). It was due to their inability to meet the requirements for professional football clubs as stated by Confederation of African Football and FIFA, including the mandatory provision of N100 million performance guarantee from an approved financial institution. The league, however, commenced despite a court order in favour of Giwa Football Club that the league be suspended, even as the legislative of government, House of Representatives cautioned them to approach the Nigeria Football Federation for the peaceful resolution of the impasse rather than adopting litigation as a conflict management strategy (Okpara, 2014, p. 61). This suggestion by the lawmakers further reaffirmed the role of Nigeria's football regulatory body in managing the affairs of football clubs in the league.

Poor officiating sometimes inspires football violence, especially among the youths, and the violence sustains hostility perception with attendant hooliganism that assumes a debilitating proportion in the premier league. Primordial sentiments and intolerance are also responsible for violence among fans who attack referees and match officials when results go against their wishes. Controversies sometimes trail the transfer of players from one club to another and such situations create unhealthy rivalry between clubs that are supposed to have cordial

relationships. Such a scenario that delays the transfer of players was observed in the 2012/2013 league season between various clubs, including Warri Wolves and Rangers, which led to the intervention of the league managers.

Before and after the commencement of any premier league season in Nigeria, the issue of players' welfare is very critical in Nigerian football given the potency of allowances in shaping and enhancing the performance of players. Funding players' welfare is one of the main sources of dispute in the league and this often brings NFF into the issues. When clubs fail to address the disputes surrounding lateness in paying allowances, including match bonuses, some players refuse to play at home or decline travelling to other regions.

Significantly, observations show that NFF has set out pertinent acceptable global standards as far as the welfare of players is concerned. Clubs that do not take seriously the welfare of players risk recording dismal performance in that season. NFF and league managers also give directives on the need for players to undergo fitness checks to ascertain the level of internal injuries they have. The player of Sharks football club of Port-Harcourt, Odinga Odinga stated on 14 February, 2014 that such directive would enhance the fitness of players in the league. It is noteworthy that the league management committee directed Nigeria Premier Football League clubs to employ the services of certified medical practitioners before the 2013/2014 season. Observations show that poor coordinations of club affairs by the technical crews and dismal performance of players create broken relationships between club owners and managers. It becomes problematic when players and coaches begin to trade blames for poor results and this is usually aggravated by agitations by players for the replacement of their coaches.

Politics of Time in Nigerian Football

Given that football is a sport that functions with time that allots duration of play, time is a critical factor in football, especially in Nigerian Premier League, which has a total of twenty teams that usually compete for title of the league over seven months. During this period, teams travel from their locations to play away matches with other clubs with the aim of getting the maximum three points after each match. However, the case is not always the same as some clubs are not lucky enough to meet friendly hosting clubs. Mostly, their ability to either win or record a goalless draw away from home is dependent upon the professionalism of referees. As umpires in the 90-minute field of play, professionalism portrays referees that do not give in to intimidation and confrontation by hosting clubs to unnecessarily award goals and penalties in their favour. For instance, if the referees have interest in the success of a particular team, especially the hosting team, whatever efforts visiting teams make to run away with victory or draw would remain a mirage. It would even be more problematic if at the end of 90 minutes of play, the referee decides to add more extra time that extends to over 95 or more minutes of regulation time, because a technically organised hosting team would take advantage of such addition to score a goal.

The issue of time is significant both in terms of duration or commencement and in the pitch or field of play. Football would be incomplete without adequate use of time and rules of engagement to regulate the activities of players, officials, club administrators and fans, and that is why various clubs that participate in the premier league plan their activities within the football season to ensure their success or possibility of winning the league. In Nigeria, various agencies, parastatals and boards regulate sports, including football at various levels. They are National Sports Commission, Nigeria Football Federation, Nigeria Women's Football League, and Nigeria Premier League, among others. Being the administrators, clubs

usually expect them to address issues that affect their position in the league without fear or favour, and this makes them respond swiftly to allegations of practices that impede professionalism in football to discourage reoccurrence.

The issue of sponsorship is critical because not all corporate bodies are involved and government's bureaucratic procedures and NFF's operational oversight sometimes delay the funding of football. In a situation where government's funding is inadequate, clubs face challenges that downplay their efforts in building formidable teams that would win tournaments.

Apart from timely management of disputes, areas that require timely transformation by NFF and premier league managers include: change of league management, especially in the area of elections into the board of Nigerian National League, more individual sponsorship of all clubs, better player welfare and allowances, timely and peaceful transfer of players, improvement of officiating by referees, timely upgrade of stadia, timely sanctions on clubs that fail to control the anti-social behaviours of their fans, curb match fixing and international publicity of the league.

It should be stated here that unresolved issues within a football season, especially towards the end of one season, could become a hindrance to the successful and peaceful commencement of a new season. The management of football-related disputes in the premier league has far-reaching implications for football development, because time is always involved when issues concerning clubs, ethical conducts and welfare of players are involved. It is also worthy to note that before the beginning of the league, teams should be enlightened on the consequences of not controlling their fans who are sometimes unfriendly to visiting clubs, to discourage them from being involved in any act of hooliganism. This is because sometimes, during the league, deviant behaviour manifests in situations where some supporters attack visiting clubs to vandalise their buses or digital devices such as cameras and tapes due to the inability of the hosting club that they support to emerge victorious.

Conclusion

Football is one of the major sports in Nigeria in which youths actively participate, while elders watch to entertain themselves. Nigeria Football League coordinates the premier league, which is regulated by Nigeria Football Federation (NFF). Premier league is the highest football level in Nigeria. One problem that the league has not been able to overcome is that of timing, especially in terms of uniformity in the commencement of every football season. The 2013-2014 football season was scheduled to commence on 16 November 2013 and speculation existed that it will commence at a later date due to poor preparation, but finally started on 7 March 2014. Club administrators and owners agreed with the new date that was scheduled after various issues had been addressed, including preparation of match venues.

Twenty teams participate annually and these clubs could be relegated or promoted depending on their performance. Relegation is not only unfortunate, but also undoubtedly the worst thing that could happen to any team and this is based on the number of matches that are won and lost by a club. The prospects of managing seasonal disputes could have a positive impact on the growth of football in the country in comparison with global standards of sports. When issues are properly addressed without nepotism and primordial sentiments, more Nigerians would begin to appreciate the premier league in Nigeria. This would also contribute to the possibility of addressing the problem of postponement that characterises the league annually.

Mostly, the league is scheduled to commence between September and November, but this suffers setbacks due to unresolved issues in many quarters.

Thus far, the NFF has been able to sustain the premier league despite seasonal challenges. Some clubs in the country are ethnic based in the sense that majority of players from the regions where the clubs are located, are given more opportunity to play for such teams. It has become crucial that NFF works towards eradicating ‘home team vs. visiting team’ mentality among players, officials and fans in the league. This would mitigate the emerging tradition of terror in the league, especially a situation where home advantage perception causes teams and their supporters to attack visiting victorious clubs.

The main lessons about time and sports within this context are noteworthy. It has made it possible for us to comprehend that every event that has a beginning must end and also should end peacefully without generating controversies that would undermine the purpose of the football league. Furthermore, sports have administrators, and it is the responsibility of players and technical advisers to create the culture of peace and discipline within their teams even as players carry out tasks assigned to them. The foregoing also points to the truism that the ending of every football season should not cause players and their supporters to become more aggressive to visiting teams, even when they have lower points than their guests.

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