

DISABILITY SPORTS: ATTITUDES, IRREGULARITIES & MORAL VALUES

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Sports in general cover a very wide spectrum of our lives and thought there are many disciplines that fall under it; only a few are notable and explored in many countries in which Ghana is included. The nation has deep interest in football so much that her drive in that sport has overshadowed every other sporting discipline there may be. We now call those sporting disciplines we do not active and particular attention of as 'lesser known sports'. And the question is that is it that Ghanaians do not know about such sporting disciplines we term 'lesser known sports' or that more is not done to promote and encourage sportsmen and women in the country into such disciplines to feel motivated and improve on their talents and skills?

One of the numerous neglected 'lesser known sports is the disability sports. The nation does not have keen interest in the disability sports at all. The government, media and the entire population are blank when it came to the sport. All the governments that have come and gone had not as one of their priorities to develop the sport and to improve the facilities needed by the sport to grow in Ghana. The media, referred to as the fourth arm of government, who are there to put the government on her toes when it came to such pertinent matters, also, have different priorities all together. If it is not our dirty politics then it will be entertainment. If it is not any of these then it will be football that is if they concentrate on sports. One way or the other I assume these three areas catch the eyes and the listening ears of the ordinary Ghanaian on the street. And why wouldn't it be so?

Physically challenged people most of the times are noted for begging and selling on the streets and living wretched lives. Our concerns and submissions are heard and taken but with a pinch of salt. We are regarded as problematic and a burden to the larger society in which we live. We are also regarded as 'aliens' in our own motherland and our plight shall forever be like this till the world comes to an end if it shall. It took a painstaking journey for the disability bill to become a law by parliament but till date very little is being done in terms of compliance after the long suffering. Modern architectural constructions are ongoing but near them and you will find out how unfriendly such buildings are to us – even the government ones. Let us take a spy on our streets and you will find how drivers who are supposed to ease our plight to and from our daily business maltreat us. Of course every human has challenges but the challenges we face are peculiar aside what every person may have. The bare fact is though the physically challenged may contest that he/she can do all that the able can do, there are limitations he/she cannot deny. Our disadvantages outweigh the merits as we compare with the able. For instance, as I am talking to you now, if there is an emergency and we are asked to evacuate the building, guess who not linger behind for what must happen should happen.

I cannot address our problems without mentioning stigmatization. We face stigmatization of every kind because of what we have become physically. And this even goes as far as pursuing formal education. Going through school the nicknames I had were 'one-legged', 'leggees', 'pozo' and the wildest one was when I was when I was voted as Assistant Entertainment Prefect during my Senior High School at Chemu. I was called 'stubborn cripple'. It sounds funny but I

alone know how I had to fight all these physically, emotionally and mentally growing up. I must say that the stigmatization does not end while we go through formal education but after tertiary when you want to get employed to serve your country and earn something to live meaningfully in the society. I completed the Methodist University College Ghana in 2007 where I pursued Bachelor of Business Administration – Human Resource Management option. I was awarded Second Class Honours (Upper Division). I had my compulsory National Service with Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority and thereafter I have been unemployed for 4years. I have attended several job interviews but I do not get the placement – stigmatization.

Parents unfortunately or fortunately with physically challenged children avoid the stigmatization to even them by not allowing their wards to have formal education. Parents hide these children from even seeing the light of the day as they are allowed to mingle with the larger society. Some who get the opportunity but are not strong-willed quit and resort to alternative livelihood to survive. Hence the rippling negative effects cast on the physically challenged.

A disability sport is one of the recognised sports globally and the structures are well built and designed to see to its growth. The sport is divided into three main categories. We have one for the deaf, the physically challenged and last is the intellectually impaired. The disability sport is created to provide the platform for persons with various forms of disability who have special talents and gifting to show forth to the world despite the limitations. Disability sports, again, is important to us because it makes we the disable to feel a part of the cosmos and by partaking in the sport motivates and encourages other persons with disability to put in their best in whatever sphere of life they may be coming from. It is one avenue we the disable use to contribute our quota to the overall development of the nation. Huge sums of monies and investments are allocated to the sport and competitions are organised through the year to demonstrate that it is indeed recognized. The disciplines in the disability sports take the exact format as the able just that our rules and regulations differ because we are special.

The neglect of the sport by the nation for a long time has led to few groups of persons who are knowledgeable in the administration and operations within the sport to take unnecessary advantage of the system to mismanage, abuse, cheat and defraud the disable community into sports the rights and benefits we may derive and also the dignity and good image of Ghana. The problem is further deepened when most of the persons with disability into sports are uneducated or their levels of educations are very low. I say these because the administrators of the sport take advantage of these facts and fraudulently connive with private agencies to manipulate and cheat the already marginalised in the society. They process splendid documents requesting for tournament participation for the Ghanaian disable sportsmen and women internationally aside the official disable sporting events within the calendar year. When the nation is granted access, these administrators deny or cheat or marginalise these sportsmen and women by either replacing the original people who are supposed to go or able people fake disability to make use of the opportunity. All these are done for a huge fee.

I had my experience when my coach asked to train for a badminton tournament in the Netherlands on the 16th June, 2004. I was in my second year at the university and about eight (8) days to writing our semester examination even. On that fateful day, when we got to the embassy, the coach brought in people who had faked disability. I could not believe my eyes but wanted to know how the whole scene with unfold. Apparently, when they do that, the embassies conduct collective interview for the group but that was not what happened this time around.

The embassy conducted individual visa interviews and those who had faked the disability never knew about the sport and how it is played. Not to bother you with the vulgar story, we were all rejected visas. What did I do to deserve this treatment from these greedy administrators of the sport? And do you have an idea how I managed to write and pass by semester examination all the same? The address for the Netherland games is www.dsusa.org.

I must confess that mine is no exceptional after have conversations with other persons like me into the sport. They told me many instances. Let me share one. For this instance, the administrators successfully managed to squeeze people who faked disability to going to the said tournament and returned but the people did not. On another time when they went to the same embassy for visas for another tournament, the embassy requested the administrators present the rest of the old team before they can issue the visas. The whole tournament was cancelled because they could not present these people. What a frustration?

Another clear example happened in 2008, if you may recall when some administrators of the sport were jailed for mismanagement and impropriety when Ghana deaf and dumb team was to make their first debut in a world Cup which was held in Australia. They qualified a year to the tournament. But these officials sidelined the original team players for persons who faked as deaf and dumb. They got to Australia when two of their group stage matches had been played and they went to honour the third. The image of Ghana got tainted that year when the story was heralded in both print and electronic and over the internet.

It may surprise you to know that disability sport Secretariat at the sport Council apply and request for their share of allocations as captured in the budget annually. They also solicit for sponsorship and funding from donor agencies, corporate bodies and philanthropists too. These monies go strictly into administrative processes and that is it. The persons with disability who do the sport itself do not have a feel of monies that have been disbursed to them to use to improve their skills. You visit their trainings and it is upsetting and an eye sore. They train under severe harsh and horrible conditions. There are no facilities for them to use, there are no proper nutritional diets available for them to take, they come to train at their own peril, and there are no transportation allowances for them to commute easily to training and back. Even, there are no allocated buses to transport them to nearer and convenient bus stations after training. We should not lose sight of the fact that these are National sportsmen and women.

I happened to be at the training grounds of the National Amputee football team and I was sad. They had qualified to participate in a World Cup tournament to be hosted in Turkey and the coach wanted me to train with them to justify my inclusion. I thought we were going to the Accra Sports Stadium. We arrived at the taxi rank at the Kwame Nkrumah Circle and that was where these national sportsmen were training. I could not change myself to join them so I watched them while they played. As they were training, one of them had the crutches broken and had to go for another. I asked him whether the Secretariat provided him the crutches and to my dismay he answered in the negative. I asked him further that what was going to happen if the other crutches also got broken and he said he would have to crawl home. They train with their own purchased crutches. Mind you these crutches and prosthesis are very expensive in Africa and Ghana to be precise and these national sportsmen and women are not served with basic equipment as these.

Moreover, when these sportsmen and women participate in tournaments, monies allocated them are cut far below what they actually deserve. Sometimes they are lied to and given excuses such as some of their monies were paid into flight, hotel accommodation and food and kits etc. Meanwhile, all these are catered for by Ghana or the host nation. It is common practice. Another piece of information is that when these sportsmen and women participate in competitions internationally, some of the benefits Ghana derives are training equipment and aids for the sport to improve and grow. Where do these equipment go? Where does the Secretariat's share of funding from government go? Where do donations made by donor agencies, corporate Ghana and other philanthropists go?

There are other opportunities that are associated with being a disable sportsman or woman. You have the opportunity of furthering your education abroad on scholarship where there are better facilities to train with and under better supervision and condition too. These opportunities are not being exploited. My inquiry into the matter revealed that the few sportsmen and women who were aware of the opportunity are made to pay huge sums before facilitations can be made for you. This deters them from pursuing higher education and excellence because they do not have that kind of money.

This is my observation. Most of the administrators of the disability sports are able personalities. They create a blockade or barrier for persons with disability who are educated to come in and find out, correct or even report some of these mismanagements and improprieties. The same is when you go to the Commission for the persons with disability. And it is sad. Most of them do not go through what we the persons with disability go through daily. They do not feel our pain. They do not understand us well. They rather sympathize with us. There is more to it than just being empathic and sympathetic to someone's plight. It is better to be a physically challenged to understand well how to deal with the physically challenged. The picture seems to cast a notion that we the persons with disability cannot or do not have the requisite knowledge and skills to manage our own Commission and Secretariat. But I bet to differ. How many competent people do we not have who are doing excellently well in their various places of endeavour and are not persons with disability?

I believe that disability sport if managed very well can bring in major benefits to the disability community and the nation at large. I also believe it is long overdue that disability sports is made popular and its frontiers entrenched to encourage and motivate more persons with disability who into sports and to attract support from good willed Ghanaians. For this aspiration to materialize, I wish to make these interventions and recommendations which may be very necessary to consider.

First, I believe management is key to the success of every organisation. There should be set a formidable management team who has the interest of us the persons with disability and our sports at heart. I hereby, suggest that persons with disability who are qualified and competent be put in charge of the daily administration of the Secretariat and other positions related to the sport and disability. When this is done it will help in decision making moments as pertinent matters that bother us will be considered and the outcomes will form the basis for policy making and direction the sport should take. I must say I am happy to see one of our own heading the disability sport in the name of Mr. Adjetey Sowah but I believe more can be done.

Also, management should draw up comprehensive annual programmes for the sport. When this is well drafted and documented it helps in achieving more for the sport. Government expenditure for sports is not solely for disability sport but encompasses other sporting disciplines and it is competitive. Yet, I believe with this well documented programme management may get the government to fund as well as other donor agencies, corporate Ghana and philanthropists. I say this because several years have passed where you will only hear about one or two organised competitions by the Secretariat.

Furthermore, when disability sports get the necessary funding management can properly organise competitive competitions countrywide to improve the skills of those who are already into the sport. This platform can also help the Secretariat to attract and unearth new potentials and talents to mix up with what the nation has. This will enable the nation to have a very strong and formidable team to compete better to achieving more laurels for the country internationally.

Better funding and sponsorship will see our sportsmen and women become well as compared to what they used to be getting in terms of equipment and of courses finances. This will help them to look after their families and do other business with their earnings. This will ease the already pressure and dependency put on government and also enable other persons with disability to get motivated and engage in something productive than what the nation knows us to be doing.

Management should endeavour to educate and expose sportsmen and women to the opportunities that are available for them in terms of pursuing higher education so that those who can take advantage may benefit. Also, management should assist and facilitate these processes for them. In the short term, we may not see the fruits but in future these people may come to support with their rich experience to grow the sport to higher pedestals.

I may like to suggest too that management should make conscious efforts to bridging partnerships and alliances with other corporate bodies and the media to get the sport popularized and entrenched in the country. This can be achieved when pieces of information concerning the sport are made readily available to such partners for them to broadcast. Invitations can also be thrown to such partners especially the media to witness what we are capable of doing despite our limitations during competitions both locally and internationally.

I know that if these interventions and suggestion are taking will help to entrench disability sport in the country and alleviate many of the problems the persons with disability face in the country.