

# Fans drum up support

*Nigeria Football Supporters' Club makes the 12,000 km trek to cheer their team*

By David KARP

[ VICTORIA ] They may be 12,000 kilometres from home, but the players on Nigeria's under-20 soccer team still have plenty of fan support at the FIFA U-20 World Cup.

Decked out in green-and-white striped toques and matching T-shirts, 90 members of the Nigeria Football Supporters' Club followed their men's youth team all the way from western Africa to Victoria for the tournament.

The group spent 16 hours flying from Lagos to Toronto last week. Fifty-seven members flew from Toronto to Victoria for Nigeria's opening on Sunday. The rest are arriving from Toronto this week.

Founded in 1955, the club has roughly 25,000 members in Nigeria, with a chapter in each of its 36 states. And there are roughly 75,000 members elsewhere in the world. At Nigeria's opening match, members from chapters in Canada, Spain and England showed up.

"It's the one thing that brings us together," club secretary Samuel Ikpea said of the sport.

Supporters must pay a membership fee equivalent to \$150 to join the club, which also has corporate sponsors. Ikpea said Nigerian telecom company Globacom provides attire for all 100,000 club members. The Nigerian government, businesses and club members also chip in when the club needs money.

Applicants must also take a test proving they are soccer savvy.

"If you fail the interview, we ask you to go and come back in six months time," said Ikpea.

Only the most gifted club members were sent to Canada for the U-20 World Cup because the club pays most of the travel costs.

"We choose them based on the years they have spent in the club, and their performance," said Ikpea. Club members sing, play drums, trumpets or a type of bell known as an agogo.



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**GREEN WITH ENVY.** To become a member of the club, applicants must pass a test proving they are soccer savvy. Ninety fans are in Canada for the FIFA U-20.

"We are the music department in the (Nigerian Football) Association," said David Sunday, a trumpeter. Sunday said there were more than 500 people interested in travelling to the U-20 World Cup.

The fans play vibrant African songs at matches to pump up their team and win over the crowd.

"They made the game more interesting," said Justin Bonnieux, 13, who particularly liked the drums. "They were drumming quickly when there were breakaways. They were louder."

Club member Michael Olubunmi said the club goes wherever a Nigerian soccer team is playing.

Although Nigeria had lulls during its opening match against Costa Rica, its fans kept the music coming. They were finally rewarded by a goal by Brown Ideye in the 75th minute.

"They are great," said Ideye. "It's a motivation for us because they're so dedicated."

Teammate Moses Adams agreed. "That's African culture," he said. "They cheer you up — it's good when your fans believe in you ... and want to be around you."

But not everyone is happy with the Nigerian team. Security at Sunday's game would not allow members to play their trumpets, Ikpea said.

And club member Levi Ohasiebula Chikwendu said he was arrested at the Toronto airport, taken away in handcuffs and imprisoned overnight. He arrived in Toronto alone because he missed his flight from Lagos and said customs officials didn't believe he was with the club despite having a list of members with Chikwendu's name on it.

"They said, 'That is your name. But we still don't believe you're a part of the supporters' club,'" Chikwendu said. "It was cold. I was hungry. It was terrible. I have not experienced this in my life."

Chikwendu, who travels often, said he had a Canadian visa.

"The trauma is still in me," he said. "The last match I watched, I wasn't comfortable. I felt bad. I felt humiliated. They made me remember the period of slavery."

He left Victoria for Toronto yesterday to meet with a lawyer. Chikwendu wants an apology from the Canadian government and a multiple-entry visa so he can return to Canada with his family and make business connections. He owns a transport company in Lagos.

"I want them to grant me that openness to come to Canada when I want to," he said.

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