

## How to develop table tennis in a developing country: the Nigeria example

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**Abstract:** The account given below shows that in Nigeria, the game of table tennis is not as popular as some others such as football. However, we could arouse the interest of Nigerians in the game- and by extension improve its standard- by introducing it to children very early in life. Also, private sports outfits could play a vital role in developing the game; although this may be difficult to achieve in a developing economy such as ours. Financial assistance from corporate bodies and philanthropists may be one of the keys to the success of a developmental program such as this. In order to continue to make progress in any human endeavor, there may be a need for self examination from time to time. Borrowing from this popular saying, a group of Nigerians-consisting of retired players, coaches, sports scientists and sports enthusiasts- came together to examine the state of affairs regarding the game of table tennis in Nigeria. After brainstorming on the matter, the group came to the following conclusions: 1, our performances at the international level in the past few years have not been encouraging. 2, there is a need to arouse the interest of Nigerians, especially children in the game. 3, the standard of the game needed to be improved on. In order to ascertain the popularity of the game amongst children, questionnaires were distributed to about 500 primary and secondary school students in the Children Unit of a popular religious organization- The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries. The result showed that majority of the children show more interest in both watching and playing football, compared to table tennis. Also, most of the children do not have facilities for the game in their schools and therefore have minimal exposure to the game. The study also showed that most schools do not pay much attention to table tennis. The above shows that the poor performance of our country in international competitions may be closely related to the low level of popularity of the game. Obviously, there is a need to develop the game from the grassroots in order to achieve the aim of improving its standard. Judging from past events in Nigeria, the private sector may have to come in to complement the efforts of government.

**Keywords:** Development program, Table tennis, Example.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In order to continue to make progress in any human endeavour, there may be a need for self appraisal from time to time. Borrowing from this popular saying, a group of Nigerians-consisting of retired players, coaches, sports scientists and sports enthusiasts- came together to examine the state of affairs regarding the game of table tennis in Nigeria. After brainstorming on the matter, the group came to the following conclusions: 1. our performances at the international level in the past few years have not been encouraging.

2. there is a need to arouse the interest of Nigerians (especially children) in the game.

3. the standard of the game needed to be improved on.

### 2. METHOD

#### 2.1 A study to assess the popularity of the game of table tennis

Before we could start planning how to arouse the interest of children in the game, we thought there was a need to assess the popularity of the game among children. After knowing the level of popularity of the game, we would then know what to do to develop the game from the grassroots. We therefore designed some questionnaires to find out the knowledge, level of exposure and interest of a group of children in the game. We believed the response to those questionnaires would be a good reflection of the above i.e. their knowledge, level of exposure and interest. The questionnaires were distributed to about 500 children of the Children Unit of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. The children used for this study are from a diverse ethnic, socio-economic and cultural background, being probably bound together by religion only. Thus, we can confidently say the children represent a Mini-Nigeria. The age of the children ranged from 5 to 16 years. A total number of 442 children completed and returned the questionnaires. The responses to the

questionnaires were compiled and same analyzed as shown in 2.2 below.

## 2.2 Assessment of the popularity of table tennis

We decided to choose football for the purpose of comparison because it is probably the most popular game in Nigeria-judging from television viewership and general comments from people from time to time. Thus, using one of the most popular games as a benchmark for table tennis may give us a fair assessment of the level of popularity of the game of table tennis in Nigeria. The division of the subjects into two age groups i.e. 5-12years and 12-16years, highlights the number of the children from the primary and secondary school levels respectively.

Table 1 Gender analysis

Gender	No of respondents	Percentage
Male	105	23.76
Female	311	70.36
Void count	26	5.88

Table 2 Age range of subjects

Age range	No of respondents	Percentage
5-12 years	341	77.15
13-16 years	75	16.97
Void count	26	5.88

Tables 3a Which of these games do you like to watch more?

Type of game	No of respondents	Percentage
Football	220	49.77
Table tennis	143	32.35
Neither	43	9.73
Void count	36	8.15

Table 3b Through which medium do you watch your games most?

Medium	No of respondents	Percentage
Television	318	72
Live	104	26
Internet	10	2

Table 4a Which of these games do you enjoy playing more?

Type of game	No of respondents	Percentage
Football	231	52.26
Table tennis	142	32.13
Neither	53	12.00
Void count	16	3.61

Table 4b Where do you have the opportunity to play your game?

Where	No of respondents	Percentage
At school only	185	42
On the street only	168	38
Both of the above	89	20

Table 4c When do you have the opportunity to play your game?

When	No of respondents	Percentage
During school hours	177	40
After school only	163	37
Both of the above	102	23

Table 5 Which of these games do you think people like more?

Type of game	No of respondents	Percentage
Football	273	61.71
Table tennis	104	23.53
Neither	46	10.41
Void count	19	4.29

Table 6a Which of the two games can you easily get opportunity/facility to play?

Game	No of respondents	Percentage
Table tennis	135	30.54
Football	211	47.77
Both	59	13.35
Neither	34	7.69
Void count	3	0.68

Table 6b How many hours of play of table tennis do you have per week?

Hours per week	No of respondents	Percentage
I cannot tell	358	81
1-2 hours	66	15
2-10 hours	18	4

Table 7. Why do you prefer the one you prefer?

Reason for preferring one	No of respondents	Percentage
Because everybody likes it	108	24.43
Because I enjoy watching it	133	30.09
Because I can easily get it to watch or play	143	32.35
More than one of the above reasons	58	13.12

Table 8. Which of these games do you have facility for?

Game	No of respondents	Percentage
Table tennis	79	17.87
Football	219	49.55
Both	70	15.84
Neither	51	11.54
Void Count	23	5.20

Table 9 Are you allowed to freely use the table tennis facility in your school?

Free use	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	175	39.59
No	189	42.76
No facility	65	14.70
Void count	13	2.94

Table 10 Would you like to play table tennis if we bring the facility to your school?

Desire to play	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	304	68.77
No	101	22.85
I don't know	26	5.88
Void count	11	2.49

### 3. RESULTS

Out of the 442 students that responded to the questionnaires, there were 311 females and 105 males, meaning that for every 4 students in this research, there were 3 females. 26 responses were put as void because the answers were ambiguous. Majority of the subjects (341) fell within the age range 5-12 years indicating that majority of the group studied is from the primary school. Regarding viewership, nearly 50% respondents said they prefer watching football to table tennis, whereas only one third (32.35 %) preferred to watch table tennis compared to football. This translates to the fact that the viewership of football is about twice that of table tennis. The main medium through which the subjects watch both football and table tennis is via television, followed by live play (see table 3b). Majority of the subjects (as depicted in table 6b), could not say precisely how much time they spend per week playing table tennis. In respect of the level of enjoyment derived from playing the game of both table tennis and football, counts of 142 and 231 were recorded, respectively. This shows that majority of the children –for one reason or the other- enjoy playing football compared to table tennis. The individual opinion of the subjects on followership showed that football has a higher rating with 61.71% of the respondents placing football high, while only 23.53 % believe that table tennis has a larger followership. In the area of opportunity, football fares better. While 211 of the respondents claim they easily have opportunity to play football, only 135 said same for table tennis. Also, 59 of the respondents said they used to have opportunity for both, and 34 subjects had for neither. From the above, it seems there is not much difference in the opportunity level for both games. In respect of the avenues available to play the games, both the schools and streets are found to be almost equally useful (table 4b). Regarding the period of the day when these kids have opportunity to play games, both the school and after-school hours are available (table 4c). Availability of facility for both games was also assessed. 219 (49.6 %) students responded

that they have facility for football, 79 (17.9 %) subjects claimed they have facility for table tennis. 70 respondents said they have facility for both, 51 subjects claim they had for neither, while only 23 candidates were put as void; this probably means that about two thirds of the respondents have facility for football while only about one third have for table tennis. For those who had facility for table tennis in their schools, we sought to find out if indeed they have free access to the facility. Only 175 candidates claim they have free access to their facility. 189 subjects said they do not have free access. 65 subjects do not have any facility, meaning that more than a half of the students do not have free access to play. The interest to play table tennis if the facility is brought to the children's schools was assessed. 304 of the children expressed a desire to train in table tennis if the facility is made available in their various schools. Only 101 students said they are not interested even if the facility is made available. The above means that 3 out every 4 subjects were ready to play the game if the facility was made available at their schools.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

From the above results, we can deduce some relationship among the various aspects examined in the questionnaires used above. This can be put as: the intuitive interest of the subjects, the exposure level and the aroused interest. Thus, we could safely say that the above factors, i.e. innate interest, exposure level and aroused interest are some of the major factors that could influence children in developing interest in the game of table tennis. The innate interest of a child could be influenced by the opinion of the general public. The innate interest-probably modified by public opinion- is seen in table 6a- where it is shown that the opportunity to play both football and table tennis are close; despite this, majority of the subjects still prefer football to table tennis. However, we could influence or mould the opinion of these children positively, by working on these areas. The negative effect of public opinion could be minimized by having promo program on table tennis, thereby creating more awareness about the game. Also, we can improve the exposure level by providing training facility with mini table tennis and rackets at primary schools and various children centers. This we have already started at the Headquarters of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (Children Unit) in Lagos. The high score for the aroused interest (see table 10)-which could be said to be favorable to the development of the game- means that if we can take adequate care of the other two factors mentioned above, we would be on our way to improving the level and standard of the game in Nigeria. In order to give what we have done at the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries a

wider base, the private sports outfit that organized this study, Value Sports One, (VSO) took further steps. For example, we have approached corporate bodies and sports philanthropists for assistance to carry through the project (Sports Development Program). In the course of executing the above developmental program, we have encountered a lot of challenges. Some of the challenges are finance and the lukewarm attitude of public servants to the whole idea of a private body coming to develop table tennis. All these are not unexpected, especially in a developing economy such as ours. However, we believe that if the initiators of this developmental program are focused and persistent, the objectives will be achieved in no distant future.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Although this pilot study may be regarded as one in its infancy, it is quite obvious from the above account that carrying through a novel project involves quite a lot. It is challenging. In the course of executing the projects, a lot of interests may be at stake and even intrigues may come into play. All these are even more likely in a developing country such as ours. The success or otherwise of the project might even be influenced by politics. Also of great importance is the level of economic development of the nation. Considering the fact that materials for the project may have to be imported, the cost of carrying the project through may be too much to bear if we are not able to secure reliable sponsorship at the different stages of the program. However, we believe we can make progress by re-strategizing from time to time.

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