

THE ROLE OF ENUGU RANGERS IN SPORTS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA, 1970-2024

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Abstract

This paper highlights the pivotal role played by Rangers International Football Club of Enugu in the development of sports in Nigeria. It argues that Enugu Rangers, formed in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, has played—and continues to play—a significant role in advancing sports in the country. The study adopts the historical method and draws on both primary and secondary sources. It concludes that football clubs in particular, and sports organizations in general, have a crucial role to play in Nigeria's national development and should emulate the achievements of Rangers in this regard.

Keywords: Sports, football, clubs, matches, development, transfer market, revenue, employment, tourism

Introduction

According to Chief Emmanuel Okala, Rangers and Nigeria's legendary goalkeeper, Rangers International Football Club of Enugu was formed from the ashes of the 30 months old Nigerian civil war.¹ And it was formed with the main aim of serving as one of the many avenues that provided succor and respite for Ndi'gbo coming out of the devastating civil war. Since its formation in 1970, Rangers International Football Club of Enugu has gone ahead to become one of the most successful football clubs in Nigeria, winning the Nigerian league eight times, a record only bettered by Enyimba International FC, and also winning several other laurels within its 55 years of existence.

More than winning these titles and laurels however, Rangers has since its formation, contributed significantly to the development of sports in Nigeria. The club has produced many football talents that have gone on to represent Nigeria at continental and international levels, both as players and coaches. Emmanuel Okala, Christian "Chairman" Chukwu, Austin "Jay Jay" Okocha, just to mention but, a few are some of Rangers' talents that have represented Nigeria and have contributed in no small means to the development of sports in Nigeria². Apart from nurturing talents that have gone on to contribute their quota to sports development in Nigeria, Rangers has also played the role of a serious employer of labour and this has also contributed to sports development in Nigeria. To be specific, the club has since 1970, recruited and remunerated thousands of players, coaches and management crew and this in itself has overtime added impetus to sports and its development in Nigeria³.

In this contemporary time, and especially since the appointment of Barrister Amobi Ezeaku as the General Manager (GM) and CEO of Rangers in 2023, the club has become better repositioned and completely transformed into a modern football club, and this has had impacts on the development of sports in Nigeria. For example, through Amobi's exemplary leadership, the club has been able to sign notable sponsorship deals like the ones with AFRINVEST and NOCTRA TRACTORS, and strategic partnership deals like the one with FC Schaffhausen of Switzerland which bothers on building global bridges for football excellence, and these have greatly impacted the club's development and by extension, the development of sports in Nigeria⁴.

Rangers has also been at the forefront of talent discovery and nurturing in contemporary times, and this can be seen in the guise of the introduction of age football in the club, a development which has significant impact on sports development in Nigeria.

As a football club in Nigeria, it is no gainsaying the fact that Rangers International Football Club of Enugu has significantly contributed to development of sports in Nigeria since its formation in 1970.

¹ Chief Emmanuel Okala, Male, 73 years old, Ex-Rangers/Green Eagle Goalkeeper, Enugu, March, 2025.

² Accessed from <https://allafrica.com/stories/200409300655.html>, on 12th February, 2025.

³ Vanguard Newspaper, *Life and Death, Two Rangers Player Remain inseparable*, accessed from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/10/life-death-two-rangers-legends-remain-inseparable>, on 17th February, 2025.

⁴ Leadership Newspaper, *Rangers Sign shirt Sponsorship Deal with Afrinvest*, accessed from <https://leadership.ng/rangers-sign-shirt-sponsorship-deal-with-afrinvest>, on 19th January, 2025.

Rangers International and Sports Development in the 20th Century

As already noted above, Rangers was founded in the 20th century, and has since its formation contributed in diverse ways to sports development in Nigeria. To be specific however, Rangers' contributions to sports development cuts across the areas of promotion of football as a sport in the Old Eastern Region, reintegration of the Igbo sports men (footballers) after the war, discovering and nurturing of footballers to stardom, national representation, amongst others.

By 1970 when Rangers was formed, sports in general and football in particular were still very much in their nascent stage of development, for instance, sports and football competitions were only organized at regional level and were not professionalized. According to Peter Alegi, sports and football in particular by this time was still very much played for leisure and recreational purposes rather than as a profession⁵. However, with the emergence of football clubs like Rangers and Shooting Stars of Ibadan in the 1970s, this pattern started to witness a shift. With particular reference to Rangers, its formation signposted the beginning of a rich sports history and tradition that has stood the test of time and inspired generations. More than anything else, the formation of Rangers and its subsequent national and continental exploits led to the round leather game being promoted widely across the old Eastern Region, and this was the development that led to the emergence of several other football clubs like Iwuanyawu Nationale and Enyimba International in 1976.

It is important to note that Rangers and these clubs it inspired have contributed immensely to sports development in Nigeria in general, and football development in particular. For instance, these clubs have produced numerous talents (Uche Okechukwu, Kanu Nwankwo, Jay Jay Okocha, Finidi George, Victor Ikpeba) that have represented Nigeria at continental and international competitions, and have also won different continental honours that have put sports generally and football in particular in the limelight in Nigeria.

At the end of the 30 months Civil War in Nigeria, the Old Eastern region, and in particular, Igboland was a shadow of itself. Igbo people were the most affected and traumatized by the war. This state of hopelessness permeated the entire embers of Igboland and sports was not left out as men and women that participated in different sports before the war were too demoralized to continue at the end of the war. The emergence of Rangers and her exploits however, helped to reignite hope and reintegrate these sports men and women some of whom went ahead to win national and international laurels. For instance, the former Director-General of the National Sports Commission, Patrick Ekeji, who championed notable reforms and policies in Nigeria's sports sector, was an ex-Ranger player. There were also Emmanuel Okala and Christian Chukwu, as well as Augustine Azuka Okocha, who though was younger, built his football career on the legacy of post-war Igbo sports men and women⁶. It therefore, follows that Rangers played a pivotal role in the restoration of hope and reintegration of post-war sports men and women in Igboland, and this itself rubbed off greatly on sports development in Nigeria.

Perhaps, it is in the area of talent discovery and development that Enugu Rangers contributed most to sports development in Nigeria. As already noted above, the formation of Enyimba, as well as Iwuanyawu Nationale and other sports and football clubs in the 20th century Igboland owe so much to the earlier formation and exploits of Enugu Rangers in that same century. Rangers, as well as these clubs that it inspired discovered and nurtured to stardom, several of Nigeria's greatest sports and football players in particular. Rangers discovered and nurtured to stardom the 1978 African Footballer of the year, Emmanuel Okala, as well Nigerian football legends like Christian Chukwu who led Nigeria to her first Nations Cup title in 1980, Jay Jay Okocha who is regarded as one of Africa's greatest playmaker of all time, amongst others; while these other football clubs it inspired produced Nigerian football legends like Kanu Nwankwo- two times African Footballer of the Year, the legendary defender, Uche Okechukwu, Victor Ikpeba who won the African Player of the Year in 1997, Finidi George amongst others⁷. These legends of Nigerian football made enormous contributions to the development of sports in general, and the round leather game in particular in Nigeria. They influenced generations of sports talents, while some of them such as Christian Chukwu and Emmanuel Okala went ahead to coach Nigeria's National Team.

From the foregoing therefore, it is crystal clear that Enugu Rangers made great contributions to the development of sports in the 20th century Nigeria. While the formation and exploits of the club promoted the round leather sports within the Old Eastern region, the club contributed immensely to the reintegration of post-war Igbo sports men and women who made enormous contributions to sports development in Nigeria. Enugu Rangers and the

⁵ Peter Alegi, *African Soccerescapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010, p69.

⁶ Chief Christian Chukwu, Ex-Rangers/Green Eagles Captain, 74 years old, Enugu, March, 2025.

⁷C. Chukwu...

clubs it inspired have produced some of the greatest football talents in Nigeria, some of whom have gone ahead to become legends of the game and sports in general.

Rangers International and Sports Development in the 21st Century

Rangers International Football Club, one of Nigeria's most iconic football institutions, has continued to play a pivotal role in sports development in the 21st century. Nonetheless the multiplicity of challenges in Nigerian football, the "Flying Antelopes" have remained relevant through on-field success, youth development, community engagement, and modernization efforts. Below are some of their key contributions since the turn of the 21st century.

One area that Enugu Rangers have contributed to the development of Sports in Nigeria is in the area of revival of competitive success. After a 32-year league title drought, Enugu Rangers won the Nigeria Professional Football League (NPFL) in 2016, reasserting their status as a powerhouse. This victory reignited passion for domestic football and inspired other clubs to prioritize long-term planning.

The win also earned them a spot in the CAF Champions League, showcasing Nigerian football on the continental stage.

Rangers have also remained competitive in the NPFL, often finishing in the top half of the table. Their stability contrasts with many Nigerian clubs plagued by relegation and financial instability and serves as an inspiration for most of these clubs.

Youth development and talent nurturing is another area that Enugu Rangers has contributed to sports development in Nigeria. The club has invested in youth academies and scouting networks across southeastern Nigeria, identifying and nurturing young talents. Players like Chiamaka Madu (now at FC Zürich) and Israel Abia (Super Eagles prospect) emerged from their system⁸.

It is worth mentioning that since Barrister Amobi Ezeaku took over as Rangers' CEO/GM, the club has witnessed massive overhauling in all areas and especially the areas of talent development. Being an expert in sports management and administration, Amobi has brought his wealth of knowledge and experience to bear greatly on Rangers. Under his watch, Enugu Rangers has continued to churn out talents yearly both in the male and female teams. For instance, there is Kenneth Igboke, Kazeem Ogunleye and Saviour Isaac who have all represented the Nigerian male national team at different levels, as well as Chidi Harmony and Funke Arogundade who are presently in the female under 17 national team.

Through Amobi's exemplary leadership, the club has been able to sign notable sponsorship deals like the ones with AFRINVEST and NOCTRA TRACTORS, and strategic partnership deals like the one with FC Schaffhausen of Switzerland which bothers on building global bridges for football excellence, and these have greatly impacted the club's development and by extension, the development of sports in Nigeria.

Rangers has always had a junior team that participated in national youth leagues, providing a pathway for teenagers to transition into professional football. However, Amobi Ezeaku's modernization effort at the club has led to a more robust academy system that includes the under 8s to under 16s. Some of these talents from the academy have attracted interests from European teams and have gone ahead to ply their trades in Europe⁹. Modernization and infrastructure improvement is another area that Enugu Rangers have contributed to sports development in the 21st century. The club has partnered with state and private stakeholders to renovate the Nnamdi Azikiwe Stadium in Enugu, improving training pitches and spectator amenities. This has elevated the matchday experience and attracted larger crowds, while setting a precedent that other clubs in Nigeria have quickly emulated.

Enugu Rangers have also been at the forefront of digital engagement in the NPFL. Rangers embraced digital platforms (social media, streaming) to connect with fans globally, setting a precedent for other Nigerian clubs who are also in the present modernizing to increase their outreach and global appeal. For example, during the Oriental Derby between Rangers and Enyimba at the tail end of the 2023/2024 season, Rangers took her digital engagement to new heights, by creating a hashtag (#Orientalderby) on several social media platforms that gained

⁸ Punch Newspaper, *Rangers sign Partnership deal with Swiss Club Schaffhausen*, accessed from <https://punchng.com/rangers-sign-partnership-deal-with-swiss-club-schaffhausen/?amp>, on 15th December, 2024.

⁹ Daily News Ngr, *Rangers International Begins under 15 football Academy Screening in Enugu*, accessed from <https://dailynewsngr.com.ng/rangers-intl-begin-under-15-football-academy-screening-in-enugu>, on 23rd November, 2024.

traction and trended very well on most platforms. This innovation by Rangers got a lot of Nigerians and non-Nigerians talking about the match in particular and the NPFL in general.

Enugu Rangers have also had enormous community and social impact in the Southeastern region in particular and Nigeria in general. In a region still grappling with post-war socioeconomic challenges, Rangers remain a unifying symbol. Their matches serve as communal events that foster pride and solidarity among Igbo people, and this is usually exported to wherever the club plays.

Enugu Rangers have also been at the forefront of women's football advocacy in Nigeria in the guise of support for female athletes in the 21st century. While historically focused on men's football, Rangers have begun promoting women's football through partnerships with local women's teams and advocacy for gender equality in sports. It was in line with this reality that the Amobi Ezeaku led management struck a partnership and development deal with Green Foot Ladies in June, 2024 to foster the growth and development of female football. This partnership has started yielding dividends for both Rangers and Nigeria as a country as players from Green Foot Ladies have been called up to the under 17 female national team as already noted above¹⁰.

Health and education initiatives are other ways through which Enugu Rangers have contributed to sports development in Nigeria. The club organizes outreach programs, including football clinics, health screenings, and educational scholarships for young athletes.

Employment of labour, mentorship and leadership are other ways that Enugu Rangers have contributed to the development of football in particular in Nigeria. The club has had and continuous to have players and coaches from all parts of Nigeria in their rank, and these professionals are paid monthly salaries and this therefore makes Rangers one of the employers of labour in Nigeria¹¹.

With regards to mentorship, Rangers legacy players play the very important role of mentors for both the club's players and Nigerian players in general as role models. Former Rangers legends like Christian Chukwu and Emmanuel Okala remain involved in mentoring young players, bridging the gap between generations.

Enugu Rangers has also contributed immensely to football coaching development in Nigeria. The club has produced coaches who contribute to football tactics and administration nationally, such as Benedict Ugwu and Salisu Yusuf (former Super Eagles assistant coach). At present, Coach Fidelis Ilechukwu is also serving as one of the assistant coaches of the Nigerian senior national team, the Super Eagles.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is clear that Enugu Rangers is not merely a football club; it is a cultural institution that has played a significant role in the social and sporting life of Nigeria. Its history is deeply intertwined with the resilience and determination of the people of southeastern Nigeria, making it a powerful symbol of hope and pride. Since its inception, the club has inspired—and continues to inspire—generations of footballers and fans alike.

In the 21st century, Enugu Rangers has transcended its role as a football club to become a beacon of resilience, innovation, and community development. By blending tradition with modernity, the club continues to shape the future of Nigerian football while honoring its storied past. Its contributions underscore the enduring power of sports as a vehicle for social change, talent development, and national pride

¹⁰Barrister Amobi Ezeaku, CEO/GM Enugu Rangers, 35 years old, Enugu, February, 2025.

¹¹ A. Ezeaku...

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