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Science In The Service Of The Lovable Game

By Femi Alabi Onikeku

The Physics of Soccer: Using Maths and Science to Improve Your Game; Deji Badiru; Universe; Bloomington;2010

WITH over 40 years as a soccer player, 25 years as a soccer dad, five years as a youth soccer coach, on one side, and over 30 years as an engineering educator, registered professional engineer (PE), award-winning author, researcher and administrator on the other, Badiru bridges both worlds and emerges as a football teacher with a new curriculum.

His textbook consists a formula called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). On the pitch, his voice is a reiteration that with more STEM, football may be discovered a more rewarding enterprise than had been known. The game, Badiru explains, need not be a mere physical undertaking but one that may be approached from a scientific and intellectual perspective.

The Physics of Soccer seeks to help players critically access game scenarios and make appropriate field-based decisions on science. It hopes to make footballers study the capabilities of teammates and opponents from a scientific viewpoint and view the field of play as a system of people (players, coaches, referees, spectators, supporters, detractors), objects (soccer ball, the pitch, the goal posts), and the environment, whose respective behaviours are governed by the laws of science.

Badiru buttresses his research with a real life instance. He writes: "The English soccer player David Beckham achieved worldwide acclaim for his soccer skill at scoring goals from free kicks by "bending" or curving the soccer ball toward the goal. Such directional mastery of the ball's path, no doubt, has underlying principles of physics, manifested through routine execution after many years of practice. The time span of repeated practice can be shortened through more scientific embodiment of the shooting process."

Had Badiru not been an African, a Nigerian to be specific, it may have been muttered-oh, those Oyinbo people have come again. In his 296-page book, he does a thing somewhat uncommon in these parts of the world. He applies knowledge to an aspect of human experience. He is not just another certificate-clutching graduate in that pitiable context the nation's education system has become. It may be said, albeit unfortunately, that in the absence of such mindedness dwells a difference between the 'developed' and 'undeveloped' nations of the world.

A renaissance across the country has begun to reveal that football and education could be merged successfully. This is evidenced by the numerous football academies, which today dot the land. For these, The Physics of Soccer would be a worthy addition to syllabi.

For a nation in dire need of political and economic goal aggregates on the international pitch, Badiru's book assumes metaphoric dimensions. 2011 may well be described as metres away. The dribbles gain momentum. Unlike the antitype however, kidnapping and assassinations of players mark our sports. It is perhaps time the nation's game were guided by a sure reform.

Unwittingly, the author raises a few questions- can soccer be altogether tamed by empiricism? Would they always emerge winners who have internalised the science of the game? Is there a place for luck in football? And what about matters like the 'hand-of-God' factor 'ministered' by Diego Maradona?

The Nation's Cup may have gone to Egypt but there remains a South Africa 2010. Who can tell, a reading of Badiru's *The Physics of Soccer* might just be the needed edge.