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Starlet

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After Ghana's splendid performance in the World Under-17 Youth competition in 1991, the Barcelona Under-23 Olympic Games and the World Under-20 Youth competition in Australia in 1993, Ghanaian footballers became attractive to foreign teams. The result was that representatives of foreign teams came with lucrative offers to lure local Ghanaian players to play for teams in Europe.

Many Ghanaian players who went to play in Europe as professionals became rich overnight: Their salaries and other allowances in Europe when converted into the local currency was astronomical. This sudden change in the fortunes of Ghanaian footballers who went to Europe to play professional football, has caused many Ghanaian parents to push their wards into football, hoping that they can one day become an "Abedi Pele" with its attendant prosperity.

As one of the key administrators with the Ghana Football Association, my office had been besieged by both friends and total strangers who wanted their children to be invited to join the National Junior Teams at least to *justify their inclusion* as they normally put it. Some of these parents went to the extent of trying to influence me with promises of cash and other favours if their children were invited to join the national teams. The belief was that the moment a boy played in the national team, he stood the chance of being invited to Europe some day to play as a professional, not to mention the anticipated financial gains.

There was this particular case which I recollect vividly because of the determination of the parent involved to get his ward invited by all means. He first approached me in a rather cunning

manner, establishing friendship with me just out of the blue. Anytime he came to the stadium, he would come to my office, greet me with all the "niceties" of a familiar acquaintance. Gradually, over a period of time the conversation drifted to the possibility of my getting his nephew invited to join the National U-17 team, because he claimed the boy was a top player in their local town team. I politely explained to him the selection procedure, adding that as administrators, we have no hand in it.

Apparently not satisfied with my explaination, this "friend" came back another time to pester me with the "invitation" issue, promising that I would not regret it if I was able to get his nephew invited. There and then my attitude changed and in a serious mood I told him not to come to the office on that issue again or he would have himself to blame.

The next thing I knew, this man had brought a note from a top public official in the ministry responsible for sports, inviting me to a meeting at his office. I later got to know that the "determined man" had some "connection" with big politicians and was trying to use the connection to pressurize me. I, however, stood my ground when I met with the top official, with the man in attendance. I explained the problem I would encounter if it became public knowledge that a player had been invited to the national junior team through the back door. I, however, suggested to the top public official that he could solve the problem by simply directing that the boy be invited, but in writing.

He did not, however, comment on my suggestion. I left the meeting, thinking the public official would take the matter up but nothing happened. Since then we have been having the usual meetings with him on football issues. He has not mentioned nor alluded to the case ever again. My "friend" also has not been seen again.