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COACHES AND ATHLETES PERCEPTION ON SCREENING OF PLAYERS AT MILO-SPONSORED SECONDARY SCHOOLS BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP, CENTRAL CONFERENCE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In determining players' eligibility for participation in youth development sport championships in the Nigeria, the rules and regulations for participating in such competitions must be of highest priority. This study, therefore, investigated the perception of coaches and athletes on the screening exercise of the Milo-sponsored Secondary Schools Basketball Championship, North Central Conference of Nigeria. The research adopted a descriptive survey design. A sample of 100 respondents was selected using a multistage sampling technique from the 200 Coaches and Athletes who participated in the 2016 basketball central conference championship. The instrument used for data collection was a validated questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.78r. Three research hypotheses formulated were tested at 0.05 alpha level using inferential statistics of chi-square. The findings revealed that the modalities adopted by the officials for the screening exercise have no significant influence ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$), while the attitude of coaches and lack of qualified personnel have a significant influence on the screening exercise ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$) of Milo Secondary Schools Basketball championship. Based on the findings, it was suggested that the biometric registration introduced at the last conference playoffs should be extended to the state level. Schools that qualify for the conference playoffs should be visited by the representatives of the organizers to assess the player's school registration to verify their classes and status. The use of scientific methods such as Nuclear Magnetic Resonance should be adopted to ascertain the actual age of players, among others.

Keywords: Screening exercise, Age-cheat, Central Conference, Milo-Basketball Championship

Introduction

Age fraud is becoming a major issue in world sport. Accusations of age cheating have upset the Nigeria national football team's success at international

tournaments in recent years. In 2016, 26 members of Nigeria's Under-17 failed an age test carried out before the African Cup of Nations qualifier. This has become a phenomenon in Nigeria sports including the game of basketball. The game of basketball in Nigeria can be likened to an acorn seed (very tiny in nature) that when sowed grew up into a very large oak tree. Basketball was introduced to Nigeria by American Missionaries, Voluntary Agencies and Military Establishments of the Royal West African Frontier Force (Ahmedu, 1992). At the early stage, basketball was seen as a recreational sport. From this status, the game moved into an amateur status in the early 70s with sponsorship of tournaments at both intermediate and senior levels. At the intermediate level, national secondary schools competitions were organized. Nestle Nigeria Plc. came to the front burner in 1994 with the sponsorship of the Future Champions' Basketball Clinic which is the first officially sponsored clinic in the West African sub-region. As a follow up to these clinics, Nestle Nigeria Plc. commenced the sponsorship of the annual Nestle-Milo Secondary Schools Basketball Championship in 1999 in collaboration with the Nigeria Schools Sports Federation (NSSF) which ensures the participation of schools and students. The other important partner in the competition is the National Collegiate Sports Foundation which is the body responsible for the Championship. They draw and enforce the rules and regulations and appoint referees among other responsibilities with the primary goal of providing a veritable avenue for youths to develop body and mind, and to encourage healthy competition as a means of furthering peaceful co-existence, tolerance, and understanding among youths at the national level. It was also to integrate secondary schools in Nigeria into the mainstream of basketball game in the country (Ekeruche, 2013)

The Milo-sponsored Nigeria Secondary Schools Basketball which started in 1999, with the pilot edition held in Lagos-Ibadan Zone wore a national outlook in the year 2000 when six conferences were created to accommodate the thirty-six states of the federation including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The conferences included Savannah, Sahara, Central, equatorial, Atlantic and Western. Each conference consists of six states with the central conference also accommodating the FCT to make up seven teams. One team from each conference qualified from the male and female categories to play the final six which is the third stage of the championship. The first, being the state, the second is the conference play-offs and the third, the national final stage (final six).

Today, the conference play-offs are now held in four centers, namely: Atlantic (Lagos Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, Edo and Delta States), Equatorial (Rivers, Cross Rivers, Abia, Ebonyi, Imo, Anambra, Bayelsa, and Enugu States), Confluence (Kogi, Plateau, Bauchi, Kano, Jigawa, Gombe, Borno, Taraba, and Adamawa States) and Central (Kwara, Niger, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zanzara, Katsina, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Benue and FCT). The 2016 edition of the Central Conference was held at the Indoor Sports Hall of University of Ilorin Sports Complex, Ilorin,

Kwara State. The best two losers from the four zones were to join the conference champions for the final six in Asaba, Delta state, Nigeria. The 2016 championship involved 9,000 Secondary Schools across the 36 states of the federation and the FCT. (Ajom, 2016).

Ascertaining the eligibility of players for the championship, over the years have been highly controversial. Age issue in Nigeria sports has been a problem ever since participating in age grade championship. Until a few years ago, age-cheat was a word known only to those in the public sector profession. However, in recent times, it has become very prominent in sport. Age-cheat is one of the well-documented topics in sports on the African continent over the years and no affiliate of sport governing bodies has been spared from this unfair practice (Alegi, 2010). About 80 percent of recorded age-cheat in sports have been found to be an intentional act by the player or the player's representative (Mai, 2009). Age-cheat has been found to be prevailing in Africa when compared to other continents owing to several reasons. Poverty, limited life changes and the desire to win at all cost are contributory to a wide-range of age cheat in sports. Coaches, parents, clubs, schools and the sport's national controlling bodies all contribute to the growing malaise by either encouraging it or turning a blind eye. (Zodidi, 2008). Age-cheating has done a lot of damage and a great deal of disservice to sports and the image of the country at the international stage. Despite these adverse effects of age-cheat, the method to be adopted in screening out over-aged athletes should conform to international best practices.

In Milo Basketball Championship, the rules and regulations guiding the competition on Items 3 (student-athlete shall be a bona fide student of his/her school for a minimum of one Academic year.); 5 (a student becomes ineligible for participation if he/she is above 17 years of age.); and 6 (duly completed forms are to be submitted to each State NSSF Sports Official of the Ministry of Education on or before the closing date specified in each year of the competition) of the rules guiding conduct of Milo Championship should be able to help in part, to streamline the mode of screening athletes for the championship (National Collegiate Sports Foundation, 2016). The method where players were screened through the physical assessment of the physique is counter-productive in this 21st century (Oniyangi, Falaye, & Aina, 2014). Some eligible players were denied participation because of their height and weight; thereby jeopardizing the future of potential talent that would have begun the quest to reach his or her goal in life. States from where students traveled hundreds of kilometers were turned back for not having the minimum required number of players after the screening exercise. This may not or even in most cases are not the true assessment of these youth (NSSF, 2005).

The Confederation of Africa Football in the year 2000 issued a directive that all age group players must undergo MRI scan (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) for the determination of the real age of players which was a timely step to restore

sanity and fair play in the game of football. This has implication for the game of basketball too. However, this should be complemented with the organization of seminars for the young players as the best way forward to eradicate age-cheating is to educate them and pinpoint the consequences and the effects of age-cheating in team sports like basketball (Figone, 2013). Other methods may include evidence of legal birth date through one of the following: A legal copy of a birth certificate; an official record of birth from the Bureau of Vital Statistics; an official passport; a hospital certificate signed by a physician and/or the hospital administrator; legal adoption papers issued by a court; official records verifying proof of birth issued by the Department of Welfare; and official immigration and naturalization papers issued by the country of residence (Association, 2011).

One of the major ways to eradicate age-cheat in sports is by consolidating on the grassroots program in the secondary school to catch athletes young which will enable the NBBF to keep proper records of the players (Umar, 2016). Nestle Milo Secondary School Basketball Championship rule stressed that only the bona fide J.S.S I – S.S.S II students of each participating school are eligible to participate in the championship provided they are not more than 17 years of age. In some cases, many unqualified players sail through the screening exercise successfully, making the entire process very subjective, controversial and ridiculous. In the light of the numerous disadvantages of the adopted screening strategy, it is pertinent to investigate, the perception of coaches and athletes on the screening exercise of the Milo Secondary Schools Basketball Championship.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the enormous financial contribution of Nestle Milo Nigeria Plc. towards basketball development among secondary schools in Nigeria, especially the game of basketball's hunt for talents from the grassroots, pertinent issues such as fielding of over-age players, inappropriate screening procedure, and poor record keeping system of Players' profiles are still threatening the survival of the championship. Kaduna and River States' male teams were disqualified from participating in the 2002 finals, while Bayelsa state's male team was also disqualified from the national finals of the 5th edition of the championship in 2003 for being found to be collections of non-students, known in sports parlance as "mercenaries" (Njoku, 2003). This type of incidence was also recorded at state and conference levels at the 2016 edition where Kaduna, Sokoto and Benue State male teams were disqualified at the Central Conference for fielding perceived over aged players. The 2017 edition was not an exemption.

The researcher observed over the years that organizers screened participants by looking at their physical appearance, where tall and well-built young boys and girls were screened out irrespective of their age and studentship status, paving ways for over-aged players with small body size to participate in the championship

thereby denying many bona fide students from participation. Furthermore, the caliber of personnel that constituted the screening committee on most occasions were not qualified considering their track record in the game of Basketball. In addition, the abnormality in the screening exercise that often brings about age-cheat or allowing over-aged players to feature in the championship has unjustly denied bona fide players from competing with their mates in this championship. Such students might lose interest in the totality of the sport and find it difficult to realize their dreams of becoming a legend in the game. Even some parents and guidance of the affected students might seek redress in a law court for infringement on the fundamental rights of their children or wards. This will negatively affect the general development of the game of Basketball, thereby defeating the aims and objectives for which the tournament was instituted. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, studies on the screening exercise on Secondary Schools Milo-sponsored Basketball Championship in Nigeria are not available. Hence this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. Will the modalities adopted by the officials influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball players in Central Conference?
2. Will the attitude of coaches influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Players in Central Conference?
3. Will the screening personnel influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Players in Central Conference?

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were formulated to guide the study.

1. Modalities adopted by the officials of the Screening Committee will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference.
2. The attitude of coaches will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference.
3. Screening personnel will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference.

Method

The research design used for this study was a survey type descriptive design. The population for this study was made up of all coaches (2 from each of the 10 participating States) and students/players (10 male and 10 female from each of the 10 participating States with a total of 200 athletes) that participated in the 2016 Nigeria Secondary Schools Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the 20 coaches from among

all the stakeholders in the competition and simple random sampling technique to select 80 players from the ten States. The instrument used for the study was a 4-point Likert Scale Format Questionnaire which was validated by experts and tested for reliability through test re-tests method using Pearson product moment correlation. A correlation coefficient of 0.78 "r" was obtained. The instrument was administered by the researcher and four trained research assistants. The data collected were analyzed using inferential statistics of chi-square to test the hypotheses formulated for this study at 0.05 alpha level.

Result and Discussion

Hypothesis one: Modalities adopted by the officials will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship

Table 1: The chi-square analysis of modalities adopted by the Officials for the screening exercise

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Total	Cal x ²	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	The players with large muscular built were allowed to participate in Milo Basketball Championship irrespective of their age.	16(16%)	14(14%)	33(33%)	37(37%)	100	14.44	9	0.107
2	Age of athletes was the major factor that was considered in the screening exercise.	13(13%)	17(17%)	46(46%)	24(24%)	100			
3	The physical appearance of the players usually makes the screening exercise more difficult for the organizer to pick the best during the exercise	15(15%)	17(17%)	43(43%)	25(25%)	100			
4	The methods adopted by the organizers to conduct the screening exercise often pave way for all bona fide students to participate in the Championship	5(5%)	13(13%)	50(50%)	32(32%)	100			
	Total	49(12.25%)	61(15.25%)	172(43%)	118(29.5%)	400(100%)			

$p > 0.05$

Table 1 reveals that a calculated x^2 value of 14.44 and p-value of 0.107 with 9 degrees of freedom at 0.05 alpha level were recorded. Since $p > 0.05$, the null

hypothesis was not rejected. This implies that the modalities adopted by the officials have no significant influence on the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference.

Hypothesis two: Attitude of coaches will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo basketball championship in Central conference.

Table 2: The chi-square (χ^2) analysis on attitude of Coaches towards screening exercise of Milo Basketball players

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Total	Cal χ^2	df	Sig (2-tailed)
1	Most of the Coaches from states often encourage non-athlete to feature in the screening exercise of the Championship.	15(15%)	10(10%)	40(40%)	35(35%)	100	47.58	9	0.00
2	Coaches' attitude encourage the type of screening exercise that often pave the way for unqualified players to participate in the Championship.	3(3%)	17(17%)	58(58%)	22(22%)	100			
3	Coaches are always in agreement with the method used by the organizer in the screening exercise of players in the Milo Basketball Championship	5(5%)	15(15%)	23(23%)	57(57%)	100			
4	Coaches are not in support of the use of biometric system in the screening exercise of players for championship	13(13%)	12(12%)	45(45%)	30(30%)	100			
Total		36(9%)	54(13.5%)	166(41.5%)	144(36%)	400(100%)			

$p < 0.05$

Table 2 shows a calculated chi-square (χ^2) value of 47.58 and p-value of 0.00 with 9 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis that stated that attitude of coaches will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship was rejected.

This means that attitude of coaches has significant influence on the screening exercise of Milo-Basketball Championship in Central Conference

Hypothesis three: The screening personnel will not significantly influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference.

Table 3: The calculated (χ^2) result of influence of the screening Personnel on the Screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Total	Cal χ^2	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
1	The caliber of officials who are assigned to conduct the screening exercise are very qualified enough to discharge the duty effectively	21(21%)	09(9%)	44(44%)	26(26%)	100	20.35	9	0.016
2	The officials that usually conduct the screening exercise of Milo Basketball are Ex-Basketball players who have the experience.	5(5%)	15(15%)	51(51%)	29(29%)	100			
3	Competency on the part of officials will make the screening exercise thorough and perfect.	10(10%)	14(14%)	37(37%)	39(39%)	100			
4	The screening exercise is usually a colorful event in the Milo Basketball Championship.	8(8%)	12(12%)	48(48%)	32(32%)	100			
	Total	44(11%)	50(12.5%)	180(45%)	126(31.5%)	400(100%)			

$p < 0.05$

Table 3 reveals a calculated (χ^2) value of 20.35 and p-value of 0.016 with 9 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance, which shows that the p-value < 0.05 , hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that the screening personnel has significant influence on the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference.

Discussion of Results

The finding from tested hypothesis 1 on table 1 revealed that the modalities adopted by the officials of the Screening Committee where tall players with large muscular built irrespective of their age were denied participation have no significant influence on the screening exercise of Milo Basketball championship. This finding is against the study which affirmed that some eligible players were usually denied from participating in age grade competitions due to their physique, height and weight (Oniyangi, et.al. 2014), and the assertion which stated that the method adopted by the official as screening strategies in term of physical appearance of the players usually paves way for unqualified players to sail through the screening successfully making the entire process very subjective and controversial (Nigeria School Sports Federation, 2013). The disparity observed from this finding might be caused by the fact that the beneficiaries of the perceived anomalies are part of the respondents in the study. This will be taken care of in future research works.

The finding from tested hypothesis 2, on table 2 revealed that attitude of coaches have a significant influence on the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference. This result tallied with the view that attitude of coaches towards the screening exercise is not encouraging, that some coaches are usually fond of featuring over-age players especially in the age-grade categories in a championship like soccer, basketball, and athletics (Scolt, 2000). In the same vein, coaches, parents, clubs, schools and the sport's national controlling bodies all contribute to the growing malaise by either encouraging it or turning a blind eye (Zodidi, 2008).

The finding from tested hypothesis 3 revealed that personnel of the Screening Committee has significant influence on the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference. The caliber of officials who were assigned to conduct the exercise have no record of high level of participation in the game of basketball or related sport, and so cannot be considered as competent for the task. This result is in line with the observation of Umar (2016) who pointed out that qualified personnel like ex-basketball players and Technical Officials should be allowed to take charge of screening exercise of age-grade competitions in Basketball Championships. In the same vein National Collegiate Sports Foundation (2016) observed that it is important to allow credible people handled sports screening exercises so as to have an exercise that will metamorphosize into raising and building up champions at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Modalities adopted by the officials of the screening committee does not have influence on the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference, Nigeria.
2. The attitude of Coaches will affect the screening exercises of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference, Nigeria.
3. Lack of qualified Personnel will negatively influence the screening exercise of Milo Basketball Championship in Central Conference, Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Organizers need to adopt the biometric registration procedure introduced at the last conference (2016) playoffs, and should be extended to the State level. This will enhance proper documentation for future reference. The use of Scientific Methods, such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), and Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR), should be adopted to ascertain the actual age of players. These are sets of clinical or medical diagnostic tools for a clear pictures of the body's interior obtained in a harmless and non-invasive manner.
2. The coaches of schools that qualified for the conference play-off should allow only bona fide students/players to feature in the championship. The qualified schools from each State should be visited by representatives of the organizers to assess the players' school registration as to verify his/her class and status through the continuous assessment records. The principal should be able to provide a file at all-times with sufficient evidence of the legal birth of each student-athlete and evidence of the student's entry into the school.
3. Qualified personnel such as coaches, referees, technical commissioners and other experts in the game of basketball should be involved in the screening exercise in future championships.

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