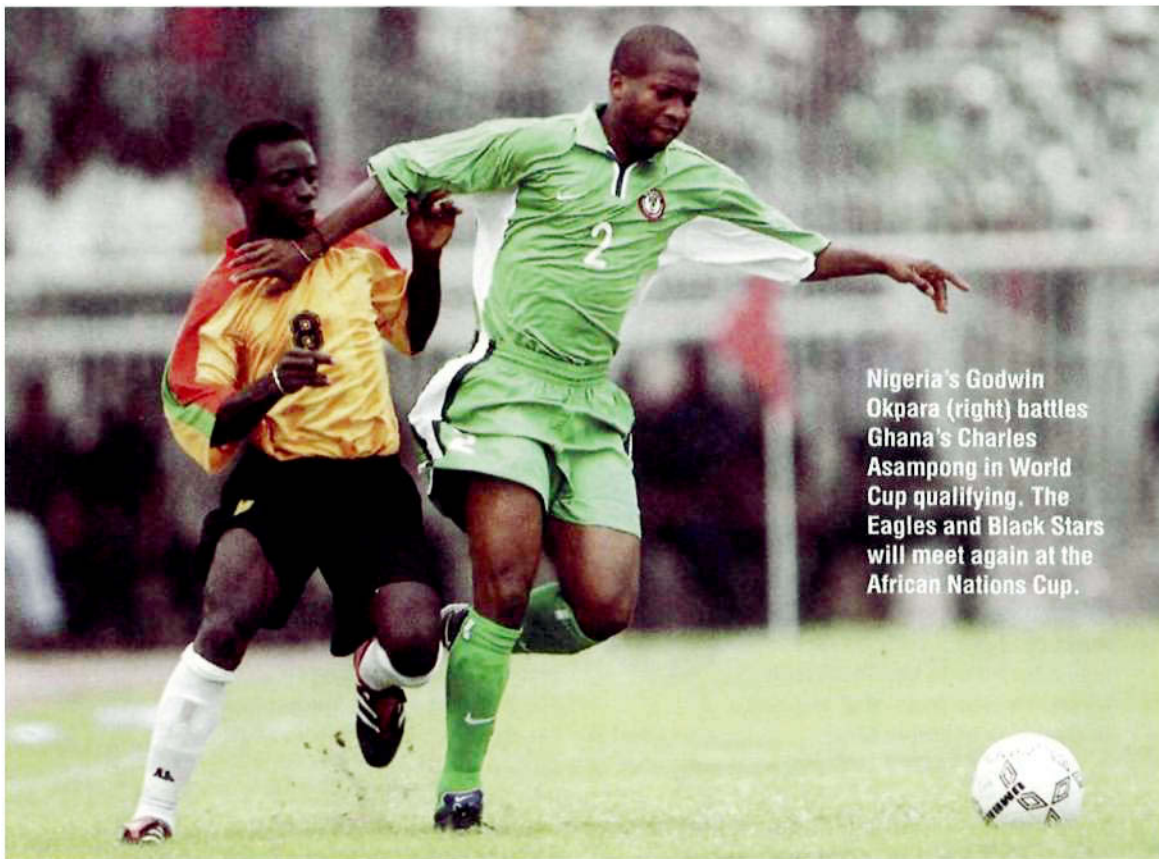




WORLD CUP 2002

POPPERFOTO



Nigeria's Godwin Okpara (right) battles Ghana's Charles Asampong in World Cup qualifying. The Eagles and Black Stars will meet again at the African Nations Cup.

The African Nations Cup will be a major challenge for its World Cup finalists. In particular, the coaches of the five teams face the possibility that they may be fired if they don't get results in Mali.

By Paul Kennedy

MALI 2002 **Africa five face big tests**

The countdown to the World Cup begins in earnest in January.

For the five African finalists, it begins with a major test, the 22nd African Nations Cup, in the West African nation of Mali Jan. 19-Feb. 10.

For Cameroon and Tunisia, Mali 2002 will mark the debuts of new coaches, German Winfried Schaefer and Frenchman Henri Michel, respectively.

For Senegal and Nigeria, the African competition will determine whether Bruno Metsu and Shuaibu Amodu, the respective coaches in place since the latter stages of World Cup qualifying, survive until the World Cup.

For the fifth World Cup finalist, South Africa, the African Nations Cup will be the biggest test since Coach Carlos Queiroz took charge 16 months ago.

The African Nations Cup (whose knockout phase is scheduled to be televised in the United States on pay-per-view via Setanta and DirecTV) won't be a

cakewalk for the Africa five.

In particular, Cameroon and South Africa will face stiff challenges from host Mali and four-time African champion Egypt in Group A.

Nigeria and Tunisia are in Group B with Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which have six titles between them.

Senegal must face Morocco, which it edged for its first berth in the World Cup, along with Liberia and Togo in Group D.

The only group without a World Cup finalist is Group C with 1990 African champion Algeria, '92 winner Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Zambia.

Cameroon is the defending champion, but the Lions had a poor 2001 season after winning the African Nations Cup and Olympics the year before.

Schaefer, 51, is the fourth coach Cameroon has had since the Indomitable Lions won the gold medal at Sydney 2000.

He predicts Cameroon will go far at the World Cup, but he might not be around to face his native Germany in Japan if the Lions don't repeat in Mali. The Cameroon federation has a history of making coach-

ing changes on the eve of the World Cup.

By contrast, South Africa, Cameroon's Group A rival at Mali 2002, is a model of consistency.

Queiroz, the former MetroStars head coach, has been in charge of the Bafana Bafana since September 2000, making him the longest-serving coach of Africa's five World Cup finalists.

Like most teams, South Africa's biggest challenge is getting its stars released from European clubs for the African Nations Cup.

Queiroz was hopeful that former Colorado Rapids and MetroStars star Shaun Bartlett (Charlton Athletic) and fellow striker Siyabonga Nomvete (Udinese) would resist pressure to remain with their clubs.

Senegal is the hottest team in Africa, but the Lions threatened to strike if their bonuses for qualifying for the World Cup weren't quadrupled from 10 million CFA francs (\$13,730) to 40 million CM francs (\$54,950) each.

Metsu appeared to be caught in the middle — Senegalese federation president El Hadj Malick Sy claimed the qualifying bonuses were agreed to in Metsu's presence — and he could well be out if the Lions don't do well in Mali.

Amodu was given the Nigerian head coaching job after Dutchman Jo Bonfrere was fired in the middle of World Cup qualifying.

Amodu is the first Nigerian to coach the Eagles to the World Cup finals, but he's in a precarious position. The Nigerian Football Association hadn't paid him in five months, according to reports out of Lagos.

Michel, who has previously coached France (1986), Cameroon (1994) and Morocco (1998) at the World Cup, would seem to have the easiest time of all the African World Cup coaches.

Unlike the other African World Cup finalists, Tunisia has few foreign-based players, so it should have few selection problems.

But that hasn't meant Michel's preparations for Mali 2002 have been trouble-free.

He had to kick three players off his 22-player team after they were involved in a brawl with their Tunisian clubs.

