

Eritrean Defense Forces Sport: a Popular Event in Eritrea

Written by Samson Yohannes
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It is conventional wisdom to understand the existing strong bond between sport and military. Sport in the military is crucial to develop physical fitness, advance spirit, promote unity and harmony, instill discipline and relieve boredom. In Eritrea's military tradition, sport is not a phenomenon which developed post-independence. Even during the armed struggle, after the strategic withdrawal of 1978 behind trenches of Sahel, especially North Eastern Sahel Front, sport was very popular. In the very challenging years of armed struggle three sport events were held in 1981, 1987, 1989. These particular junctures of time in the history of sports among the military during the revolutionary struggle magnify the popular sport legacy in Eritrea's military tradition.

In the first five years after Eritrea was liberated, sport was not organized consistently and at higher level. It was only dependent on the operational unit level (brigade, battalion and company) initiatives. But in 1997-1998 organized wide range sport event by the then Ground Force was organized. Again with the outbreak of the TPLF invasion of Eritrea's sovereign land 1998 that led to a three years' war, sport was interrupted. In 2001, with the establishment of Information and Agitation Office in the Ministry of Defense, sport again become very popular. As a result of the sport initiative, sport clubs from the Burie Front, Alitena Front, Ksad-ika Front, Mereb Setit Front and Sawa Training Center, participated in the sport match of 2001. Major Tesfazgi Habtay, Head of sport branch in the Information and Agitation office of the Ministry of Defense, said that in 2001 the sport activity focused on football, volleyball, and athletics on both genders. But following the massive female demobilization in 2004 female sport activity has been terminated until this year. From 2001-2010 the EDF sport season was taking place every year. But from 2010 until now the sport event at Ministry Defense level is held every two years." Says Major Tesfazgi. The reason for the extension of time is to enhance sport activity at division level by organizing sport event in each zonal command in every odd number year. As a result, sport remains an important activity within EDF members with no slack year of sport.

The Information and Agitation office, beyond hosting and organizing sport competition, works hard on training of referees and coaches as a mechanism for capacity building. As the result of previous efforts, a number of federal judges, (which means people who can judge on their respective area of sport at national level) and in coaching also have level "B" CAF license. According to Major Tesfazgi, the effort of holding such sports' competitions, "... is not only promoting sport benefits for the sportsmen or enhancing unit harmony, upgrade fighting spirit but to provide excellent public visibility of the defense force by building a strong sport club which is named Denden Club to represent Ministry of Defense at national sport events". As a result of previous efforts, even at international sports, EDF has come with a number of Olympic medalists. To mention some of them, Nebeyat Habtmaryam, Samson Kfilemariam, Yared Asmerom, Nguse Amlesom, Eskiel Tewelde are members of the Eritrean Defense Forces. Mountain world Champions are also from EDF. Petro Mamo, Azerya Teklay, Abraham Kidane are also some of them. Five out of the fifteen Eritreans who participated in the 2016 Rio de

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Janeiro Olympic Games were EDF members.

This reflects how the Eritrean Defense Forces is contributing to national pride and progress in sport. The Information and Agitation office of the Ministry of Defense is member of international organizations such as IMSC, OSMA, ECALO with similar interest and function in promoting sport within the military. IMSC (International Military Sports Council) which is commonly known with its French acronym CISM established in 1948 to promote sport activity and physical education among armed forces as a means to foster world peace. Eritrea became member of CISM in a congress held in Dubai in 2002. Eritrea as a member of this organization pays its annual membership fee, participates in conferences. CISM organizes various sporting events including Military World Games and World Military Cup for the armed forces of 134 member countries. Eritrea is active member of this largest multi-sport discipline organization which holds more than 20 competitions annually. IMSC also has its sub-branches such as OSMA (Organization Du Sport Militarie En AFrique) and ECALO (East and Central African Liaison Office). Eritrea participated in sport competition organized by the continental branch of CISM Organization for Military Sport in Africa (OSMA). In 2002, Eritrea participated in the fields of football and athletics in Kenya, which EDF won the football cup of OSMA.

For the last two months, 2016 EDF sport event took place in the second largest city of Keren. In addition to its facilities for sportsmen, Keren is endowed with a very favorable geographic location, moderate temperature and also has a relatively unique advantage; mass of sports fans. That is why people call it "Small Brazil" in consideration of regularly mass gathering of sport fans in Keren stadium. In 2016 nine EDF sport clubs were participating in multiple areas of sport. The 2016 sport event hosted eight sport fields with both genders. With the exception of the male football completion, Chess, shooting, traditional sports, volleyball, athletics basketball, badminton, and others were finalized ahead of October 29. Colonel Kidane Tesfay, Head of the Information and Agitation Office, in his speech on the closing ceremony said that the renaissance of female sport competition and the introduction of chess as a sport competition in EDF were assumed to be the main sport developments of the 2016 EDF sport event.

The 13th round EDF sport competition which officially opened on September 1 and officially closed on Saturday October 29 was fascinating sport season in Eritrea with better media coverage. Present during the official closing ceremony which took place at Keren Stadium were, Minister of Energy and Mines, General Sebhat Efrem, Minister of Tourism, Ms. Askalu Menkerios, Eritrean Defense Force Chief of Staff, General Philipos Weldeyohanes, Commissioner of the Commission for Sport and Culture, Ambassador Zemedet Tekle and other high level government officials, Anseba Regional Administration as well as PFDJ officials, Army commanders and staff members of MoD were attending in addition to mass of Keren residents.

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The official closing ceremony of the sport event began by a moment of silence in memory of the martyrs. Followed by the national anthem and cultural performance by the Walta Cultural Troup of the Ministry of Defense, the event also hosted a friendly football match between the female teams of Denden club and the selected team from 2016 female football match. The selected team won the game. Shoula of the Naval Force and Anberbeb of Staffs of MoD came to the field for male football championship. The game ended with the victory of Anberbe Club 2 to 1. After the football match, the event was concluded by a military march of all the nine clubs which participated in 2016.

Finally, champions of the sports event from their respected fields received their prizes from the Amete Neguse, PFDJ Secretary of zoba Anseba, Ms. Asklu Menkerios, Major General Asmerom Gerezgihier, General Sebhat Efrem, Ambassador Zemedet Tekle. The Super football club, Anberbeb received trophy and 50,000 Nkf from General Philipos Weldeyohanes.