



## LITERACY ACTIVITY - KANU

**In the following piece, Kanu tells his own story of growing up in Nigeria and playing football:**

I was born in Owerri and grew up in the east of Nigeria, in Imo state. You could say I was a ‘street boy’: we grew up on the street, played on the street, did everything out on the street! My family was an ordinary family. My dad was a civil servant before he retired and my mum worked, too. We could not always get three meals in a day. Sometimes we’d struggle. But we always had soccer: something that everybody, especially in Nigeria, loves. It’s something that pulls the whole country together, something that can bring peace and unity to Nigeria: everybody wanting the Super Eagles to win.

When you’re growing up, you have your heroes and you hear about people going off to other countries to play football but, when you’re so young, you’re not thinking about that. You just play: no referee, no rules. And when I say we played in the street, I mean in the road, with cars going past! We would just put things down to make goalposts and play with a rubber ball. If you were lucky, it might be like a tennis ball. Something perfectly round. But often the ball wouldn’t be like that. You wouldn’t know where it was going to bounce. We didn’t realise it then but, looking back, maybe using a ball that we couldn’t figure out where it would bounce next helped us with our skills and ball control.

Sometimes we would go to play on a pitch, usually at a school nearby. But I don’t mean a ‘pitch’ like at a professional club in Europe. Those are beautiful, green and flat. At home, it would be a hard, dry surface. Every time you fell over, you’d get cuts and grazes. But we’d run around, we’d play just because we loved the game. You wouldn’t even feel those scratches! We were full of energy and we’d play from morning until night unless our parents shouted at us to come inside. We’d forget everything; forget to eat! Quick: get a little snack and a drink and then play again! I didn’t have any kind of coaching until I was about 11. When you are younger, seven or eight, you just play and whatever skill is inside you can grow.

My dad was chairman of our local football club, Spartans, for a while. But when I was a boy, people didn’t think of football as a career. Only one or two players, like Stephen Keshi, had gone to Europe to play. Sometimes boys would get in trouble for playing: parents wanted their children to read their books and study. Most Nigerian footballers come from poorer families who need their children to help out, to go on the street and do their bit to raise money to help support the family. So they can’t just be playing football all the time. I read my books and did my schoolwork. Dad wanted me to be an engineer. But, eventually, I was spotted for footballing talent.

I can still remember boys I played football with when I was little. When I go home to Owerri now, I still see some of those guys. And we still play. Some of them have moved away, some are still there. But you don’t forget your roots and we get together, eat, drink, hang out. And, at the weekend, we play football together. For fun: we go and find a school field and have a game. And we remember the old days because loving football starts when you’re young. Look at boys when they play: clothes all dirty; then they’re washed at night before they put them on next day, and get them dirty all over again! All they’re thinking of is to play football. They don’t even think about eating. Football’s their food.



### QUESTIONS

1. How does Kanu describe himself?
2. What does Kanu say football can bring to Nigeria?
3. What was the ball that Kanu played with as a child made out of?
4. How old was Kanu when he first had football coaching?
5. What was Kanu’s father’s role at ‘Spartans’?
6. The Nigerian team’s nickname is The Super ...?
7. What did Kanu’s father want his son to be when he grew up?
8. Playing with an unpredictable ball helped the kids with skills and ...?