

From podiums to coffins: Inside Nigerian sports' deadliest enemy

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Wreckage of the bus after the accident that killed 22 Kano athletes

By Peter Akinbo

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For many athletes, there is no farewell match, no final race, no closing bell. There is only the road—a strip of asphalt that has claimed boxers, footballers, Olympians and hopefuls long before their time. From Anthony Joshua's lucky escape to the unluckiest journeys of lesser-known names, Nigeria's highways have become an invisible graveyard where talent fades and futures are buried, writes PETER AKINBO

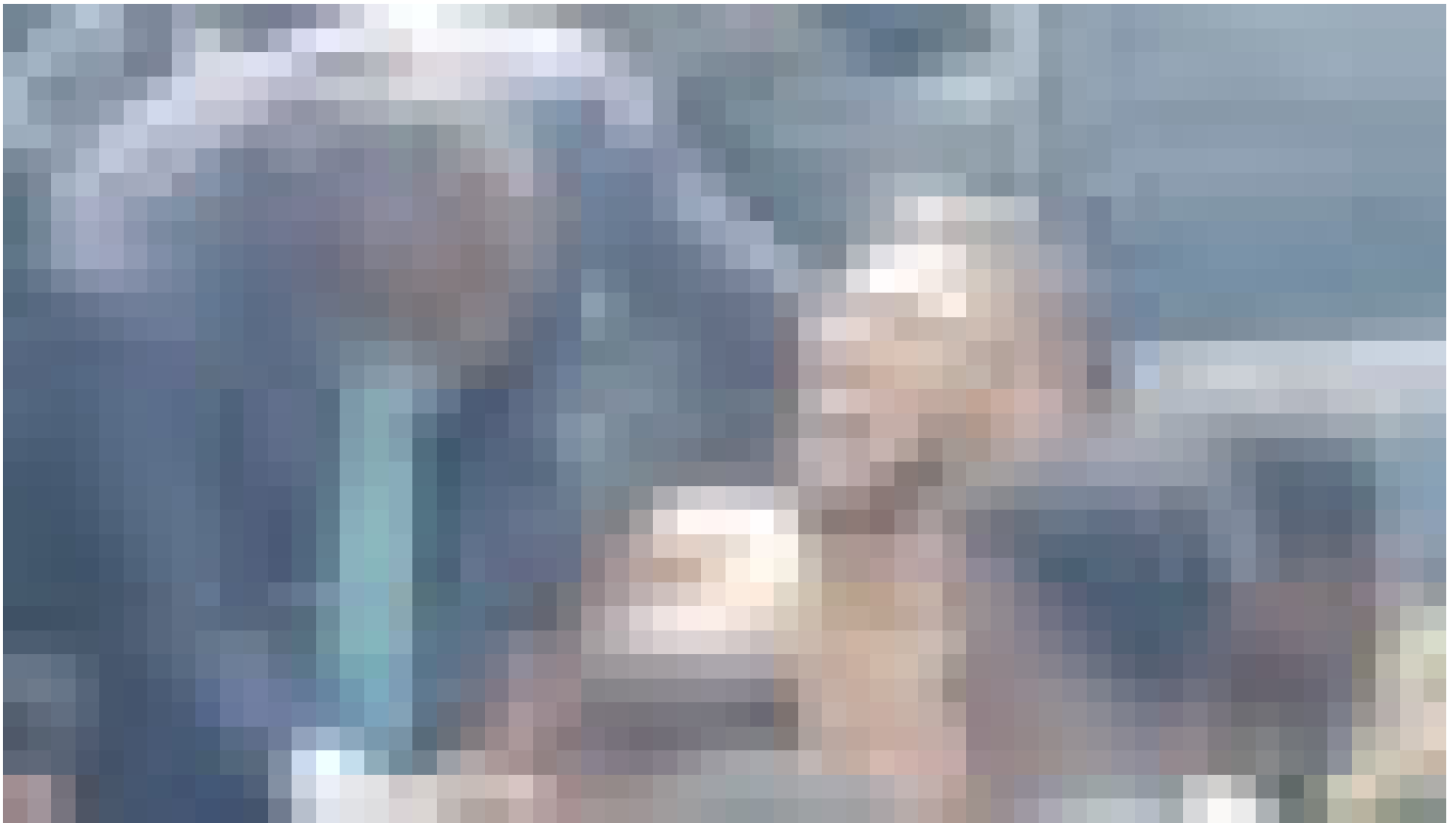
"If he never fought again, you could never ever blame him," Eddie Hearn, Anthony Joshua's promoter, said this after the ghastly car crash that killed two of the boxer's closest friends last December.

For many athletes, the end of a career is announced by a whistle or a bell. For others, it comes with the violent sound of twisted metal. In Nigeria, too many sporting dreams have not ended on the pitch, the track or the ring, but on the road — careers halted not by age or form, but by crashes that left no chance for a farewell.

Countless athletes never reached a point where choice or retirement speeches mattered.

Joshua's escape

On December 29, 2025, Anthony Joshua was travelling from Lagos to Sagamu, his ancestral home in Ogun State, to spend time with his family. The journey should have been routine — just over 50 kilometres on one of Nigeria's busiest expressways.



Anthony Joshua after the accident on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway

Instead, it became a nightmare.

The Lexus SUV carrying Joshua and his team collided with a stationary truck near Makun. Two men died at the scene: Sina Ghami, his strength and conditioning coach, and Latif “Latz” Ayodele, his personal trainer. Both had been with Joshua throughout his rise to the top of world boxing. Both had travelled to Nigeria to meet his family, to see where he came from, to understand the roots that made him the fighter he is.

Joshua had to be extracted from the wreckage by rescuers. He was rushed to the hospital with minor injuries—physically, at least. He has since been discharged and is back in the UK. The psychological wounds, Hearn suggests, may never fully heal.

“Sina and Latz were two guys incredibly close to him on so many different levels,” Hearn told *The Sportsman Boxing*.

“They came up with him and saw the rise, but were also integral parts of the team.”

At the family home in Sagamu, Joshua’s uncle, Adedamola Joshua, spoke to *The PUNCH* with a mixture of relief and resignation and seemingly confirmed Hearn’s psychological fears.

“The major thing there is that he has retired from boxing,” he said.

The accident has sparked fresh questions about Nigeria’s emergency response systems, its road safety record, and how many more talents and potential dreams will be cut short.

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Joshua’s story, devastating as it is, is just the latest chapter in a much longer, bloodier narrative.

Kano 22 rewarded with graves

While Joshua's accident drew international headlines, the Kano 22 only made a ripple beyond Nigeria's borders. Yet their story is, in many ways, more tragic, even more so, because their deaths were so utterly, devastatingly preventable.

On May 31, 2025, a Coaster bus carrying athletes and officials from Kano State plunged off the Chiromawa Bridge on the Kano-Zaria expressway. They were returning from the National Sports Festival in Ogun State, flush with medals—six gold, 13 silver, 10 bronze. They were coming home as heroes.

Instead, 22 of them came home in coffins.

Aminu Idris Abdullahi, the captain of the kickboxing team, remembered the moments before the crash. "We were just chatting when everything changed," he told *The PUNCH*.

"It happened in an instant."

Another survivor, Dorathy Okwuzuluike, said she gripped her seat tightly before "everything went blank." She woke up in the hospital.

Khatimu Hussaini recalled pulling people from the wreckage even as she lay in pain.

"We suddenly found ourselves going under the bridge," she said.

"I saw a woman about to be crushed by the vehicle, and I quickly pulled her back. I also pulled another person. But at that point, I just lay down and started crying in pain."

The Federal Road Safety Corps cited driver fatigue and speeding. But the athletes were in a faulty bus that had broken down in Lokoja days earlier, a vehicle that should never have been back on the road. The champions returned home in death traps while governors flew overhead in helicopters.

Abdulgaffar Oladimeji, Executive Director of Sports Without Borders, was scathing in his assessment. "The bus was donated by the Kano State Government in 2017," he told *The PUNCH*.

"It was originally meant for transporting athletes, but over the years, it became a utility vehicle for everything—political campaigns, weddings, and even ferrying delegates to rallies."

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In 2019, a northern state governor spent N1.2bn on aerial logistics, such as helicopters and private jets. That same year, the state allocated just N18m for athlete development, including transport, feeding, and kits.

However, the Kano 22 died going home in a faulty bus.

Some don't 'walk' out of hospitals

Friday Njengo never made it to Calabar.

The Golden Eaglets defender was travelling from Jalingo to the team's camp in February 2013 when his vehicle crashed near the Taraba State capital. His teammate, goalkeeper Adamu Abubakar, who was with him, walked away with minor injuries.

But Njengo sustained a head injury.



Ex-Eaglets defender Friday Njengo died after a road accident

He spent nine months in the ICU at the National Hospital in Abuja. The Nigeria Football Federation paid for surgery and his treatment but on November 17, 2013, hope ran out. Njengo died without ever playing another match, unable to fulfil the promise he'd shown at the 2013 African U-17 Championship qualifiers.

"This is very sad news," then-NFF General Secretary Musa Amadu said at the time.

"It is a thing of sorrow to lose such a huge talent this way."

Where Anthony Joshua still has a decision to make, Daniel Joshua never did.

On December 12, 2008, the former Golden Eaglets defender, who had helped Nigeria win the 2007 FIFA U-17 World Cup in South Korea, was driving to the Super Eagles camp in Minna when his car crashed. He woke up in hospital, paralysed from the waist down.

"I couldn't remember anything that happened," he told our correspondent.

"I just woke up in the hospital days later. When I woke up, I discovered that my legs were not moving."

Joshua had been on the verge of signing for Atletico Madrid. He'd already impressed at Zenith St. Petersburg in Russia. However, at just 19, the door of football opportunities slammed shut.

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The Niger State Government flew him to Germany for surgery. A professor there told him he would walk again after 120 days of rehabilitation. Joshua began to recover. Then, after three weeks, the government recalled him, saying the treatment was too expensive.

"That was how I missed the chance to recover," Joshua said. "I was brought back on a wheelchair."

For years, he received little support. According to him, the Federal Government didn't respond to letters while Kaduna State said he was "a federal property." The NFF gave him N500,000 and, in Joshua's words, "abandoned him to his fate."

Those who don't reach hospitals

Like the 22 Kano athletes, some others died at scenes of crashes, unable to even get healthcare.

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Hyginus Anugo never got to compete at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. The 22-year-old 400m runner was in Australia with Nigeria's athletics team, a reserve for the 4x400m relay squad. On the evening of September 7, 2000, he was crossing a road in suburban Sydney, reportedly rushing to catch a bus, when he was struck by a car and died at the scene.

His fiancée, Glory Alozie, a World Championships silver medallist, was in Japan at the time, preparing for a competition. She was devastated. The Nigerian flag at the Olympic Village was lowered to half-mast, and the team mourned.



Olympic gold medallist Dosu Joseph's career crashed after a car crash

Less than two decades later, another promising career ended on Nigerian soil.

On February 3, 2019, Kazeem Tiyamiyu, known as "Kaka," was detained by police officers from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad in Sagamu, Ogun State. His club, Remo Stars, alleged that he was pushed out of a moving police vehicle before being struck and killed by another car.

The police denied the allegation, claiming Tiyamiyu had jumped out of the vehicle while trying to escape. An investigation was launched. The officer involved was ordered to be arrested for leaving a detained person alone in the vehicle.

Tiyamiyu was 21, already the assistant captain of Remo Stars. He had his whole career ahead of him.

Survivor with no career

Ifeoma Onwuegbuchulam, a women's footballer, was a passenger on a motorcycle in Osogbo, Osun State, in July, 2025, when a car ran into them. She suffered multiple fractures.

Now, she needs N3.5m for corrective surgery.

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"This accident was very, very serious, but I am happy that I am still alive," the 27-year-old said. "I need another stage of surgery in order to get back fully on my feet, but I can't afford it."

Her former coach, Oscar Emmanuel, was blunt about her future. "She really needs help now, not just for her to play football again, but to at least get back on her feet, if only for her to walk again."

Death traps

Nigeria's roads are among the deadliest in the world. According to the 2025 Africa Status Report on Road Safety, despite having only three per cent of the global vehicle fleet, Africa accounts for 24 per cent of global road fatalities—259,601 deaths yearly. Nigeria has the second-highest road accident record in the world, and the highest in Africa.

The World Health Organisation estimates Nigeria's road traffic fatality rate at 52.4 per 100,000 people—more than 15 times the rate in Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands.

Between January and September 2025 alone, the Federal Road Safety Corps recorded 6,858 crashes, resulting in 3,433 deaths and 22,162 injuries.

December 2025—"Detty December," when millions travel for the holidays—was particularly brutal. Joshua's crash was just one of many.

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The causes are well-documented: speeding, dangerous overtaking, driver fatigue, poor vehicle maintenance, and terrible road conditions. Over 90 per cent of crashes stem from human error, but the infrastructure that enables that error—the potholes, the lack of street lighting, the absence of emergency services—is a failure of the state.



U-17 World Cup winner Daniel Joshua's career ended after an auto crash

Dr Patrick Adenusi, Technical Director of Safety Beyond Borders, is blunt in his assessment.

“A lot of things are wrong in Nigeria, and Anthony Joshua’s case is bringing them to the fore now,” he said. “If you sample the views of 100 Nigerians regarding emergency numbers, 99 of them will not know it.”

The national emergency number, 112, exists. But in many states, it doesn’t work. Network coverage is patchy. Ambulances are few and poorly equipped.

The “Golden Hour”—the critical first 60 minutes after an accident when prompt medical care can mean the difference between life and death—is routinely wasted in Nigeria.

The others many forget

Nigerian sport is haunted by ghosts and more bodies are still being added.

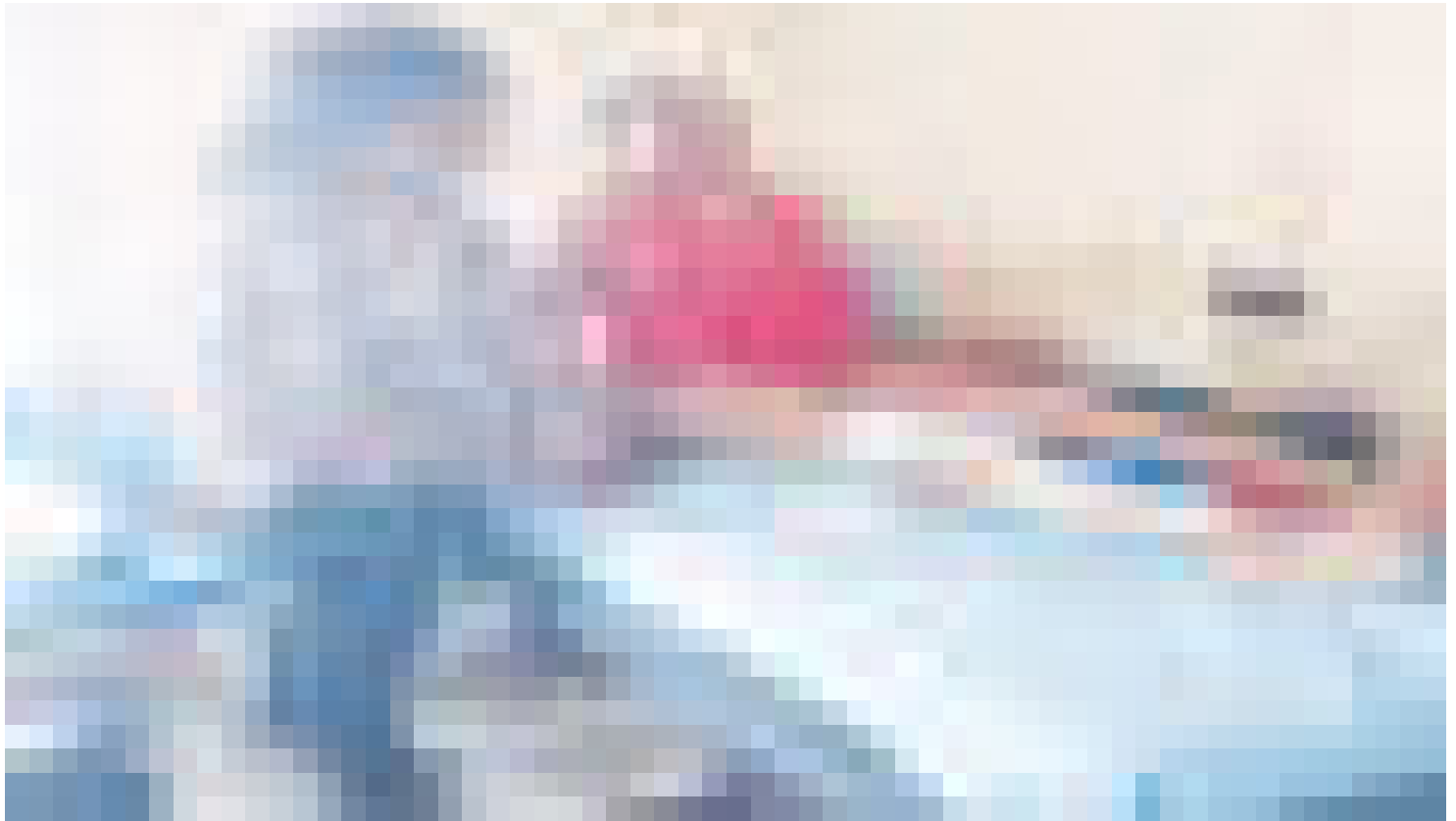
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Olufemi Adebayo, Chinedu Udoji, Ifeanyi George, Kazeem Tiya miyu, Saturday Glory, Aniebet Ekong, Paul Julius, Christian Obi, Oluyemi Kayode and Hussaini Isiah.

These men and women, who dreamt of glory under stadium lights, died after road accidents.

Adebayo’s wedding was supposed to be beautiful. He’d played alongside Mikel Obi in the 2005 U-20 World Cup, stood on the podium at the 2008 Olympics with silver around his neck. In April 2011, at 25, he was driving from Xanthi to Salonika in Greece, his mind probably on vows and the future he was about to build. The car crash took all of that. His fiancée never became his wife, and his career was halted.

Udoji's children were aged six and four respectively when their father died. The Enyimba legend, the man who'd captained one of Africa's greatest club sides to continental glory, had just been named man of the match for Kano Pillars. It was February 2018. He was driving home, and he never arrived, and his wife became a widow at 29.



Onwuegbuchulam on her sick bed

Saturday Glory and Aniebet Ekong died together. They'd just finished training with Police Machine FC on October 1, 2019. They were walking along New Stadium Road when the car hit them. Both died before they reached the hospital.

Like Udoji, Hussaini Isiah, a Niger Tornados left-back who was named man of the match in a 1-1 draw against Kwara United on a Sunday in 2020. The next evening, he was walking along Maitumbi Road in Minna when a motorcyclist, popularly known as okada rider, struck him down. He was 24.

The lucky one

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While Joshua can be counted as the luckiest guy in the world, another lucky one is Dosu Joseph. The Olympic gold medallist, the goalkeeper who'd helped Nigeria's football team stand atop the podium in Atlanta in 1996, was 23 when his car crashed in Lagos in 1997. Italian Serie A side Reggiana were ready to sign him. His gloves, which had kept clean sheets for his country, would never touch European grass. Today, he runs a football club that bears his name, a life rebuilt from wreckage, but not the life he was supposed to have.

These are some of the ones whose names made the papers. How many others have been forgotten?

The past, present and the road ahead

Anthony Joshua's uncle expects his retirement to be announced soon, though Hearn believes he'll return once he's grieved.

“Knowing AJ, after he’s grieved, I believe he will want to get back to boxing,” Hearn said.

Joshua was supposed to fight Tyson Fury in 2026—the biggest British heavyweight clash in a generation, a fight that would headline Riyadh Season and captivate the boxing world, and probably surpass 2025’s richest fight, his \$267m bout vs Jake Paul. Now, that future is uncertain.

For the Kano 22, there is no return. For Daniel Joshua, there is no miracle recovery. For Friday Njengo, Kazeem Tiyaamiyu, Chinedu Udoji and many more, there are only eulogies and what-ifs.

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Change is possible. Sweden’s Vision Zero policy, introduced in 1997, aimed to reduce road deaths to zero by 2020. While they missed that target, road deaths have nearly halved. The policy involved redesigning roads, building more roundabouts and pedestrian bridges, strict enforcement of traffic laws, and a cultural shift in how Swedes think about road safety.

Of course, not all the crashes happened in Nigeria, but with the ugly publicity Nigeria got following the Anthony Joshua car crash, the country could certainly learn from this.

But change requires political will, investment, and a recognition that the lives of athletes, of all citizens, matter.

Sports advocate Igoche Mark has called for compulsory insurance for Nigerian athletes. “It is imperative that we make life insurance coverage for athletes a mandatory requirement,” he said, following the Kano tragedy.

“Such a policy would provide essential financial protection and peace of mind for athletes and their families.”

Although good, insurance is a plaster on a gaping wound. Prevention, as they say, is better than cure. What Nigerian athletes need is safe transport, functioning emergency services, roads that don’t kill, and a government that doesn’t treat them as expendable.

They need a country that values them as much when they’re travelling as much as it does when they’re standing on a podium, draped in green and white.

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The final whistle needs to be back on the pitches and tracks, and the bells of the rings. Way too often, it comes too early, on a highway, in the dark, when no one is ready.

And the silence that follows echoes forever.