

*By Jeje Muhinde;*

The Tokyo Olympic curtains closed on Sunday, August 8 with athletes and nations packing their bags to head back home.

It was an Olympic Games more than ever before, staged a year late because of COVID-19 with no crowds of supporters-emptiness, physically in the stands.

For the athletes and nations, the celebrations are still ongoing back at home for having won medals, breaking new records or setting new personal best performances while others will be looking at where they can improve in three years' time when the Games head to Paris in 2024.

Well, it was business as usual for the dominant nations in the Tokyo 2021 Games, and not so good performance for others like Rwanda.

The USA earned the most medals of any nation, also narrowly taking home more gold medals than any other country after trailing China in the gold medal count for much of the games.

For Africa, Tokyo 2020 was not a successful Olympics. The continent's final tally was dwindling to 37 medals equal to that of Germany nonetheless eight fewer than in Rio de Janeiro five years ago.

In East Africa, Kenya and Uganda turned out to be the bigger Africa representatives on the continent. In total, Kenya has won ten medals which include four gold, four silver and two bronze.

Besides athletics, Kenya featured in sevens rugby for men and women, boxing, swimming, volleyball, beach volleyball and taekwondo.

Uganda also put up impressive numbers winning a total of four medals, which include two gold, one silver, and one bronze. Uganda's Joshua Cheptegei and Kenya's Faith Kipyegon both won gold medals on the athletics track on day 14 of the Tokyo Olympics.

Ethiopia rounded up Africa's top-placed countries after South Africa with a total of three medals – one gold, one silver, one bronze.

As always, and for the tenth time at the Summer Olympic Games, Rwanda came

back empty handed, the road to gold is still elusive.

For every four years — in this case five — the same questions are posed in Rwanda. Why is the country so bad at the Olympics? And does it even matter?

Well, the argument is, the East African nation should consider broadening Olympic focus to other sports like Taekwondo, Karate, skating, boxing, tennis, fencing, shooting and sport climbing.

Both the local sports federations and the National Olympic and Sports Committee (RNOSC), should try to understand the secret of preparation, and getting young athletes involved early.

In Kenya for instance, they have invested a lot in the development of the youth, right from schools. Sports organizations are partnered very well with the ministry of education, while the ministry of education has a good program of tapping talent right from primary schools and secondary schools, who then graduate to senior ranks through the organization of sports.

Theogene Uwayo, head of Rwanda Olympic Committee with a difficult task at hand, has acknowledged that there is need for major change.

In Tokyo 2020 for example, a total of athletes from 61 nations plus three members of the Refugee Olympic Team competed in taekwondo alone.

Then again, statistics highlight the sport's significance to smaller sporting nations like Rwanda since it is very easy to practice and its popularity rests, in part, on the fact that it does not require expensive equipment.

It is also fair to point out that Rwanda has failed to create a centralized system for identifying talented athletes, later on supporting them financially, with first class training, coaching and scientific expertise.

RNOSC and sports federations are condemned for the atrocious preparation of athletes while in response, the federation claim, "lack of financial sponsorship".

Furthermore, athletes have also been under pressure, they're accused of lack of ambition, being unable to compete as well as failure to complete the events.

Then again, there are factors which seem to be constraining more like the

prioritizing of sports disciplines, dependence on specific sports plus the cut in funding which has left little room for representation in other sports.

Since making its Olympic debut at the Los Angeles Games in 1984, Rwanda is remarkably confined to three sports.

These sports are, of course, athletics, cycling and swimming. It was only once in 2012, when the East African nation sent a Judo representative for the London Games.

It should be noted that, overdependence is centered around athletics. A total of 37 have represented the nation since Rwanda joined the Olympics Games in 1984, the biggest contingent sent for the Games was seven at the Barcelona Games.

Tokyo 2020 was another field of disappointment for Rwanda, female long distance runner Marthe Yankurije finished in #17 position, 1:20min behind the Ethiopian gold medalist Gudaf Tsegay.

In cycling, Moise Mugisha rammed into a service car while trying to get a water bottle. Another runner, John Hakizimana didn't have enough in his tanker to complete the marathon.

Numbers to indicate, the nation has only sent two swimming participants for the Games since the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

In cycling for example, the proportion has come down since the Barcelona Games when the nation sent three riders. In Rio, Rwanda sent two riders, and one for each at the London and Tokyo Games.

Different theories have come up as to why the performance of Rwanda in Tokyo did not measure up to any expectations. COVID-19 was one of the factors.

"The pandemic totally disrupted events and training sessions for athletes," observed a member from Rwanda Athletics Federation.