

**ADDRESS BY H.E. JERRY JOHN RAWLINGS**

**AT THE LAUNCH OF THE BOOK**

**THE PROFESSOR: THE LIFE STORY OF AZUMAH NELSON**

**ALISA HOTEL ACCRA, WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 29, 2014**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my pleasure to join Professor Azumah Nelson in launching *The Professor*, a book about his extraordinary life – a life perhaps unparalleled in Ghana's rich history.

Athletics, football and boxing were sporting disciplines that put Ghana on the world map during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, as Ghana participated in various tournaments from the All Africa Games to the Commonwealth through to the Olympics.

While we can describe the performances of our sportsmen as commendable, it was the genius of Azumah that sent some across the globe to check the position of Ghana on the world map.

Azumah put Ghana on the map long before football did through the Starlets 91 group that proudly annexed the World Under-17 Cup.

The story of Azumah is truly one of a man who was never intimidated by the challenges of his humble beginnings. He saw every challenge as a reason to create an opportunity. Author Ashley Morrison does an excellent literary job of piecing together the Azumah story, the Azumah way – full of innocence, candour and emotion.

The book not only showcases Azumah's lineage and ancestry but also Ghana's rich cultural history. It leaves nothing out in capturing the socio-political situation that persisted especially during the world title days.

It was quite instructive when Azumah's childhood friend Obi Oblitey offered a vivid description of the beauty of the blue seawater that used to be the Korle Lagoon – full of fish that swam in peaceful abandon surrounded by coconut trees that bordered the river bank. He went ahead to offer persuasive reasons why the Lagoon is today a sea of filth and lifelessness.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Azumah became a world champion during a very trying moment in Ghana's history. A period when the fortunes of our country had declined to dangerous levels and drastic measures had to be taken to turn the tide and bring Ghana back to its rightful position on the continent.

Professor Azumah Nelson almost singlehandedly flew the kite of Ghana under those trying periods and brought so much joy to millions across the country. He was an embodiment of the sense of purpose, sense of mission and unity that had gripped the nation during the revolutionary period.

Azumah's incredible childhood is what should inspire our youth today. Reading his story in black and white, as we used to say, exposes a story of perseverance, sense of commitment and will power so formidable that even his diminutive figure was turned into a veritable asset – a weapon that deceived many into believing that he could be beaten easily especially during his early days in the profession.

The handsome looking young man sitting here today was a man who was never going to go hungry, and found ingenious methods, applying skill, dexterity and wit to make ends meet during the formative years of his life. Even his love life as told in the book is one that will confound many.

One of the most inspiring moments during Azumah's long sojourn as a world title holder was his post-match interviews, which Ghanaians looked forward to. It was the round thirteen of most bouts as he sometimes created his own lexicon and riled us with laughter as we savoured his latest victory. He was always magnanimous in victory but never hesitant to drop a threat or two, completing it with a knockout prediction when the unrepentant opponent claimed Azumah had not won on merit.

As Australian hothead Jeff Fenech will attest to, Azumah held no punches when it came to return matches and that resounding trashing at his backyard put paid to the accusations that Azumah's first victory was a sham.

Azumah was uniquely different. He had a sense of intuition that was earned not only through the various knocks of life but also through a high sense of spirituality that is expressed in the book in diverse ways. He had both a sixth and seventh sense.

Ring Magazine's Nigel Collins tried to unravel the enigma of Azumah when he described his style as "a strange hybrid", adding that: "He is best described as a cerebral slugger, and it's what goes on inside his head that is his greatest asset. He is cool, calculating, with just the right touch of fanaticism. And never, even under the most trying circumstances, does he get discouraged."

There are several instances in the book when his famous trainer Buffalo Martinez is perplexed by Azumah's refusal to follow the game plan. That is Azumah all right but victory was always guaranteed even if his trainer had to miss a few heartbeats. It was a surprise though that handling a tough guy like Azumah did not bring down the weight of oversized Buffalo.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I have been quoted extensively in the book because of my historical links with Azumah right from his time training as a boxer with the Armed Forces, to my continued interest in his career progress during my tenure as Head of State, but please allow me to quote this passage.

"What I noticed about Azumah was that when the odds were stacked against him, that was when he was at his best. And it was proven through what happened against Fenech in Australia.

"He demonstrated the true spirit of a boxer. In football, when you are in trouble, most players pass the buck or pass the ball. In boxing, there is no one to pass it on to. You can't pass the buck in a boxing ring, and to have held the title for that long also demonstrates the fighting spirit of the man. He is, in a way self-made. Others who tried to rely on other environments didn't last that long. Most champions do not last as long as he did, and he

did so because of his own personal and internal spiritual, mental, and physical discipline – all three, the state of his mind and spirit. He made sure that his physical performance did not fall behind the strength of his mind and spirit. Winning the championship, the environment did not change his mindset. If he made money, it did not change him.”

In fulfilling his duties as a boxer Azumah was always aware of the need to provide for his family and his numerous friends and admirers who were underprivileged. And sometimes he had to achieve victory under circumstances that many would find difficult to overcome. His desire to die for Ghana and put a smile on the faces of Ghanaians played a significant role in those victories and it is gratifying to note that Azumah had a clause in his contract that ensured that all his world title fights had to be relayed directly to GBC so that Ghanaians could watch him live. When such arrangements were not in his contract he doled out thousands of dollars for the live telecast to take place.

Such is the sense of humility and patriotism of the man we celebrate today. He has not stopped to show love and compassion to the disadvantaged. The establishment of the Azumah Nelson Foundation and the projects already underway prove how much of a blessing this proud Ghanaian has brought to our country.

Ashley Morrison has done excellent research in interviewing opponents, judges, referees, promoters and other boxers and offers a varied and broad commentary on the intriguing life of the Professor as well as the controversial world of boxing.

Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot end without the mention of the role the late Attuquaye Clottey played in shaping the career of Azumah. And I commend the champion for paying significant tribute to his first trainer and mentor. Once you read the book you will understand what a master tactician Attuquaye Clottey was.

Professor, I commend you for taking great pains to put together this biography. It is another sign of your selfless devotion to your country. This book should be compulsory reading for our young ones at all levels of education in the country. It is a book about a life well lived and a life every citizen of our country should emulate.

Azumah, you are a great blessing to our country.

I HEREBY DECLARE THE BOOK, ***THE PROFESSOR***, DULY LAUNCHED!

Thank you.