CHAPTER TWO

'The thing that is not round'
The untold story of black rugby in South Africa*

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Recently retired South African rugby legend Uli Schmidt was known throughout the rugby playing world as a brilliant, bruising hooker with a penchant for popping up in the most unexpected places to score tries. But off the field he continues to play according to old rules. In 1994 he declared that rugby was not a natural game for blacks to play. 'It is not in their culture', he said. 'They should play soccer'. Schmidt was echoing what most white rugby players in South Africa have come to accept as truth. And although they try to cloak this fact in new-South-Africa-speak, their views are grounded in old-style apartheid ideology, which implicitly explains racial domination and discrimination as 'natural'.

As late as 1977 the official South African Year Book claimed that it is only comparatively recently that the Black peoples have shown a marked increase in what may be called modern sporting activities. For centuries they found their recreation in traditional activities, such as hunting and tribal dances. It was the White nation, with its European background and tradition, which participated in the recognised sports ...²

Past Springbok captains transmitted this apartheid thinking in almost unabridged form. In 1971 Hannes Marais, now convener of the South African selection panel, suggested that: 'The Coloured population does not seem very interested in sport. They do not play much rugby and cricket'. In 1980 Dawie de Villiers, now a cabinet minister in Nelson Mandela's government of national unity, declared: 'Don't forget that the Blacks have really known western sports [only] for the last ten years. [Therefore] they have naturally not yet reached the same standard'.

The time has come to bury the myth that current inequalities in rugby evolved naturally; that they existed because black South Africans were not interested in the game or were not suited to it, psychologically, emotionally and physically. This underlying assumption, which still directly and indirectly permeates the game despite rugby 'unity' and the achievement of political democracy, is one of the main reasons for the muddled arrogance and unhappiness that has characterised South African rugby in recent years. The fact that it is still articulated with such smugness is an example of a deep-seated and enduring racism in South African sport and society. For the future of the game, racism in its overt as well as hidden forms needs to be addressed at the highest levels by rugby administrations.

Black rugby players and sportspeople are relatively underdeveloped as a direct result of South Africa's history of colonialism, segregation and apartheid. Sport in South Africa has always been linked closely to politics and has reflected the society and social structures. This can be seen on various levels: in the organisational structures that developed, in the value systems that became entrenched in sport, in the issues that excited sportspeople over the years, in the differences that emerged amongst them, and in the way the development of sport closely followed the pattern of historical and regional development.

Contrary to general knowledge, black South Africans have a long, indeed remarkable, rugby and sporting history. This piece is the first work that locates black rugby firmly in an historical context, identifies the main contours of its development and analyses internal problems and contradictions, while also providing some details of general interest for rugby followers. It has drawn largely from, and tries to build on, three important earlier works. Firstly, the labour of love by the late Braber Ngozi, a star rugby player from the 1930s and 1940s,
who made it his life's task to collect brochures, news reports and personal reminiscences on the history of black rugby. Secondly, the 1981 academic article by Jeff Peires which started exploring the history of African rugby in the Eastern Cape and helped bring the importance of sport in understanding South African history to the notice of academic researchers. And, finally, the chapters on black rugby by Paul Dobson, official historian of the old establishment South African Rugby Board.

Although this chapter cannot provide the definitive history of black rugby, it assists in recovering and understanding a story that has been scandalously ignored, to the detriment of sport in South Africa.

Cape Town origins

Cape Town was the birthplace of South African sport as we know it today. After the British took over the Cape on a permanent basis early in the 19th century, soldiers and settlers introduced games like horse racing, cricket and, later on, rugby. For the British colonisers in the African and Asian colonies these sports and the clubs that were set up later served as symbols, not only of social, but also of political domination. As one historian has pointed out,

'[the club] was developed as an enclave of power and privilege in an alien setting, its members patently different from the unadmitted millions not only in colour and status, but also in place. More than anywhere else it was the place where the imperialists celebrated their Britishness, authority and imperial lifestyle'.

Nevertheless, the local people, both black and white, soon came into contact with these sports, and started giving them a distinct South African character. The historian Hattersley tells, for instance, of a horse race in Green Point, Cape Town, as early as the 1820s where ‘... Malagasy Negroes mingled with whites, all crowding and elbowing, eager to get a sight of the momentous event’. One of the earliest artist's sketches of a rugby match in Cape Town also features spectators wearing the distinctive *koufeia* identified with the Cape Muslim community. By the 1860s young men with names like Lobengula and Moshesh were playing cricket for Zonnebloem College, the school started in District Six by Cape Governor Grey with the specific aim of acculturating or 'civilising' the sons of African chiefs.

Organised sport was still in its infancy at that stage. By the 1870s there were only a few clubs in existence in larger centres like Cape Town, Pietermaritzburg and Port Elizabeth, where sizeable numbers of British soldiers, administrators and settlers could be found. Among these was the first African cricket club started in Port Elizabeth in 1869. No regional or national sports associations had been formed and there were no official leagues or competitions. It was only between 1875 and 1885 that sport became institutionalised. In those ten years the first rugby, soccer, athletics, cycling, horse racing, golf and tennis clubs were formed, and regular competitions were started. From the 1880s onwards, national organisations were formed to place sport on an organised footing.

There were two main reasons for this growth in sport. The first was the discovery of the richest mineral deposits in the world which dramatically transformed South African life. Diamonds and gold attracted large numbers of European fortune seekers into the interior, gave rise to industries and towns, and encouraged Britain to extend its sphere of power. This led to the so-called Anglo-Boer War and the new Union of South Africa which, in 1910, drew previously fragmented political territories into a single state. Secondly, during the last half of the 19th century sport became a mass leisure activity catering for the large populations moving to the new urban environments which sprang up following the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Within South Africa, new arrivals from Britain started emulating what was happening at 'home'.

When the British colonists started to form clubs, competitions and regional and national organisations, black sportspeople soon followed suit, particularly in Cape Town, the Eastern Province and Kimberley. The Western Province Coloured Rugby Union (WPCRU), for example, was formed in Cape Town in 1886, only three years after white rugby players had formed their own exclusive Western Province Rugby Football Union. The founding clubs of the WPCRU were Rosyls from District Six, Violets from Claremont, Good Hopes and
Arabian College from the Bo-Kaap (or what was then commonly known as the Malay Quarter). Later these clubs were joined by Hamediahs, founded in 1896, and other teams. In 1898 competition was put on a formal footing with the Fernwood Cup competition for first division teams in the union.11

As the names Arabian College and Hamediahs indicate, the teams in the Fernwood Cup were drawn from the cohesive and well-established Muslim community in Cape Town. Although the Cape Muslims became passionate rugby and cricket followers at an early stage, they adopted the new games on their own terms, giving them a distinctive character and meaning. The values of muscular Christianity and the British empire attached to sport by the ruling classes and the church schools of the time obviously did not have the same relevance for Muslim sportspeople.

Teams were community-based, often coming from one street, a family group or the ‘Jamaahs’, organised groups meeting for religious purposes which spread out into the social sphere. Formal sports clubs emerged from these communal activities.12 The teams were predominantly Muslim. A local Muslim sports historian has explained why this was so:

They ... decided ... to organise on ethical and cultural grounds in order to keep the Muslims of the Cape together and also to bring unity amongst them. As most of the leading administrators were also the Imams of the congregation, they felt it was better to organise separately as they were mostly against the drinking habits of the other groups, especially over the festive season.13

The local ‘Malays’, as the Muslims were generically (and often incorrectly) labelled, became colourful features of the white-only establishment rugby scene. Easily distinguished by their koufeias (or fezzes) and liedjies (songs), they became passionate supporters of local white clubs and the provincial team:

The teams which had most support were near the people’s homes – Varsity, Villagers and Hamiltons, and this led to increased rivalry between the people of the city and those agter die Tol – beyond the Tollgate at Woodstock. These were above all the people of Claremont, known to the people of the city as Tamaleitjiedorp. If Villagers lost they would say, ‘Die ligte is uit [the lights are out] in Tamaleitjiedorp’. And if Hamiltons lost ... the Malays of Claremont ... would say with delight, ‘Vaanand is daar martial law in die Kaap’ (tonight there is martial law in the Cape).14

The Muslim supporters became synonymous too with the historic Newlands rugby ground. They were accommodated behind the posts in the segregated south stand (or Malay Stand) sitting in ‘rows of red fezzes above smart grey suits’. For more than 30 years – from 1919 to 1953 – the legendary Gasant Ederoos Behardien (commonly known as Gamat) was the ‘ballboy’ for Western Province and South African teams. According to Paul Dobson, Gamat would inevitably appear at the tunnel ‘elegant in his long white coat and red fez’ to stir up a ‘delicious pre-match excitement’. Doekums or ‘Malay tricks’ meant to jinx the opposition and ward off bad luck for the home team became part of the Newlands folklore. Famous players like Bennie Osler, who carried a bag of doepa around with him on the 1931-32 tour to Britain, (and was injured in the one match he failed to do so), were known to engage in superstitious rituals attributed to Muslim custom.

Osler was reputed to have been very close to the Muslim community, regularly coaching local teams and even helping to establish the Cape Malay Choir Board. One observer has pointed out that he was also a representative for the United Tobacco Company and that part of his duties were to be at local meetings to get players to use UTC products. Gamat the subservient jester and Osler the famous benefactor were reflections, from different ends of the spectrum, of the unequal and paternalistic relations that characterised sporting contacts between black and white at the Cape. White players sometimes helped coach black teams, or allowed them to use their fields, and the affinity which developed between the white rugby establishment at the Cape and the so-called Malay constituency was not
BEYOND THE TRYLINE

paralleled anywhere else in South Africa. However, these contacts certainly did not challenge the racial order.

As a result of cultural and religious particularism, re-inforced by the segregationist politics of the state, not one, but several 'provincial' rugby boards eventually emerged from the black communities of Cape Town. This had a major impact on the history of black/non-racial rugby, complicating relations and leading to long-running tensions which spilled over at both local and national level.

Following the formation of the predominantly Muslim board in 1886, a second regional organisation, the City and Suburban Union, was formed in 1898. Cities was based in Mowbray and its main club was Wanderers. Formed in 1896, it had won the championship 13 times by 1920, overshadowing rivals like Oaks, Thistles, Perserverance, Temperance and Californians. A correspondent reported in 1914 that the city and Suburban Union had impressive facilities, including a stand which could accommodate between 600 to 700 people, good dressing rooms, first-aid facilities and a 'nicely-kept refreshment stall' run by a 'very obliging lady and her daughter' who served cake and tea.15

The names of the early officials - Carelse, Maneveld and Mulder - confirm that this was a union representing a different sector of the black community. Club names like Temperance, Progress and Perserverance might have come straight out of John Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress, as Dobson has indicated, and they showed how the contemporary values of Christianity and Victorian 'progress' had been internalised by sections of the black population. City and Suburban remained very specific about membership: as late as the 1960s, a clause in its constitution forbade membership to Muslims.16

This kind of sectionalism existed in other sports as well, and remained a perennial problem in sport in Cape Town. For a time the Cape District Football Association did not admit Muslim clubs. Richard van der Ross claims that the reason for this was that the administrators of the separate Western Province Muslim Soccer League actually asked Cape District to exclude Muslim clubs 'in order to strengthen their own League'.17 But this was only part of a complex story in which communities discriminated against on the basis of their colour developed their own internal hierarchies and sets of discrimi-

natory values. As the legendary sports administrator, Hassan Howa, recalled:

When I started playing cricket I found a very sad set up. Muslims played in one league, Christians in another, Indians in another. I couldn't fit in with the Malays, nor with the Indians and so I fell in with the Coloureds of the Wynberg Cricket Union ... conditions were highly discriminatory. One had to be a Christian before one could play for Western Province, one had to be a certain lightness and one had to be able to run a pencil through one's hair. It was then that I learnt to fight the whole reactionary establishment.18

Perserverance rugby club was among those which attached special importance to the lightness of one's skin. When the non-racial sports movement emerged in the 1950s it tried to counter these longstanding divisions amongst black sportspeople, but the old fault lines continued to open up from time to time - and even today their topography is still visible.

Meanwhile, by the turn of the century rugby had spread beyond the city of Cape Town to Stellenbosch, Paarl and other outlying areas. For example, the Central Rugby Football Union (Coloured) was in 1912 organising leagues involving Swellendam, Robertson, Heidelberg, Riversdale, Ladismith and Mossel Bay.19 Statistics provided by Dobson show that by 1930 there were more than 200 black rugby clubs in Cape Town and the surrounding areas.20 These included African rugby clubs, as we shall see below. Small wonder then that the Western Cape became the stronghold of black/non-racial rugby in South Africa. The sportspeople here were part of a long tradition. As city dwellers they were relatively affluent. They took part in large numbers. And they had closer connections with white establishment sport than anywhere else in the country.
The Eastern Cape as a cradle of rugby

The other important cradle of black sport in South Africa was the Eastern Cape. Here, dynamics very different to those in the relatively cosmopolitan Western Cape shaped the development of games like rugby and cricket. This region was the home of hundreds of thousands of Africans brought under British rule during the 19th century as Xhosa chieftoms were conquered and incorporated into the expanding Cape Colony. British rule had a disruptive effect on the conquered societies. A European system of administration was imposed over them and agents of imperialism such as missionaries, teachers, traders and farmers moved into the African territories bringing the indigenous people into contact with alien European ideas and institutions. The missionaries, for example, set up schools and encouraged the people to forego their ‘uncivilised’ customs and obtain a Western education, learn about Christianity and adopt British cultural values. This led to the emergence of a market, rather than subsistence, oriented peasantry and a new class of literate, missionary-educated ‘school’ people. These people — teachers, ministers, law agents, clerks, interpreters, storemen, transport riders, blacksmiths, telegraph operators and printers — entertained high hopes that having accepted the way of the white man they would eventually be assimilated fully into the evolving Cape colonial society.

The Cape Colony constitution of 1853 provided for a qualified franchise which allowed all citizens, regardless of colour, to vote if they owned property to the value of £25 and could sign their names. By the mid-1880s around ten thousand Africans had registered as voters. They formed their own political organisations based on the example of the white political parties, started a newspaper and were so strong in some constituencies that they were able to return candidates of their choice to parliament. 21

Sport was integral to this whole process of assimilation and mobilisation. Together with politics, education and religion, it was one of the many aspects of British culture that the new African elite enthusiastically adopted in pursuit of its assimilationist goals.

The mission schools, often racially mixed and providing education based on the English model, were the training grounds for black sportsmen. The numbers of people attending these schools rose from 2,827 pupils in 1865 to 15,568 pupils in about 700 schools by 1885. Recreation was a matter of supreme importance at these institutions and as many of the cultural activities of tribal Africans were deemed ‘incompatible with Christian purity of life’ and had to be abandoned by those embracing the new religious ideas of the missionaries. Provision was, therefore, made for the ‘profitable employment of leisure’. 22 Drill became a regular feature on time-tables and sports were introduced. Instructive of the relationship between religion, education, culture and sport was a report in a missionary newspaper of festivities in 1870 to celebrate the founding of one of the earliest African Sunday School unions. After a day-and-a-half of church services and festivities, the 700 young people involved ‘broke up into parties for various sports’. 23 And on the Queen’s birthday in 1877, all the pupils at Lovedale had a day of sport in the fields. 24

If the schools were where Africans in the Eastern Cape were introduced to sport, they needed no encouragement to develop their interest after leaving these institutions. The first African-controlled newspaper, Isimangaliso (Native Opinion) — started in 1884 and still publishing today — abounded with copy of sport. These were printed under the heading of ‘IsiXhosa’ (sport reports), and by 1888 the newspaper had a ‘sporting editor’. The big Dyer and Dyer merchant house placed advertisements in the newspaper directed specifically at African sportsmen and clubs. 25

Cricket was by far the most popular sport. For the Victorians it embodied ‘a perfect system of ethics and morals’, and the school people of the Eastern Cape made it their own as well. By the mid-1880s there were thriving African cricket clubs and regular competitions in almost all areas in the region. Following the white precedent of the inter-town tournament for the Champion Bat, the precursor to the Currie Cup provincial competition, black cricketers started their own inter-town tournament in 1884. In a subsequent challenge match, the champions from King Williams Town beat their white counterparts who had taken part in the Champion Bat tournament. The Port Elizabeth Telegraph was not exaggerating when it observed that cricket ‘seems quite to hit the Kaffir fancy’. 26

After cricket, rugby, football and tennis were the next most popular games for the aspiring black petty bourgeoisie. Although
rugby, or *mboxo* (the thing that is not round), was relatively slow in taking root in the region, it established itself in an enduring manner. Today the Eastern Province is virtually the only place in the country where rugby has a popularity rivalling soccer amongst Africans. The first black teams were probably institutional, based at Lovedale, Healdtown and the Kaffir Institution. Located in Grahamstown and run by the Anglican Church, the latter was a sister school to the white St Andrews College, which started playing the game as early as 1878. And, according to tradition, it was the St Andrews headmaster, Reverend Mullins, who introduced rugby to the black community.27

The first adult club in the region was Union Rugby Football which was formed in Port Elizabeth in 1887. According to records collected by rugby historian Braber Ngozi, the club was started by ‘kitchen boys who learnt their rugby from whites’.28 This could only have been part of the story because the first president, Stephen Katta, was one of the leading figures in the local Native Vigilance Committee through which the local elite of voters (totalling 274 in 1891), ministers and educated people represented African opinion in the town.29 The headquarters of the club were at KwaMpundu, the present Mill Park, and the games were played at Dubula, where the provincial hospital now stands. At first Union’s opponents were local coloured teams, which formed themselves into a Port Elizabeth Coloured Rugby Union in 1892; but in 1894 a second African club, Orientals, was formed, followed by the Morning Star, Rovers, Frontier and, in 1906, Spring Rose clubs.

Union and Orientals became the strongest teams, and their matches were modelled on the rivalry between the main white clubs, Crusaders and Olympics.

Around the turn of the century, the first major attempts at urban segregation occurred in the main towns of the Cape Colony. Following a pattern that would become familiar in South Africa during the 20th century, just over twenty thousand Africans from Port Elizabeth were pushed to the edges of the town, into new ‘locations’ at Korsten and New Brighton. Orientals became the Korsten club and Spring Rose, named after the area near Bedford from which most of its members had come, belonged to New Brighton, though the club’s meetings continued to be held ‘in the open air’ in town.30

Contests between different towns in the Eastern Cape were taking place well before the turn of the century. Sometimes challenges would take place via the press, as when Grahamstown challenged towns like East London and King Williams Town in the columns of the *Imvo Zabantsundu* in 1899: ‘Velani makwedini ase ma X[h]oseni’ (come on/show yourselves young boys of Xhosaland), the Grahamstown correspondent teased.31 By 1904 the level of organisation and enthusiasm had reached the stage where the first inter-town tournament could be organised in Port Elizabeth. Teams from Grahamstown and East London participated.

Following on this event, an Eastern Province Native Rugby Union was formed in 1905. The first EPNRU president was Tobias Myula and the secretary was R.R. Booi, an employee of the Union Castle shipping company. The inter-town fixtures were continued under the new union, and were played over a period of several weeks. After first round play-offs in the various localities, the winning local teams went on to play against other towns in the second round, leading to a final in Port Elizabeth for the Wynne’s Cup, which had been presented by a local businessman. In 1906 there were nine teams playing for the Wynne’s Cup: the 1905 champions Oriental, Union and Rovers (all Port Elizabeth), Zebras Football Club (Uitenhage), Lions Football Club (Cradock), and Wanderers, Winter Rose, Lilly White and Eastern Province Football Club (Grahamstown). The following year, they were joined by the Tigers club from Somerset East.32 Founded in 1895, Tigers acquired their first jerseys after the South African War and chose the colours of the Union Jack – red, white and blue – ‘in honour of the victors’. Up until 1926, when lorry transport was provided, the players of the club used to do a round trip of 80 kilometres by foot to fulfill fixtures against the neighbouring town of Cookhouse.33

The aim of the Eastern Province Native Rugby Union was clearly regional, but it does not seem to have been able to cover the whole of the vast area now formally called the Eastern Province. For example, in 1908 the Queenstown-based Winter Rose Rugby Football Club, which was not a member of the EPNRU, played no less than eight games, indicating that there were a number of rugby networks oper-
sting in the region. Later, various other ‘provincial’ units based in East London, Queenstown, Aliwal North and Alice would emerge.

Meanwhile, coloured rugby players were playing in separate competitions. By 1912 there was a smoothly functioning Eastern Province Coloured Rugby Football Union based in Port Elizabeth. The two champion teams, which met in the final played at the prestigious St George’s Park ground, were West End and the predominantly Muslim Red Crescent club. In the same year the EPCRFU combined with the EP Coloured Cricket Board to organise a special dance in the Town Hall to raise funds for the widows and children of local fishermen who had lost their lives in a fishing disaster. Clearly the Eastern Cape rugby players were respected members of their local communities, closely tied to what was happening there – and they were not without means, as the EPCRFU’s credit balance of £25.12.4d in 1913 indicated. But, here too, we see early patterns of segregation, which would be re-inforced by legislative decree and lived experience in later years.

The game goes national

Soon the game of rugby was spreading out from the cradles of black sport in Cape Town and what today constitutes the Eastern Province to other parts of the country. Artisans and school people from Cape Town and the Eastern Cape were among the hundreds of thousands of people who converged on the new mining centres in the late 19th century, or started working on the developing infrastructure unfolding magnetically northwards towards Kimberley and the Witwatersrand. Trained to participate in the colonial economy, they generally occupied the most sought after and best paid jobs available to black people: clerks, interpreters, teachers, ministers, etc. In the new cosmopolitan surroundings, they also started assuming positions of social prominence and began to imitate the middle class games and manners of the white ruling classes. Amongst other things, they started new choral, church, mutual improvement and sports associations.

Kimberley in particular became a cultural melting pot and a growth point for sport. Here the Cape Town and Eastern Cape traditions described above became more closely intertwined than anywhere else. The different sectors of the black community and people from different religions played and organised together. A Griqualand West Colonial Rugby Football Union, consisting of coloured, ‘Malay’ (Moslem) and African clubs, was started in 1894. The four founding clubs – Universals, Violets (perhaps named after the Cape Town club), Excelsior from Beaconsfield and the Native Rovers Rugby Football Club – were soon joined by Progress and others. A correspondent from Kimberley proudly reported in Imvo Zabantsundu that the amadodana (young men) there were doing good work and that they had organised a trophy which could be seen in the window of Harris and Co. in the town. He challenged other areas to become organised as well. The Union was soon running three divisions, the bottom one being for ‘young men who are under 17’. By the mid-1890s Kimberley also had three African tennis clubs – Blue Flag, Champion and Come Again – and a regional cricket association with no less than ten Indian, ‘Malay’, coloured and African teams.

The Griqualand West Colonial Rugby Football Union (GWCRFU) was one of the very first sports organisations in South Africa which was specifically non-racial. In the Xhosa columns of Imvo Zabantsundu it was noted that it did not discriminate on the basis of ‘bala, luhlanga, lutwimi, nalunqulo’ (colour, nationality, language and religion). This is the earliest evidence of this development thus far found. And the fact that the founders used ‘colonial’ in the name rather than the usual racial appellation to distinguish them from the white establishment body indicates that they were serious in their aims.

The secretary of the GWCRFU was the 25 year-old Isaiah Bud Mbelle. He was typical of the new generation of educated intellectuals and sports leaders. Educated at Healdtown, he taught first before becoming the first African to pass the qualifying examination for the Cape Civil Service. A speaker of no less than six languages, he was appointed as Interpreter in Native Languages to the Northern Circuit of the Supreme Court in Kimberley. His salary of £25 per month reputedly made him the highest paid African government employee in the colony. Mbelle’s sister later married Sol Plaatje, the famous journalist, writer and political figure. Their marriage across trad-
national ethnic lines, which caused unhappiness in family circles, was yet another example of how the younger generation of western-educated, urbanised and Christianised intellectuals was crossing old boundaries and shaping new directions.

Clearly determined to emulate the example of white rugby players who had formed the whites-only South African Rugby Board in 1889 with its Currie Cup tournament (as well as the black cricketers who had by then organised various inter-town tournaments), the well-connected Bud Mbelle and his fellow rugby administrators in Kimberley initiated plans to start a national black rugby body and competitions. In 1897 they persuaded Cecil John Rhodes, the arch imperialist and symbol of the town’s new wealth, to present ‘all the Coloured Sporting People of South Africa with a Silver Cup, valued at Fifty Guineas, for Competition amongst themselves on the same lines as the Currie Cup’.42

The GWCRFU sent out a notice calling on clubs and ‘Unions (if any)’ in ‘the various towns and districts’ to send delegates to a meeting at the Savona Cafe in Kimberley on 19 August 1897. The aim was to form a South African Coloured Rugby Football Board (SACRFB).43 The meeting was held one day after a team representing the GWCRFU left for a tournament in Cape Town where they were due to play seven matches. The turnout was disappointing. Only local people attended, although Bud Mbelle was requested by the Port Elizabeth Union (consisting of the Rovers and Union clubs) and African clubs from Johannesburg and King Williams Town to represent them by proxy. Nevertheless, J. Joshua of the Progress club, seconded by Bud Mbelle, proposed that the new SACRFB be formed, and the motion was carried.

Robert Grendon from the Excelsior club in Beaufort West was elected as the first president of the SACRFB. Educated at Zonnebloem College in Cape Town, Grendon was a teacher at the Beaconsfield Public School. He later taught at the famous Ohlange Institute in Natal, founded by John Dube, first president of the South African Native National Congress (later simply the African National Congress), and editor of its newspaper, Abantu Batho.44

Isaiah Bud Mbelle was voted in as the SACRFB secretary and D.J. Lenders and E. Heneke as auditors. The former was a foreman at a local ‘Harness and Saddlery’, while Heneke was a ‘boiler’ at De Beers, and secretary of the ‘B’ (or Coloured) Section of the South African League, a pro-British imperialist organisation formed to support Rhodes’s adventures in Southern Africa. Lenders later became a prominent politician and the president of both the national rugby and cricket boards. In his capacity as vice-president to the legendary Dr Abdullah Abdurahman in the African Political Organisation (APO), Lenders was a member of the South African Native and Coloured Delegation which travelled to London in 1909. The journey was undertaken in a futile bid to persuade the British Parliament not to ratify the constitution for the new Union of South Africa until the discriminatory ‘colour-bar’ clauses in it were removed. The leaders of the new rugby board were, therefore, respected figures within the emerging black educated and political elite.

The newly-formed SACRFB decided to hold the first of 27 Rhodes Tournaments in Kimberley in August 1898. Bud Mbelle was instructed to inform the rugby fraternity of the plans and to send them the constitution once the committee appointed to finalise it had done so. He also had to see that the Rhodes Cup, which ‘has been ordered from overseas’, was acquired. When it arrived it was ‘on two separate occasions exhibited to the public’. Bud Mbelle, in the meanwhile, was working hard travelling to and corresponding with other areas in order to ensure that they set up provincial associations and affiliated to the new national board. When the SACRFB met again in May 1898 there were representatives from Western Province, Eastern Province and Transvaal ‘Coloured Unions’ in addition to the GWCRFU, and all had paid their registration fees. These had also been the four constituent unions of the white South African Rugby Football Board (SARFB), formed a few years earlier in the same city. The development of sport in South Africa among both black and white was clearly influenced by broader patterns in the historical development of the country as a whole.

In keeping with the convention of the time, the SACRFB decided that ‘an influential local gentleman’ be asked to become a patron of the Board. The person chosen was William Pickering, brother of Cecil John Rhodes’s closest friend and sole heir. Pickering later became secretary and a director of the De Beers Company.45 Reflecting the
Harris of De Beers for a similar trophy for cricket. The union duly received a silver cup worth one hundred guineas, called the Barnato Memorial Trophy, in honour of another mining magnate, and initiated a national cricket body and tournament.47

Educational institutions were the breeding grounds for the new games and the ethos that went with them, although the initiatives in the formation of clubs, regional associations and competitions had come from the black elite themselves. However, from now onwards the mining industry played an increasing role in the development of black sport. It came to see sport as an important means of social control, not only helping to accommodate and channel the social aspirations and needs of the small petty bourgeois elite, but also to ensure discipline and productivity among the mass of non-literate menial workers. Under the compound system, hundreds of thousands of black male workers came to be housed in harsh, strictly controlled conditions. To deflect their attention away from the beer drinking, prostitution and faction fighting (and later also political discontent) that were common in the harsh mining environments, management initiated organised recreation. In the 20th century recreation facilities became a common feature on the mines and the mining houses organised and sponsored many competitions on a community-wide level. In this way the basis of sport amongst black people was widened with the result that black sports became more working class in nature. The mines began to influence the whole direction of sport in the black communities, including the sphere of rugby.48

The rise, fall and resurrection of the South African Coloured Rugby Football Board

The inaugural Rhodes Cup tournament organised by the South African Coloured Rugby Football Board in Kimberley from 20–27 August 1898 was a roaring success. Advertisements for the tournament were placed in the local Diamond Fields Advertiser and ‘spectators rolled up in good numbers’ The mayor was in attendance to present medals to the winners and the South African rugby international, Chubb Vigne, was one of the referees. Western Province won all three of its matches to win the tournament.49 The four team lists reflected the sporting demographics of the different regions as discussed pre-

paternalism of earlier Cape politics, it was common for prominent white politicians, local councillors and business people to be patrons of black sports associations right up to the apartheid era. The well-known historian Jeff Peires (referring to African rugby) has explained why this was so:

The game itself was played in appalling conditions. Most fields were without grass, and many were riven by ditches, located on slopes or acting as public thoroughfares. Boots were considered a luxury and each team had at most a single set of jerseys. Such circumstances bred dedication and selflessness: sacrificing one’s wages to buy the team colours, walking all night to be at a match the following day. It also bred dependence on local whites. So much was so far beyond the reach of the average man – particularly when a large sum was suddenly needed for a special purpose such as a distant match or an anniversary celebration – that there was very little recourse but the ‘benevolence’ of the white man. One informant, who raised the money to take a Transvaal team on a tour of the Eastern Cape recalls, ‘I had to cringe’. The chronic demand of black rugby for money and facilities meant inevitable dependence on whites. It also meant that prominent rugby administrators were either those who were [attached to institutions of learning or were] well off themselves, or excelled at least in asking whites for money.46

In many cases there were also social and political motives: the black elite was determined to win for itself a greater role in colonial politics and society, and this was one of the ways in which alliances were formed in an effort to advance its members’ interests.

The donation of the Rhodes Cup, which the proud administrators stressed was more expensive than the Currie Cup, reflected the entry of a major new factor in black sport, namely big business and, in particular, the mining industry. Soon after the launch of the SACRFB and the presentation of the Rhodes trophy, Bud Mbelle and the Griqualand West Coloured Cricket Union approached Sir David
The South African Coloured Rugby Football Board, which had been particularly active during the early years of the century, was resuscitated again after 1928. In that year the Rhodes Cup tournament was organised again in Kimberley, which had to remain the permanent headquarters according to the terms of grant of the Rhodes Cup. Five more tournaments - held at irregular intervals in various parts of the country - followed in the next decade. The Rhodes Cup once more became an integral feature of the rugby calendar until the 27th and last Rhodes tournament held in 1969.

Scant information is available about how the SACRFB was reconstituted and who was involved. But it did not remain untouched by old problems and the broader political developments that were transforming sport. In 1936 the Board had to cope with two major crises. Firstly, African players broke away to form a separate South African Bantu Rugby Football Board. Secondly, a major realignment of forces in the Western Cape led to the formation of a new Western Province League. The founder members of this new super union were City and Suburban, whose vice-chairman Fred Russouw had initiated the move, Parow, Paarl and teams from other country districts. Later new unions joined until by 1960 the Western Province League 'controlled rugby in the Western Cape' apart from a few clubs falling under the jurisdiction of the predominantly Muslim Western Province Union. Thus, the cultural-religious divides that had become clear in Cape Town by the turn of the century were accentuated, and two Western Province teams took part in the 1936 Rhodes Cup tournament.

After the 1938 Rhodes Cup tournament, the SACRFB elected a national team for the first time. The coloured springboks, as they were called, went on a hectic internal tour the following year. The captain was City and Suburban flyhalf Johnny Niels. Most of the players came from the two Western Province sides. The team travelled by train, playing nine matches along the line of rail in 21 days. The national side won the first six matches and lost two of the last three after injuries had necessitated the call up of eight replacements from Paarl.

The idea was that the coloured springboks should also undertake a tour to England. Ever since the 1880s when John Tengo Jabavu,
editor of the first independent black newspaper in South Africa, suggested sending a team of black cricketers to that country, black sportspeople had expressed the desire for international contacts. The proposal for the coloured rugby tour was received with misgivings by representatives of the white board. However, when the Second World War broke out in September 1939, these plans became academic for the time being.

This was the third war involving South Africa during the course of the 20th century and once again sport experienced its disruptive impact. The national tournament was suspended for several years. After the war, the National Party of Dr Malan won the 1948 election and South Africa entered the violent and tempestuous era of apartheid. But, before dealing with apartheid's impact on rugby, events in the separate 'Bantu Board' require examination.

**The South African Bantu Rugby Football Board**

In the years after the turn of the century, African rugby in the present Eastern Province had continued to grow from strength to strength. By 1934 ten clubs were playing in the East London first league for the Martin Cup. Their were also leagues in places as far afield as Aliwal North on the Free State border and Umtata in the Transkei. The original inter-town tournaments were apparently still being held regularly and the game was now well established at educational institutions such as Healdtown and the South African Native College (later the University of Fort Hare).

Besides the rugby heartland in the Eastern Cape, the Transvaal became a new growth point for African rugby in the 1920s and 1930s. New clubs such as Swallows and United were formed by Eastern Cape people, and several mine-based teams emerged. In 1923 a Transvaal Rugby Union was formed. E. Juno Nogaga presented a cup for its competitions, which Swallows won in the first two years, beating four other teams in 1924. In 1925 the Native Recruiting Corporation donated the NRC Grand Challenge Cup. In the same year a combined Queenstown team toured Johannesburg and Pretoria to 'baptise rugby in the Transvaal which had just started ...'. By 1934 the Union had 15 clubs playing in A and B divisions. The growth of rugby on the

mines was reflected by some of the club names: Wits Deep, Simmer and Jack, Geldenhuis Jumpers, etc. The annual meeting that year was held in the Bantu Men’s Social Centre, the enclave for Johannesburg’s black middle classes in Eloff Street in the very centre of the city. The minutes record that W. Gemmell ‘Esq[uire]’ and H. Wellbeloved ‘Esq[uire]’ were the patron and honorary life president of the Union respectively. Mines, municipality and munificent liberals were strongly shaping the direction of the game amongst Africans.

In 1935 the first Transvaal African provincial side was selected for a national tour. Reflecting the historical links, the first stop was the Eastern Cape. Starting in Aliwal North and going along the line of rail to East London on the coast, then inland again, Transvaal played nine matches on this leg of the tour, winning four, losing four and drawing one. The tour created considerable interest: the Lovedale authorities rolled out the red carpet, matches were played on white-controlled grounds, referees included ex-international Jack Slater, and in Adelaide the ‘European public’ turned out in force: ‘all classes were represented and amongst those present was the Native Commissioner, the Mayor, members of the side bar, professional men as well as prominent farmers’. Transvaal completed its tour with a visit to Cape Town, where it heavily defeated Western Province three times, and a match against Griquas in Kimberley, which it lost.

Following the formation of a separate South African Bantu Cricket Board in 1932, moves were by now under way to form a separate national body for African rugby as well. The brochures, reports and reminiscences collected by Braber Ngozi show that although African and coloured teams were regularly playing against each other at club level, and players from the respective communities were taken up in teams on both sides, the trend was towards organisational separation. Residential segregation was increasingly shaping the patterns of social intercourse and, in addition, the conditions were developing for the emergence of a more assertive nationalism stressing African self-determination. Sometimes the separation occurred amicably, for example when coloured players in Queenstown club left to form their own team. Sometimes strained relations caused the parting of the ways. In Cape Town in 1928 some (but not all) of the African rugby players who had been involved with the coloured Busy
BEYOND THE TRYLNE

Bees club formed their own club because 'they rejected coloured leadership'. In the same year, five African cricket clubs broke away from the Metropolitan (Coloured) Cricket Union in 1928 to form the Western Province Bantu Cricket Union because they were not getting a fair deal both on the field of play and in administrative matters. According to one urban historian, the above developments were probably influenced by the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act, which led to the stricter enforcement of urban segregation; the Langa township was itself established in that year and soon people were forming area-based clubs.

Early in 1935 Port Elizabeth administrators formed a committee to discuss the formation of a South African Bantu Rugby Board (SABRB). Further discussions took place at the inter-town tournament in East London. The board was formally launched in Port Elizabeth later in the year, during the inter-provincial cricket tournament. The local people were undoubtedly taking advantage of the fact that sports administrators from various parts of the country were going to be in the city. This showed at once how tightly knit the African educated elite of the time was, and how interlinked the organisation and interest in the middle class games of rugby and cricket were amongst Africans. The new president was J.M. Dippa of Port Elizabeth, who later became Native Welfare Officer for the Municipal Native Affairs Department in Bloemfontein. The secretary was Halsey Plaatje from Kimberley. The son of Sol Plaatje, and the nephew of Isaiah Bud Mbelle, he was one of the driving forces behind the first national rugby and cricket bodies.

The first inter-provincial tournament to be organised by the new SABRB was held in Kimberley in 1936. At stake was the Native Recruiting Corporation Cup, donated by the Chamber of Mines. Eastern Province and Transvaal shared the honours after the final ended in a goalless draw. The other teams were the newly established Northern Eastern Districts union, with its headquarters in Aliwal North, and the home team Griqualand West; Kimberley declined as an industrial centre relative to the rapidly growing Witwatersrand in the 20th century, and was no longer the sporting force it had been at the turn of the century. For some reason Western Province, Border and Natal did not take part, even though the former had defeated the latter only the month before in a game in East London attended by 4 000 people.

This was the first of 28 inter-provincial tournaments to be held in the next 38 years up to 1974, when a new competition, played on a home-and-away basis and sponsored by Bols Brandy (Stellenbosch Farmers Winery), was started. The inter-provincial tournaments involved a grinding schedule of matches over a period of one week. Sometimes teams played more than one match a day, particularly after a knockout competition for the Partons Cup was added to the league format for the NRC Cup.

The news reports of the 1940 SABRB tournament give a good indication of the ambition of these events and the level of organisation required. Considerable effort went into preparing for the tournament. The EP team was selected after trials involving teams from Grahamstown, Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth. Similarly, the Border team included 'many students from the Native colleges of the Ciskei'. The cost of organising the tournament was put at £200. Because of the war the board decided not to send round the customary subscription lists for financial assistance, but depended instead on gate takings. The usual enthusiasm for, and social importance of, sport was once again underlined: each of the six teams, consisting of squads of 25 players, played every day for a week and they were also entertained at a 'reception and dance' held in their honour in the East Bank Location. The power relations in the wider society were once again evident as well:

When the Mayor opens the tournament at 2.30 pm today, with him will be the Native Commissioner, Mr D.G. Hartmann, the manager of Urban Native Affairs, Mr R.C. Cook, and the secretary of the [white] Border Rugby Union, Mr H.W. Wedd. There will be a separate entrance to the grounds for Europeans.

The white officials stated that the local council had always had the welfare of the natives at heart ... They would also be pleased to hear [that] ... the chairman of the Native Affairs Committee was quickly recovering after his serious illness (Applause). It would only be in
the 1950s that black rugby players started challenging more aggressively this sort of paternalism and discrimination.

The Umteteli wa Bantu newspaper described the condition of the ground as ‘atrocious’. Hartmann acknowledged this when he said at the opening at Rubusana Park, ‘I have heard the Bantu players are tough men. To play on a field like the one here they will have to be very tough’. Nevertheless, there were 2 000 spectators in attendance and the atmosphere was ‘as tense as at an inter-varsity at Newlands’. The crowd included a ‘large number’ of whites. Hosts Border ended up winning the tournament. Star wing Braber Ngozi scored 33 points during the week, a tournament record which was never bettered.

Studies confirmed that sport had become an important part of the social life of the black townships by the middle of the 20th century. According to a survey conducted by Prof B.A. Pauw in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the majority of residents who had been born in the East London townships and could, therefore, be regarded as urbanised, expressed an interest in sport. Rugby was the most popular game: about half of the people interviewed specifically mentioned the game, and virtually all claimed to belong to a rugby club. The under-35 age group and those who had an educational level of standard five and higher were the most enthusiastic, but interest extended along the whole spectrum of residents.

Although only 12.5 per cent of the East London women interviewed in Pauw’s survey expressed an interest in sport, some were actually members of the local rugby clubs. In a strongly patriarchal society, where rugby was a ‘man’s game’ and ‘women belonged in the kitchen’, women did not have the same freedom to play and follow sport as men. When they were involved it was inevitably in support roles: ‘recruiting, cheering, laundry and also providing catering when there were visitors’, as the historian Rachidi Molapo has noted. Mr M. Faku, an old stalwart of the Mother City club in Cape Town recalled that the club started a women’s section in 1968 and that ‘we never used to hire any ladies for washing our outfit after the match. We used to collect all those smelling jerseys and took them to our ladies’ section and had them washed up’. Ironically, the Western Province Rugby Union was encouraging clubs to start women’s sections at the time because women ‘were bound to the kitchen at the moment’.

As in any society, the rugby clubs reflected the broader dynamics of township life. In some, distinctions of occupation and social status played a role. For example, East London Stone Breakers was a club which attracted the ‘more educated players’. In many townships sections of the educated and professional middle class strata held themselves aloof from other township residents. Placing great emphasis on speaking English, and priding themselves on being ‘respectably dressed and gentle and polite in manner’, they were derogatorily referred to as the ‘oosuse-me’ type. The clubs in the local coloured communities also conducted their business in English, although the Cape Afrikaans patois was often the medium of communication amongst members.

The migrant labour experience, which underpinned segregation and apartheid, also had a big impact on rugby. Town dwellers and migrants from the country often belonged to different clubs. Mother City Rugby Club in Langa, for example, was ‘exclusively’ for people ‘born and bred’ in Cape Town. Thus, people were themselves perpetuating the distinctions made by the apartheid rulers between urban insiders and temporary migrants. A condition of membership was that ‘the recruit should give evidence of having been in Cape Town for a continuous period of at least five years’. These conditions were very similar to those contained in the state’s influx control measures.

Migrants in turn were usually organised on a ‘home boy’ basis, those coming from certain areas joining specific clubs. In Cape Town, the rugby and soccer clubs had tell-tale names like Transkeian Lions, Zulu Royals, Natal Wanderers, Basutoland Happy Lads and Bechuana Swallows. According to Wilson and Mafeje, as the numbers increased these would again split up into smaller units. For example, Eastern Cape people from the larger towns, those from rural villages in the reserves or bantustans, and those from small farming towns would split into different clubs. Harlequins broke away from Busy Bees because members from the larger towns like King Williams Town (abantu basebdolophini) tended to dominate those from nearby smaller towns like Peddie, who they dismissed as ‘pagans’ (amaqaba). The Harlequins lived in Langa in the single-sex barracks
and zones, while Busy Bees’ members lived in better areas in Cape Town proper. Notwithstanding these differences, the members of the two clubs (because they came from neighbouring areas in the Eastern Cape) would still cheer on each others teams when they played against other Langa clubs.

According to Pauw, the ‘home boy’ tradition, which provided people with security in the often-difficult urban environments, also meant that a number of rugby clubs in East London were associated with ‘particular tribal groups’: Swallows with the Ndlambe, Bush Bucks with the Gcaleka from the Transkei, Tembu RFC with Tembu from Glen Grey and Cala, Black Lions with the Gqunukwebe from Middledrift, etc. However, these clubs were not confined to ethnic groups, and the majority were ‘formed on some other principle’. The United rugby club in Johannesburg was given that name in the 1920s because it members came from many different areas. And the Bantu Men’s Social Centre was a place ‘where any mention of tribal loyalties is deprecated and where English as a language is assiduously fostered in the belief that a common language will help to merge natives of different tribes … into a Bantu nation’.

Clearly, the rugby clubs were reflections of the myriad of influences shaping 20th century South African society.

Responses and realignments during the apartheid years

In 1948 the National Party won the whites-only general election, inaugurating the era of rigid institutionalised apartheid. Racial discrimination was extended and legalised in a way which was unique in world politics. The new government passed a barrage of segregation legislation, including the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Group Areas Act and the Bantu Education Act, until eventually there were more than three hundred laws controlling every aspect of people’s lives from the cradle to the grave.

Apartheid soon gave rise to its antithesis: a powerful national movement in favour of non-racialism and democracy in South Africa. In 1949 the African National Congress adopted a new Programme of Action which rejected traditional moderate (and unsuccessful) methods of protest such as petitions and deputations to the authorities, and proposed the use of direct action through boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience in a ‘mass struggle for national freedom’. The increasing influx of Africans into the urban areas in the 1940s meant that a basis now existed for the first time for a strong nationalist movement which could politically challenge white minority rule in an assertive way.

In 1952 the ANC organised a Defiance Campaign against unjust laws. Over 8 000 volunteers were arrested in a civil disobedience campaign organised on Gandhian lines. Volunteers deliberately offered themselves up for arrest, sitting on whites-only park benches, using whites-only railway facilities and otherwise flaunting apartheid laws. The volunteer-in-chief was a young lawyer called Nelson Mandela. The Defiance Campaign dramatically increased the popularity of the ANC. Soon afterwards the ANC joined with other pro-democracy Indian, coloured and white groups to form the Congress Alliance in order to ensure a broader campaign against apartheid. In 1955 the Congress Alliance adopted the historic Freedom Charter which spelled out an a new democratic vision for South Africa. The response of the apartheid government was to arrest and try 156 leaders in the massive Treason Trial which dragged on for years before all the accused were acquitted.

Sport in South Africa has always been linked to the social and political situation and, once again, both the application of apartheid and the intensification of the struggle against it had a direct bearing on developments in sport. From the late 1940s various racially compartmentalised black sports bodies sought to establish unity amongst themselves. They also began to seek international contacts, and to protest discrimination much more forcefully than before.

For example, between 1948 and 1958 the various black cricket and soccer bodies started playing inter-racial matches and forming new inter-racial umbrella organisations – the new South African Cricket Board of Control (SACBOC) and the South African Soccer Federation (SASF), for example. These moves were in many ways similar to the multi-racial co-operation happening on a political level in the Congress Alliance during the 1950s.

In 1955 a young Port Elizabeth school teacher, Dennis Brutus, started the Co-ordinating Committee for International Relations in
Sport, the first organised sports protest group in South Africa. Its first success was in 1956 when the non-racial tennis association was given international recognition at the expense of the white organisation. Concerned by these developments, the government stepped in formally for the first time and announced an official government policy for sport. It reiterated that sportspeople should adhere strongly to the apartheid policies of the state. The government started harassing non-racial sports activists, _inter alia_ by withdrawing their passports.\(^9\)

Rugby did not remain unaffected by these broader political and sporting developments. In 1956 the South African Bantu Board initiated attempts to bring black rugby players closer together. In October that year the first ‘test’ between the national sides of the Bantu Board and the Coloured Board was played at the Showgrounds in Port Elizabeth. A crowd of 15,000 watched the Africans win by 14-3. Four more such ‘tests’ were held in the next two years. In 1951 representatives from the two national bodies formed a committee to organise a tour to New Zealand ‘to play against the Maoris’. The estimated cost was £10,000. The following year the two boards decided to form a federation. Sipho Sivisa of the Bantu Board was elected as president with John Kester of the Coloured Board as vice-president. In 1953 a combined Federation team was selected. It was meant to undertake an internal tour, but this was cancelled ‘because of racial tension in the country’, a reference probably to heightened feelings following the Defiance Campaign.

The Federation, apparently formed at the initiative of the African body, was short-lived. Neither the New Zealand tour nor a Fijian tour to South Africa mooted for 1954 materialised, and no further ‘tests’ were held until 1957. The reluctance of Kester and the Coloured Board to co-operate was a major reason for the Federation’s failure. The Coloured Board was still rebuffing African overtures at unity in the 1960s. An African rugby spokesperson complained that the coloureds were only interested in working together if they held the ‘whiphand’. There were complaints that SACRB people were even unwilling to share changerooms and showers.\(^9\) Despite growing anti-apartheid struggles, ethnic feelings and an awareness of ‘the other’ were still deeply ingrained. This also applied to the African rugby players. A rugby fan of that time recalls that though people were starting to talk unity, negative racial attitudes towards coloureds were fairly common.\(^71\)

In a context where segregation and race were being practically enforced by law and projected as a historically given reality, non-racialism was a goal that had to be struggled for and self-consciously constructed. A further step towards non-racialism in sport was the formation of the South African Sports Association (SASA) in January 1959. SASA aimed to co-ordinate ‘non-white’ sport, to advance the cause of sport and the standards of sport among ‘non-white’ sportsmen, to ensure that they and their organisations received proper recognition here and abroad, and to pursue these aims on a non-racial basis.\(^72\)

The national associations of eight different sports codes joined SASA, and amongst the patrons were prominent anti-apartheid political figures from the ANC, Natal Indian Congress and the Liberal Party.

The black rugby bodies were not among those present at the launch of SASA, but there were indications that the more militant politics of the 1950s was rubbing off on them. In 1959, the South African Bantu Rugby Board changed its name to the South African African Rugby Board (SAARB), showing its rejection of the racial epithets being used by the apartheid state. The president of the SAARB at the time was the East London attorney Louis Mtshizana. He clearly aligned himself with the intensifying struggles of the liberation movements. Under Mtshizana, the Board returned the Native Recruiting Corporation Trophy to the Chamber of Mines—it was replaced by the Zonk Trophy presented by a popular magazine—and in 1960 he called for rugby players to boycott the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Union of South Africa:

_Celebrations run on the basis of apartheid may not be supported by an organisation that rejects apartheid in principle. What are we to celebrate? To the European folk it is the 50 years of prosperity that they have to celebrate ... To us [this] has been nothing else but 50 years of oppression and poverty ... We have no cause to celebrate ..._\(^73\)
When SASA criticised the rugby people for having virtually been the only ones not to have initiated discussions with their white counterparts and for continuing to play inter-racial matches which perpetuated apartheid’s racial categorisations, Mshizana apologised to SASA secretary Dennis Brutus and said no such contests would be held in future. He made an impassioned plea for unity between the SAARB and the SACRB in 1961, saying that the only way forward was to ‘emerge from our racial kraals and form a truly representative organisation, an organisation open to all racial groups on this basis of equality’. But the progressive voices within the rugby bodies were still in the minority. The racial contests continued and when Mshizana was banned in June 1963 under draconian measures adopted by the apartheid government, the SAARB suspended him and elected B.D. Myataza as his successor.

The stab in the back for Mshizana reflected the factional tendencies which bedevilled rugby administration for decades. Not only was unity between the SAARB and the SACRB not realised, but serious splits occurred within each of these bodies during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Dobson details a number of cases in which disagreements within the African body led to personality clashes, disorderly meetings, suspensions, court cases, physical confrontation and breakaways. According to another informant, administrative matters often revolved around personality clashes, and the prevailing political attitude was that of resignation: ‘we are playing along racial lines because that is the reality of the situation in South Africa’.  

The South African Coloured Rugby Board also experienced serious internal problems in the 1950s and 1960s. The most serious was the rift that appeared between leaders of the Western Province League and the Kimberley-based leadership of the national board. With 14 unions, nearly 200 clubs and 10 000 players, the League was by far the biggest affiliate of the SACRB. It was unhappy about the way the national body was run, and pointed to the SACRB’s inability to progress financially and develop the game in other parts of the country. Although the Western Cape was strong, there were only a handful of clubs to be found in cities like Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg and Kimberley. In 1954 the League drew up a memorandum calling for reform of the SACRB. When this was ignored by the ‘Kimberley clique’, which allegedly controlled proceedings via proxy votes at the meetings in that city, the officials of the League started canvassing support for a new national body.

In April 1958, the Western Province League, followed shortly afterwards by the Great Karoo Rugby Board and other small units, withdrew from the SACRB. In January 1959 the dissidents formed the new South African Rugby Football Federation (SARFF) at a conference in Paarl, the base of the new president, Cuthbert Loriston. Loriston remained at the helm of the Federation until his death in 1986. In later years he was pilloried for supporting the government’s so-called multi-national sports policy and forming an alliance with Danie Craven’s whites-only establishment SACRB, but according to Dobson it was a power struggle between Loriston and Abdullah Abass (who later succeeded Kester as president of the SACRB) and not political or religious differences which were responsible for the formation of the new body.  

Thus by 1960 there were three national bodies catering for black rugby players. The new SARFF started its own Gold Cup inter-provincial competition to run alongside those of the SAARB (Zonk Trophy) and the SACRB (Rhodes Cup). In 1964 the first annual test match between the Federation and the African Board was played. The Africans also continued to play tests against the Coloured Board. However, the latter body and the Federation met only once, in 1964, largely because of ongoing tensions emanating from the split in 1958/9. Inter-race matches also continued at provincial level.

These inter-racial matches drew big crowds, and it is clear from the reports that the Africans, often assumed always to have been the cinderellas of South African rugby, more than held their own. For instance, in 1960 the Eastern Province Africans beat the Western Province Coloureds 9-6 before 12 000 spectators in Cape Town in a match which was meant to determine the champion provincial team in South Africa. The legendary flyhalf Eric Majola dominated the match. He and other stars of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s are still remembered with reverence by many of today’s rugby pundits.

In 1963 the three black national bodies held discussions about unity, but nothing concrete resulted from this and subsequent attempts. Black rugby players also started making contacts with the...
white officials, but the SARFB continued to be guided by the rigid apartheid policies of the government.

If rugby players from the oppressed communities had been slow to respond to political events at first, growing polarisation within South Africa compelled them to take decisions from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s which clearly drew the lines between those supporting the struggle against apartheid and those throwing in their lot with the white SARFB and government policies.

After the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960, when police killed 69 people and injured 180 during an anti-pass demonstration, the state resorted to open repression to crush opposition to apartheid. It declared a State of Emergency and more than 18,000 people were detained. The ANC and the newly formed Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned. Anti-apartheid activists were forced to go underground or into exile. With legal avenues for change closed, the ANC and PAC embarked on an armed struggle. Draconian new legislation gave the state the power to detain people without trial, first for 90 and then 180 days. The knock on the door in the middle of the night and deaths in detention became more and more common. Sports activists were among those affected. Dennis Brutus, who helped start the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC) in 1963 to lobby for South Africa’s exclusion from the Olympic Games, was shot by police and subsequently imprisoned on the notorious Robben Island. The secretary of SANROC, John Harris, was sent to the gallows for planting a bomb on Johannesburg station. SANROC was smashed and like other organisations forced to re-establish itself outside the country. It set up offices in London in 1966 where, together with the growing number of international anti-apartheid groups and the newly formed Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, it started co-ordinating a successful international campaign to boycott apartheid sport.76

The open repression of the 1960s was accompanied by a massive programme of social engineering as the National Party tried to reshape the country according to the grand designs of apartheid. Tens of thousands of people in the coloured and Indian communities were forcibly removed from their homes under the Group Areas Act after the suburbs in which they lived were declared white areas. Long

settled communities in rugby strongholds like District Six and Parow in Cape Town were broken up. As people were scattered throughout the Cape Flats in areas with few facilities and infrastructure, established sports teams folded and rugby associations like City and Suburban and Parow and District lost playing fields they had used for decades.

Sports people in the rest of the country were similarly affected. The ferocity with which the apartheid government tried to enforce segregation and set up separate political institutions for the so-called coloured, Indian and African ‘nations’ created widespread resentment. Apartheid institutions were rejected from the start and increasingly the racial basis on which sports were organised in the black communities was challenged.

In 1966 the SA Coloured Rugby Board decided to change its name to the South African Rugby Union (SARU), dropping the racial designation it had carried since its foundation in 1896. In 1969 it replaced the Rhodes Cup, now recognised as a symbol of colonialism, with the SA Cup competition.

After the fierce repression of the early 1960s which temporarily smashed the radical challenge to apartheid, there was a resurgence of resistance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This could be seen not only in the rise of the Black Consciousness movement led by the charismatic Steve Biko and the growth of black trade union activity at the time, but also in the re-emergence of a powerful non-racial sports movement within the country, reflected by the formation of the new South African Council on Sport (SACOS) in 1973. Within ten years SACOS, working closely with SANROC and international groups, exerted an iron grip over South African sport, as one establishment body after another was expelled from international competitions because of apartheid. SARU was a founding member of SACOS and although its relationship with this body was sometimes complicated, it soon became recognised as the one rugby organisation in South Africa which formed part of the ‘people’s camp’.77

SARU’s gradual alignment with the democratic forces in South Africa not only gave it credibility, but also new impetus. In 1966, the City and Suburban Rugby Board left the Federation for SARU because of dissatisfaction with Cuthbert Loriston’s autocratic leadership
and the continuation of the racial matches between coloureds and Africans. In 1971 several clubs in Port Elizabeth broke away from the African Rugby Board’s local affiliate and formed the KwaZakhele Rugby Union (KWARU) which joined SARU. This brought a significant number of African players into SARU’s ranks for the first time since the Bantu Board had split from the ranks of the predecessor Coloured Board in the 1930s. Within a year of joining SARU, KWARU reached the finals of the SA Cup. Further splits from the SAARB to SARU followed shortly afterwards in Uitenhage, Cape Town and other areas.

While SARU became firmly established as part of the broad democratic movement in South Africa, the Federation and the African Board responded to the political pressures of the time by moving closer to the white establishment. Playing as the African Leopards and the coloured Proteas respectively, the two boards became active participants in the new multi-national sports policy devised by the government and establishment sports bodies in the 1970s in an attempt to ward off growing international pressure. This policy aimed to relax the rigid segregation of the past by allowing limited contact at the national and international level without jeopardising ‘traditional’ policy at provincial and club level. The Leopards and Proteas were sent on tours abroad and given fixtures against international sides for the first time. A few players were included in non-representative South African invitation sides.

As old moulds were broken, new patterns became discernible in the 1970s. While SARU struggled to secure sponsorships and its players were regularly refused access to facilities by local authorities, the SAARB and SARFF received generous support from the state, business and the white SARB. The Mdantsane Stadium in East London, for example, was upgraded to the tune of R332 000 for the showpiece fixture between the Leopards and the British Lions in 1974. However, this unprecedented financial support could not neutralise the strong disapproval expressed within black communities about the participation of the two boards in multi-national sport. They were branded as sell-outs and as the lines were drawn droves of players left to join SARU. A rugby historian sympathetic to the Federation noted that by 1972 this body ‘was on its knees’.

Clubs and unions were spilling over to SARU with its clear anti-apartheid stance. The Federation stood accused of being sell-outs and failures, giving the white administrator an excuse to avoid full integration … by giving the Federation the sop of the odd overseas opponent.

The Federation and the African Board (now renamed the South African Rugby Association, SARA) became almost totally dependent on the white establishment. The main base for the former became the coloureds-only Cape Corps military camp, ‘beginning the army connection for the Federation’. The latter came to depend largely on support from Bantu Administration Boards and the well funded, well developed sports offices on the mines which became important conduits for channelling trained black sportsmen into multi-national sport during the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1977 the SARFF, the SARA and the white SARFB united to form the reconstituted South African Rugby Board (SARB). The lines were clearly drawn. On the one side were the status quo—supporting proponents of multi-nationalism and on the other the non-racial SARU which closely aligned itself with the struggles of the resurgent liberation movements. Relations between the two camps remained antagonistic right through to the 1990s. Then the normalisation of the political climate and mediation by the National Sports Congress and the ANC’s Steve Tshwete paved the way for rugby unity for the first time in the long history of the game in South Africa.

As had been the case for over one hundred years, ‘politics’ had the final say. One big difference now, however, was that the balance of power had swung dramatically in favour of the oppressed since the days when Isaiah Bud Mbelle and other pioneering administrators head set out to establish the first non-racial rugby bodies in the 1880s and 1890s.

Notes

* The title of this chapter is derived from the Xhosa word for rugby, mbixo. Encouragement and support from Albert Grundlingh and Zohra Ibrahim ensured that I finally got down to writing this piece, and I also need to acknowledge the help received from John Nauright.
Beyond the Tryline

A note is required on the vexed question of racial terminology in South Africa: black is used here to refer to all those rugby players who would have been classified as 'non-white' under apartheid. Non-racial (rather than black) rugby became the preferred term in later years, but it would be ahistorical to conflate the words non-racial and black when dealing with a century of rugby history. Although non-racialism was a goal from the start amongst progressive-minded rugby enthusiasts, there were periods in which black rugby players did not practise non-racialism, and even when non-racialism was assertively promoted from the 1950s onwards many black rugby players continued to support racial and 'multi-national' sport.

1. ‘SA blacks not made to play rugby, says Uli Schmidt’, Cape Times, 26 October 1994.
5. B. Ngozi, History and development of non-race rugby in South Africa (unpublished, n.d.). This is a bound source book, consisting of notes, newspaper reports, brochure articles and other miscellaneous pieces, which Mr Ngozi allowed me to copy in 1992.

The Thing That Is Not Round

17. Van der Ross, *The political and social history* part 3, p. 622.
24. Cape archives, NA 467, Ecclesiastical 1875-1890, J. Buchanan to C. Brownlee, 21 July 1877.
25. See, for example, ‘Ixesha le bhola, 1889’, *Izwi Zabantsundu*, 17 October 1889.
27. Peires, ‘“Facta non verba”’ p. 1; Dobson, *Rugby in South Africa* p. 201.
34. *Izwi Labantu*, 23 March 1909.
35. APO, 19 October 1912; 2 November 1912; and 3 May 1913.
37. ‘Ibara labadlali’, *Izwi Zabantsundu*, 1 August 1894.
42. ‘A Rhodes Cup’, *Izwi Zabantsundu*, 29 July 1897.
46. Peires, ‘“Facta non verba”’ p. 2.
47. ‘A Barnato trophy’ and ‘The Barnato memorial trophy’, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 2 December 1897.
51. For more on the changing political economy and its effect on sport and culture during the inter-war years, see Archer and Boullion, *The South African game* pp. 118-124; and Marks and Rathbone (eds), *Industrialisation and Social Change*.
55. Ngozi, reports from *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 18 April 1924 and 26 May 1934.
61. Ngozi, reports from *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 2 June 1940 and 8 June 1940; and ‘Arrangements for East London tourney’, n.p. The quote is from the first source.
68. Archer and Boullion, *The South African game* pp. 120-1.
69. For a detailed discussion of the rise of the non-racial sports movement and the international anti-apartheid sports campaign see R. Laphich, *The politics of race and international sport: The case of South Africa* (Westport, 1975).
70. Dobson, *Rugby in South Africa* pp. 204-211.
Beyond the Tryline
Rugby and South African Society

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