Abstract

Sport of the apartheid era was based on customary segregation reinforced by general discriminatory legislation, challenged by an increasingly forceful non-racial movement that raised the crucial question: who is a South African? The government responded to the non-racial movement in a number of ways that included accusations of treason and regular threats of draconian legislation specifically targeted at sport. The authorities consistently failed to solve their problem of controlling recreational space sufficiently rigorously to achieve ultimate segregation; and in any case after 1967, sport was used as a reforming tool to persuade the rest of the world that real change was underway in South Africa. The new, multi-national sports policy failed to convince the international community that a boycott was not justified and South Africa was effectively isolated from 1970 onwards. By the early 1980s, sport had been exempted from apartheid legislation, but the facts that it continued to be practised in the context of apartheid society and that the non-racial movement was increasingly absorbed in broader political struggles meant that readmission to international competition had to wait for the unbanning of the ANC in 1990.

The ideological foundations of modern South African sport are found in the imperial connection that laid heavy emphasis upon British cultural and political ascendancy, as well as for some a sentimental attachment to ‘Home’. This led not only to segregation in sport, which emphasized the otherness of Black South Africans, but also encouraged their polarization one from another. At the same time sport was used, with varying degrees of success, to unite the White community across the English/Afrikaans language barrier. Immediately after the Second World War, mixed sport, which traced its origins back to the 1890s, began to reassert itself and by 1956 multi-racial table tennis had achieved international recognition at the expense of its White counterpart. In 1959, Black cricket abolished all ethnic categorization and during the 1960s multi-racial football set up a professional league. Hegemonic social practice, segregation that seamlessly translated into apartheid (separate development), was significantly challenged in the post-war period. At issue was the very definition of who was entitled to own the description South African.

It was this situation, which stimulated the first significant call for a sports boycott of South Africa (by Father Trevor Huddleston¹), that precipitated...
the National Party government’s first policy statement on sport. It had come to power in 1948 and put onto the statute book the Population Registration Act that made possible the Group Areas (GAA, strict segregation of the ownership and occupation of residential and business property) and the Reservation of Separate Amenities (RSAA, segregation of specific services and facilities) Acts. These built upon extant legislation, such as the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923 and the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation (Ghetto) Act of 1946, to affect all urban South Africans. The use of sport for the purpose of social control of those Africans who had not been endorsed out of (removed from) urban areas was widespread, but variable.

A National Party MP described international recognition of non-racial sport as a declaration of war. Such recognition challenged the assertion of beleaguered White South African identity projected through a desire to dominate World sport. In June 1956, the Minister of the Interior indicated that there would be no mixed sport in South Africa: Blacks seeking international recognition could achieve this only through affiliation to racially specific bodies subordinate to White official organisations. This reflected a paternalistic, controlling relationship implicit in many other South African institutions. The affiliation policy was subtle and convenient and, like many apartheid measures yet to come, created an illusion of change while effectively maintaining the status quo. The mathematics of affiliation ensured that Blacks exercised minimal influence, enjoying just a vague promise of better opportunities to come.

Magubane makes the crucial point that it was vital to Whites that Blacks should be treated as anonymous units within amorphous groups: the emergence of a Black sporting hero could have challenged and undermined the fundamental beliefs required to sustain apartheid ideology. Sportspersons who questioned White hegemony were labelled agitators and subversives. The model Black township had recreational facilities: a lack of finance made these scarce in practice, although their contribution to social stability had been an article of faith in some municipalities since the 1930s.

The history of sport under apartheid from 1956 to 1967 may be summarized as a series of threats by government against mixing on the sports field, evoking tradition and custom while alluding to the possibility of specific legislation. In the event only boxing and wrestling were ever controlled by an Act of Parliament (1954), but of course many other statutes impinged upon, or appeared to influence, sport and recreation. The non-racial opposition (non-racial may be defined as multi-racialism applied in principle and practice often with the involvement of broader political and social organisations) to White sporting hegemony endeavoured to challenge loopholes in the law, but increasingly came under pressure from a developing police state. The South African Sports Association (SASA), founded in 1959, demanded the right of all South Africans to participate in national sports teams: its slogan was ‘bread, not crumbs’.

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In 1961, an amendment to the GAA disqualified persons from the use of land they were not otherwise entitled to acquire or occupy, but the definition of use remained opaque, especially over the relatively short time spans required by sport. Cabinet Ministers inveighed against racial mixing on the sportsfield, claiming improbably that this would lead to violence. He urged Black sportspersons to accept the affiliation model. One of its victims was the weightlifter Precious McKenzie who refused to accept its consequences and left for England in 1964. Other exiles were the boxer Jake Ntuli, the cricketer Basil d’Oliveira, and yet more weightlifters, Ronnie van der Walt and Reg Hlongwane.

Opponents of the government shrewdly pointed out that its evocation of tradition and custom should not require constant repetition, nor supporting legislation. In late 1963, the government threatened to introduce legislation to debar Black spectators from White events, except under permit, and prohibit all mixed sport amongst Black communities even if separate seating and other segregated facilities were provided. Nevertheless Black inter-communal sport survived, although mixed teams were harassed. In October 1961, Lincoln City, a mixed team of White and Coloured players from Pietermaritzburg, met an Indian team at Curries Fountain in Durban. Seven players and two officials were acquitted of an offence under the GAA on the grounds that playing football did not constitute occupation of land because of the short time span involved, no buildings had been used and no socializing had occurred. But multi-racial football supported the international sports boycott and this prompted the White Football Association of South Africa (FASA) to persuade municipalities to withdraw their facilities. Eventually only three grounds, in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg, were left to the non-racial Football Professional League (FPL).

The apex of apartheid sport was Proclamation R26 of 12 February 1965, decreeing that permits would be required for mixed crowds at all events. In practice they tended to be awarded for international and provincial matches as long as separate entrances, seating and toilets were provided. Human rights lawyers argued that mixed sport could take place legally on private premises provided no gate was charged, although the use of a clubhouse or consumption of alcohol would certainly be illegal. Cancellation by New Zealand of their 1966 rugby tour over the inclusion of Maoris simply increased the intensity of South African defiance. In his infamous Loskop Dam speech of 4 September 1965, Prime Minister Verwoerd instructed the world to abide by South African custom. His view was that mixed sport would lead to miscegenation and violence.

The attitude of apartheid to Black sporting aspiration and its sympathizers was sneering and disparaging. When the national Department of Sport and Recreation was set up, its remit was the growth of a physically and spiritually strong White nation; not, in the words of its Minister, Frank Waring, to ‘build turf wickets for the Coloured people’. By way of retort, the poet
and non-racial sport activist Dennis Brutus promised that the international boycott would deprive Whites of their ‘sporting prowess and esteem’. In the late 1960s most Whites, whether English- or Afrikaans-speaking, agreed that mixed sport was too high a price to pay for international recognition. The opposition United Party differed from the government only in disagreeing with legislated enforcement of sport segregation via police state methods, preferring laissez-faire conservatism to interventionism. Critics of segregation were labelled traitors, the agents of World liberalism and communism. The exiled non-racial sport movement, the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC), was treated as an enemy organization. In refuting SANROC’s allegations regarding discrimination in South African sport, White administrators referred in vague terms to the constraints of the law. They also claimed that Black South Africans were not interested in sport, or of insufficient ability, in spite of evidence to the contrary: for instance, Humphrey Nkosi, the South African half-mile record holder in 1964. He could, of course, never be the national champion as he was Black.

Under a new Prime Minister, John Vorster, South African sport adopted a new direction in 1967. Vorster saw international sport as an extension of his outward-looking foreign policy. The government now accepted that South Africa could field an integrated team in multilateral sport such as the Olympic Games, the Davis and Federation Cups, and Canada Cup. His right-wing opponents labelled this ‘golf politics’ (Vorster was a keen golfer) and forced a split in the National Party in 1969, although this had minimal effect: in the 1970 General Election, the Herstigte (Purified) Nasionale Party registered only 3.6% of the popular vote and won no seats. Surveys showed growing support among English-speaking students for sports integration, but there was less enthusiasm for mixing at club level. Vorster described South Africa’s view of sport and ethnicity as ‘rowing upstream’, but National Party ideologues also saw potential in sport reform for propaganda purposes. The international boycott intensified: South Africa was excluded from the Mexico City Olympic Games of 1968, played her last cricket test and Davis Cup tennis match in 1970, and was suspended from international athletics in 1972.

In April 1971, a new policy described as multi-nationalism was unveiled. This allowed mixed competition as long as sufficient numbers of foreigners were involved. In the case of single nation tours such as cricket or rugby, the tourists would play against ethnically defined South African teams and only in front of segregated audiences. Sports policy was now predicated on the belief that South Africa comprised a number of different nations with separate identities. Sports administration was increasingly dominated by the elite and secret Afrikaner society, the Broederbond, whose policy resulted in the government issuing stern warnings about mixing on the sports field, while slowly edging closer towards depoliticizing sport within the context of apartheid society. By 1973, mixed football was included
in the South African Games programme, but no foreigners were present as policy theoretically demanded. But at local level, old habits died hard and police intervened in the Natal town of Tongaat to stop mixed football which had been practised for twenty years. By 1974, South Africa was excluded from nine international sporting associations including the Olympics, weightlifting, swimming, athletics and football, but in many others, like cricket for instance, membership was retained while participation was forbidden.

In 1973, an ethnically mixed group of cricketers formed Aurora Cricket Club in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal, and it was admitted to the local White league. This was in spite of intense government pressure that included the issue of a proclamation in terms of the GAA. Aurora’s first match proceeded under police surveillance, but with minimal disruption. Eleven cricketers and their supporters demonstrated that the government’s sports policy was in a state of confusion; and that in spite of a range of repressive of laws from which to choose, the authorities could not prevent a determined attempt to play mixed sport. Indeed, the government’s mood became concessionary and by 1974, sports that had been suspended by international bodies were free to compete on a multinational basis without the need for a foreign presence. The government was keen to extend multinational status to the annual Comrades (ultra) Marathon, but this was delayed until 1975 because the members of Collegians Harriers, the organizing club, voted against a mixed event in a 1974 referendum. Road running had never, in any case, been subject to racial restrictions, although the associated facilities were affected of course, and numbers of Black athletes (and women) had competed unofficially in the past. In 1976, the concept of multinationalism was extended to all adult sport from club level upward: ethnic identity would remain the key concept, but teams were urged to work together as closely as possible to advance the interests of sport.

For a brief period in the season 1976–7, cricket abolished its racial structures and played under one umbrella, the South African Cricket Union (SACU). Cricket was the first sport to make such a move, which was labelled ‘normalisation’. But few teams became multi-racial, racist incidents took place, facility provision remained highly skewed, and good Black players were not selected for representative sides. The structures of apartheid that made mixing difficult were not affected: off the playing field ordinary life remained unaltered. But above all, this was the year of the Soweto Uprising and there was great pressure on players not to participate in what was seen by many to be an establishment propaganda exercise designed to achieve readmission via the back door to international competition. After one troubled season, cricket reverted to its normal state of abnormality: Western Province and Natal being the first provinces to break ranks with SACU. Its rival, the South African Cricket Board (SACB), was typical of anti-government sports bodies that demanded equal opportunity in all areas of life, not just recreation, in a non-racial, democratic society.
Within government circles the prospect of racially mixed clubs caused considerable anxiety. Whatever their international propaganda advantages there was a fear, one that was to be justified by posterity, that they would be the thin end of an unthinkable wedge of integration. In 1976 in a feat of statistical dexterity the Minister of Sport, Piet Koornhof, explained that only 0.0045% of South African sport, mainly cricket, had been integrated. The government had conceded that mixed sport was not illegal, merely constrained by a number of statutes, leaving the matter in the hands of sports administrators, local government and educational authorities. Desperate about international isolation, the government argued that it was phasing out contrived and indefensible discrimination by removing the permit system. The government awarded places of entertainment, including many sports clubs, international status, which meant that they could supply food and drink to whoever they pleased.

But this fell far short of the demands of the South African Congress on Sport (SACOS, the internal anti-apartheid umbrella body for sport founded in 1973) for one non-racial body per sports code; the abolition of racially exclusive clubs; and the integration of school sport. These reforms would have disturbed the very foundations of apartheid. In turn, SACOS continued to enforce its double standards resolution, which punished any of its members who had anything to do with establishment sport. Government attacks on SACOS at the end of the 1970s became increasingly virulent, in part because it adopted more overtly political tactics, taking a lead in opposing race-based local government structures and attaching its name to high-profile strikes. SACOS with its links to the Unity Movement had an inclination towards a strategy of principled non-collaboration with state and establishment structures. This provided a strong moral and philosophical framework for the anti-apartheid sports movement, but as a result it struggled to attract sponsorship and continued to suffer from the attentions of the security police.

During 1979 the Department of Sport and Recreation became a service department for all communities, although its mission was subverted by the Liquor Act and RSA that the government continued to insist were vital in order to maintain law and order and avoid friction. Sport was finally disentangled from the GAA in October 1979: a pre-purchased ticket to a sports event in a Black area now in effect functioned as a permit. This suited the sports establishment, which had regarded sport as an activity ideally divorced from surrounding society; but it simply reinforced the SACOS dictum that there could be no ‘normal sport in an abnormal society’.

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) report of 1980 recommended that sport should be depoliticized, freed from legal restrictions and subject to equitable funding. The first two of these provided a blueprint for the 1980s together with a threatening attitude to opponents of the government. In 1980, a British Sports Council delegation led by Richard Jeeps visited South Africa. The Jeeps Commission report was favourable towards South Africa, but there was no end to international isolation because
reform in the area of sport was unacceptable without more fundamental political change. The balance of power within World sport had changed radically against South Africa: the Jackman affair of 1981 in which an England cricketer with South African connections had been refused entry to Guyana led to the United Nations blacklist, for instance.

Sport in South Africa was now ostensibly depoliticized. But a vast range of apartheid law and practice remained, acting in concert with the decisions of local government and commercial imperatives. Under the new constitution of 1983 and its tricameral structure (White, Indian and Coloured), school sport became an ‘own affair’, the responsibility of a racially defined education department, and a refined form of multinationalism. During the late 1980s, the government cautiously encouraged mixed school tournaments and was attacked from left and right. Surveys showed that Whites controlled 70% of school sports facilities and that per capita expenditure on Whites was seven times greater than that on Blacks outside the bantustans (Black ethnic homelands).

Right wing opposition to change emerged through conservative municipalities and publicly funded schools. The South African government countered its left wing opposition by demonising SACOS and detaining without trial or withholding the passports of its leaders while describing the organization as part of a ‘total onslaught’ against the country. SACOS pointed out repeatedly that players might be treated as Whites during a short period on the sports field, but then they had to return to their allotted position in apartheid society. During the 1980s, South Africa became a security state and local Joint Management Centres (JMCs) led the campaign against SACOS. At the end of the decade the latter lost its influence to the ANC’s sports arm, the National Sports Council (NSC), over the efficacy of the boycott and complex arguments around principles and practical tactics. There was a growing sense that boycotts needed to be targeted and not imposed as a matter of course. SACOS was seen as defender of rigid faith and over concerned by doctrinal purity where a more textured approach was required. However, the consequent marginalization of the SACOS intelligentsia would prove a serious loss in the future.

South Africa hit back at the boycott by organizing mercenary cricket, rugby and football tours consisting of players, many of them out of favour or near retirement, described by Archbishop Tutu as pariahs. These tours emerged out of clandestine activity and much rumour and were denounced even by conservative World leaders such as Margaret Thatcher because of their commitment to a Gleneagles Agreement that bound Commonwealth nations to isolate South Africa as far as possible. Beckles describes mercenary tours as a ‘backstreet illicit encounter with South African apartheid’. They represented a hardening of the face of South African sport and a White nationalist triumphalism, although the football tours received minimal support. At a time of instability in World cricket, South Africa threatened to split it along racial lines. By the time the Australian mercenaries arrived
in 1985, it had become clear that the tax concessions awarded to sponsors amounted to an effective government subsidy, although it is possible that earlier tours were directly funded. Ironically the sponsors were shy about revealing their identity for fear of alienating a large sector of South African society. Much of the work of South Africa’s embassies overseas during this period consisted of keeping sports links alive. One result was a surreal juxtaposition of pseudo test matches and mass funerals for the victims of unrest.

The final mercenary cricket tour, led by Mike Gatting, coincided with the unbanning of the liberation organizations and release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990. The tour had already attracted considerable opprobrium, large demonstrations and few spectators and it provided the opportunity for the African National Congress (ANC), a body that had historically shown minimal interest in sport, to become involved. The remainder of the tour was cancelled, but the ANC was to become the prime supporter of South Africa’s rapid return to international competition, a political ploy to lend reassurance to Whites at a time of profound political change.

Sport provides particularly important insights into apartheid society. It was a powerful signifier of White South African identity and a means of distancing Whites from other communities. But it was also highly vulnerable. Apartheid legislation for all its draconian might failed to find a watertight formula for the control of recreational space, which at its most elemental consisted of an open road or a piece of veld. For the international community wanting to demonstrate its abhorrence of apartheid, the sports boycott was an easy option; and for some small countries it was the only one. For many White South Africans, a victory by their team on the sports field was conclusive, muscular proof of the righteousness of their way of life; yet sport was the country’s Achilles Heel in more ways than one. The symbiotic relationship between government and establishment sports bodies was based on the former’s evocation of custom and tradition and the latter’s fear of legislation. Establishment bodies throughout the period under review were rarely more than standard bearers for government policy, lacking any vision of a broader role in society. The restrictions surrounding apartheid sport depended not so much on statute, but on National Party policy and the connivance of the White sports establishment. But ultimately sport was mortgaged to the need to provide apartheid with a more acceptable face.

Notes

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