



How Soccer Defeated Apartheid

As South Africa prepares to hosts the World Cup, it is also coming face to face with its own history.

BY NICHOLAS GRIFFIN | JUNE 7, 2010



Imagine an alternate reality of the United States in the 1960s, where the collective experience of the political elite had been formed in all-black baseball leagues. The country is led by President Jackie Robinson, Vice President Satchel Paige, and Secretary of State Willie Mays. Sounds crazy? Replace baseball with soccer, and you've got South Africa, a country that has given new meaning to "political football."

Much attention has been paid to President Nelson Mandela's role in South Africa's 1995 Rugby World Cup triumph, captured in the film *Invictus*. But Sean Jacobs, a Cape Town native, historian, and author, describes that tournament as "a blip" in South Africa's history of racial conflict. "The real story," he says, "is soccer."

And the real story begins several miles from the site of Cape Town's swanky new stadium -- on Robben Island, which will be clearly visible to billions of TV viewers as they tune in to this month's World Cup. The island prison colony was home to thousands of South Africa's political prisoners during the apartheid era. Of the men who played in the prison's soccer league, an astonishing number would go on to become important figures in shaping post-apartheid South Africa.

Their ranks include current President Jacob Zuma, opposition leader and former Defense Minister "Terror" Lekota, Minister of Human Settlements "Tokyo" Sexwale, and Kgalema Motlanthe, who completed former President Thabo Mbeki's second term. Mandela never participated; he watched the early games from an isolation block until the authorities built a wall to obstruct his view. Zuma had the distinction of doubling as a referee. Leave it to a future president to play one weekend and arbitrate the next.

More Than Just a Game, written by Chuck Korr and Marvin Close, revealed that Robben Island's inmates had two favorite books from the shelves of the prison library: Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, and Denis Howell's *Soccer Refereeing*. After years of steadfast petitioning, prison authorities finally agreed in 1967 to let the inmates establish their own soccer league, the Makana Football Association. The prisoners spent their weekdays breaking rocks in the quarry, but two hours of every Saturday were reserved for soccer matches. Sunday evening was for talking about the game, Monday to Wednesday for dealing with breaches of rules, and Thursday and Friday for choosing squads and strategizing. The thought process among the players, according to Jacobs, was: "If we can run a league in these extreme conditions, then maybe we can run a country."

The Afrikaner officials of the apartheid regime never embraced soccer. They loved rugby and cricket and funded those sports generously, but saw soccer as a game for Africans. At first, they ignored the sport -- then they began to ban some matches. In April 1963, at the Natalspruit Sports Ground in Johannesburg, authorities locked the gates and left a note saying the day's games had been canceled. Fifteen thousand supporters scaled the gates, carrying an extra pair of goal posts to replace a set that had been removed. The matches went ahead.

The government would later try a new tack, organizing an annual match between black and white players. The plan, however, backfired: It merely emphasized the inequitable and racist nature of the country's political system. The matches did, however, succeed in undermining the apartheid regime in crucial ways. In 1976, the government allowed a mixed-race team to play against a visiting Argentine squad in Johannesburg. Black and white South Africans lined up together on the pitch, though the stands were still segregated. The home team won 5-0, including a hat trick for a then unknown black player named Jomo Sono. When he scored against Argentina, his teammates, black and white, did what teammates have always done: hugged and shook hands. This feel-good victory was overshadowed only a few weeks later, however, when approximately 500 black South Africans were killed in the Soweto uprising -- including Ariel Kgongoane, a prominent player for the Kaizer Chiefs.

Apartheid's opponents quickly seized on the potential of using soccer to rally support and raise funds. The African National Congress (ANC), then a banned underground movement, quickly realized that wherever there was soccer, there was a crowd. Political meetings suffered a blanket ban from 1976 onward, but it was far harder to prevent several members of a political party from sitting together in the stands, amid thousands. Zuma, for instance, would emerge from hiding to attend the matches of the Zulu Royals and confer with other politicians. And it's no coincidence that when Zuma returned from exile in Zambia in 1993, his first residence was at the home of the owner of the Orlando Pirates, one of the largest soccer teams in South Africa.

By the 1980s, activists commonly organized themselves into soccer squads to confound the regime. They could travel easily across international borders, and matches represented a valuable source of money for underground anti-apartheid organizations. Peter Alegi, a historian and author of *African Soccerscapes*, told me that as early as 1944, the revenue from soccer matches was being handed over to the ANC. Patson Banda, a former player for the Orlando Pirates, remembers one game that was played across the border in Zimbabwe in front of more than 100,000 paying fans. Again, the ANC received the proceeds collected at the gate.

Soccer kept countering apartheid -- white teams knew that to test themselves they had to play against the black teams, and unofficial games became more and more common. The truth became obvious: The white league was second class. Few were surprised at its collapse in 1977. Sono, when he returned from his lucrative stint alongside Pelé in the New York Cosmos, made a very political statement in 1982 apartheid South Africa -- he bought the white soccer powerhouse, Highlands Park.

By the late 1980s, soccer matches were at center stage of the country's rapidly evolving politics. ANC flags, which were still banned, were seen openly in soccer stadiums, a sign of the regime's weakening grip on power. In 1991, South Africa's current soccer federation was founded. During its inaugural meeting, it made the **astonishing assertion** that its formation was "only natural ... as the sport of soccer had long led the way into breaking the tight grip of racial oppression." It was an audacious statement, even dangerous, as the fall of apartheid was still a more than two years away.

While the national squad arrived with a bang on the international scene, winning the Africa Cup of Nations in 1996 and qualifying for two World Cups, 2010 finds them with a much weaker squad. Their best players have followed the money to Europe and back at home, the national soccer federation has only been able to organize friendly matches against second-tier countries in the run-up to their day in the sun. The general feeling, according to Mninawa Ntloko, the sports editor of South Africa's *Business Day*, is that while blacks supported the rugby victory in 1995, the favor has not yet been returned.

Despite South Africa's progress, much work remains to be done before soccer is truly a sport that bridges the country's pernicious racial divide. The national team, Bafana Bafana, or "the Boys" in Zulu, has only one white player. While the Cape Town stadium was built in a white part of town, its heart is still four miles offshore, on Robben Island. The World Cup stands will likely be a portrait of racial diversity, as fans come from far and wide to watch the games, but most matches in South Africa's local leagues are still black-only affairs.

However, with the World Cup, some think the tide might finally be turning. "I'm beginning to see it now. Just in this last month," says Ntloko. "You see white children in Bafana Bafana shirts."

As the 2010 World Cup kicks off, there has been a great deal of speculation about whether the tournament will make South Africa rich. In monetary terms, the answer is resoundingly no. The hosts build the infrastructure, but it is FIFA, soccer's international governing body, that reaps the profits from television and sponsorship rights. Still, the tournament will be invaluable for other, less tangible, reasons. It will provide South Africans

with an opportunity to reflect on how far their country has come from the days of apartheid, and the work that remains to be done. Even with apartheid dead and gone, the story of soccer still lies at the heart of South African politics.

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