

Mihir Bose

Sport and South Africa



South African propaganda showing the 'comradeship' of black and white sportsmen.

Just before the present cricket season started I happened to get involved in a discussion with a prominent English sporting journalist about South Africa and sports. The journalist, who writes for one of our great liberal papers and has established a reputation for his empathy with sportspeople and his vivid style, increasingly veered towards what may be called the *Daily Telegraph* line on South Africa, 'if businessmen can go there why not cricketers or other sportsmen?'. And after I had expounded the proposition that sport occupied quite a different position in society and that sporting deeds created moments of magic and fantasy that elevate the lives of most people, unlike business contracts, the journalist exploded with 'Ah. You Indians. You are such politicians. You have made the whole issue so terribly complicated'.

The whole South African issue has, indeed, got terribly complicated — with

some help, I might add, from our own liberal media. Yet the complication should not obscure the two central points: (1) That South Africa and sport is not a question of bringing politics into sport (the favourite cry of those who do not like the ban on sporting links with South Africa) but *of South Africa introducing race into sport and presenting it as the normal state of play*. (2) That if opponents of South Africa are politically motivated, then there is the much greater political motivation of those white South Africans who now claim that their sport is free of the essential racial character of the society.

The fact that in 1982, twelve years after the 1970 South African cricket tour of this country was abandoned, these points need to be made is indicative of the ability of white South Africa to confuse the issue and play the charade of 'liberal' people and sports

officials desperately fighting an obdurate government. The charade that can persuade even otherwise logical and quite impeccably liberal people in this country to say: "But you know South African sportspeople have made tremendous sacrifices to de-segregate their sports. To deny their own sportspeople would surely dishearten them, without doing anything about apartheid'.

So now important is sport in South Africa? And what effect does a sporting ban have on apartheid? In their excellent book on South Africa and sport, *The South African Game* (Zed Press £6.95 pb) Robert Archer and Antoine Bouillon write, 'All but the most fanatical sportsmen would probably agree that sport is not central to South African politics, or to the liberation of the country from apartheid . . . Sport and sporting policy is marginal in that relatively few Africans play sport, which means that even if sport

were completely "integrated" under apartheid, it would have little effect on the well-being of the majority, who would still be confined to the compounds, townships and bantustans'.

Nor is the white South African government's use of sport as a way of advertising the 'South African Way of Life' all that unique. Most countries, of whatever political creed, are quick to take advantage of sporting success: the Soviet Union does it regularly, Harold Wilson believed that the triumph in the 1966 World Cup helped Labour, just as defeat at the hands of the 'Krauts' in 1970 damaged Labour, and recently we saw on our television screens the effect of Italy's World Cup win on their ageing President and the country's even more creaky political system. What makes the white South African effort special is the way it is done and the mirror it holds up to our attitude to sport and life in general.

Western-created sport

The sport we play is the sport of the minority — sports created by the white Western world during its confident, imperialistic phase. In India for instance the indigenous game is *kabaddi*, the game played by millions, while cricket is confined to the urban areas. *Kabaddi* is a wholly Indian game which almost every Indian knows about, and most have played at some time, yet as a sport it ranks so far below cricket that it virtually disappears when the cricket season starts. Similarly there are other indigenous sports in most third world countries, sports patronised by the people but generally ignored by the media and the establishment of the country. For them sport means the sports devised and, in general, administered by the West.

This is of significance since it determines how we treat the sporting achievements of the third world countries. Thus the World Cup performances of Kuwait, Honduras, Algeria and Cameroon were invariably described as the 'breakthrough' of the third world into international football: one *Times* letter writer got so carried away by this that he even considered Brazil's performance as part of the rise of third world football. And though much of the press comment was complimentary, the underlying theme was that of wonder that unknown teams from faraway countries of which we know little could cause such major upsets. Such sporting wonder is of course part of the very nature of sport — one that inevitably makes an FA cup match between, say, a First Division side and a non-leaguer part of the 'magic of the Cup'. This is the perpetual sporting search for a David slaying Goliath, be it with a tennis racket, or a football, a

hockey stick or a cricket bat. In respect of the third world, however, it acquires an edge because of the racial overtones. In the late nineteenth century Lord Harris, governor of Bombay, could believe that Indians would never make cricketers because these Asiatics were rather too excitable for cricket; but once Ranji had established himself as a great cricketer in this country almost every cricketer from the sub-continent was ascribed the magical powers that the Indian Prince was said to have possessed: wonderful eye, wrists of steel, delicate hands, graceful mover, even though there have been a whole generation of Indian cricketers who were about as magical as Boycott. A good example of the sporting stereotype being necessary to explain the unusual sporting phenomenon.

Bridge-building

In South African terms this stereotyping takes on a particular aspect, one that is used by the white South Africans to claw their way back to international recognition: that international tours are necessary not so much for the whites but for the oppressed blacks and other non-whites who could then appreciate what the world has to offer and learn from it. It was the argument used by Jimmy Hill to justify the attempt by some soccer players to organise the recent series of international matches in South Africa and

You cannot have normal sport in an abnormal society

also by the rebel English cricketers who earlier this year played so-called 'tests' against South African teams. It is the latest version of the old bridge-building argument (one that before the bans of the '70s argued that it was important to play with white South Africa as this was a conduit for subtly influencing that society and making it see how integration and non-racialism could be made to work).

Even supporters of the bridge-building school now accept that, during the ten years since the rumpus of the early 70s, sport in South Africa did change. The ban on contact with white South African sporting associations did force them, helped by a government seriously embarrassed by the bans, to make some *cosmetic* changes. *But the really interesting thing is that those who never really wanted to break their links with South Africa managed to organise the ban on their own terms.*

This is best illustrated with a cricket example. Till 1968 international cricket was effectively segregated. Of the seven test playing countries of England, Australia, South Africa, India, Pakistan, West Indies

and New Zealand, all barring South Africa played one another home and away, South Africa only playing with the white countries of England, Australia and New Zealand. It was only the banning of the 1968 England team by the South African Prime Minister Vorster that undid the whole system and eventually led to the expulsion of the country from the International Cricket Conference.

Escape change

However, the white countries of the ICC, who reluctantly agreed to ban South Africa, managed to leave a window open for their former 'bridge partners'. The ICC resolution spoke of South Africa being re-admitted if cricket were to become integrated, in other words one cricket authority to represent all the cricketers in the country. The white cricket authorities did this — in ways far in advance of their counterparts in other sports — and formed one single unified body to represent cricket in the country. But as Hasan Howa of the rival non-racial cricket body puts it, 'you cannot have normal sport in an abnormal society', and this has meant a cricketing structure that is only integrated at the top: the bedrock of the game at the club and school level still follows apartheid.

But officials of the 'integrated' cricket body can claim — as they did again during the recent ICC meeting in London — that they have fulfilled all the demands made by the ICC and should be re-admitted to the international fold. And if the ICC were to follow the letter of their resolution then South Africa should be allowed back. The response of the white members of the ICC is to wring their hands and say in effect, 'Well we know you have fulfilled our conditions, but political pressure will never allow the black countries to vote for your re-admission and for economic reasons we could just not exclude the blacks'. A revealing example of how officials in committee rooms win back the argument that public pressure of the anti-apartheid movement had wrested from them on the field of play.

They have been able to do this — and not merely in cricket — because while the anti-racial sport crusades have been well orchestrated and often successful, most of the officials who represent the third world in the various international committees have singularly failed to stand their corner. The administration of most sports is often a complicated messy business, made messier by the fact that often officials are not aware of the rules and the intricacies of the organisations they run.

This is particularly so of third world officials representing their countries at inter-

national sports organisations. While the West — and for that matter the Soviet block countries — bring professionalism to sports administration, sport in third world countries is generally administered by officials who have never played the game they administer at the highest level — or even at any level at all. They often acquired their positions due to considerations other than sporting. This makes them very vulnerable at international meetings, a vulnerability that is exploited by those in the West keen to preserve their traditional sway over international sports associations.

This is not to suggest that all Western sports administrators are naturally biased towards South Africa, or racist — but that while the anti-apartheid movement has won impressive victories on the field of public debate, it has not been quite so successful in educating the officials, including very often officials of the third world countries whose governments are so vociferous in supporting all the right resolutions against South Africa at international gatherings.

Partly this reflects a certain sporting ambiguity. When English cricketers who were lured to play in South Africa recently returned to this country few of their fellow professionals, including the black cricketers, remonstrated with them for what they had

done. They, almost, instinctively accepted that as professional cricketers they had to ply their wares where they could, more so as their sporting life was limited to a few years. Again, even in third world countries, I doubt if there is a great deal of pressure against the participation of South Africa in international sports, or even understanding

a few white sportsmen are willing to take a stand

of the subject. In that sense the sporting boycott of South Africa is sport's equivalent of Lenin's vanguard of the revolution.

Sporting magic

What makes it worse is the empathy that sport naturally creates. Sport, even more than the arts, has the ability to transcend nations and cultures. You don't have to know Portuguese or anything about Brazil to appreciate the football they play. The Colombian wife of a friend of mine finds cricket inscrutable and boring — except when she watches the West Indians and the game becomes immediately magical and crystal clear. It is this ingredient of sport that at once makes it so important and yet so vulnerable.

For in the last decade since white South

Africa has been steadily pushed out of international sports organisations — not entirely successfully with tennis, perhaps the most glaring example of the bridge-building mentality — the white South Africans have been able to score emotional propaganda points by saying: 'Yes you have kicked us out of cricket but look what that has meant to gifted cricketers like Barry Richards, or Mike Proctor, or Graeme Pollock — all deprived of their ability to demonstrate their unique abilities. Don't you think that is unfair to the cricket world?' And many cricket followers — not all of them white — would accept that there was some truth in that. The first instinctive sensation when you saw Richards make those flowing cover drives of his, or Proctor sensationally knock a middle-stump out of the ground, was not that he was a white South African but that he was a wonderful cricketer. The awfulness of his society would be a later, more logical reaction.

A Proctor or a Richards may have done something to reduce that awfulness — and they have — but that cannot be a reason for accepting white South Africa as it is. As Jasmat Dhiraj, South African non-racial tennis champion in exile puts it, in *The South African Game*: 'There are a few white sportsmen willing to take a stand and I

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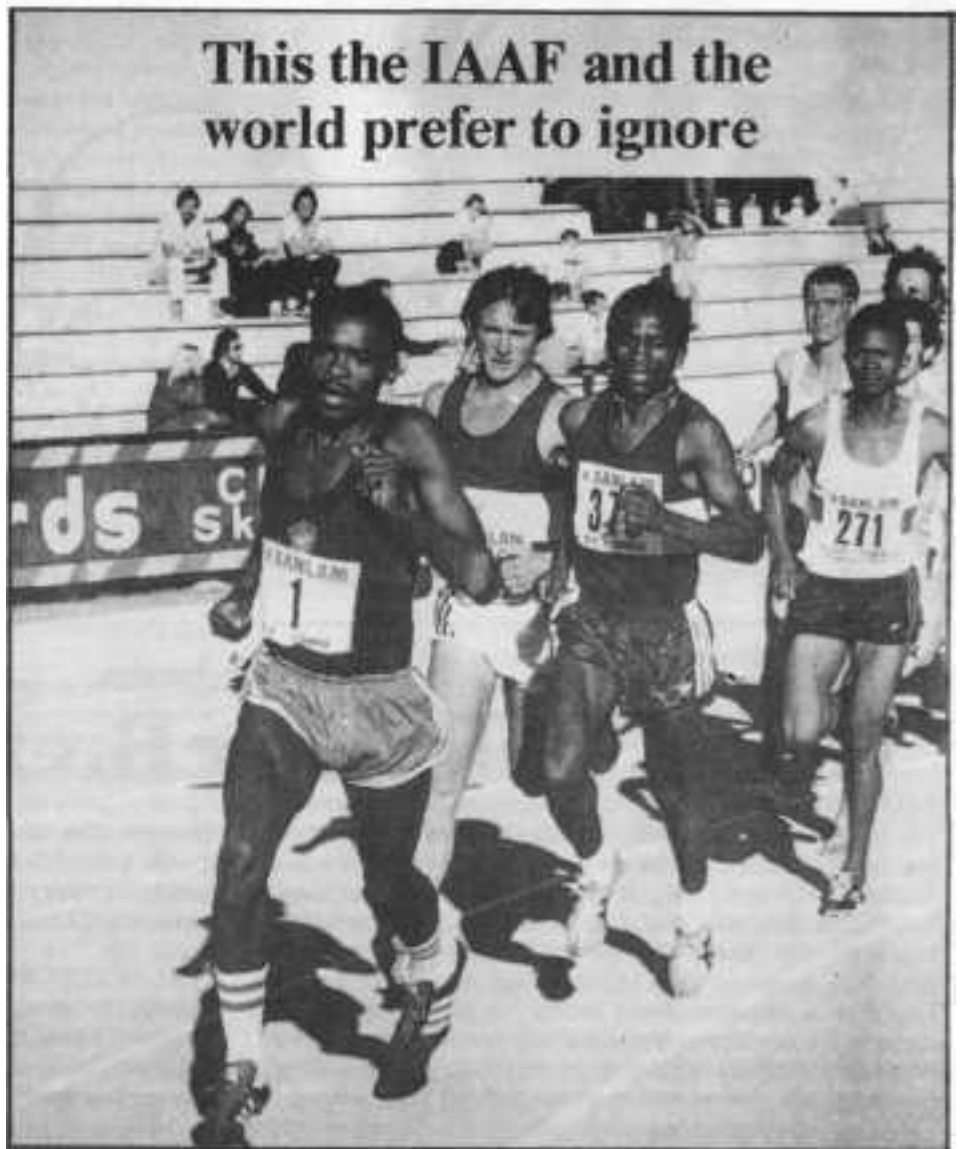
admire them. But after the game is over they go home to their own townships, they do not live with us, they do not experience the hardships of black sportsmen, they don't know our problems. The white world is a very privileged world and the black world is very underprivileged — and unless the white sportsmen will help us to come out of it, are ready to make sacrifices — to sacrifice their sport as we have done, or give up their jobs as we do, or even go to jail as we have to do — I can only feel bitterness.'

And no amount of sporting skills — however aesthetically pleasing — can or should erase that bitterness. It is a bitterness that most whites may find difficult to understand. The racial condition is such that some of it can only be experienced at first-hand, there are no all-purpose simulation models that can make a white person feel what it is to be a black in South Africa.

What it can and cannot achieve

It is this that can make even those who say they oppose apartheid — I have yet to meet someone who publicly supports the system — make strange statements. Thus, soon after the English rebel cricketers went to South Africa in March I appeared on an LBC phone-in to discuss the issue. One caller after making the ritual, 'I dislike apartheid' etc, accused India — and by implication me — of hypocrisy as the Indians still had the wretched caste system. When I retorted that the caste system was practised in India despite brave attempts by the government to outlaw it, whereas in South Africa apartheid was part of state policy, he replied, 'Well I think it is better to be open as the South Africans are, rather than sneaky in the way the Indians behave'. No doubt the caller would have thought that the prize for openness went to the Nazis for their treatment of the Jews. Then, again, in another more recent phone-in, a caller asked the presenter, 'If you were paid £100,000 for a few nights work would you not go to South Africa?' The clear implication being that professional sportsmen can only be expected to look after No 1: money.

In order to counteract this, the supporters of non-racial sport in South Africa tend, perhaps, to load the argument about the effect sporting boycotts have on South Africa. Even a complete ban on all sporting contacts with South Africa — whether of teams or individuals — would not cause apartheid to come crumbling down. The South African government does use sport as part of a political weapon and Archer and Bouillon's book shows how each stage of the development of apartheid has been matched by a corresponding sporting connection. In



An everyday scene in South African athletics: SA Athletic (1981). Part of a South African article on integration in sport which totally ignores the apartheid of all but top level sport.

recent years, as far as the ruling Afrikaaner society is concerned, nothing has dented its arrogant self-confidence as much as the attempts to isolate South African rugby. And certainly some of the changes in South African society — albeit cosmetic — have come from this pressure.

But despite all that, even if sporting South Africa were to be totally isolated, its society and way of life could continue. For that to crumble the economic factor would have to come into play. Where the sporting factor is important is in determining at the popular, common level what the rest of the world's relations with South Africa should be. When attempts are made to breach the boycott — as with the football fiasco, or the earlier cricket one — it indicates to black South Africans that there are still many in the world who do not care enough about their condition to make an issue of it.

Thus the Lord Chalfont-inspired group that wants to uphold the rights of individuals to go to South Africa ignores the rights of the many blacks in this country for whom travel to South Africa would be impossible. And when the good Lord makes his utterances many blacks are made to feel like strangers eavesdropping on a private conversation. This, he seems to be saying, has nothing to do with you, I am talking to my fellow white Britons. Put this way it would be considered scandalous, except white South Africa has been making much the same pitch for a long time now. And with the help of officials and natural sympathy and support among sections of the population, allowed to get away with it.

This is at the heart of the constant attempts to break free from the sporting isolation, and of the attempts by various people to help South Africa do it.

South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal motorists urged to take precaution as road accidents spike. GBV victims remembered during balloon send-off ceremony. ~Size of second wave of Covid-19 depends on peoples~ actions~. World. Cameroon: Children killed in attack on school in Kumba. Europe~s clocks are going back. Here~s how to stay positive as the nights draw in.~ Beware, negligent taxpayers ~ you could soon face serious jail-time in South Africa. Bitcoin resurgence leaves institutional acceptance unanswered. Politics. EFF holds Central Command Committee meeting. Nigeria~s problems will be solved by the country~s government: Magushule. Time will tell whether Ramatlakane will be up to task to chair Prasa: IFP. Education. Cricket is a popular sport in Africa, especially in South Africa, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Just like other sports, cricket has become popular and appreciated across the continent. A few decades ago, only white people were allowed to play cricket in South Africa in line with the Apartheid policy.~ Despite beginning as a traditional sport synonymous with the village, wrestling has become a popular urban sport and there is no doubt the future is bright. Rallying. Motor rallies in Africa are known all over the continent and globally, making rallying one of the most popular sports in Africa. The rugged African roads and off-road terrain is a favorite for rally lovers. African rallies are considered to be the most challenging in the world and bring together renowned and upcoming rally drivers.