
South Africa and the Olympic Movement

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Introduction

Australians now compete regularly with South Africans in golf and tennis, swimming, netball, men's and women's hockey, cricket, rugby union, motor cycle racing, and more — to such an extent that the sporting boycott, before and after the Commonwealth Gleneagles Agreement of June 1977, has disappeared from contemporary view. Australians and South Africans now have sporting commonality enough to share both match-fixing scandals and innovations such as the first indoor international one-day cricketing fixture. But what of the Olympic movement and the Olympic ethos?

The (re)admission of the New South Africa to international sport in the Australian popular memory is probably focussed on rugby union and cricket, the sports over which Australia broke with apartheid South Africa in 1971 (Goolagong, 1975, Harris, 1972, Harte, 1993). I recall while in South Africa in 1993 being glued to M-net at some very unsociable hours to see the Wallabies beat the Springboks in Australia and South Africa going on to host and win the 1995 Rugby World Cup at Ellis Park, with President Mandela donning a rugby cap and calling the players "our boys". In cricket, the Gatting rebel tour had disintegrated in early 1990, but by 1992 South Africa, initially excluded from the draw until Mandela intervened, made the semi-final of the World Cup in Sydney (Norrie, 1993).

However important those sports are to Australia, an ex-British colony with a strong sporting tradition like South Africa, it needs to be recognised that they were left at the starting blocks by the Olympic Movement, which expedited an invitation to South Africa for the 1992 Barcelona Games. So rapidly has the New South Africa reintegrated with the Olympic 'family,' that in September 1995 it competed in the All Africa Games in Harare, in 1996 its press criticised security arrangements at Atlanta, found fault with IOC governance, and advanced the view that Cape Town was the frontrunner for the 2004 Summer Games (Beresford, 1997, Drew, 14 July 1997, Anon. 2 February 1996, Thiel, 13 January 1997, Duncan, 1 November 1996). And although one had to watch SBS very carefully to know it, Johannesburg hosted the 1999 All Africa Games, the regional games of the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa, ANOCA (Thoma and Chalip, 1996, p.210-11. Anon., 15 September 1999).

Clearly there was a movement for the readmission of South Africa that well predated the debate in Australia about whether South Africa should be readmitted, when some like Douglas Booth and Cohn Tatz argued that it was a mistake and that sport in South Africa had not changed (Booth, 1990). And whether or not it was judicious to do so, the great influence of the Olympic movement meant that recognition of a reconstituted national Olympic committee in South Africa was in practical and political effect the full readmission of South Africa to international sport. I want to look more closely at that process and its implications. But before doing so, it is worth considering the position from which the Olympic movement made its decision: as one of the key forces that encouraged change by isolating apartheid South Africa.

South Africa's expulsion from international sport

The distinguished Senegalese jurist and IOC member, Keba Mbaye, has argued that there were two phases of Olympic policy towards South Africa: "one of indifference and hesitation, characterized by embarrassed and contradictor attitudes, and one marked by an interest in the issue and a readiness to take action against apartheid in sport" (Mbaye, 1995, p. 18). He modestly omits to mention that he was a key player in a third phase, the return of South Africa to the Olympic movement. The expulsion of

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South Africa is thus the crux of those first two phases. Two aspects of the policy shift bear examination: first, the forces pressing for the isolation of South Africa, and second, the methods (which ultimately failed) adopted by apartheid South Africa to break out of that isolation.

As draconian segregationist policies were enforced during the first 10 years of the Nationalist government, there was massive mobilisation by the Black population in the form of political organisation, civil disobedience, trade union agitation, and opposition to forced removals (Danziger, 1971). Discriminatory municipal law combined with occupational and urban apartheid was having a detrimental effect on the ability of the vast majority to play sport freely and was alienating sporting facilities from an already underresourced section of the community (Archer and Bouillon, 1982). Sport thus became another arena of opposition to total apartheid.

Les Stone, an ANC activist and schoolteacher, now living in retirement in Australia, was instrumental in forming the non-racial South African Table Tennis Board, subsequently serving two periods of 90 days in detention for mixing sport and politics. The International Table Tennis Federation refused to recognise the all-white national federation (NF) and admitted the SATTB in 1996, the South African government retaliating by refusing passports to SATTB athletes to compete at the international level (de Broglio, 1971, p. 23). Sir Ivor Montagu, president of the ITTF said the decision was an easy one to make: one side restricted membership to 20 percent of the population, while the other side represented 80 percent with membership open to the other. At about the same time the all-white Football Association of South Africa (FASA) was denied recognition as the recognised FIFA NF during a special emergency meeting of FIFA in May 1955. But the neither was the South African Soccer Federation (SASF) recognised, although FASA was suspended from FIFA in 1961 (de Broglio, 1971, pp. 23-24). In these sports and weightlifting, the non-racial sports movement was well organised, and influenced international federations (IFs) well ahead of any shift in IOC policy.

There were, however, other forces at work with the decolonisation of Africa after 1959. South Africa was expelled from the Commonwealth and its athletes, including disabled athletes, excluded from the 1962 Perth Empire and Commonwealth Games. The influence of NFs from independent Africa were seen in the exclusion of South Africa from judo (refused membership 1969) basketball (suspended), and boxing (expelled 1968) (de Broglio, 1971, pp. 21-23). Other IFs that took action before the IOC were fencing (suspended 1964), wrestling (commission of enquiry 1969), and pentathlon (excluded 1969).

For Olympic sports like weightlifting, the mechanism for exclusion was simple but effective. The IOC recognised only one peak body in each country, in this case the South African Olympic and Commonwealth Games Association (SAOCGA). This NOC, in turn, left national team selection up to the NFs (these being all-white). When the NOC endorsed final selections these became the South African Olympic (or Commonwealth until 1958) Team which happened to be all white. From 1948 onwards, representations from excluded Black athletes and their federations were referred by the IOC back to the NOC.

The IOC first discussed the growing problem of apartheid sport in 1959, although prior to that, in 1958, Avery Brundage was still advocating a form of twin and parallel NFs with composite national teams (Avery Brundage, IOC, Chicago, to Ira G. Emery, SAOCGA, Johannesburg, 27 September 1958 & 24 October 1958, reproduced in Mbaye, 1995, pp. 274, 275). At an executive meeting in 1962 Brundage said that “no progress has been registered in South Africa in spite of promises which were made by our Johannesburg member” [IOC member, Reginald Honey] (Brundage quoted in de Broglio, 1971, p. 15). At Baden Baden in 1963 the South African IOC member, Reginald Honey, advanced the view that “Apartheid was an internal matter which did not concern the IOC” (Honey quoted in de Broglio, 1971, p. 15). In response, the IOC decided that if there were not modifications to the policy of racial discrimination in sport then the South African NOC would be forced to withdraw from the Olympic Games. South Africa was thus excluded from the 1964 Tokyo Games. South Africa was again excluded from the 1968 Mexico Games and was expelled at the IOC’s Amsterdam session in May 1970.

Although non-racial ‘national’ bodies had been formed in South Africa they had little influence with the IOC. However, the African bloc with Asian support had growing influence within the IFs, and the IFs potentially had a growing leverage over the IOC on the matter of South Africa’s exclusion. The bloc had turned to excluding South Africa from international agencies (inside and outside the UN) because the anti-apartheid cause had been stymied in the UN from 1954 onwards. As a strategy that grew out of relative weakness, the IOC’s expulsion of South Africa is one of its major triumphs. Thus, a decade after Sharpeville, after the emergence of the OAU, after half a dozen IFs had taken action against South Africa, and after ANOCA had invited the non-racial SANROC to its executive session and voted for decisive action — only then did the IOC act to expel.

But having done so, this compelled another half a dozen IFs to follow suit more or less immediately (cycling, gymnastics, netball, tennis). And the Olympic isolation was far more watertight and unwavering than any other. The Empire sports (cricket, rugby, and lawn bowls) were revealed to operate within a form of bilateral rather than truly international governance, which resisted international public opinion. The South African government attempted to deny the devastating reality that now all the country’s elite athletes were to grow old without the opportunity of Olympic competition with the bravado of the South African Games, and subsequently rebel tours of cricket’s commercialised sport form, and even a whites-only version of Sport for All (taking little more than the name from the international mass participation movement). If anything, these events only highlighted the regional and international isolation of South Africa.

The admission of the New South Africa to international sport

The readmission of South Africa to international sport took place against the backdrop of the reimposed state of emergency, the tempestuous growth of the mass democratic movement, a reinvigorated overseas anti-apartheid movement, and increasingly effective economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the Commonwealth (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989, McKinley, 1997).

The IOC adopted the stance that the leaders of African sport governance should be the key drivers of sporting policy toward South Africa, and out of this was formed the Apartheid and Olympism Commission in 1988. On this committee of seven was Australian IOC member Kevan Gosper; its three consultants were from the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa (SCSA), the international anti-apartheid movement, and SANROC (Mbaye, 1995, p. 139). The IOC was thus drawing together both the forces of the human rights campaign against apartheid and those of Olympic internationalism within Africa in an attempt to develop a strategic approach. The IOC also kept a channel open to the South African NOC, with President Samaranch meeting with Johan du Plessis and J.B. du Plessis in September 1989 (Mbaye, 1995, p. 143).

The du Plessis's met with Mbaye, head of the IOC Commission, in October 1989, at which time the following minimum conditions were set for South Africa's readmission:

- Links to be established with South African athletes belonging to all races - sport in South Africa must be organised multi-racially;
- Relations to be established with non-racial bodies in and outside South Africa, such as SANROC;
- Relations to be established with the neighbouring countries, which were instrumental in determining the position of African and other countries with respect to South Africa in the field of sport;
- Relations had to be established with all African countries in general (Mbaye, 1995, pp. 145-6).

Essential to this process would be normalisation of relations between the NOC in South Africa and ANOCA. Meetings were subsequently held in Harare and Gaborone between the two, and a meeting between the three Commission consultants and the NOC was held in Paris (Mbaye, 1995, p. 146).

If this seems merely to be admission on the basis of regularisation of South African sport governance in keeping with the rules of the IOC, rather than on the basis of wholesale change in the country, it should be kept in mind that already in 1987 similar roundtable meetings between the exiled ANC and prominent South African business leaders had been held in Harare, so that sport risked being left behind in this new political process. In addition, the NOC agreed at the Paris meeting that it could not seek readmission prior to the abolition of apartheid. The 'treetops' nature of the IOC strategy, in drawing in all the stakeholders, was made even clearer by its communication with Nelson Mandela, first through the Commonwealth's Sir Shridath Ramphal and then directly with Mandela's visit to Lausanne in June 1990 (Mbaye, 1995, pp. 151-3).

South African sport governance was extremely fragmented, with four peak bodies and with some sports having as many as four organizations competing to be the equivalent of a NF. A key aspect of South Africa's re-admission was a process of unification, politically a highly charged affair that involved far more than the application of a bit of instrumental rationality to a crazy jigsaw.

In late 1990 the IOC became aware that the IAAF was undertaking its own reassessment of the South African situation and took steps to have this action delayed (Mbaye, 1995, p. 162). Once again the IFs were flexing their muscles, potentially spoiling the IOC's plan to be the first international sports organization to readmit a New South Africa. The final phase was set in motion by two events: President de Klerk's speech to the South African parliament on 2 February 1990 outlining a new political dispensation, and the release of Nelson Mandela nine days later. Those events themselves had been preceded by a secret dialogue between the ANC and the Nationalists.

As a result of the Harare meeting of November 1990 and the Gaborone meeting of March 1991, both with ANOCA, the unified Interim National Olympic Committee of South Africa was created, INOCSA (Mbaye, 1995, p. 177). The IOC Commission visited South Africa in March 1991 to report on progress. At the IOC executive board meeting in Barcelona in April 1991 the members decided, *inter alia*, to "consider the possibility of inviting the INOCSA to participate in the 1992 Olympic Games" (quoted in Mbaye, 1995, p. 185). On 9 July the unified NOC was recognised outright by the IOC (Juan Antonio Samaranch, IOC, Lausanne, to Sam Ramsamy, NOCSA, Johannesburg, 9 July 1991, reproduced in Mbaye, 1995, p. 285). The New South Africa competed at the 1992 Barcelona Games, with Mandela in the crowd. The athletes competed, appropriately enough, not under the national flag but the Olympic flag.

South Africa, Africa, and the future of the Olympic Movement

South Africa, and Africa more generally, is a challenge and an opportunity to the Olympic movement. In Australia in the early 1960s Olympic idealism was the starting point for some for a critique of apartheid policies and even before the first cricket protests, was the basis for suggestions that South Africa be expelled from the international Olympic movement. So at the level of abstract ideas, this was a minor illustration of the positive value of Olympism — although in practice the Olympic movement was far too accepting of apartheid in its midst. South Africa's first major contribution (never having hosted the Empire or Commonwealth Games) to Olympic idealism was the All Africa Games of 1999 (Drew, 10 September 1999, Finch, 3&16 September 1999, Potgeiter, 4 September 1999, Vlismas, 15 September 1999).

South Africa has returned to an Olympic movement far removed from that of the early 1960s, with its amateur ideal. But that ideal limited the potential appeal of Olympic sports among South Africans. If ever there was a society where amateurism represented the hegemony of a (racial) elite it was South Africa (Bonde, 1995, Grundlingh, 1996, Nauright, 1995, Nauright, 1996). This was muted within the Olympic sports since the non-racial federations were also amateur. Instead this sporting divide was played out very sharply in the field of soccer, where the "white" association resisted the professional ethos of the non-racial association, which grew to dominate the sport. And furthermore, soccer's inroads into Africa continentally is very much tied up with the professional sport. On the scale of Africa the Olympic movement is very much playing catch-up football. But on the scale of South Africa the professional era is much more in tune with the fluidity and mobility of the New South Africa (Grundlingh, 1998, Anon., 3 September 1999).

South African sport is, of course, massively handicapped by the social inequalities of the apartheid era, if not longer (Jones, 1995, Merrett, 1994, Macguire, 1991, Hill, 1996). For example, sporting facilities under Grand Apartheid were allocated by planners on a racial ratio, so that the ovals (much rarer anywhere than in oval-mad Australia), tennis courts, swimming pools, and so on, were apportioned to new areas according to the racial group for which it was planned, with 'whites' receiving the most generous portion. Since the recession of the early 1980s and the subsequent economic, social, and political upheaval, the urban infrastructure has seriously deteriorated. With the departure of the central government's racial engineering has come the integration of municipalities and cross-community rates, so that eventually the rising black middle class will be a source of funds for renewal.

Added to the legacy of the group areas are more direct economic factors, such as the low income and lack of a permanent urban domicile for most of the population. Those who enjoyed them also enjoyed quite considerable employment-related access to sporting facilities. For example, on the Rand, where every usable scrap of land is occupied, "white" employees had the use of mining company owned golf links. These factors, along with the role of segregated institutions such as schools and the universities in mobilising sport participation, mean that even a decade after the release of Nelson Mandela, the athletes at the elite level are a reflection of the old South Africa rather than the New South Africa in their composition.

NOCSA had to face this issue in 1999 when framing national team selection for the Sydney Games. It did this by way of two interlinked mechanisms. First, it has tried to set down a regime whereby individual sport federations must select athletes or teams according to criteria approved by it — there is a strong centralising element not necessarily present in other national Olympic movements. Second, in the various sports NOCSA specifies, as elsewhere in the international sport, objective, subjective, or combined criteria of selection for the various sports — with protocols for out-of-country performance to be considered for qualifying. In addition, it specifies under "subjective" recommendations addressing development aims — that is, a "community" compositional element, basically bending the results in the direction of community groups traditionally and actually under-represented at the top level. The aim is one of fostering a broadening of the spectrum of the elite athlete group in the name of general social harmony and the future prospects of the sports.

This has caused a furore in South Africa, particularly in hockey, with various athletes feeling that they have been done an injustice and with some national federations resisting the NOC. Apart from the irony of this happening in a country that simply excluded the majority of athletes even from consideration by selecting from all-white national federations, how valid are these criticisms? This has been a remarkably parochial debate in South Africa, with little appreciation of the variability of national team selection across the Olympic movement and across individual sports internationally. Yet the new type of selection criteria comes out of the Olympic movement itself, and is a way of dealing with the problems of selecting teams in socially divided nations.

While in some other contexts, such as US gymnastics, a discretionary element that is not simply aesthetic operates under the heading of "subjective", the South African case at least has the merit of spelling out the rationale for the operation of this type of subjective criterion. It is not without precedent. One example is the Belgian swimming team, where athletes (not necessarily at a national selection trial, particularly if the times are not fast enough) must meet the national qualifying time twice to guarantee Olympic team selection:

In Belgium there are two national teams representing the Flemish and French languages, respectively. These two groups have a fierce rivalry. For example, in 1991 a dispute arose on the composition of the women's relay team

for the European Championships. No agreement could be reached between the sides. As a result the Belgian team that, on paper, could have taken a silver medal did not even enter the competition. Therefore, in order to avoid this potential problem Belgian swimmers seek automatic qualification based on reaching the standard (Thoma and Chalip, p. 134).

While there has to be agreement on those who do not qualify twice, in Belgium the two groups are not radically unequal in socio-economic terms. Furthermore, this selection problem does not present itself in all sports — which is precisely the problem in South Africa. This is obviously an area with which South Africa must grapple if Olympic sports are to garner mass participation, mass spectator support, and nurture elite athletes.

Olympic sport also has a role to play in the renovation and establishment of large top-level sporting arenas in South Africa. Professional cricket and rugby have yet to make a real impact here and may well not do so on their own. The urban inequalities of apartheid saw the marginalisation or disappearance of the essentially pre-war inner-city stadiums, such as Old Wanderers. Newlands is saved from being a purely suburban ground by being on a railway line, while New Wanderers is basically a lavish suburban ground. What South Africa lacks are venues suitable for integrated mass spectator sport and for hallmark sporting events. While broadcasting interests, sponsors, and the individual sports are part of the equation, this was the gaping hole in the (2004) Cape Town Summer Olympics bid — where were the facilities?

The public purse is constrained by neo-liberal economic policy and a very long social priority list in a country where homeless squatters number in the millions and where household electricity and sewerage cannot be taken for granted. We are brought, then, to the idea that has gained some currency recently, that should the IOC want to see the first African Olympics, it might consider funding a special sustenance fund to build the quality of facilities needed. South Africa would not necessarily be the first choice for such largesse, but it would be in contention. Where ever such facilities were to be built and such a games held, it would boost the Olympic movement throughout Africa, including South Africa, and would represent a great step forward for the Olympic movement as a whole. An African Commonwealth Games now seems certain to be the next step in this direction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, at least in Australia, there was some reaction in the anti-apartheid movement that this symbolic recognition of the New South Africa might, in effect, let the diehard racialists of, in particular rugby, as well as cricket, out of jail and back into international competition, without changing their ways after years of being pinned down by boycotts and sanctions. There were certainly ongoing problems with unification in rugby, and inequities in resources and opportunity exist in South Africa today. At the time it was difficult to grapple with the ‘keep-the-sanctions’ view as the possibilities for “real change” in South Africa remained uncertain, even through the CODESA process. But what this position tends to overlook is that the process of fundamental change was driven by the ANC and by the Nationalists, and that both sides made large compromises to achieve a settlement.

South Africa is still a very unequal society and the further commercialisation and professionalization of elite sport and the less than full integration of the school system, the great mobilizer of mass sport participation in South Africa, have meant the slow growth of greater equity and equality in sport. Nevertheless, the sport scene is undergoing significant change. The All Africa Games marked a cultural shift for South Africa from colonial-settler mentality to African identity. Holding the Games in Johannesburg developed the skills, although not as yet the venues, necessary to successfully hold the Olympics. It also strengthened African sport, which is aiming for 66 medals at the Sydney Olympics. Africa has much to contribute to international and global sport, but that contribution has been hamstrung for half a century (Honey, 1997, Noakes, 1995). At the beginning of the new millennium the prospects of Baron de Coubertin’s plans for the Olympic ideal in Africa are looking brighter than they have in the past.

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