The Death of Doubt?

Sport, Race, and Nationalism in the New South Africa

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In early December of 2009, South Africa held a ceremony to receive the World Cup trophy as a kickoff to a year-long celebration. President Jacob Zuma declared, "Let us display the Rainbow Nation to the world, let us display that here on the southern tip of Africa, where mankind originates from, we can make the home of everyone."[1] Chief Executive Officer of South Africa's 2010 FIFA World Cup bid Danny Jordaan—whose job is admittedly to boost the significance of the event—added, "All of us who were [involved in the struggle against Apartheid] said 'one day we are going to be a democratic South Africa, one day we are going to host this World Cup.' Today, as we welcome this trophy, we announce the death of doubt."[2]

The message was clear: throughout the years of contention and struggle between peoples during and even after Apartheid, the world has looked on, doubtful that South Africa would ever find peace and harmony. Now, the World Cup represents a vital component of the country's process of reconciliation. Indeed, the event signifies the fact that, for generations, sport has been central to the country's political debate over race and nationalism. It is now seen as central to national reconciliation.

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But why was there doubt that harmony in South Africa could be achieved in the first place? And what does sport have to do with it? Though there are many examples, a telling one is an incident that occurred in 1981. South Africa's national rugby team, the all white and largely Afrikaner Springboks, traveled to New Zealand to play that country's All Blacks in a series of matches.[3] Due to South Africa's Apartheid policies, which, by 1981 had made the country a pariah in most of the world, the Springbok tour met with passionate and sometimes violent protests and placed the debate over Apartheid front and center. Supporters of the tour in New Zealand and South Africa argued that sport and politics should not be mixed—a false claim that was itself a political stand.

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In the period between 1960 and 1972, South Africa found itself excluded from the international sporting community—expelled in short order from the Olympics; the world cups of football, rugby, and cricket; and virtually every other sporting event in the world.[4] This status largely held true until the country transitioned to democratic rule with the negotiation process that culminated in the 1994 election of Nelson Mandela. Fourteen years after the controversial Springbok tour, South Africa and New Zealand squared off in the finals of the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa. Unlike in 1981, the world now celebrated the match for what it represented about the dramatic changes that took place in South Africa.

With the 2010 World Cup, sport-mad South Africans celebrated the opportunity to return to the world stage. Yet, while the Apartheid period's long sporting isolation has ended, the linkages between sport and politics in South Africa have not. Sport in South Africa today reveals both the distance the country has traveled to overcome its white supremacist past and how far it still has to go to surmount that bitter legacy.

Fast forward nearly three decades, after the imbroglio over the Springbok tour of New Zealand. South African sport has received some nice publicity in recent months. In Clint Eastwood's film *Invictus*, Matt Damon and Morgan Freeman portray World Cup-winning, 1995 Springbok captain Francois Pienaar and Nelson Mandela, respectively, as saving South Africa from descending into chaos. Americans who had never thought about South Africa's Springboks and who are not familiar with *Bafana Bafana*—the name of the South African national football team, which means "the boys, the boys" in Nguni—have suddenly been deluged with rather clear-cut narratives about the redemptive power of sports. However, the reality of the interconnectedness of race, nationalism, and athletic competition in South Africa is messier and more complex than *Invictus* would have us believe.

The Informal Institution of Sports. South African rugby is fraught with tension over the idea and practice of reconciliation. The message of 1995 is not one of unalloyed success but rather of the ways in which even a global championship celebrated by millions did not change the realities on the ground for millions of South Africans whose embrace of the Springboks was broad but shallow. For many millions of non-white South Africans, the Springboks represented Afrikaner white supremacy at its apex. Most black Africans despised rugby, and those who did not despise it supported any team except the Springboks. *Invictus* depicts Nelson Mandela's calculated embrace of the Springboks despite the potential political blowback; he recognized that bringing about reconciliation in South Africa would require the support of all South Africans, white and black.

To truncate a long and complicated story, South Africa hosted the 1995 World Cup as a sort of coming out party. Following decades of sporting and increasingly political isolation, the Springboks made an improbable run to the final game against the mighty All Blacks of New Zealand. Nelson Mandela made an appearance before the game wearing the number six jersey of Springbok Captain Francois Pienaar, with whom he had forged a relationship that helped bridge the gap between a team and a nation. In a tightly fought match, the Springboks defeated the All Blacks in extra time.

In its broadest contours, the story told in *Invictus* is true. Mandela did embrace the Springboks, who made an implausible run to the championship, and in its wake, many millions of South Africans embraced Mandela and the idea of reconciliation. Whites used the World Cup as a way to portray themselves as being tolerant of a new regime that the vast majority of them desperately wished had never come to power. Many, but not all, were surely earnest in their newfound embrace of South Africa as "the Rainbow Nation." Black South Africans embraced the phrase *Amabokoboko* Zulu—for "our Springboks"—as a way to promote the idea of the democratic, non-racial South Africa they had long envisioned. Thus, Mandela in that jersey and Springbok cap is one of the great symbolic moments in the history of the post-Apartheid era.

Unfortunately, reality is a lot more complicated than the movies. Sport can represent a marvelous way to examine a society because it is a microcosm of the world at large. Sport is messy; it occasionally leads social trends; and simple morality plays rarely exist.[5] However, symbolism is of limited utility in the face of hard political realities. For example, it may have seemed as though the country had made great progress when the nation embraced Mandela as a result of his support for the Springboks. In actuality, the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up to address the gross human rights violations of the Apartheid past, had not even convened when the Springboks stunned the All Blacks. The World Cup victory did not represent the apex of reconciliation—it represented a beginning stage.

Even today, rugby itself is far from a multi-racial panacea. The vast majority of the country's fans are white, and the sport is still a civic religion

for Afrikaners. Additionally, most of the country's elite players are white, even if almost assuredly the majority of the country's players, at all age levels, are black.[6] Nevertheless, the country's black masses have not yet fully embraced the professional manifestations of the sport. There is a consistent clamor to eliminate the Springbok logo that is still hated in many corners of the country, and millions still prefer to see the Springboks throttled when they play international matches. For large numbers of South Africans, the Springbok is a racist symbol.

In pursuit of reconciliation across politics and society, the South African government has used sport as an informal means to bridge racial inequalities. Due to the unequal racial makeup of professional teams, rugby has become a visible symbol of this fight for racial equality. The government and various sporting bodies have instituted quota policies in sports, a form of affirmative action that requires representation from previously disadvantaged groups. These practices are profoundly unpopular among whites, in particular, many of whom believe that sport—of all arenas—should see outcomes determined solely on merit. Meanwhile, supporters of the quota policies argue that rugby must work to overcome its deeply racist past.

Much of this debate may well be settled on the field. As more good players from the majority black population have the opportunity to excel on the pitch, more black players will rise to the highest ranks of the sport and contribute to the success of the national team. No Springbok fan can argue with this trend.

As a testament to this outcome, today's Springboks look very different from their 1995 predecessors. In 1995, the only black player, Chester Williams, became something of a poster child for the country's blacks, despite the fact that he is a native Afrikaans speaker from the country's so-called "coloured" population—the term still used by South Africans to refer to the mixed race population. By contrast, the Springboks today not only have a number of black players, but some of those players are also among the most popular in the country—and the best in the world—at their positions. For example, stars such as Tendai Mtawarira and Bryan Habana are adored by black and white fans. Additionally, the Springbok coach, Peter de Villiers, is the first non-white to helm the team, leading them to some of their greatest achievements since taking over the national squad in January 2008.

The Meaning of South Africa 2010. There is still ample doubt among naysayers about South Africa's ability to host the 2010 World Cup.[7] People worry about infrastructure, sufficient lodging, and the country's reputation for violence. Generally, they wonder if South Africa will be up to the task. Some of these worries are legitimate, while others are overblown. Many of them come from a place that, if not exactly racist, at least falls into the category of thinking of Africans as somehow incapable of handling a global event such as the World Cup. This is, after all, a country that has not quite recovered from its racist past.

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try's ability to achieve reconciliation. Sport may be a microcosmic representation of society, and quota policies may address inequalities in the racial composition of prominent teams, but they do not translate perfectly into broad change at all levels. While Zuma and Jordaan conveyed an optimistic view of the power of sport during the kickoff ceremony, regular citizens may not share their feelings. On the whole, white South Africans do not seem as optimistic as black South Africans about the success of the World Cup. Where black South Africans see an opportunity to show off the reformed South Africa, white South Africans fear that crime will overwhelm the hordes of tourists, or that the government will be unable to pull off an event of such magnitude.

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On the other hand, European reporters could not resist the narrative of reverse racism they saw and heard unfolding during the 2009 Confederations Cup football tournament. Every time the only white *Bafana Bafana* player touched the ball, a cascade of what sounded like boos rained down upon him—so much for reconciliation. Rather than catcalling their sole white player, however, the crowd was celebrating him. Every time he touched the ball, the patrons were honoring the last name of possibly their favorite player, Matthew Booth.[8] The rest of the world has absorbed the lessons of South African racism so well that the default setting is to see racism, including reverse racism, everywhere.

The problems that football confronts in South Africa mirror rugby's dilemmas. As much as rugby has always been "a white sport," football has long been the favorite sport of the country's black majority.[9] Just as black South Africans have often rejected rugby because of its undeniable history of racism and its connection with Afrikaner nationalism, many fear that whites have rejected local football.[10] White South African fans of football seem to have rejected the national team, *Bafana Bafana*, for other teams: England for the country's English-speaking whites, the Netherlands for Afrikaner fans, or even Brazil, which is popular among black South Africans. Even fewer whites who care about football pay attention to the country's Premier Soccer League (PSL), preferring instead Europe's elite leagues.

As with rugby, race plays a role in South African football. With the country hosting the 2010 World Cup, football is best seen as a lens through which to examine sporting nationalism—the creation or buttressing of national identity through sports.[11] President Zuma has been clear in his belief that the World Cup serves as an opportunity to "renew our commitment to national unity and nation building," calling 2010 the most important year, since 1994, in the country's history.[12]

Bafana Bafana will enter the tournament as arguably the weakest team in the field, having only qualified because of a special provision ensuring that the host team receives automatic entry to the final draw of competing teams. Nevertheless, South Africans will be out in full force to support the national team, which they hope will respond to the excitement of serving as host. Moreover, all of the African teams will be seen as locals in this year's World Cup, for this is widely viewed not only as South Africa's World Cup but as the entire continent's. Thus Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, and Algeria will likely have the support of locals, especially if South Africa falters. Africans across the continent have embraced this World Cup as being theirs and desperately want to see South Africa—and thus Africa—succeed in such a vital, global event.

Outside observers also understand what this year's event means for Africa. Ruud Gullit, a former captain for the Netherlands, has argued that a positive perception of South Africa will change perceptions of the continent. "When people think about Africa, they think about starvation, HIV, civil wars – things like that . . . . But things are changing. Now there is a real possibility to show the world that Africa is much more than" a story of tragedy and privation.[13] In the same vein, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has said that the World Cup has "great power" to present to the world "a different story of the African continent, a story of peace, democracy and investment."[14]

While skepticism about South Africa's World Cup remains, the country's citizens maintain a fundamental optimism. This optimism reflects the progress of a country that has come so far since the Apartheid years and that has rejected retributive justice in favor of reconciliation. It may also be spurred on by the tangible benefits that many expect the World Cup to bring. Such benefits include a massive boost to the economy through tourist money and thousands of new jobs.

A question underlying South Africa's preparation for the World Cup is what benefit the majority of the country's people will accrue from the event, especially when the world has packed up and headed back home. National Commissioner of the Police Bheki Cele argues that policing will be markedly improved because of the extra training, equipment purchasing, and other efforts undertaken for the World Cup.[15] It would be easy to dismiss such talk as mere palaver from someone whose job it is to advocate for the police. At the same time, if South Africa derives incremental improvements in policing, infrastructure, and delivery of services, so much the better.[16] The World Cup does not need to radically transform South Africa to serve the country well. South Africa needs salve, perhaps, but it does not need salvation. Transformation is an ongoing and long-term process; the event merely needs to contribute to this process.

Conclusion. South Africa has come a long way since the controversy over the 1981 Springbok tour of New Zealand. Soccer and rugby, inarguably the most popular sports among black and white South Africans, reveal both the strengths and the limitations of transformation in South Africa.

Although the legacy of Apartheid deeply cuts the country, one must put modern-day South Africa in the context of history. Just a quarter century ago, as townships burned and the government's security forces crushed the opposition, the current state of South Africa would have been nearly unimaginable. South African rugby fans—white and black—sitting in a stadium together and cheering wildly for black players would have been the stuff of fantasy, as would Matthew Booth receiving the adoration of the black masses. Yet, both embody the "death of doubt" to which Danny Jordaan referred.

On 11 June 2010, *Bafana Bafana* will take the field to face off against Mexico in the opening match of the World Cup at Soccer City Stadium. An entire country and an entire continent will be behind it. Matthew Booth will take the field with his teammates, and upon him will rain down what most decidedly are not boos. The black, white, and "coloured" members of the world champion Springboks will be in the crowd. So too will be global icon Nelson Mandela, perhaps wearing a *Bafana Bafana* jersey, possibly even Matthew Booth's. The World Cup will not signal an end to racism, but it will show the world how remarkably the country has confronted its racist past.

NOTES

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2. Hayward, "World Cup: SA ready to provide continental lift."

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10. Setumo Stone, "Do white South Africans hate local soccer?" *Mail & Guardian*, 6 June 2008.

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13. Mike Collett, "2010: Another side of the African story," *Mail & Guardian*, 4 December 2009.

14. Guy Berger, "Shedding African stereotypes during the World Cup," *Mail & Guardian*, 28 October 2009.

15. Donna Bryson, "Cele says cops 'better skilled after 2010," *Mail & Guardian*, 23 February 2010.

16. "Zuma wants SA to build on 2010 momentum," *Mail & Guardian*, 25 February 2010.