

South Africa's soccer woes

Inspiring youth to new heights

Soccer development in South Africa is in a dire state as Bafana Bafana's performance indicates. **Tony Fluxman** looks at why this is the case and comes up with a strong argument for ways of correcting this mess.

Soccer in South Africa is in crisis. Although the country will host the greatest soccer tournament in the world, the FIFA World Cup, the national team Bafana Bafana has little chance of doing well in this competition. At the moment South Africa is ranked 90th in the world and 20th in Africa.

It is striking that a country with the most powerful economy in Africa and with such widespread and intense interest in soccer is ranked so low. There is much sadness in the fact that South African soccer seems to have gone backwards since the great successes of the 1990s which included Orlando Pirates winning the African Champions Cup in 1995 and, of course, Bafana

Bafana's famous victory in the African Nations Cup in 1996.

But the problems are to be found not only at the summit of South African football. There appears to be a general failure to adequately develop the skills of players, and this is reflected in the disappointing quality of the game at all levels.

In a series of important articles in *SALB* (Vols 33.1, 33.2, 33.3), Dale McKinley provided a useful analysis of the many reasons for this sorry state of affairs. The relevant factors include the failure of the government to invest in the sport due to substantial cuts in subsidies to local communities and city councils, the top-heavy management structure of the most important and

powerful soccer body, the South African Football Association (SAFA), and the rapid commercialisation of football, which has had the unfortunate effect of promoting selfishness and greed at the expense of the growth of the game.

Perhaps the most serious problem is the lack of an effective development programme.

According to Gavin Hunt, manager of Super-Sport United and South Africa's leading soccer coach, there is a shortage of quality players coming through the lower ranks. He attributes this to inadequate development at the grassroots, which is illustrated by the fact that hardly any 16 or 17 year olds are today making their debuts in the Premier Soccer League (PSL).

A related issue is the sharp decline in the number of young white footballers. Aside from representivity in soccer being an important issue in its own right, it is undeniable that South African football has been weakened by the decrease in the number of whites playing the game. But the feeling amongst soccer experts is that the great white players of the nineties such as Neil Tovey and Mark Fish added a stability, toughness and self-discipline that complemented African players' flair.

Although an effective development programme is key to

Getty images



Bafana Bafana has little chance of performing well in the 2010 Fifa World Cup.

the success of any sport, it is doubtful, as McKinley points out, that such a programme for soccer in this country actually exists. While SAFA has promised much, little has happened on the ground. Whatever development there has been is due to the activities of committed individuals and private organisations.

One of the most impressive projects is the *Dream Fields* programme, overseen by John Perlman (see interview SALB 34.1), which supplies soccer kits and low cost fields to disadvantaged communities in small towns and rural areas, and also assists with the running of tournaments. This is an initiative that should clearly be supported, and one that has already enriched the lives of youngsters.

But such projects, praiseworthy as they are, are unlikely to fundamentally alter things. Projects of this nature are limited because they tend to occur in certain areas and moreover are not able to address the major organisational and resource problems of football development. Supplying fields and equipment on a fairly ad hoc basis is no substitute for across-the-board interventions, which must include

structured coaching, proper training and selection, and well-organised football leagues.

SOCCER IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

But in all this talk of development a critical factor seems to have been left out and that is the place of soccer in South Africa's education system. Indeed, I believe it is the absence of football as a serious school sport that is key to accounting for the poor state of soccer development.

To see this, one only needs to examine the crucial role school cricket and school rugby have played in the development of these sporting codes in South Africa. Model C and Independent schools have a long tradition of excellently managing both these sports. Indeed, the pride of many of these schools is often associated with success in cricket or rugby. The commitment to these sporting codes is such that, in the Eastern Cape, where I live, schools ferry their teams across long distances so that they can play matches against learners in other towns.

Model C and Independent schools provide an ideal ground for the training of youngsters in cricket and rugby from grade 1 all the way to

matric. The high point for school cricket is undoubtedly the 'Kaya Majola Cricket Week' (formerly, the Nuffield week) and for school rugby the 'Coca-Cola Craven Week'. The importance of the schools in producing cricketers and rugby players of the highest calibre is demonstrated by the large number of top cricketers and star rugby players that have emerged on the national stage though participating in these tournaments.

Soccer, by comparison, has little presence in South African schools. As far as the former Model C and Independent schools are concerned, football is found in only a minority of such schools, mainly in big cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, and then generally only at primary school.

There is, of course, huge interest in soccer amongst township youth (despite most township schools making no provision for the game). The youth even organise their own teams and matches (sometimes with the help of local sponsors). But none of this can compare with the highly effective organisation of cricket and rugby at the more privileged schools.

Unfortunately, the situation with regard to soccer still bears strongly the imprint of apartheid. While the former Model C and Independent schools (which are today mostly completely non-racial) continue to manage cricket and rugby in a committed and highly effective manner, soccer is still in an haphazard state and remains the sport of the disadvantaged. It is no accident perhaps then that some white South Africans regard soccer as basically a 'black sport' (which is of course bizarre considering that soccer is the dominant sport in Europe, and in most of the world).

There really are no good reasons for carrying on with the status quo. It is time for soccer to be



The situation with soccer still bears the strong imprint of apartheid.

tourneycentral



A programme of soccer in former model C and Independent schools is likely to result in a massive surge of interest in soccer amongst whites, coloureds and Indians.

systematically introduced into the South African school system. Having football played at most schools, from primary through to matric, would provide a wonderful platform for the development of the game in the country as a whole. One can imagine how a well-managed system of school soccer would enable both the training and identification of talent from an early age upwards.

Moreover, it is possible to envisage one day the existence of a national football schools competition along the lines of the Majola or Craven weeks, which could be named after one of the soccer 'greats', and which would inspire youth to new heights in the game.

Giving football a major presence in schools would also go a long way to addressing the shortage of non-African players. Indeed, I believe that an extensive programme of soccer in former Model C and Independent schools is likely to result in a massive upsurge of interest in the local game on the part of whites, coloureds and Indians and this would result in a much broader support base for Bafana Bafana.

NO REASON FOR OBJECTIONS

Naturally, as with any proposal, the idea of making soccer a major school sport is likely to face opposition. Some resistance is likely to come from the former Model C and Independent schools. Whilst one can ignore opposition motivated by the idea that soccer is a 'sport for blacks', a more serious objection is that making soccer a major school sport might impact negatively on school rugby.

A second objection, which is likely to come from very different quarters, is that giving football a strong foundation in former Model C and Independent schools would perpetuate the neglect of soccer in deprived areas.

With regard to the first objection, there are really no good reasons for keeping soccer out of more privileged schools and many good ones in favour of giving football a major presence in schools across the country. Soccer, firstly, is by far the most popular sport in South Africa and indeed in the rest of the world. Preventing soccer from being played in these schools is clearly absurd in the light of such facts.

As far as fears regarding rugby are concerned, there is undoubtedly place in the education system for both sporting codes. Many Model C and Independent schools field as many as five or six rugby teams for each age cohort. It would hardly be a disaster if these were reduced to three!

Another solution is to play football and rugby in different terms. At present, the rugby school season runs over the second and third terms (April through August). Surely, one of these terms could be reserved for soccer. Moreover, such an arrangement would give those learners interested in participating in both sports the chance to do so.

In respect of the second issue, it is certainly true that there is a great

need for more soccer development in disadvantaged communities. The problem is that the strategy of focusing only on development in these areas is likely to perpetuate the current situation. The result is that soccer will definitely remain the poor cousin of cricket and rugby, and will continue to be played almost exclusively by youth in deprived areas.

Township schools on their own cannot do much to fix the problem given that many of them are unable to teach mathematics and science properly and thus can hardly be expected to put much energy into soccer development.

Giving football a strong base in the more privileged school sector will in fact, I believe, improve the soccer situation in the townships. Township schools would benefit from interaction with the more privileged schools by having greater access to fields, coaching, and training of these schools and would also benefit from their management skills.

At the same time, having a fully fledged programme of soccer across the board would facilitate the identification of talented youngsters from township schools, who could be afforded real opportunities to show off their skills on the wider stage.

Finally, an integrated system of soccer development could perhaps do something to overcome class and race barriers between different communities.

I think I have made a strong case here for introducing soccer systematically into South African schools. Those who are seriously interested in improving the fortunes of the local game should commit themselves to ensuring that soccer becomes a major sport in the South African education system. LB

Tony Fluxman teaches political philosophy at Rhodes University.