

Upside-down state of South African soccer

Soccer is South Africa's most popular game. Yet as **Dale T. McKinley** tells an historical legacy has left it in a state of financial, policy and administrative underdevelopment.

For the better part of the past century, the most popular sport in South Africa both as public entertainment and in active participation has been soccer. From its introduction into South Africa as a sport played almost solely by the propertied, white gentry, soccer quickly became, by the turn of the 20th century, the sport of choice amongst the non-white population and white lower classes.

Not surprisingly, this rapid spread in popularity set off alarm bells within the corridors of white political and economic power. As R. Morell noted in *Rugby and white masculinity in Natal*, "soccer became emblematic of threatening, socially integrative forces within society...". For the next few decades, soccer became the enemy of the racist white establishment, who used all means at their disposal, including the extensive powers of the apartheid state, to promote and support white sports such as rugby and cricket as well as to suppress and control the social, economic and political reach and impact of soccer.

These attempts in racialised, political engineering included legislation designed to ensure racial

segregation and material inequality in South African sport. The results were predictable. There was a woefully inadequate soccer infrastructure and trained personnel, especially in non-white urban and rural areas. Also there was an almost complete lack of any meaningful or sustained development programmes for non-white youth.

Further, a racially divided institutional and administrative framework emerged which had, by the 1980s, produced four different soccer bodies to oversee the amateur and semi-professional side of the sport. And finally, there was the complete institutional and practical isolation by the governing bodies of international soccer which ensured that South African soccer remained a wholly domestic affair.

None of this however, could prevent the game of soccer in South Africa from becoming the national sport even if it mostly involved the black male population. Nor could it stop the gradual breaking down of racial barriers on the field of play amongst widely-supported semi-professional and mostly 'township' based teams. By the late 1980s it

was clear that, for the most part, the game of soccer was outside of the control of the apartheid state.

In 1987, all four of the different soccer bodies, the South African Football Association (SAFA), the South African National Football Association, the Football Association of South Africa and the South African Soccer Federation, met with the exiled leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) in Lusaka, Zambia. This meeting signalled the first steps towards the institutional unification of soccer inside South Africa, and also foreshadowed political shifts that took place in the coming years which would finally usher in the end of formal apartheid.

It took another four years however, before unification of all soccer bodies in South Africa happened.

In December 1991, SAFA was founded at a meeting of all soccer bodies in Johannesburg. In SAFA's own words: "It was only natural that the game finally be united, as the sport of soccer had long led the way into breaking the tight grip of racial oppression."

Indeed, given soccer's history, it came as little surprise that the sport led the way a full two years before the apartheid state disappeared with South Africa's gradual re-acceptance into the international 'community', as well as for the eventual de-racialisation of sport. Within a year, SAFA had gained membership to both the continental Confederation of African Football (CAF) and the global Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) governing bodies.



One of the cruellest legacies of apartheid was the distortion of sport. Yet reduced municipal subsidies ensured this continued after 1994.

Over the next years, South Africa's various national teams from the senior men's side, Bafana Bafana, and senior women's side, Banyana Banyana, down to the under-17 boys team hosted a number of international games and participated in CAF and FIFA competitions.

By 1996, the country's first, fully-fledged soccer business corporation for professional clubs, the Premier Soccer League (PSL), was formed led by South Africa's biggest and most popular clubs Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs. A number of senior men players began plying their trade in overseas professional soccer leagues and club teams like Pirates and Chiefs quickly gained a continental support-base and received widespread international attention.

The performance of these teams on the international stage indicated that in spite of its long isolation from international competition and uneven development at the domestic level, South African soccer had emerged from the shadows of apartheid in pretty decent shape.

In 1995, Orlando Pirates won the premier club competition on the continent, the African Champions Cup in 1996, and the senior men's national team won the African Nations Cup. In 1997, the boys' under-20 team were runners-up in the African Championships and, in 1998, the senior men's team qualified for the World Cup Finals in France where they performed admirably despite exiting in the first round.

Five years into the new, democratic South Africa, soccer seemed to be the only sport in the country to have 'delivered' for the majority of its people, despite the distorted patriotism and national euphoria surrounding the victory of the Springboks at the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

Unlike most of South Africa's other major sports, such as rugby, cricket, athletics, hockey, swimming and tennis, soccer did not enter into the post-apartheid era as a sport in need of racial transformation. Indeed, it was the only major sport in 1994, in which the vast majority of players, at all levels of the game, were black.

In many ways, this reality was reflective of the apartheid system's social, economic and political marginalisation of soccer alongside the exact opposite for the country's other major sports. For many white South Africans (and some sections of the Indian and coloured populations), soccer had become a 'black man's sport', a part of 'black culture'. In an ironic symbolism, soccer represented the one sport in South Africa that had 'defeated' apartheid.

Yet, the apartheid system's efforts to ensure racial segregation and organisational division and socio-economic inequality in sport meant that such a 'victory' came with other 'costs'. The good early showings of South African soccer in the international arena masked transformational deficiencies at a much more fundamental level.

TRANSFORMING WHAT?

In the period leading up to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, the ANC and its allies in the trade union movement and the community had adopted a redistributionist developmental framework, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP, set out the basic principles and policies that the new democratic government would pursue in addressing the legacies of apartheid.

As applied to 'Sport and Recreation', the RDP set out both the apartheid inheritance as well as what needed to be done to ensure transformation and redress. It said:

"One of the cruellest legacies of apartheid is its distortion of sport and recreation in our society, the enforced segregation of these activities and the gross neglect of providing facilities for the majority of South Africa's people. This has denied millions of people and particularly our youth the right to a normal and healthy life. It is important to ensure that sporting and recreational facilities are available to all South African communities... This cannot be left entirely in the hands of individual sporting codes or local communities... Sport and recreation should cut across all developmental programmes and be accessible and affordable for all South Africans... Particular attention must be paid to the provision of facilities at schools and in communities where there are large concentrations of unemployed

youth. In developing such policies it should be recognised that sport is played at different levels of competence and that there are different specific needs at different levels.”

Yet, in the 14 years since democracy, these fine words, for the most part, remained in the realm of principles and proposed policy when it came to addressing the development needs of soccer.

At a time when sustained and meaningful financial, institutional and strategic support and guidance for soccer was most needed from the new government, it was busy pursuing macro-economic policies that made it a non-player. As part of the government’s Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic framework, and following the neo-liberal economic advice of international financial institutions

and Western governments, national grants and subsidies to local municipalities and city councils were drastically decreased.

What this meant in practical terms was that public resources, both human and material, at the local level for sports such as soccer were virtually wiped off the map. In other words, the ‘people’s’ sport was privatised or ghettoised.

Local government could not address decrepit municipal and public school soccer infrastructure. Training programmes for community and school coaches were left in the hands of volunteers. And provision of basic soccer equipment and grassroots development programmes for township and school-going youth players had to rely on individuals, sympathetic community groups and hoped-for support from the private sector.

In turn, this produced a situation in which SAFA, a private body, became the central provider of human and material resources for addressing the massive organisational and developmental needs of soccer.

The country’s other main soccer body, the PSL, was set up to look after the specific interests and needs of the main professional clubs. Like the local government response at being thrown in the deep-end of sustainable service provision, the PSL ‘transformation’ mandate revolved around administrative change and impressive-sounding programmes and frameworks.

As will be fleshed out in the next parts of this series, there are two main, and inter-connected, reasons for the failure to deliver transformation in South African soccer.

On the one hand, there was a lack of political will on the part of the post-apartheid government to actively transform soccer administration through institutional and financial support and policy intervention. On the other hand, there was the institutionalisation of a top-down, bureaucratic and self-serving approach within the context of a market-driven sports philosophy to the development and management of the ‘people’s game’.

Dale T. McKinley is an independent writer, researcher and lecturer and a political and social activist. The research for this series was conducted as part of a larger Human Sciences Research project on South African sports begun in 2006. This is the first of three parts looking at the game of soccer in South Africa.



A lack of political will has left soccer untransformed

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