

Why schools should allow athletics this year

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- BRIAN ISAACS (mind in a healthy body).



ATHLETICS is a sport where many life-lessons can be taught, such as getting to know your teachers and student compatriots better, competing against other schools, and building long-lasting friendships, says the writer. |

SCHOOLS are scheduled to start on Monday, February 15, for students. Medical experts predict that the peak of the Covid-19 virus will reach South Africa some time in late January, and then the level of infections will begin to drop. In the wake of these predictions, will it be safe for our students to participate in sport and especially athletics this summer?

I know that before 1994 athletics in the schools of the poor was a key sport in the first term of the new year. After 1994, it no longer became an essential part of the academic year. With no financial assistance from the government, schools found it difficult to organise inter-house athletics and inter-school athletics. Many schools withdrew from participating under the newly formed United School Sports Association of South Africa (USSASA).

This body showed scant regard for its member schools, calling meetings at its discretion and stunting free debate among schools as to how to organise sport and debate the crucial issue of sports facilities at schools and the availability of athletic venues for schools.

USSASA collapsed in the early 2010s amid rumours of wide-scale corruption. The control of its finances was never investigated.

School sport is now jointly run by the Department of Culture and Sport (DCAS) and the provincial Education Departments. If these two departments cannot effectively make a success out of their departments, how can schools expect them to make a success of school sport?

Unfortunately, these two departments are responsible for the lack of participation in school sport in South Africa. It seems as if in SA only schools of the rich can run successful sports

programmes. The question I want to raise is: “How did the South African Council on Sport (Sacos) from the 1970s to 1994 run successful sports programmes for the masses in SA?”

Very simply, dedication to the cause of getting the masses to play sport and to cultivate a political ethos of no normal sport in an abnormal society. In talks with the “white” sport organisations and the establishment of the ANC-aligned National Sports Council (NSC) in the early 1990s, Sacos called for a moratorium on all international sport for five years to normalise sport in SA.

The “white” sport bodies and NSC wanted international sport at all costs.

Every effort was made to smash Sacos, and, sadly for the masses, Sacos was smashed. In progressive political terms, the slogan “Memory is the weapon” is apt now. The former Sacos president, Frank van der Horst, remains true to his principles, and up to today, calls for a new, truly non-racial sports organisation that has the interests of the masses of South Africa at heart. The poor must organise school sport.

“They have to regain control of sport from the clutches of most of the present greedy administrators in sport. The oppressed, with the experience of principled teachers and administrators, must rescue sport for the oppressed and especially the students, and it must be done immediately.

I return to my question at the start of the article whether we should have athletics this year. All over the world, sport has restarted tentatively. Huge sporting events have been delayed.

The world has learnt a lot about Covid-19 and the steps that must be taken to curb/prevent the virus from spreading. I believe that the same must happen in schools. Schools must take the necessary precautions when students participate in sport and especially in athletics. I believe athletics should happen at schools this year.

I know that some teachers feel that mass participation by students in athletics is a waste of their time. I disagree. It is a sport where many life-lessons can be taught, such as competing against other schools, and building long-lasting friendships.

As a teacher for 39 years, I enjoyed my interaction with parents, teachers and students on the athletics field. *Mens sana in corpore sano (a healthy mind in a healthy body).*