

## **Pitch Battles: Sport, racism and resistance.**

### **Notes.**

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Thank you to the organizers for this opportunity, it is an honour and a privilege to have been included in the launch of this important book. Books such as these, are very important in bringing the story of the sports struggle to newer audiences, especially younger audiences, who often believe that sport is about waving a flag, wearing a jersey, or celebrating a world cup victory. As this book reveals, it is about much more than that. Sport is about community and about social justice and social responsibility. I think that it is important to point out that I was never an official for SACOS, nor was I an athlete of any merit. I was a club member of a community club in Kimberley, but I fully imbibed the principles of radical non-racialism as taught by, not only SACOS, but members of the TLSA, and other affiliated bodies through the social interactions I experienced through my schooling and my sporting contact. Today, non-racialism is no longer radicalized, but rather it has become liberalized, which is a great tragedy.

The book could, with its references to the struggles through sport, link the Black Lives Matter movement with the exceptional work of the radical non-racial sports movement in South Africa. Sadly, non-racialism has become a political obscenity without the fundamental lessons of its philosophies being fully taught and understood in the post-apartheid era.

The failure of the South African democratic transition, which has manifested itself in virtually every facet of South African society, finds in sport, a means to celebrate these failures. The comments on the Facebook page of The Herald, advertising the dialogue, just highlights the blanket ignorance of South Africans regarding the role of sport as a social and political enabler. Not a single commentator on the page (238+comments) seemed to understand that The Herald was advertising the dialogue, with some commentators even thinking that Peter Hain (the photograph used), was Dr. Danie Craven. It is unfathomable, that sport, which is the flag-bearer of South African patriotism, is such an unknown quantity, and furthermore, if the readership of The Herald is anything to go by, ignorance is absolute patriotic bliss!

This book covers a lot of important historical and social matters. I have made lots of notes, and it would be impossible for me to cover all the questions that were raised as I read through the very detailed chapters. The chapter that looked at sport as a commodity made reference to the yawning chasm in English football as being a microcosm of society. The plight of Universal RFC in Kimberley, and the AR Abass Stadium in that city, serves as a microcosm of South African society and there are countless similar examples all over South Africa. Professor Odendaal whose departing caution to colleagues at Newlands, that sport was more than a commodity, should be seen in the rapidly dimming light of the historical contexts of the deceptive nature of the sports transition.

I suggest that by reading Sam Ramsamy's and Bill Jardine's biographies would illuminate just how deep the grooves of deception ran. Both of them declaring SACOS as an outdated organization; while 'Pitch Battles' describes SACOS thinking as puritan. My question is: What has replaced this puritan thinking? What about the quality of ideas? Or was there nothing worth looking at within the SACOS group, which is why its model of grassroots sport was completely destroyed?

We also need to take a closer look at the 1995 Rugby World Cup! A tournament that South Africa did not bid for. This scrutiny is certainly required. SA Rugby shared in a US\$550 million TV deal windfall with Australia and New Zealand, pleading for an extra share because of 'development work that needs to be done'. According to an interview with Hugh Bladen in SA Sports Illustrated, this deal was already being sorted out in 1994, but was only announced a day after the 1995 Rugby World Cup final! This was the deal that took rugby viewing away from the masses – 1995 was the last time rugby was broadcast by the SABC – except for special licenses during world cups, so that the joy could be shared.

So, I think that the book misses out on South Africa's 9/11 moment by 12 years! When we look at the money being spent in the professional arena, I think that our academic work should also look at the money being spent on selling sport to the masses through commercials and television productions – how much did chasing the sun cost? – and how much do they spend on actual development? The 2016 TV commercial #LoveRugby cost ZAR5-million to produce, and that excludes buying

advertising space on the various channels. Elitism is being shoved down the throats of viewers, which is why they confuse sportriotism with patriotism.

I was reading the 2020 publication of Chris Schoeman ‘Crossing the White Line: The 1969/70 Springboks Tour of Britain and Ireland’, and took note of the remark by Chris Laidlaw in the preface, where he wrote:

We owe a debt of thanks to Chris Schoeman for documenting this ill-fated tour as a precursor of more positive things to come for South Africa; and for the Springboks as a team that has come to represent all of South Africa’s people. (Schoeman, Chris, 2020)

I wonder what was meant by Laidlaw, who by the way, was intimately involved in building relationships between the apartheid regime and the exiled African national Congress during the early days of the sports negotiations. I was interviewed by Chris Laidlaw in 2011 when I visited New Zealand to participate in some of the commemorations of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1981 HART protests. I sensed that he was somewhat perplexed that I did not share in the joy of the team that has ‘come to represent all of South Africa’s people’. My question is: In what way are the Springboks representative of the South African nation? Historically? Racially? Ideologically? Culturally?

Schoeman’s book, as in ‘Pitch Battles’ also mentions transformation and refers to the efforts of the 2019 Springbok team in Japan as a marker of the successes of transformation. But what is this transformation? What has the Springbok transformed from? And what has it transformed into? The Springboks are still selected from roughly 25 – 30 elite schools, similarly the cricketing Proteas. This transformation also speaks to what sporting discourse describes as ‘representivity’. Representative of what? ‘Pitch Battles’ even says that Siya Kolisi was ‘plucked from poverty’. So now, an elite, highly resourced athlete, becomes the representative of an impoverished area.

South Africa is all about pageantry and if you look only within the framework of the spectacle, everything is perfect, everything is pristine, there is hope, there are prospects – in summary, the future is bright. But outside of the framework of pageantry, the picture is markedly different. There is hopelessness, there is despair, there is misery. It is a place of complete and utter devastation and of total social

and moral desolation. The annual pageantry that heralds the 16 days of activism against Gender based Violence against women and children, does not fully describe the state of horror that exists in areas where people can be plucked from for a lucrative sporting career. We need to look at how we arrived at this bipolar state of patriotism. Sport and the transition to democracy needs special focus.

Schoeman's book goes on to describe the proud tradition of the Springboks, who had 'big boots to fill' as all former touring sides held proud winning records – including the maiden Springbok tour of 1906, when the disputed saga of James 'Darkie' Peters occurred. Peters was England's flyhalf at the time, and he was black. According to a 'disputed' legend, Paul Roos's Springboks refused to take the field against a black player. In the book, Schoeman even quotes Springbok fullback, HO de Villiers, who said that he was not into politics, despite the fact his brother was a member of parliament in the apartheid government. Dawie de Villiers, the captain of the 1969/70 tour, was FW De Klerk's right-hand man during the time of CODESA. De Klerk in turn, was strongly opposed to SACOS, and considered the group to be the most dangerous organization in the country – advocating its destruction while apartheid minister of sport.

In Schoeman's book, the Springboks come off as unfortunate victims of circumstance, not as flag-bearing representatives of a repressive regime.

On the hard grounds of anti-apartheid sport, we knew exactly what they were and what they stood for. Through sport, we were entertained, skilled and educated about social responsibility, equality and justice. Sport transcended the confines of our poor facilities, and opened up the space for an imagined South African, non-racial democracy. I was mildly surprised by the closing line in the preface of the book 'Pitch Battles: Sport, Racism and Resistance' by Peter Hain and Andre Odendaal which declared that:

...*Pitch Battles* illuminates and reinforces the case for sport to acknowledge and act upon its social responsibilities in a way it has rarely ever done. (p.9)

Further on in the book, the writers describe SACOS's absence in 'African' townships as a 'screaming absence'. I think that this needs to be contextualized, because apartheid law prevented free movement amongst designated racial

groupings. My very first club rugby trip was with my rugby alma mater, Universal RFC of Kimberley, to the township of Ezebeleni in Queenstown/Komani. On the way to Ezebeleni, we were prepped by our senior players and managers about behavior and protocols, and not once were the terms ‘Black’, ‘Coloured’ or ‘African’ used. We were told that we were going to be accommodated by ‘poor’ people – and that was it! In my documentary ‘Injury Time-the Rise of the 80 Minute Nation’, Mrs Toko Mlonyeni of Winter Rose sports club in Mdantsane, openly says:

Township people were afraid of being arrested. So, you had to be bold to join the non-racial sports body.

Within SACOS, the struggle of bridging the group areas divide was not a secret, and many sport activists were arrested in trying to link up oppressed communities through sport, and the successes in the Eastern Cape were in spite of the apartheid permit laws, and not recognizing this reason for the ‘screaming absence in townships’ is a serious flaw in this book. SACOS was not perfect, but because of my education within the non-racial sports movement, I can think of no other purpose for sport other than it being a vehicle for social cohesion, community mobilization and direct socio-political education. At an elite level, such as is the case within the professionalized federations in South Africa specifically, social responsibility through sport, becomes an opportunity for an unjust system to become legitimized. This of course ties in with the skewed socio-economic system endorsed by the post-apartheid regime. This raises some questions that are tied into the global struggle for social justice. Community sport under the broad umbrella of SACOS acted on its social responsibility in a way that the post-SACOS era has not even come close to emulating. The claim in the book therefore, that:

both SACOS and the NSC – in different eras and contexts – were unable to implement what they wished for, though they both took South African sport forward in significant ways.

Should be re-examined, because SACOS was severely crippled by the NSC’s drive to free up the space for the elite structures to compete internationally. The two bodies had two totally different purposes, and I have written extensively on this. Presenting the two bodies as having similar agendas, is being very flexible

with the contexts of historical truth. The springboks have been triumphant in three RWC tournaments, while townships structures, in almost every single sport, is in complete disarray. The plight of people confined to townships because of poverty, therefore needs to be seen within the framework of the SACOS slogan – that there can be NO NORMAL SPORT IN AN ABNORMAL SOCIETY.

With specific reference to the different roles played by the two bodies, it is important to differentiate between the role played by SACOS in delivering sport to the masses at a grass roots level, and the efforts by the NSC to ensure that the elite structures returned to international sport. This is an important distinction, because SACOS received no support from the apartheid government, and in fact many of its officials were harassed, arrested and banned, whereas the NSC received full cooperation from the apartheid government and the elite apartheid structures. In this sense, one has to consider that SACOS struggled under extreme and repressive conditions in the 19 years between 1973 and 1992, and it managed to deliver far more than the NSC has managed to do under the guise of the national department of sport in the 27 years between 1992 and 2019! The reflection on the reasons for the inability of the two bodies to ‘implement what they wished for’ should be seen within the context of their roles, not within the context of historical sympathy. Why was SACOS not successful? And in which areas were they successful and unsuccessful? What were the obstacles they faced and had to overcome?

And why was the NSC unsuccessful? What were the obstacles they had to overcome? The importance of sport within the South African socio-political framework, cannot be underestimated. The answers to the questions surrounding the roles of SACOS and the NSC could shed important light on the transition to democracy, if thoroughly examined through the lens of sport.

Trying to insert social responsibility into pageantry and commercialized sport is, in my opinion, a futile exercise, and can only work during a time when the spectacle of sport is absent from the social frame. In this sense, taking the knee becomes part of the sporting spectacle, inserted in-between the dancing cheerleaders, the frolicking mascot and after a word from the sponsors. SACOS sport was different. It was community rooted. Social justice through the ideology of radical non-racialism through community-based sport was not a side-issue nor was it pageantry-based – it was central to the teachings of SACOS.

Pitch battles is a very valuable book, in that it raises a number of questions in my mind. The dismissal of the teachings of the radical left in South Africa, as being the teachings of armchair theoreticians, have been replaced by rabid reactionaries in red. The hasty solutions that culminated in the ‘stitched together sporting solutions’ have not brought about equality in mass-based sport, rather it has eradicated mass-based sport. The importance of the sporting struggle against apartheid, is undervalued in the broader liberation discourse, and yet it is sport that is presented as the flagship of social cohesion, rainbowism and South African success. It is sport that is celebrated as the crown jewels of transformation, and it is sport that drives the masses into orchestrated frenzies of patriotic ecstasy.

The book is dedicated to the “millions of people throughout the world who reached out in solidarity across boundaries to bring a violent political system and twisted sports set-up to its knees” – But my question is: “Has the apartheid system been eradicated? Or has it been reimaged by the ANC?” (p.18)

The book also claims to offer lessons taken directly from the Black Lives Matter movement, and I am concerned by the deflection away from the untaught lessons of the non-racial sports movement. Instead of South Africa taking the lead in teaching the world about non-racialism, the ANC’s adoption of multiracialism and multinationalism, fits into the multiracialism and multinationalism of the new wave of identity politics. The teachings and philosophies of people such as Don Kali, Dennis Brutus, Hassan Howa, Raymond Uren, Dan Qeqe, Neville Alexander, Les Van Breda and so many unheralded thinkers and political philosophers, who gave new life to the theory of non-racialism in sport and politics, should be directing the South African social orchestra, not the race theorists from North America.

As an academic resource, I found the book to be very stimulating and there was some new information on the principled stance taken by SACOS that I was unaware of – such as the decision not to attend international darts and table tennis events, and even endorsing the barring of its own members:

Non-racial tennis players would suffer, ‘but then suffering has been our lot for many decades’ and it was worth it to bring about ‘the total elimination of all form of racial discrimination in South

African sport'. There should be 'no concession on grounds of compassion or sentiment'. (p.196)

This quote proves that the SACOS movement was more focused on social justice than sporting prestige. I think that it is this principle that sets it apart from the ANC-aligned NSC. Community sport was sport focused on social justice and was sport with purpose, whereas elite sport, is sport that is focused on prestige and personal gain. Social justice is not the central focus of elite, professional sports federations and their athletic charges, it is essentially a sideshow, more often than not, part of wider marketing and CSI campaigns.

The "ANC, SANROC and NOSC-led initiatives" (p. 171) which led the elite structures back into international sport was, in essence, the limpet mines that sunk community-based sporting structures in South Africa, and led the discussions away from what is now celebrated as revolutionary thinking on the part of top athletes. This type of presentation of the sports struggle suggests that the philosophies of non-racialism and the deeper community values of the internal sports struggle, have little to no educative value for this country. Which brings me to another set of questions:

What is the definition of South African 'transformation?'. What have we transformed into, and in which areas of society has this transformation taken place, and where has it been totally successful? Why was the ANC/NSC/NP alliance so determined not to follow the ideology of non-racialism as proclaimed by SACOS (as imperfect as it was under the circumstances of apartheid siege), and rather accept that the elite, apartheid structures were the models to drive sport forward? Why move away from a model that had done yeoman's work in community development and organisation in and through sport, to a structure that had racism as its foundation, and exclusivity as the mortar that kept the bricks of its ideology together?

The book assumes that the path taken by the ANC/NSC to liberate elite sport, at the expense of community structures, was the correct path, citing the successes of Siya Kolisi and others as evidence that these decisions have paid dividends. This book has thrown up lots of questions and issues that are vital to our understanding of where we are as a nation, and it would be impossible for me to recount all of



these issues in such time. We have to be careful however, not to be apologetic to the processes of unification, because it was the elite sporting fraternity that tasted the fruits of liberation first. It was this spectacle that deflected community energy away from themselves, into the flag waving exercises we now see whenever our national teams play on pay-per-view television channels and yet the book does not look at the role of the media such as NASPERS and Supersport at all!

The well-articulated quotes by Siya Kolisi and Rassie Erasmus on ‘pressure’ and the meaning of victory, and giving hope, are verbal smokescreens that hide, for 80-minutes at a time at least, the sad state of our schools, hospitals, municipalities, roads, universities, townships, transport infrastructure, unemployment figures, economic outlook – South Africa’s national debt is pegged at an ascending US\$230 billion – growing at a rate of US\$500 per second! The state of our community sporting structures, those that have survived the crush of unity, is an unhappy testament to the unity processes, whose gaze was focused much higher than the gravel-pitches of township cricket and rugby.

Somebody on Facebook once critiqued my writings on SACOS as ‘political nostalgia’ and I responded by asking whether ‘this political nostalgia is any less damaging than the political mythologies that surround the revolutionary actions of the ANC, whose negotiations in sport, politics and the economy, led us directly to where we are today’? The transition to democracy should be examined through the sporting lens, because it was sport that presented a face of normalcy to the world. Jonty Rhodes’ run out of Ul Haq in 1992 heralded the dawn of a new sporting hero, one quite divorced from the strife in communities. For me the greatest irony, is that the sporting fraternity of the rainbow nation had to follow what was happening in the rest of the world, when an inspection of the history of South African sport, and its struggles, will reveal that the negotiations between the NSC and apartheid sport, was not about community structures and their needs, but rather, it was about how best to get the elite structures back into international sport. Sam Ramsamy, a key figure in South African sport said about his strained relationship with SACOS:

While they considered sport alone, I believed it was necessary to appreciate the broader picture. Into 1991, sport began to play an important, trail-blazing role within the wider political and social transformation, and it was our responsibility as sports leaders to

accelerate our talks and keep moving forward. /We must not forget where we started. Unity, development, participation: in that order. Now that we have achieved unity, we must launch efficient development programmes to create equal opportunities, and we must do that before we return to international sport.

So, by 1991, all of this had seemingly been achieved, and 29 years later, we are celebrating highly paid athletes taking the knee and considering this to be revolutionary – something new. South Africa’s anti-apartheid sports struggles holds many untold narratives of the fight from social justice through principled, radical, non-racialism. I believe that we should be cautious of literary sleight of hand, which could obscure the contextual timeline of how the transition through sport, actually took place.

This reentry had to have the appearance of legitimacy, which the ANC, through the NSC, provided. Not a single professional sportsman in South Africa took the knee after the murder of Andries Tatane, nor did they drop a ball after the Marikana massacre. Between 1994 and 2019, over 500, 000 South Africans have been murdered at the hands of other South Africans. The popular claim that ‘negotiations were preferred to revolution and bloodshed’, is soaked in the blood of this peaceful transition while flags are waved and trophies are held aloft.

The mess that is South African society on all levels, and most certainly in the area of race relations, requires that we refocus our attention on the transition to democracy. The SACOS sports model was a social system that was focused against injustice based upon social commonalities, not upon difference. I find that the current clamour for social justice to be focused on difference, not on commonality.

Are we addressing institutionalized racism or socialized racism? If racism is institutional, is it not easy to identify? Is it part of the institution’s policy, or code of conduct? The killing of George Floyd, was it a public execution as dictated by policing policy, or are there social barriers or educational paradigms that encourage ‘othering’ and ideological social distancing that drive human beings apart on a number of fronts? The preface to the book links what happened during the struggle against apartheid through sport, directly to the Black Lives Matter movement

claims that there are lessons to be learned through this movement. What about the lessons that the non-racial sports movement provided?

The SACOS slogan of ‘no normal sport in an abnormal society’ is rubbished by the celebration of Siya Kolisi and the triumphant Springbok team in the 2019 RWC, because the reference to the ‘impoverished township of Zwide’ overlooks the crude reality of the failed state which the Springboks represent in international tournaments. And while much is made of the 2019 Rugby World Cup triumph, we should note that the last Women’s World Cup tournament in Ireland in 2017, did not see South Africa, because SARU did not send a women’s team!

We are at a moment in history, where an invisible, yet formidable enemy, has focused attention on the inequalities that are rife in societies across the globe. This is an opportune time to reflect on history and the human processes that have created the silos of inequality. In the book ‘Palaces for the People’ by Eric Klinenberg, he writes that:

Social infrastructure is crucially important, because local, face-to-face interactions—at the school, the playground, and the corner diner—are the building blocks of all public life. People forge bonds in places that have healthy social infrastructures—not because they set out to build community, but because when people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships inevitably grow.

In the South African context generally, and specifically with reference to the non-racial sports struggle under SACOS, we have to ask whether the negotiations by the ANC/NSC in facilitating the sporting transition, created more space for communities to interact around sporting activity, or completely eradicated it? Pitch Battles certainly has prickled my senses into re-examining my own questioning of the transition into democracy through the sporting unity processes, and this is what we all should be doing in order to realize a new, just world.

**My questions:**

1. In the context of contemporary South Africa, and its sporting footprint, what is the value and relevance of the SACOS slogan of NO NORMAL SPORT IN AN ABNORMAL SOCIETY?
2. The book makes reference to the eradication of apartheid, but has apartheid been eradicated, or has it merely been re-imagined under the ANC?
3. In the context of the fight for a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic society, what is the definition of transformation in South African sport and society?
4. Is the current state of South African sport not a direct result of the negotiations between the ANC/NSC and the elite federations that led to unity? Are we not exactly where we are supposed to be due to those hasty negotiations?

I have many more questions, but time will not allow for these to be explored. I will print this out and highlight what I want to touch on.