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Hitting Apartheid for Six? The Politics of the South African Sports Boycott

In the 1970s and 1980s, the South African regime was an international pariah. Foreign governments, multinational corporations, churches, the media, campaign groups and individuals condemned apartheid, a political system that denied social and economic opportunities and political rights to South Africa's black majority.\(^1\) International action against the Republic included an embargo on the sale of military hardware, financial sanctions, refusing visas to South African officials and nationals, and boycotts of produce and products. Inside South Africa opposition took the form of sabotage and guerrilla attacks, civil disobedience campaigns, strikes, staying away from work, schools and universities, demonstrations, marches and rallies, and boycotts of apartheid institutions, goods and services. Given the range of approaches adopted by opponents, it is not surprising that scholars continue to debate the contributions of individual strategies to the end of apartheid.\(^2\) This article assesses the effectiveness and significance of the sports boycott. More specifically, it analyses the shifts in the objectives of the boycott over 30 years. In the 1960s, proponents of the boycott simply sought to deracialize South African sport. By the end of the following decade, the sports boycott was one of a raft of resistance strategies aimed at isolating the South African regime and forcing it to abandon apartheid. In the late 1980s, the focus of the boycott shifted again; supporters reappraised it as a strategy to build non-racial democratic sporting structures that would assist the transformation to a post-apartheid society.

Modern sport emerged as an institutionalized form of human activity in the late nineteenth century. In a remarkably short time, publicists, propagandists and proselytizers, such as the founder of the Olympic movement, Pierre de

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1 Among anti-apartheid activists the term 'black' designated African, Coloured and Indian South Africans. While highly problematic, the term 'Coloured' generally refers to South Africans of mixed European and black ancestry. It must be noted that some white South Africans, including Afrikaners, also actively opposed apartheid.

Coubertin, and his principal disciple, Avery Brundage, constructed an enduring myth that sport surmounted racial, religious and political prejudices and engendered social cohesion and integration. Although most western nations initially frowned upon racial mixing in sport, by the late 1960s the South African government remained the lone advocate of segregation, its racial precepts overriding the ideology of sport. National Party ministers argued that interracial contact in sport exacerbated social stress. M.D.C. de Wet Nel, the minister of Bantu administration and development, said that ‘there is sufficient evidence to prove that such a policy would lead to the most distasteful racial tensions. It is senseless injudiciousness to encourage such a thing.’ The minister of the interior, P.M.K. le Roux, cited evidence from other countries to ‘prove that racial disturbances and integration were synonymous’. Consistent with these assumptions, the government instructed national sports federations to separate into African, Coloured, Indian and white associations. Black sportspeople could compete abroad, but only white players could earn national Springbok honours and only white officials could represent South Africa in international federations.

Some sports groups refused to separate into racially-based associations and, over time, coalesced into the non-racial sports movement. On a few rare occasions, individual white sportspeople tested apartheid policy. In 1961, Springbok cricketer John Waite led a white team, comprising four Springboks and six provincial representatives, against a black team captained by S.A. Haque. Waite’s team included Ali Bacher who, 10 years later, joined a two-minute walk-off at Newlands (Cape Town) to support the principle of selecting national teams on merit, irrespective of race; in the mid-1980s, Bacher initiated a programme to develop cricket in African townships. In 1962, General H.R. Klopper, president of the whites-only South African National Olympic Committee (SANOC), an affiliate of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), rejected segregation that discriminated against black people and said that ‘sport must be for all, regardless of race’.

White sports officials did not systematically disregard or seriously challenge racial segregation. Klopper withdrew his remarks under government pressure and his successors, Frank Braun and Rudolf Opperman, refused publicly to dissociate SANOC from apartheid policy. On the contrary, Opperman maintained that SANOC was ‘subject to the prevailing political order and . . . we have to serve sport to the best of our ability within . . . this reality’. Nor did

3 Allen Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement* (New York 1984), 27. While historians, sociologists and philosophers dismiss this as naive idealism, academic critiques have failed to debunk the popular myth.


8 Lapchick, op. cit., 46.

9 Letter, Opperman to Norman Middleton (president of the non-racial South African Council
the international sporting community evince much interest in South Africa’s racial policies, preferring to accept Pretoria’s propaganda that black people were either disinterested in western sport or the victims of circumstances, usually of their own making. Reporting on the boxing success of Jake Ntuli, who won the British Empire flyweight title in 1951, the New Zealand Free Lance noted that the ‘pint-sized Zulu boy’ was a role model ‘to millions of black men whose opportunities in life are restricted by poverty’ (emphasis added).10 Black protests fell on deaf ears. In 1963, Dennis Brutus, the chairman of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SAN-ROC), wrote to members of the Olympic movement urging them to join the struggle against racist sport. The IOC’s member in New Zealand, Arthur Porritt, dismissed Brutus as a ‘well known trouble-maker’.11

Well into the 1960s, white sports officials played on South Africa’s historical connections with international sport. South Africa was a founder member of the International Rugby Board and the International Cricket Conference and sent its first team to the Olympic games in 1908. Five years later, Sidney Farrar became the first of six South African IOC members. Such ties bestowed kudos and influence. In 1966, the International Amateur Athletics Federation voted along racial lines and turned down a motion proposed by the Soviet Union to expel South Africa. Like most federations, athletics had a weighted voting system that, in this case, gave 37 white nations 244 votes and 99 non-white nations just 195.12 The constitutions of international sports federations also assisted South Africa. The Olympic Charter, for example, prohibits ‘discrimination . . . against any country or person on grounds of race, religion or political affiliation’. Brundage insisted that apartheid was a government policy about which the Olympic movement should not concern itself: ‘We must not become involved in political issues, nor permit the Olympic games to be used for . . . extraneous causes.’13

The complexion and structure of international sport changed in the 1960s. Aided by new forums such as the General Assembly of International Federations (GAIF) and the Permanent General Assembly of National Olympic Committees, Third World and Eastern bloc nations began to challenge white, western sporting interests. They rejected amateurism as a tool of colonialism and used sport as an overt political weapon against racism. At its first meeting

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11 Letter, Porritt to New Zealand Olympic Committee, 1 April 1963. New Zealand Olympic Committee archives, Wellington, Box 485.
in 1966, the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa resolved ‘to use every means’ to expel South Africa from international sport.\textsuperscript{14}

The white sporting establishment initially resisted. Berge Phillips, the Australian president of GAIF, praised Brundage’s decision to invite South Africa to the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City: we ‘are completely opposed to any interference in sport on political, racial, or religious grounds. . . . International sport cannot survive if it is used as a tool . . . for political purposes.’\textsuperscript{15} Only a threatened boycott by African nations forced the IOC to withdraw SANOC’s invitation to Mexico.

Apartheid sport increasingly provoked the moral sensibilities of South Africa’s traditional sporting allies. The turning-point was Prime Minister John Vorster’s refusal to let Basil d’Oliveira, a Coloured South African émigré, represent England during a proposed cricket tour of the Republic in 1968–9.\textsuperscript{16} British Prime Minister Harold Wilson summed up the new sentiments: ‘Once the South Africans had said that they were not taking a player we wanted to send, I would have rather thought that put them beyond the pale of civilized cricket.’\textsuperscript{17} Vorster’s view that racial integration is ‘conducive to friction and disturbance’\textsuperscript{18} was anathema; racial segregation violated sporting tenets.

The international community had no option but to expel an unrepentant South Africa. Following the IOC’s lead, international federations began expelling or suspending South Africa.\textsuperscript{19} Rugby was the exception. South Africa’s historical rugby opponents initially stood by their friend. But the cost proved too high. Siege conditions surrounded Springbok tours to Britain (1969–70), Australia (1971) and New Zealand (1981): cordons of police kept thousands of protesters at bay, bloody clashes erupted between police and demonstrators, barbed wire encircled the playing fields, and police guarded the Springboks off the field. By the mid-1980s, even rugby had abandoned South Africa.

Isolation took its toll and the South African government finally acknowledged sport’s role in international relations. The minister of sport, Piet Koornhof, admitted that ‘play and sport are strong enough to cause political and economic relations to flourish or collapse.’\textsuperscript{20} The first inkling of reform came in 1968 when Vorster allowed New Zealand to include Maori players in rugby teams touring the Republic. (Sensitive to South African ‘custom’, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union omitted Maori players from its teams that

\textsuperscript{14} Allen Guttmann, \textit{The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games} (Chicago 1992), 125.

\textsuperscript{15} Opperman and Laubscher, op. cit., 57.


\textsuperscript{17} Lapchick, op. cit., 169.

\textsuperscript{18} RSA, op. cit., 3961.


\textsuperscript{20} RSA, \textit{House of Assembly Debates} (Pretoria 1977), 7974.
toured South Africa in 1928, 1949 and 1960. Domestic protests against the 
policy of excluding Maori forced the Union to cancel its 1967 tour of South 
Africa. 21) Consequently, three Maori and one Samoan toured South Africa 
with the New Zealand All Blacks in 1970. The following year, the National 
Party formalized this arrangement in a new policy. Multinationalism — a 
grand political scheme that divided South Africa into ten black ‘nations’, each 
with its own territory and responsibility for some of its own affairs, including 
sport — allowed black sportspeople to compete against white South Africans 
in so-called ‘open international events’.

Multinational sport was a minimalist approach to apartheid reform. 
Initially it did not extend to club, or even provincial competitions and white 
officials remained in charge of grandiose new federations that subsequent-
ly assumed the appellation ‘multiracial sport’. 22 White officials refused to 
negotiate new democratic structures in sport with their counterparts in black 
associations and they remained hostile towards the non-racial movement. 
Opperman accused officials in the latter of concocting ‘half-truths, deliberate 
lies and complete misrepresentations’ and of ‘playing politics’. 23 The state also 
continued to harass non-racial leaders and deny them passports. In 1973, the 
government withdrew Morgan Naidoo’s passport to prevent him attending a 
world swimming federation conference in Belgrade. At that conference, swim-
ning expelled South Africa and the government immediately banned Naidoo 
for five years. 24 During his ban, state agents sacked Naidoo’s home and petrol-
bombed his car.

Multinational sport frequently descended into farce. Blacks ran the Com-
rades Marathon, an 88-kilometre race between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, 
for the first time in 1975. The Department of Sport, in the words of Durban’s 
Daily News, ‘sprinkled its magic formula on the event’ and approved the 
registration of six blacks from each ‘nation’ — an infinitesimally small quota 
in a field of 1500. Organizers decided to use armbands to mark the ‘nationali-
ties’ of African participants but the plan fell into disarray when they ran short 
of the correct tags and Zulus had to wear Xhosa identification. 25 Later, when 
asked whether he would don an armband identifying him as English, 
Koornhof replied: ‘If I was an Englishman I suppose I wouldn’t mind.’ 26

Yet, even in this crude form, multinational sport marked a turning-point in

22 For example, the multiracial rugby confederation comprised the South African Rugby Board 
(for white players), the South African Rugby Federation (Coloureds), and the South African 
Rugby Association (Africans).
23 Ad Hoc Committee of National Non-racial Sports Organisations, op. cit., 34.
24 People subjected to banning orders were restricted as to their movements and with whom 
they could associate, and prohibited from writing anything for publication.
25 Christopher Merrett, ‘Comrades of a Particular Type: An Alternative History of the 
26 Robert Archer and Antoine Bouillon, The South African Game: Sport and Racism (London 
1982), 280.
National Party ideology. At long last the South African government began to refer to mixed sport easing racial conflict and assisting social stability.27 The new thinking was a direct result of the boycott that alerted the regime and state to the importance of sporting relationships as a register of South Africa’s international standing. Over the following years, the National Party continued to amend its policy and effectively deracialized sport. In September 1976, the government extended multinationalism to club level and, shortly after, Koornhof announced that codes could conduct racially-mixed trials to select representative national teams on the basis of merit. Most importantly, mixed representative teams were now permitted to wear the Springbok emblem.28 In 1977, seven blacks wore national colours in an international soccer match against Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and the next year, long-distance runner Mathews Batswadi became the first black person to receive a green and gold Springbok blazer. Twenty-five blacks participated in the first mixed trials for the Springbok rugby team in 1977, although it was another three years before selectors chose Errol Tobias as the first black rugby Springbok.29 Further reforms followed in the early 1980s, when the National Party granted officials autonomy to administer sport without interference from the government.30 Bureaucratic controls over sport, such as the permit system, became obsolete, ignored or unenforced.31

Deracialization demonstrated the effectiveness of the sports boycott as a vehicle for change and black sportspeople could easily have claimed victory. By allowing black people to wear the Springbok, for example, the government technically acknowledged their membership of the South African nation — a concept reviled by many right-wing Afrikaners. But deracialization failed to end sporting isolation. By the 1980s, blacks demanded more than deracialized sport. Symbolic citizenship meant nothing to Tobias who said that he did not feel like a real national until he cast his vote in the first universal democratic election in South Africa in 1994.32 In short, precisely as the National Party began to deracialize sport, the non-racial movement redefined the objectives of the boycott.

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27 In sanctioning the multinational sports policy, the Broederbond (the vanguard of organized Afrikaner nationalism) said that it had considered ‘the recent drastic changes in the internal security situation which makes the promotion of internal peace and good relations between whites and non-whites essential. The policy change is seen as an important step to prevent or decrease tension and promote goodwill among large sections of the population.’ Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, The Super-Afrikaners (Johannesburg 1978), 248.
30 RSA, House of Assembly Debates (Pretoria 1979), 6899–910.
31 Under the Group Areas Act, members of one racial group could not attend the recreational events of another without a special permit — which authorities rarely issued.
The initial objective of the non-racial movement was to deracialize South African sport. The South African Sports Association (SASA), the first non-racial domestic umbrella organization to lobby international sports federations to withdraw recognition of whites-only South African affiliates, initially campaigned for ‘international participation . . . [by] black sportsmen [sic] within the framework of segregation in national sport’.33 Revealing a deep commitment to the ideology of sport, SASA said it did not want athletes barred from the 1960 Olympics — ‘We simply desire to see all South Africans being given a fair chance to compete on merit and ability.’34 SASA’s successors,35 SAN-ROC and the South African Council on Sport (SACOS), also pursued negotiations with white officials with a view to integration — in the belief that sport ultimately transcended race and politics. For example, Hassan Howa, president of the SACOS-affiliated Cricket Board of Control, held discussions with his counterparts from the whites-only Cricket Association.

Black attitudes toward negotiation hardened in the 1970s under the growing influence of the Black Consciousness movement and especially after the Soweto riots. In 1977, members of the Black Consciousness movement formed the Black People’s Sports Council that opposed SACOS’s stance on negotiations and all contact between black and white sportspeople until South Africa had been ‘normalized’.36 This non-collaborationist stance particularly resonated with SACOS’s core constituency in the Western Cape. As supporters of the Non-European Unity Movement in the 1950s, they had rejected the Congress Alliance’s strategy of participation in favour of non-collaboration37 and now they regarded negotiations in sport ‘with utmost suspicion’. In the case of cricket, they demanded that ‘talks cease forthwith’.38

Debates over strategy within SACOS, now widely recognized as the internal sports wing of the anti-apartheid movement, were sparse and a consensus emerged, coloured by discussions with deceitful and hypocritical white sports officials, and by state harassment, that reform was an elaborate hoax. Equally important, there was a greater appreciation that sport did not transcend politics and that black people would continue to experience discrimination in sport while they suffered mass unemployment and poor living conditions, inadequate health services and transport, housing shortages, inferior education and subsistence wages. ‘No normal sport in an abnormal society’, a slogan coined by Hassan Howa, president of SACOS between 1977 and 1981,

33 Archer and Bouillon, op. cit., 191.
38 ‘Cricket: A Story of Success’ in SACOS Sport Festival ’82 (SACOS 1982), 32–3.
encapsulated SACOS's analysis. Reflecting on his early strategy of negotiations, Howa admitted that he 'should not have fought [against apartheid] from a cricket angle':

I should have fought from a completely humanitarian angle. I should have carried the fight right down the line. People come to me and say what you fought for has arrived, why aren't you satisfied. I can't be satisfied if I was fighting for the wrong thing. My standards were wrong. Probably I've become mature. Probably I've become aware of politics."

SACOS's arguments were not original. As the then secretary-general of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa (and now disgraced former IOC member), Jean Claude Ganga pointed to the explicitly political dimensions of sport in the 1960s when he asked, 'What happens after the [Olympic] games?' Directed at a desperate Avery Brundage who wanted a South African team in Mexico City in 1968, Ganga was the first sports official to discuss publicly the phenomenon of 10-second, 15-round or 80-minute black sports heroes. Cheered on the track or field, or in the ring, they invariably find themselves shunted to the back of the bus that returns them to the ghetto. In Ganga's words, 'We do not wish that the blacks of Africa appear like costumed apes presented at a fair and then, when the fair is over, sent back to their cages.' But it was SACOS, through its (clandestine) links with SAN-ROC, that challenged the peculiar apolitical ideology of sport and reminded the international sporting community that it could not ignore the broader conditions under which sport is played. This perspective justified the boycott as the National Party began to deracialize sport, although, by the late 1970s, the international campaign against apartheid had gathered a momentum of its own whereby most foreign governments simply viewed the boycott as one strategy, in a raft of many, to shame and isolate the Pretoria regime.

Multinationalism, multiracialism and administrative autonomy were patently inadequate reforms. Autonomous sport did not reflect an enlightened attitude towards race relations beyond the co-optation of middle-class urban blacks — the sports-playing class. This was implicit in a warning from the minister responsible for sport, F.W. de Klerk, that the government expected sports officials to maintain 'good order' and adhere to the 'general laws of the land'. Nonetheless, deracialization was not irrelevant. As Morris and Padayachee remind us, state reform opened space for anti-apartheid groups to follow the lead given by the independent trade union movement and begin building non-racial democratic structures. Non-racial sports groups, for example, could have negotiated more training and competition facilities in the

39 Archer and Bouillon, op. cit., v.
40 Lapchick, op. cit., 112.
41 Guttman, The Olympics, op. cit., 236.
42 RSA (1979), op. cit., 6900-1.
townships. Instead, the liberation movement rejected the National Party’s reforms as ‘apartheid in drag’.

The secretary of the SACOS-affiliated Western Province Council on Sport (WEPCOS), I. Joseph, dismissed the government’s withdrawal of permits as ‘trickery’. This so-called victory, she said, had merely befuddled ordinary non-racial sportspeople and caused them to lose sight of the real struggle against capitalism.

In the 1980s non-collaboration was a lodestar. Two assumptions underpinned the strategy. First, non-collaboration with state-sponsored institutions, such as township community councils, would supposedly coerce or persuade the government to abandon apartheid. Second, it assumed that black leaders who worked in apartheid institutions retarded mass militancy and that only non-collaboration would foster the required levels of political action to force real change. Little historical evidence supported these assumptions; moreover, non-collaboration raised serious problems.

Non-collaboration quickly evolved into a principle. Of course, strategies are predisposed towards principles because ‘they tend to develop a culture of commitment with rituals of dedication and sacrifice that very often demand uncritical loyalty’. Few groups enforced non-collaboration more rigorously than SACOS, which adopted it as a tactic of political purification. SACOS willingly sacrificed members and refused to analyse alternative strategies. For example, SACOS suspended the Soccer Federation, its oldest and largest affiliate, simply because its president, Norman Middleton, was a member of the (Coloured) South African Labour Party and as such violated SACOS’s double standards resolution. (According to SACOS, non-racial sportspersons who worked in, or associated with, institutions such as Coloured and Indian representative councils, management and local affairs committees, Bantu administration boards and community councils, were guilty of double standards and collaborated in their own humiliation.) SACOS did have to guard against collaborators and opportunists, but it also needed flexibility to capitalize on ideological and social changes. Middleton recommended that SACOS use the ‘legal platforms provided by the system . . . to confront and embarrass the whole system’. He also reproved political opportunists who used government structures for their own ends ‘without exposing the situation’. They have ‘no right to belong to any of our non-racial organisations’, he added.

Strategy also tends to reflect values. Apartheid trapped the resistance movements in a predicament that defined their values as the opposite of their existential anguish — a negation of the conditions they held responsible for

44 Ibid.
45 SACOS, Seventh Biennial Report (SACOS 1987), 129.
46 Fine and Davis, op. cit., 69–70.
48 Development Studies Group, Politics in Sport (Johannesburg 1981), 16.
their plight. ‘Democracy’ and ‘non-racialism’ were the opposites of racial oppression; ‘socialism’ was a panacea for exploitation and poverty. Non-collaboration negated the state and provided a psychological escape from helplessness, but it neither transformed the state nor empowered its victims.

Non-collaboration hamstring SACOS’s ability to build non-racial sport. SACOS argued that although apartheid laws compelled blacks to live and work in specific areas, sport was a purely voluntary activity and if blacks wanted to play, they should play non-racial sport ‘outside’ apartheid. This would prove impossible. SACOS did not have the resources to provide non-racial facilities, especially in African townships, and many blacks rejected SACOS’s charge that playing in apartheid sporting structures was tantamount to supporting racism. But it would be a decade before the anti-apartheid sports movement moved beyond non-collaboration.

A hiatus in opposition politics occurred in South Africa after the government clamped down on black political groups and banned Black Consciousness organizations in 1977. (At this point the Black People’s Sports Council dissipated.) Paradoxically, SACOS benefited from state repression. Unable to organize at the national level, many activists returned to their local communities where they swelled the ranks of SACOS affiliates and hid in the relatively sheltered world of sports politics. Indeed, SACOS helped to fill a vacuum and assumed a high profile in black politics. But the situation soon changed. In the early 1980s, recently-formed student, youth, community and other grassroots organizations began to discuss ways of co-ordinating internal resistance at the national level. In August 1983, over 600 organizations launched a new political bloc, the United Democratic Front (UDF); almost immediately SACOS’s political cachet collapsed.

Although initially subscribing to non-collaboration, the UDF re-evaluated the strategy late in 1986 after the state had crushed the township insurrection that had begun two years earlier. A handful of prominent activists began to argue for calculated participation in state institutions. They correctly claimed that non-collaboration had already extracted maximum concessions and cited gains made by the trade union movement as evidence that participation in the apartheid system could bear fruit. Addressing SACOS in 1987, Alec Erwin, an education officer from the National Union of Metal Workers (now the Minister of Trade and Industry), warned that while ‘attempts to build organisation[s] outside apartheid structures ... are valid’, they are ‘also totally inadequate’:

We are not able to provide the facilities and resources that could sustain mass participation outside the facilities provided by the apartheid structures. Use or non-use of apartheid facilities is no longer a crucial political question — it does not take us forward strategy-wise.

50 SAIRR (1979), op. cit., 487.
The black press also publicly condemned the boycott for the first time on the grounds that it failed to distinguish between the victims and beneficiaries of apartheid. For example, it questioned the ban on black soccer idol, Jomo Sono, that prevented him from playing in a series of international charity soccer matches to raise money for AIDS victims. Journalist Sekola Sello called it ‘irrational’. ‘Can you logically explain to a young talented black sportsman that barring him from playing abroad and broadening his horizons was actually meant for his good?’ he asked.52

Reggie Feldman, president of the SACOS-affiliated Transvaal Council on Sport, agreed that the boycott deprived blacks but contended that ‘the oppressed . . . must be prepared to sacrifice if we are to obtain our goal of a truly non-racial South Africa’.53 It was an obtuse and prescriptive reply that merely raised questions about SACOS’s leadership of the non-racial sports movement and in particular its relations with sportspeople in the townships.

Few Africans played non-racial sport and the movement frequently faced charges that it was unrepresentative.54 Most SACOS players were Indian and Coloured artisans and skilled workers; the leadership typically came from the black, non-African, salaried middle class. SACOS’s principles did not impinge on these relatively affluent groups who could afford the costs associated with playing outside apartheid structures. But this was not true for working-class Africans. Although SACOS undoubtedly articulated the political aspirations of the majority of African sportspeople and, in this sense, could legitimately claim to represent them, its policies discouraged African members. The National Football Association, for example, reconsidered a proposal to affiliate to SACOS in the mid-1980s since it ‘would not dictate to members how they should lead their lives outside football, provided that they do not engage in matters that may bring the association . . . into disrepute’.55 But SACOS preferred principle to members.

SACOS’s dogmatism led to increasing charges of political paralysis and abstentionism. The most vocal criticism emanated from the Indian-dominated Natal Council on Sport (NACOS) and this intensified following the launch of the UDF in 1983. Many non-racial sportspeople implored SACOS to affiliate to the UDF as a way to build non-racial sport in the townships. Addressing SACOS in 1988, Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, secretary of the Catholic Church’s Institute of Contextual Study, asked whether the time had not come

54 Roberts, op. cit., 7; Ad Hoc Committee of National Non-racial Sports Organisations, op. cit., 32; Human Sciences Research Council, Sport in the RSA (Pretoria 1982), 51. SACOS leaders were generally coy when quizzed about membership numbers. At its height, in the mid-1980s, the Council consisted of 24 national affiliates, and my estimates put the number of open-age members at around 150,000. The inclusion of school pupils affiliated to SACOS through the Primary Schools’ Sports Association and the Secondary Schools’ Sports Association perhaps quadrupled this number.
55 Vivian Reddiar, Soccer Annual ’88 (Johannesburg 1988), 107.
for the Council to align politically. No, replied Abe Adams, an executive member of SACOS from the Western Cape, ‘political alignment will cause unnecessary division’. ‘Political alignment presupposes the acceptance of a single, exclusive political tendency to the exclusion of all other tendencies. Who must we exclude by taking sides?’ he queried. Similarly, general secretary Colin Clarke said that SACOS had ‘always strived to use the best of all tendencies to plot unity among non-racial sportspersons’. Unfortunately, reality did not match the rhetoric.

Policy differences emerged at the first meeting between SACOS and the UDF in late 1983. A UDF delegation asserted that the Front would not automatically isolate people working in government institutions. Rather, it wanted to ‘win them over’. It also noted that many people in Soweto played in, and supported, the National Football Association and that it would be folly to isolate them simply because the Association’s president, George Thabe, served on a community council. Official relations with the UDF continued to deteriorate. At SACOS’s general meeting in Kimberley in 1985, WEPCOS distributed a pamphlet dismissing the UDF as a populist movement. ‘The unfortunate trend of the populist movement’, inveighed WEPCOS secretary I. Joseph, ‘is that it rushes ahead in a maelstrom without a very strong political base and in doing so it sweeps along and destroys every bit of disciplined structure.

SACOS increasingly forged closer relations with political left, Africanist and black consciousness groups that shared its predisposition towards non-collaboration. This in turn led to charges, mostly unfounded, that minority tendencies manipulated and controlled SACOS. But by the end of the decade SACOS could no longer claim political independence. In 1989, SACOS announced that it would open international offices through the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) network. Members of the PAC, the Azanian People’s Organisation and the New Unity Movement (NUM) dominated SACOS delegations that met different political groups. The NUM, in particular, rallied to SACOS, charging the UDF with ‘trying to hold SACOS to ransom’ and ‘giving populists and liberals a free hand’.

As the tide slowly turned against non-collaboration in the anti-apartheid movement in the late 1980s, two groups openly voiced dissent within SACOS. NACOS chided SACOS for its uncompromising ideological grip on sport, its refusal to affiliate, or even identify with, mass-based community organizations, and its ‘infantile malady of ultra-left rhetoric’. Simultaneously, a hand-

57 Abe Adams, ‘To Align or Remain Non-aligned’ in SACOS (1989), op. cit., 175.
58 Ibid., 70.
60 SACOS (1987), op. cit., 38.
ful of minor non-racial sports officials and former players, including Arnold Stofile,63 Muleki George and Krish Naidoo, advocated a mass mobilization of non-racial sportspeople to force multiracial sport, now called establishment sport, to negotiate new democratic structures.64 Mostl from the Eastern Cape, members of this group had close links to the UDF. They believed that every deracialized democratic institution was a victory for non-racialism and that every victory, no matter how small, would help build a post-apartheid society.

Although radically departing from SACOS’s position, negotiation acknowledged changing circumstances. SACOS foolishly dismissed the dissenters. Former SACOS president Frank van der Horst described the NACOS leadership as ‘a clique of petty bourgeoisie’.65 In 1989, Stofile, George and Naidoo launched the National Sports Congress (NSC); non-racial soccer, rugby, cricket and table tennis immediately defected from SACOS and affiliated to the NSC. The leaders of these sports were all Indian and mostly lived in Natal.

In many respects, the NSC’s ‘cumulative ground-up’ strategy was as idealistic as SACOS’s all-or-nothing approach. While warning that the NSC’s strategy would be a ‘slow and painful process’, sympathizer and journalist Sefako Nyaka painted a highly romantic picture of the struggle:

We must bring on to our side millions of workers and rural people, the women and the youth, the intellectuals and the students, patriotic chiefs, business people, the religious community, cultural workers, sports people, professionals and politicians, black and white. Together these constitute the tidal wave that will surely sweep away apartheid sport and the apartheid system and take their rightful place as the democratic power in our country.66

Notwithstanding its idealism, the NSC scored an immediate victory. In cooperation with the mass democratic movement,67 the NSC staged large-scale protests against mercenary English cricketers who toured the Republic in 1989–90 at the invitation of the establishment South African Cricket Union (SACU). Demonstrations forced SACU to negotiate a shortened tour. The NSC thus achieved within months of its launch what SACOS had threatened

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63 In 1985, the Reverend Arnold Stofile, a member of the UDF executive and president of the SACOS-affiliated Victoria East Rugby Union, formed a ‘cultural desk’ within the UDF. The cultural desk later divided into two with one dedicated to sport. Stofile visited New Zealand the same year on behalf of the UDF and successfully lobbied against a proposed All Black rugby tour of South Africa. In 1986, NACOS nominated Stofile as president of SACOS, arguing that he would be a more representative leader and give SACOS direct access to the townships. At the time, however, Stofile was in prison and procedural rules disallowed the nomination. Nonetheless, SACOS made Stofile one of three patrons.

64 Krish Naidoo, ‘The New Ball Game’, Sunday Tribune, 4 March 1990. The term ‘establishment sport’ reflected the increasing penetration of blacks into multiracial sport.

65 Personal interview, 16 September 1991.


67 The term ‘mass democratic movement’ came into vogue in 1988 after the government banned the UDF and other progressive organizations and placed restrictions on the Congress of South African Trade Unions.
for nearly a decade — an end to mercenary cricket tours. Moreover, in one strike the NSC had seized control of South African sport. On the eve of the English rebel tour, the chairman of the NSC, Krish Naidoo, provided a critical insight into the internal resistance movement’s strategic thinking and evidence that those who supported negotiation and participation as strategies to transform apartheid had won the debate against non-collaborationists: ‘We’re past the stage of straight anti-apartheid resistance. We’re building a new non-racial South Africa and there’s a proper way of doing things through consultation. The time has come to sit down and start talking.’

Non-collaboration ceased as a strategy of resistance in South Africa when State President F.W. de Klerk unbanned the African National Congress (ANC), the Communist Party and the PAC in February 1990. De Klerk’s move put negotiations on the agenda. In sport, officials from establishment and non-racial organizations met to negotiate the formation of democratic national controlling associations whose priority was to develop sport in the townships. Only when a code had united and put in place township development programmes would the NSC lift its moratorium on international competition and allow South Africans to compete abroad.

Establishment sport’s perceptions of international reactions to de Klerk’s reforms and an under-resourced NSC sounded warning bells about expectations for the transformation of South African sport. Foreign reactions to de Klerk’s initiatives informed establishment sport that the international community would readmit South Africa without qualification. Banner headlines on the front pages of the daily press in the first half of 1990 excitedly announced that international competition was imminent. In this climate of optimism there was little pressure on establishment sport to enter serious negotiations. Indeed, just as SACOS warned, negotiations between the NSC and establishment sport produced political amalgamation rather than genuine unification. Sports unity typically consisted of a black ceremonial head and a sprinkling of non-racial personalities among a core of establishment administrators who refused to change even their uniforms and banners. Many united associations were exceedingly fragile. Rugby officials convened a Crisis Committee in

69 NSC, Sport Perspectives (September 1991), 4. Of the 126 national controlling associations recognized by the department of national education (which liaised with and provided grants-in-aid to establishment sport), only some two dozen entered into serious negotiations. The most important negotiations occurred between the umbrella organizations. Department of National Education, Annual Report, 1991 (Pretoria 1992), 20; RSA, House of Assembly Debates (Pretoria 1992), 5407.
October 1992 to prevent unity from collapsing, and the NSC appointed a retiring supreme court judge to investigate political divisions in athletics, 13 months after it had ‘united’. Many of the supposedly carefully-negotiated development programmes ceased with the appointment of black development officers who received neither adequate resources nor moral support. In September 1993, rugby’s Director of Development, Ngconde Balfour (the current Minister of Sport), resigned, accusing senior administrators of using development as a smokescreen for international tours.  

While the NSC slammed the door on visits by mercenary sports teams, it lacked the human and financial resources to negotiate with, or monitor, every establishment sport. Many NSC national affiliates existed in little more than name. The Amateur Swimming Congress, for example, consisted of three affiliated clubs. As a result, the architects of transformation were forced to recruit the incompetent and opportunistic. Many NSC officials lacked the skills necessary for tough negotiation; many were passive officials of subordinate African associations affiliated to white bodies during the era of multinational sport. Few had sports administration and management training, or experience in formulating or implementing development programmes. Most lacked the energy, ruthlessness, and moral resolve to tackle equity and justice issues. Some recruits saw the NSC as a fortuitous avenue to self-enrichment in an uncertain and rapidly-changing environment.

The ANC and international federations had different objectives for sport and they also compromised the NSC, forcing it prematurely to lift its moratorium on international competition. The ANC did not regard sport as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with the National Party; it identified international competition as a way to reassure whites about the reconciliation intentions of a future black government. ANC leader Nelson Mandela played a decisive role in cricket’s return. He personally telephoned Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley and asked the West Indies to support South Africa’s application to rejoin the International Cricket Council.

Most international federations lifted their boycotts in late 1991 and early 1992 after the National Party repealed the legislative foundations of apartheid. They claimed that the boycott had worked — sport had triumphed over racism. According to Kéba Mbaye, who led an IOC delegation to the Republic in March 1991, political rights were not, and never had been, on the IOC’s agenda. ‘Democracy is not total’ in South Africa, Mbaye wrote in his official report, ‘but there are a lot of countries like this.’ It was a classic example of trivializing apartheid. Of course, Mbaye’s prime concern was sport, and the arguments that had rationalized the boycott for over a decade now posed a
threat to the philosophy of sport and the belief that it could unite and reconcile South Africans.

The IOC invited South Africa to Barcelona in 1992; the following year 93 South African sports enjoyed international recognition with a further 13 awaiting official re-affiliation.75 Most of these sports had simply rewritten their constitutions and made vague promises — still largely unfulfilled a decade later — to assist disadvantaged sportspeople.

Any assessment of the effectiveness of the sports boycott of South Africa as a political strategy must acknowledge shifting objectives. The early boycotters pursued a simple goal, to deracialize sport. It was a feasible and obtainable aim. Indeed, the National Party responded to the isolation of South African players and officials by sanctioning mixed-race sport. Deracialization was a victory for non-racial sport, although it was not a sufficient reason to lift the boycott: integrated sport did not justify apartheid South Africa’s place in the comity of nations.

In the late 1970s the boycotters changed tactics. They reconceptualized the boycott as a strategy of broad social change, but in so doing they set unrealistic objectives. Boycotts can only win concessions and limited social reforms, such as racially-integrated facilities or the removal of the permit system in the case of sport. The sports boycott did not transform apartheid society because the pressures it could exert were insignificant compared with the social changes that the boycotters demanded, at least in the all-important eyes of the National Party. At this juncture, a well-administered selective boycott may have produced more gains, such as better sports facilities and resources in the townships. Some establishment codes were desperate to prove their credentials to the outside world; others, notably the cash-rich SACU, were even prepared to tackle historical inequities. Rewarding these codes may have increased the pressure on others to offer more to black sportspeople. However, it took almost a decade for the non-racial sports movement to reappraise the blanket boycott, by which point it was too late.

When F.W. de Klerk unbanned black political organizations and repealed apartheid legislation as a forerunner to political negotiations that would lead to a post-apartheid society, the international community, supported by the broader liberation movement, immediately rewarded South Africa and welcomed its teams back onto the playing fields. The boycott was over. Sports officials entered negotiations to determine new constitutions and governing structures in each code, but without a boycott non-racial officials had no means to exert pressure. It is hardly surprising then, that South Africa continues to send predominantly white representative teams abroad while sports development programmes in the townships languish.

Some commentators argue that the sports boycott contributed to de Klerk’s

75 RSA (1993), op. cit., 6293.
decision to abandon apartheid. The evidence remains highly circumstantial. David Black and John Nauright refer to the ‘corrosive societal and psychological effects of steadily expanding cultural sanctions’, including sport, which they intimate played an indirect role.76 Perhaps the more pertinent question is, did interracial sport contribute to the demise of apartheid? Dan O’Meara reminds us that by the late 1980s few Afrikaners subscribed to apartheid as a moral project and that their diminishing numbers certainly made it easier for de Klerk to act.77 Racially-mixed sport undoubtedly contributed to Afrikaners’ discarding their racial ideology. International acceptance of interracial sport, the inclusion of blacks in foreign representative teams touring the Republic, and the increasing profile of black sportspeople in the domestic media simply posed too many logically irreconcilable contradictions for long-held Afrikaner notions about physically inferior blacks who were disinterested in sport.78 In this sense, interracial sport, rather than the sports boycott, assumed a far more important role in hitting apartheid for six than critics have been willing to concede.

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76 David Black and John Nauright, Rugby and the South African Nation (Manchester 1998), 93.
77 O’Meara, op. cit., 405.
78 Hoberman, op. cit., 530. For copious examples of white stereotypes of the non-sporting African, see Lapchick, op. cit.