

Football

Another Nation-Building Moment

58

[SIMON KUPER]



While Nelson Mandela was serving his life sentence in jail about 25 years ago, he got a new commanding officer. Mandela had charmed all the previous ones, but Major Van Sittert was harder. Van Sittert wasn't a talker. He especially didn't like political prisoners. And so, writes John Carlin in his book *Playing the Enemy*, Mandela made enquiries to discover Van Sittert's soft spot. It was rugby. Mandela then spent weeks studying the – to him - unfamiliar sport, reading the sports pages and watching rugby games on the television set he had acquired by charming the prison officers.

Finally he buttonholed Van Sittert in a corridor outside his cell. Speaking in the Afrikaans he had learned in jail, *'he welcomed the major as if he were a guest at his home,'* writes Carlin. Next Mandela launched into a well-prepared chat, again in Afrikaans, about current rugby matters. He praised this player, criticised that one, got Van Sittert nodding in agreement to all his points. Then Mandela steered his new rugby buddy into his cell. He had a little problem, he explained. He always saved some of his lunch to supplement his dinner, but by dinner-time the food had gone cold. However, Mandela had heard of a modern invention called the *'hot plate'*. Might it be possible to get hold of one? Instantly, Van Sittert turned to a subordinate and barked: *'Go and get Mandela a hot plate!'*

This conversation was perhaps the first time that South Africa's George Washington used sport to cross colour boundaries. Mandela went from there to using sport to create South Africa. That was a tricky task. He had to create the very idea that *'South Africans'* existed as a nation, rather than just white



and black and 'Coloured' and Indian 'races' all eternally at odds with each other. Work on the South African nation continues to this day; and more perhaps than any other nation, South Africa is being made through sport. That's why this year's football World Cup in that country matters more than it ever could in Germany, Japan or France.

Aerial view of Cape with Table Mountain and Green Point Soccer Stadium, Cape Town.

Still not a nation

When my parents were growing up in Johannesburg in the 1950s, the words 'South Africa' meant only white South Africa. Most whites did not consider non-whites to be South Africans. My great-uncle Leo Kuper, a sociologist, explained in 1965 in his book *An African Bourgeoisie*, in a chapter about a black Durban soccer league, why the country refused to field non-racial national sporting teams. You could have a team that represented the whites, Leo explained, or the blacks, but not a team that represented the whole nation, because under apartheid 'South Africa is not a nation'.

South African whites in those days had a football team they called 'South Africa'. Essop Pahad, who served for years as President Thabo Mbeki's right-hand man, and is now on the local organising committee for the World Cup, recalls watching internationals in the 1950s from the two stands reserved for non-whites. 'They would be crammed full,' he told me, 'with everyone supporting the visiting team. I can only recall one foolish Indian fellow supporting South Africa, only one foolish fellow, and he was always in trouble.' Steve "Kalamazoo" Mokone, perhaps the best South African player of the late 1950s, couldn't play for the national team because his skin was the wrong colour. So he ended up in the Dutch provinces playing for Heracles Almelo, where he became a local hero known as 'The Black Meteor'. He has backed South Africa's bid to host the World Cup – giving a younger generation a chance he never had himself.

Green Point Soccer Stadium,
Cape Town.

Apartheid, based on the bogus ideology that races are different, ended up creating white, black, 'Coloured' and Indian South Africans who really were like separate peoples. Even today, the different South African 'races' speak different tongues (the country has eleven official languages), carry around different maps of the country in their heads, die at different ages and play different sports. When you visit Cape Town, for instance, it is useful to know apartheid has been abolished because you might not notice it immediately. The beachfront neighbourhoods remain almost all-white. Out of town are the 'Coloured' Cape Flats, separated from the whites by highways and golf courses. Blacks live in Langa township. *'There are ghettos in other parts of the world,'* Pahad protests. But he admits: *'South Africa is an extreme case because of the legacy of apartheid.'*

That makes it hard even today for any writer to presume to describe 'South Africa'. We say the World Cup will take place *'in South Africa'*, but there are multiple South Africas. There's an urban white one that's rather like the US, a rural black one that's more like Mozambique, and many other South Africas in between, not all of them any longer defined only by skin colour.



Most South Africans cannot describe South Africa but only the ethnic group they grew up in. The South Africa I know is the English-speaking white northern suburbs of Johannesburg. When I used to visit my South African grandparents as a kid in the 1970s, we would leave dank dark Europe at Christmas-time and land the next morning in South African midsummer. Within an hour we would be in the pool at my grandparents' house, or eating the chocolate cake the maids served on the veranda. This was the South Africa of tree-lined avenues, cricket on the radio, tranquil neighbourhoods with British names

like Norwood or Sandringham. These particular 'South Africans' were the richest people on earth.

The northern suburbs aren't so different today. Many of my South African relatives still read *Time* magazine, design their gardens on English models, take tea on the lawn at five in flowery china in imitation of some imagined Edwardian England. As the historian Allister Sparks says, English-speaking South Africans '*feel themselves to be members of a global community of English-speakers*'. If they live in Sandton – perhaps Africa's wealthiest suburb – they feel they have more in common with a white person in Atlanta or Perth or Brighton than with someone living just across the highway from them in the black township of Alexandra. For much of the time, South Africa today is still not a nation. And the best way it has found so far to ameliorate that condition is sport.

The Springbok team

In the nineteenth century, the idea developed that a state should be composed of people who spoke the same language, shared historical memories, and whose ancestors had inhabited the same territory together – in short, people who belonged to one nation. Many nations were forged on the battlefield. Garibaldi fought to unite Italy and Bismarck to unite Germany, just as the Dutch had once spent 80 years driving out their Spanish rulers.

But by the 1990s, when South Africa became the so-called '*last nation*' on earth, international wars were rare. On the other hand, international sport had grown into a behemoth. In many countries the most popular television programmes were the matches of the national football team. Even in an old nation like the Netherlands, the nation exists most truly when the national team is playing. An estimated three-quarters of the population saw the Holland-Brazil semifinal at the 1998 World Cup. Dutch nationalism will crescendo again when the national team, *Oranje*, plays in South Africa. *Sport* helps sustain the feeling of being Dutch. But in South Africa sport does even more: it helps *create* the feeling of being South African.

Mandela grasped this early. In January 1993, a year before the first post-apartheid elections, he travelled through the bush to the Helderfontein country estate outside Johannesburg to meet the South African football team. The press was invited. The old man appeared, looking as ever like a Chinese giant. He joked with the players, shook hands with the black reporters, and then, as these things still happened in South Africa, turned round to see us three white journalists standing together. Stricken with nerves, we had our hands by our sides, and he was thrown by finding nothing to shake. I plucked up all my courage, and called out, "*Mr Mandela, we hear that you are an Orlando Pirates supporter. Is this correct?*"

He said: "*Nooooo! I was asked this question many times during my long years in jail, and each time I answered, "I support all the teams equally."*" The father of South Africa does not play favourites. He then gave one of his famously mediocre speeches, from which I remember only one line. '*Soccer*' – Mandela pronounced it '*sucker*' – *is one of the most unifying activities among us.*' At Helderfontein that day, the claim rang true. The players standing before him – blacks, whites, '*Coloureds*' and Indians – had only football in common. Ten years before, the blacks among them could only have entered the estate as servants. Just three

Morgan Freeman (Nelson Mandela) and Matt Damon (Francois Pienaar) in *Invictus* (a film by Clint Eastwood, 2009).



years before, Mandela himself had still been serving his life sentence. Now he was starting to create a nation.

The best chance he got was the Rugby World Cup of 1995, the first big international sports event ever staged in South Africa. The Springbok team consisted almost entirely of white Afrikaners. Mandela charmed their thuggish, apolitical captain Francois Pienaar into turning the Springboks into a team for all South Africans. The team resolved it would learn to sing the new national anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, even if it was mostly in a strange tongue. After their first lesson, the three biggest players, huge white farm-boys, asked to sing the song by themselves. *'They began like three giant choirboys,'* their teacher recalled for Carlin, *'softly at first, rising, rising to the high notes. The other players just stood there with their mouths open.'* Before the final against New Zealand Pienaar couldn't sing the anthem because he knew he would cry.

The day of that rugby final was probably the first day South Africa was ever a nation. Inevitably the Springboks won in extra time, whereupon Mandela appeared in a Springbok jersey with Pienaar's name on the back to give Pienaar the cup. Mandela said, *'Francois, thank you very much for what you have done for our country.'* Instantly Pienaar replied, his words transmitted by the microphone to a listening nation: *'No, Mr President. Thank you for what you have done for our country.'*

Walk this road

The next year, nation-building was re-enacted through football. South Africa hosted and won the 1996 African Nations Cup. Before the final Mandela, now nearly eighty years old, wearing a South African team shirt with the name of the team's white captain Neil Tovey on the back, danced on the pitch, and the entire stadium danced with him. Mark Williams, the 'Coloured' striker who came on as a substitute to score both South African goals in the final, told me later: *'When I looked to the stadium I could see people sitting on the stands, people holding on*

one another, blacks, whites mixing, holding, grabbing, crying, celebrating. It was berserk in South Africa that day.' Williams had seen what Archbishop Desmond Tutu called 'the Rainbow people of God', the 'Rainbow Nation'.

Winning those two tournaments 'was symbolically of great importance', writes Robert Ross, professor of African history at Leiden University. Sport helped make the new South Africa. In 1995, the authoritative International Social Survey Program measured national pride in 23 countries. Polling 28,456 people, it found that the most commonly mentioned source of national pride was sport. Seventy-seven per cent of all respondents said it made them proud of their countries.

For all South Africa's crime and AIDS and economic inequality, the Rainbow Nation does exist. It frequently appears for a moment or two, before it melts away again like a rainbow and people go back to their own ethnic neighbourhoods and normal life restarts. Often what brings out the rainbow is sport. South Africa has long since slipped from fairy tale to sad complex country, but you can still see the Rainbow Nation in a South African nationalism that crosses colour boundaries and can be seen both in polls and in the pogroms of foreign

Soccer City Stadium, Soweto,
Johannesburg.



immigrants in poor townships in 2008. You also see it in those million daily moments of inconsequential friendliness, when whites and blacks meet. When South Africans aren't committing crimes against each other, they mostly treat each with what Mandela and his buddy Walter Sisulu called 'simple respect'. South Africa's greatest achievement, the thing the country is most proud of, is the South African nation itself.



Soccer City Stadium, Soweto,
Johannesburg.

When South African officials were trying to persuade Fifa to give their country the World Cup they used the line, *'We need another nation-building moment.'* The World Cup will above all create another series of rainbow moments for the national family photograph album. Admittedly the Bafana Bafana, the South African soccer team, won't repeat the feats of 1996. They aren't a patch on the Springbok rugby team (reigning world champions) or the national cricket team (ranked first in the world). The Bafana are the Belgium of African football, so weak that they are sometimes known as the *'Banana Banana'*. Yet they do beat the rugby and cricket teams in one department: uniting the nation.

Rugby remains mostly the sport of the Afrikaners (who despite their Dutch origin have never gone in for soccer much), cricket is the sport of all whites, and South African league football the sport of the blacks. Only international football draws all the colours. To support the Bafana is to cheer for the new South Africa. When the white Bafana defender Matthew Booth had the ball during the Confederations Cup of 2009, some foreign journalists thought they heard black fans shouting *'Boooooo!'* Was this a new South African racism, they wondered? In fact the fans were shouting *'Booooooth!'*, just as in 1996 they had chanted *'Feeeeeesh!'* and waved fake fishes for the white defender Mark Fish. It sometimes seems that the Bafana's mostly black fans cheer the white players even more fervently than the black players. It makes the point of unity.

The World Cup won't make South Africa rich, and there will probably be mishaps and muggings. Yet somehow that's all beside the point. Danny Jordaan, who has devoted much of his adult life first to bringing the Cup to South Africa and then to organising it there, told me: *'One is just blessed, I think. To see in 1990 Nelson Mandela walk out of prison, to see the elections go off peacefully in 1994, to see Bafana Bafana win the African Nations Cup in 1996, to be given the right to host this event – these are special events. Nobody decided for us to walk this road. We decided to walk this road.'* Note that word 'we': there is now a South African nation, and its national days are sports tournaments. ■