

THE GREAT CHANGING ROOM OF COLOUR AND CLASS

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The race to transform:
Sport in post-apartheid
South Africa

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Review Title:

The great changing room
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Reflecting on the issue of winning and losing in a chapter on sport in his 2005 work entitled, *The angry island: Hunting the English*, the acerbic Scottish writer, A.A. Gill, makes two acute observations, both of which have some bearing on the book under review. The first of these is that, in sport, the lesson to be learnt from the English is that it is comforting to be beaten, for the measure of how well you lose is a moral audit of character. The second is that irrespective of which sport is being played, whether it be tennis, football, rugby or even bridge, the English thing is fairness. Or, rather, it is unfairness with which the English are preoccupied, in the sense that what most provokes resentment is a playing field that is not level; hence, their creation of intricate sporting codes and rules to ensure fairness. As South Africa's 2010 FIFA World Cup tournament has again illustrated, if sport is a circus of symbol, simile and metaphor, then its greatest – and endlessly repeated – truism is that the playing field *is* level.

The notion of a level playing field is at the heart of *The race to transform: Sport in post-apartheid South Africa*, a fact that is clearly evident from the inclusion of this term in the book's index. Of equal prominence, however, is the theme of losing or, to be more exact, of losing out. While the post-apartheid transition has brought home the bacon for some in the shape of World Cup glitter, the country's skinny shacklands continue to be stuck with 'sandpits that pass for football pitches'. Indeed, the argument of this volume is that the disparity in resources between the sporting activities of an increasingly well-endowed deracialised elite and those at a grassroots township level has been widening, calling into question the facile trumpeting of 'sport as a symbol of redress and nation-building'.

Edited by the Rhodes University sociologist, Ashwin Desai, *The race to transform* consists of eight chapters, each authored by writers of varying scholarly and other professional backgrounds, ranging from sociology, history and economics to gender politics, political activism, advocacy journalism and sports writing. Well integrated and thematically coherent, the book addresses the obvious main fields of South African sport since the 1990s: cricket, rugby, football, athletics and swimming. While these are the predictable 'usual suspects', some of the ground covered within them has barely been trodden, as is the case with Prishani Naidoo and Zanele Muholi's analysis of the position of female players in the sexualised and exploitative culture of competitive national football.

As with most essay collections, the quality of individual contributions varies, although these pieces are generally well documented and written in an authoritative tone. That said, *The race to transform* is still rather a mixed bag. In one corner, there is Justin van der Merwe's precise, measured evaluation of athletics transformation, in which a probing micro-study of the fortunes of a track and field organisation in a minor Boland town provides an absorbing account of the intricate local politics of racial integration and the intractable social dilemmas accompanying it. For example, while it may not be 'uncommon to find the son of a white wine farmer and the son of a street sweeper running alongside each other' in Boland athletics training, White athletes still fly to sports festivals, while their Coloured counterparts are



Source: Photo taken by Gareth Smit
Soccer's deep secret: Will one team be better than the other?

obliged to arrive by bus. This practicable author's sensible view of the faltering state of sport transformation is that, over time, major change is likely to prevail and, to help it along, meddling politicians and muddled administrators ought to be identifying and fattening up existing pockets of African, Coloured and Indian sporting strength, rather than trying to dole out resources evenly and everywhere.

In another corner, one finds a hefty dose of clunky sociological jargon from other contributors, trotted out as a form of explanatory shorthand to denounce various national ills. Naidoo and Muholi's 'Women's bodies and the world of football in South Africa' reminds us that women's choices in 'the world of football' are dependent on 'the specific configuration' of the legacy of the apartheid order, its 'fundamentally racist, sexist, homophobic beliefs, values and institutions, and its current perpetuation in the form of neoliberal macroeconomic policies'. Acting in concert, these forces turn the dream of 'playing the game' into a theoretical nightmare. At some elemental level, this assessment may not be far wrong, but it still leaves one wondering about the dreams, the satisfactions and the agonies of actual life on the pitch.

Setting aside the insatiable appetite of the contributors for axe-grinding and rhetorical indignation, there is much in the approach of this collection that is both challenging and informative. Several of its offerings are even wryly amusing, mocking such things as South Africa's world leadership in swimming pool filtration systems. Ashwin Desai also lays bare the larger absurdities of a promiscuous world of quotas and targets, in which floundering swimming team managements either try to guess from lists which team members are Black, or make statutory numerical choices, thereby ensuring that the pool, in some perverse way, continues to reflect 'the racial contours of the apartheid era'. Meanwhile, underfunded schools and neglected rural areas await adequate programmes through which they can begin to establish a culture of swimming.

The coverage of more prominent sports, such as football, rugby and cricket, is much as might be expected. In a deadpan style, Dale T. McKinley charts the sorry story of South African soccer development – a cauldron of incompetence, managerial avarice and personality squabbles. Along with Goolam Vahed and Vishnu Padayachee, Desai offers a particularly expert account of the ethnic and class antics of local cricket. Understandably, these chapters tackle the obvious level playing field issues of 'fundamental transformation within the game', such as the ascendancy of Black administrators amounting to no more than the equivalent of BEE deals and the failure of cricketing programmes to produce a decent squad of 'African world class cricketers'. While these issues may be true enough, they are not half as true as the fact that the real post-apartheid children of South African cricket are 'outstanding young Afrikaner

cricketers' groomed at crack sporting high schools like Bloemfontein's Grey College.

The erosion of the umbrella anti-apartheid ideology of Black Consciousness, particularly in regions such as KwaZulu-Natal, is another influential development in post-apartheid sport. One consequence is that transition in local cricket has not been a straightforward matter of toppling White dominance and establishing non-racialism. It has also spawned jostling between ethnic cabals, with non-Muslims whining about Muslims, Indians complaining of African anti-Indianism, Africans feeling slighted by the decisions of Indian selectors, Coloured schoolboys being passed over in favour of Africans and Indians and even rumblings among North Indians of being squeezed out by South Indians. Behind the stumps lurk plotters, who are either in power or who want to get there. As the great West Indian writer, C.L.R. James once mused, 'what know they of cricket who only cricket know', although the KwaZulu-Natal Cricket Union is probably not quite what he would have had in mind.

The overall coherence of *The race to transform* lies in a couple of commanding propositions which stitch together its contributions. For a privileged elite, both Black and White, easy access to the resources required to breed champions continues to sustain sporting inequality and thwarts the role of sports activity as a transformative project that can be used to forge a common South African identity. As long as the government remains comatose or too preoccupied with feasting on the credit of staging a succession of World Cup 'jamborees', local grassroots sport will stagnate, while at higher levels, trophies will continue to fall into the laps of the muscular middle classes, in whose changing rooms 'class' trumps 'race'. Similarly, the deepening intrusion of corporate capital, with its market-driven philosophy of sports sponsorship, imposes a profitable professionalism that dictates who gets what from the feeding trough.

All of the issues discussed above are formidable problems to which there are no simple answers, although this book does suggest ways of distributing resources more efficiently to serve a common nationhood. It also leaves one with a final, testy question: can sport and recreation ever really be an important and worthwhile part of radical social and economic reform? Whether they are utilised fairly or unfairly, playing fields remain a carnival distraction from the pinching burdens of poverty and stunted life chances. One does not have to view sport in Marxist terms as some opiate of the people to see it as the classic solution to the perpetual dilemma of our rulers, that is, what should be done with us when we are not working? If one considers this in the context of South Africa's very recent sporting past, it would include savouring the sight of Ghanaian footballers squeezing the USA out of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. ■