

# From Apartheid to Unity: White Capital and Black Power in the Racial Integration of South African Football, 1976-1992

## Abstract

This article analyzes the complex process that deracialised and democratised South African football between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. Based mainly on archival documents, it argues that growing isolation from world sport, exemplified by South Africa's expulsion from the Olympic movement in 1970 and FIFA in 1976, and the reinvigoration of the liberation struggle with the Soweto youth uprising, triggered a process of gradual desegregation in the South African professional game. While Pretoria viewed such changes as a potential bulwark against rising black militancy, white football and big business had their own reasons for eventually supporting racial integration as seen in the founding of the National Soccer League. As negotiations for a new democratic South Africa began in earnest between the African National Congress and the National Party in the latter half of the 1980s, transformations in football and politics paralleled and informed each other. Previously antagonistic football associations began a series of 'unity talks' in 1985-86 that eventually culminated in the formation in December 1991 of a single, nonracial South African Football Association just a few days before the Convention for a Democratic South Africa opened the process of writing a new post-apartheid constitution. Finally, three decades of isolation came to an end as FIFA welcomed South Africa back into world football in 1992—a powerful example of the seemingly boundless potential of a liberated and united South Africa ahead of the first democratic elections in 1994.

**Keywords: South Africa, football, race, politics, democratization**

## Apartheid football and failed reforms

The first documented football matches in Africa took place in 1862 between white civil servants and soldiers in the Cape Colony of what is today South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Between the 1880s and 1910s, football associations and leagues developed in the major South African

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<sup>1</sup> This overview is based mainly on P. Alegi, *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004). For further details, see P. Alegi and C. Bolsmann, *South Africa and the Global Game: Football, Apartheid and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2010).

cities and mission schools, while a number of tours to and from the country occurred as well, so that by the 1930s football had become the national pastime of the majority. However, not only was the game segregated between whites and blacks, but also between African, Coloured, and Indian. The 1950s ushered in a new desire among black South Africans to play across the colour line, just as apartheid was being entrenched. In 1951, Africans, Coloureds, and Indians came together to form the anti-apartheid South African Soccer Federation (SASF). From 1961 to 1966, the South African Soccer League demonstrated that racially integrated professional soccer was hugely popular and so the white authorities shut it down. While there was never a law prohibiting mixed team sport during the apartheid era, a vast number of harshly enforced segregation laws made integrated sport nearly impossible. In response, progressive (mainly black) South Africans and their international allies in the mid-1950s embarked on a campaign to impose FIFA sanctions on South Africa. Initially, the white Football Association of South Africa (FASA) successfully used stalling tactics, aided by conservative members at FIFA, and maintained the *status quo*.

But in the aftermath of the massacre of 69 black protestors outside the Sharpeville police station (70km south of Johannesburg), and the admission of newly independent African (and Asian) members to FIFA, football apartheid was put on the defensive. FIFA's 1960 Rome Congress passed a resolution in which national associations could not practice racial, religious or political discrimination and the whites-only FASA was given twelve months to abide by the resolution.<sup>2</sup> FASA's unwillingness to change its racist stance forced FIFA to suspend the association in September 1961.

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<sup>2</sup> Alegi, *Laduma!*, 117 and P. Darby, *Africa, Football and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism and Resistance*. (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 73.

Establishment football in South Africa responded to the suspension by creating the ‘Top Level’ Committee, which represented FASA and the Africans-only South African Bantu Football Association (SABFA).<sup>3</sup> Among the most influential individuals in this committee were Vivian Granger, a founding member of the white National Football League, and Bethuel Morolo, president of SABFA. Morolo was a member of the FASA delegation that attended the FIFA Congress in Chile during the 1962 World Cup.

The Top Level Committee’s stated brief was to meet at regular intervals to ‘discuss all matters of common interest and concern’<sup>4</sup> and, according to FASA president Fred Fell, ‘should answer all the requests and demands made by FIFA’.<sup>5</sup> Another important and less publicized goal of the Top Level Committee was to undermine the activities of the anti-racist South African Soccer League. SASL matches regularly drew large and racially diverse crowds at ramshackle stadiums in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town—men, women and children eager to enjoy what many considered the most exciting brand of football yet seen in South Africa. Top Level’s Viv Granger conspired with the Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department, as well as the Minister of the Interior, Jan De Klerk (FW De Klerk’s father), to deny access to municipal grounds to SASL clubs. In a move aimed at strengthening white power and authority in the game, Pretoria declared in September 1962 that, ‘the use of all stadia and fields for Native football . . . [was] reserved for use by Associations affiliated to the Football Association of South Africa’.<sup>6</sup> On the international front, Top Level Committee members argued that

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<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1933, SABFA was one of two ‘African’ national associations. Its rival was the more oppositional South Africa African Football Association, which belonged to the anti-apartheid South African Soccer Federation. For further details, see Alegi, *Laduma!*, 42-47.

<sup>4</sup> FASA Annual Report 1961, Historical Papers Collection, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (hereafter FASA Archive), AG3827.

<sup>5</sup> FASA AGM 3 March 1962, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>6</sup> Alegi, *Laduma!*, 132.

nonracial football was run by political agitators and cast FASA's inclusion of some African, Coloured, and Indian affiliates as evidence of genuine transformation in local football.

The formation of the Top Level Committee inspired FASA president Fred Fell's optimistic prediction that FIFA's suspension of South Africa would soon be lifted. White South Africans enjoyed the support of FIFA's conservative English President Stanley Rous. He and Joseph Maguire of the United States made an official visit to South Africa in January 1963 that came to the astounding conclusion that, 'There is no wilful [*sic*] discrimination on the part of FASA in respect of any organization in South Africa.'<sup>7</sup> As a result of this report, the world body's executive committee temporarily readmitted FASA. Coming only a few months after the arrest of Nelson Mandela and the establishment of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid, readmission to FIFA was a public relations coup for South Africa. However, it was shortlived. In 1964 FIFA's Congress re-imposed the suspension thus heralding a 28-year period of football isolation for South Africa and a major victory for the global anti-apartheid movement.

The Top Level Committee intensified its attacks on organizations opposed to racism in football, especially the SASL. Like the African National Congress and its allies in the liberation struggle, this league embodied the majority's demands for freedom and equal rights.<sup>8</sup> Black and even some white fans of clubs like Avalon Athletic, Durban Aces, Cape Ramblers, Orlando Pirates, and Moroka Swallows were taking a stance

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<sup>7</sup> FIFA, "Report of the Visit of Sir Stanley Rous and Mr. J. Maguire to South Africa, 5-19 January 1963," cited in P. Darby, "Stanley Rous's 'Own Goal': Football Politics, South Africa and the Contest for the FIFA presidency in 1974, *Soccer and Society* 9, 2 (2008), 265.

<sup>8</sup> For deeper analysis of the history of the SASL, see Alegi, *Laduma!*, chap. 8, and Alegi, "Football and Apartheid Society: The South African Soccer League, 1960-66," in G. Armstrong and R. Giulianotti, eds., *Football in Africa: Conflict, Conciliation and Community* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 114-134.

against state-enforced racial discrimination and segregation. The popularity of the SASL continued to grow while the Top Level Committee, despite the addition of two minor Indian and Coloured football associations, was meeting irregularly by 1965 and experiencing serious difficulties. According to FASA documents, ‘personalities . . . interfered with constructive policy’ and the [Top Level] agreement was cancelled.<sup>9</sup>

South Africa’s international isolation in sport was intensifying and so in 1967 Prime Minister John Vorster announced a new sports policy which, among other things, allowed New Zealand’s rugby team, the All Blacks, to field Maori players against the Springboks in South Africa.<sup>10</sup> Following South Africa’s expulsion from the Olympic movement in 1970, this policy became officially known as ‘multinationalism’. It allowed, in some cases, teams of racially defined ‘nations’—African, Coloured, Indian and White—to compete against one another and also accepted the possibility of a racially mixed national team taking the pitch against foreign opposition.<sup>11</sup>

White football under FASA viewed multinationalism as a useful way of projecting an image of substantive change abroad (especially to FIFA), while maintaining control and privilege at home. In September 1971, it requested all divisional associations to canvass opinions on multi-racial football. At FASA’s 1972 AGM it was reported that 70% of the affiliates had agreed in principle to playing multi-racial football.<sup>12</sup> However, FASA affiliates were against multiracial football at amateur and junior levels (including schools). This stance exposed the limits of superficial change pursued by white football

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<sup>9</sup> FASA Annual Report 1965, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>10</sup> C. Merrett, “‘In Nothing Else are the Deprivers so Deprived’: South African Sport, Apartheid and Foreign Relations, 1945–71”, *International Journal of the History of Sport* 13, 2 (1996): 146–165.

<sup>11</sup> Alegi, *Laduma!*; R. Archer, and A. Bouillon, A. *The South African Game: Sport and Racism* (London: Zed Press, 1982) and D. Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> FASA, Annual General Meeting, 11 March 1972, FASA Archive, AG3827.

while segregation was left intact. In fact, white football officials conspired with black officials from SABFA to expel Coloureds and Indians playing for clubs based in African areas. This coercive policy of 'Africanising' black professional soccer was intended to offset the gains of anti-racist football bodies in the 1950s and 1960s. After the purge, SABFA prepared to launch of the National Professional Soccer League (NPSL).

In April 1971, a newly created Africans-only professional league sponsored by Keg Lager, a brand of the South African Breweries (SAB), kicked off. Later that year SAB agreed to continue sponsorship of the Keg League and discussed the introduction of a separate knockout competition similar to the FA Cup in England. In December 1971 George Topp, general manager of SAB, presented Orlando Pirates with the Keg League Trophy and predicted that, 'black professional soccer will be the biggest spectator sport in the country within 10 years'.<sup>13</sup> By the time the Keg League kicked off George Thabe had replaced Bethuel Morolo at the helm of SABFA. Unsympathetic to apartheid's critics (like his predecessor), Thabe would go on to become the most powerful black football official in the 1970s. A former primary school teacher, he then worked as a public relations officer for the United Tobacco Company (UTC), a major sponsor of both white and black football since at least the 1940s. Thabe's increased importance in black professional football, as well as his complacency in relation to the apartheid state, was evident when he met with Piet Koornhof, Minister of Sport and Recreation, in 1972 to request stadium improvements for Keg League sides. Thabe's collaboration with the apartheid regime facilitated a meeting with Prime Minister B. J. Vorster. Government support encouraged business sponsorship of African football and that same year SAB doubled their sponsorship of the Keg League. Thabe praised the brewing behemoth's

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<sup>13</sup> M. Gleeson, 'History of the Castle League' (unpublished manuscript).

infusion of capital for it ‘virtually put African soccer on its feet’.<sup>14</sup> Increased self-confidence saw SABFA replace the derogatory term ‘Bantu’ in its title in 1973 and rename itself the South African National Football Association (SANFA).

By this time the Top Level Committee had been revived and was responsible for organizing ‘multinational’ football competitions with the approval of the regime. In 1972 FASA began preparations for the South African Games, also known as the ‘apartheid Olympics’, which were to include racially mixed amateur international sides (with Pretoria’s consent) and multinational, that is racially defined South African teams. Thanks partly to Stanley Rous’s vocal support, FIFA gave a ‘special dispensation’<sup>15</sup> for a football tournament to take place at the Games. Brazil and England provisionally accepted invitations to send amateur international sides with FASA covering all financial costs. FIFA requested additional information from FASA about whether teams would be racially mixed and whether stadiums would be segregated.<sup>16</sup> When FASA replied that South African teams would be selected on a racial basis and that stadium seating would be segregated. FIFA immediately withdrew its approval and wrote: ‘we regret the executive was misled and wrongly interpreted the term “multi-racial”’.<sup>17</sup> Despite the withdrawal of FIFA’s support, the 1973 South African Games went ahead with the South African ‘Whites’ twice beating their ‘Black’ counterparts in football.

In 1974 the tinkering continued with the Embassy Multinational Series tournament which featured ‘national’ teams of Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites, while in the following year the Chevrolet ‘Champion of Champions’ pitted black and

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<sup>14</sup> Gleeson, ‘History’.

<sup>15</sup> FIFA, ‘Letter to FASA’, 26 January 1973, FIFA Archives, Zurich.

<sup>16</sup> FIFA, Letter to FASA, 28 November 1972. FIFA Archives, Zurich

<sup>17</sup> FIFA, Telegram to Dave Marais, n.d. FIFA Archives, Zurich

white clubs against one another.<sup>18</sup> Large crowds watched these tournaments, which generated significant revenue and demonstrated that racially mixed football was popular. In addition, companies such as General Motors expressed their interest in sponsoring football, not under the white-run FASA but under the Top Level Committee, an African-directed organization working within apartheid structures. This arrangement demonstrated quite clearly how private capital was eager to tap into the large and growing black consumer market, even if only with the regime's official approval. FASA's recalcitrance to relinquish power and control over the domestic game was again made clear in 1974 when it rejected SANFA's plan to form a Supreme Council of Soccer that would represent South Africa at FIFA should sanctions be lifted in the near future.<sup>19</sup>

### **South Africa's expulsion from FIFA and the demise of the white professional game**

The expulsion of South Africa from the Olympic movement in 1970 was an important milestone in the victorious struggle against apartheid, one that reinvigorated anti-apartheid activists' resolve to secure the country's expulsion from world football. At the Frankfurt FIFA Congress in 1974, the Brazilian João Havelange's decision to support sanctions against South Africa (and also Rhodesia) proved decisive to his rising popularity among African delegates. As FIFA's largest voting bloc, Africa came together across regional and Cold War divides to provide crucial votes in Havelange's victory over the incumbent Rous in the 1974 FIFA presidential election.<sup>20</sup> In the wake of this display of African power on the global stage, FASA acknowledged that multinational football

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<sup>18</sup> Alegi, *Laduma!*, 141-42.

<sup>19</sup> South African National Football Association Proposals to the Top Level Committee, 21 November 1974, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>20</sup> P. Darby, "Stanley Rous's 'Own Goal': Football Politics, South Africa and the Contest for the FIFA Presidency in 1974", *Soccer and Society* 9, 2 (2008): 259-72.

had not brought any changes in the South African game. Thus, FASA President Dave Marais suggested to Minister Koornhof that, '[we] use soccer as the guinea pig for experimenting with multi racial sport'.<sup>21</sup> In 1975, Marais also recommended to FASA that it 'should gradually be expanded into a multi racial body [to include] a multi racial Executive'.<sup>22</sup> The white association deliberated on the issue of forming 'an umbrella organization or expanding FASA into a multiracial body' and eventually concluded that proposals should be submitted to FIFA before the July 1976 Congress in Montreal. FASA's goals in this regard were clearly to avoid a likely expulsion from FIFA.

Growing militancy within South Africa and international pressure to ostracize the apartheid regime made it unlikely that FASA's strategy had any chance of success. Then, on June 16, 1976, in Soweto, outside Johannesburg, security forces gunned down schoolchildren marching peacefully against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of classroom instruction. The Soweto Uprising that followed, and which spread nationwide, was a watershed event in South African history. Domestic and international opposition intensified further and Pretoria responded with a mix of repression and reform. But in the short term, the Soweto uprising doomed FASA's extensive campaign to garner sympathy and support at FIFA. In July 1976 at the Montreal Congress the world body expelled FASA. As far as FIFA was concerned readmission would be considered only after the dismantling of apartheid laws and the formation of a single, nonracial controlling football body in South Africa.

The reaction of establishment football in South Africa to international sanctions was influenced by the government's response to political events inside and outside the

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<sup>21</sup> FASA, Minutes of the Executive, 10 August 1974, FASA Archive, AG3827

<sup>22</sup> FASA, Minutes of the Executive, 7 March 1975, FASA Archive, AG3827

country. While Pretoria's security forces carried out brutal counterinsurgency operations, professional football—with its largely black fan base—found itself at the forefront of the regime's plan to 'ameliorate apartheid'. This strategy would later include the legalization of black trade unions, the growth of a black middle class and the creation of a Tricameral Parliament with token legislatures for Coloureds and Indians (but not Africans who represented nearly three-quarters of the population). Marais resigned from FASA and the Football Council of South Africa was formed in October 1976. The Football Council brought together FASA (whites) and SANFA (Africans), and also included two minor Indian and Coloured organizations. Crucially, council members chose George Thabe, the black chief of both SANFA and the National Professional Soccer League, as President.<sup>23</sup> In a letter to FIFA in December 1976, the Council indicated that its 'basic aim . . . is to establish and control normal and unrestricted football at all levels in South Africa'.<sup>24</sup>

Football and politics were inextricably linked. The regime's support for mixed elite football under Thabe's leadership was part of a broader pursuit of a divide-and-rule strategy most prominently visible in support for 'homeland' leaders.<sup>25</sup> It is also important to clarify that while African, Coloured, Indian and white South Africans were permitted to join the Football Council, this organization was not genuinely colour-blind and thus oppositional, but rather one with members representing different racially defined football groups abiding by the policies and regulations of the apartheid establishment. A clear indication of the Football Council's conservative politics came from its adoption of a

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<sup>23</sup> Football Council of South Africa, Letter to FIFA, 1 December 1976, FIFA Archives Zurich.

<sup>24</sup> Football Council of South Africa, Letter to FIFA, 1 December 1976, FIFA Archives Zurich.

<sup>25</sup> The homelands (or 'Bantustans'), a cornerstone of the 'grand apartheid' policy of the 1960s and 1970s, were created by the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959. It divided Africans into ten ethnically discrete groups, each assigned a 'homeland'. Built on the territorial foundations imposed by the Land Act of 1913, the homelands constituted only 13% of the land for approximately 75% of the population.

powerful symbol of apartheid sport—the Springbok (antelope)—as its official emblem. Beyond its control over football in South Africa, a primary aim of the Council was to regain admission to FIFA so as to allow South Africa to participate in international competitions (such as the World Cup and the African Nations Cup) and also permit foreign teams to visit South Africa. If this were to happen, the Football Council recognized that it might generate handsome profits and further increase the popularity of the game in the country, particularly at the professional level.

The rise of the black-led Football Council coincided with the sharp decline of the whites-only National Football League (NFL), a professional league established in 1959.<sup>26</sup> Throughout its existence, the NFL received generous sponsorships from SAB, United Tobacco Corporation, Coca-Cola, British Petroleum, Sanlam and other major national and transnational corporations. Some prominent British players represented NFL sides in its heyday, including Billy Wright, Stanley Matthews, Tom Finney, and George Best. The NFL remained a white league with segregated stadiums and, in certain instances, a whites-only attendance policy. Even so, some popular clubs like Cape Town City, Durban City and Highlands Park attracted a surprising number of black supporters, particularly Indians in Durban and Coloureds in Cape Town. In a desperate attempt to compete with the rising popularity of the African professional game and FIFA sanctions, in 1976 the NFL's general manager, Vivian Granger, encouraged the signing of African players from the NPSL.<sup>27</sup> These cracks in the edifice of apartheid, both in the context of football and more broadly in South African society, opened a space for racial integration

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<sup>26</sup> C. Bolsmann, 'White Football in South Africa: Empire, Apartheid and Change, 1892-1977'. *Soccer and Society* 11, 1-2, (2010): 29-45.

<sup>27</sup> The NPSL came in for extensive criticism for not suspending the league in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising and for permitting Moroka Swallows and Vaal Professionals to play in Umtata to celebrate 'independence' of the Transkei 'Homeland'.

in football, albeit only at the professional level which accounted for about 3 percent of the country's players.

The Football Council's first attempt at 'reforming apartheid' was the Mainstay League Cup launched in 1977. White capital's financial support proved crucial to this effort as the Stellenbosch Farmers' Wineries (owners of Mainstay, a cane spirit) provided a R70000 sponsorship. 'Mainstay believes firmly that S.A. is on the verge of a sporting breakthrough,' argued a company spokesperson, one 'that may well usher this country back into international soccer'.<sup>28</sup> The inaugural Mainstay Cup boasted thirty-two teams: fifteen from the African NPSL; thirteen from the white NFL; and four from the marginal South African [Coloured] Football Association. The competition was not completed due to ineffective management and high travel costs, as well as spectator violence, police intervention, and the constraints of residential segregation (under the Group Areas Act) which sharply curtailed fans' freedom of movement. Despite this initial failure, the Mainstay Cup was organized again in the following season and sponsorship rose to R100000 and was completed successfully. The Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery public relations officer candidly spelled out white capital's logic in providing financial backing to the sport of the black majority: 'There's a definite spin-off from black consumers. They identify your product with the game and support it. Football's helped us retain our market share in a competitive industry.'<sup>29</sup> The 1978 Mainstay Cup final took place at a packed Rand Stadium in Johannesburg, while millions of fans watched the live television broadcast around South Africa. Black fans were deflated by the outcome as Wits

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<sup>28</sup> 'Announcing the Mainstay League Cup', *African Soccer Mirror* (April 1977): 21.

<sup>29</sup> Archer and Bouillon, *The South African Game*, 254.

University, a white team, defeated Kaizer Chiefs, the most popular team in the country, by a score of 3-2.<sup>30</sup>

Three factors finally sealed the fate of the white NFL, which folded after the 1977 season: Pretoria's support for sporting reforms, the steady supply of corporate sponsorships for (partially) mixed football, and the defection of Wits and four other white teams to the African-controlled NPSL. Given white football's dire straits, FASA officials met with Norman Middleton and Abdul Bhamjee, the main powerbrokers of the anti-apartheid South African Soccer Federation (SASF) and its Federation Professional League (FPL), to explore alternative paths to the integration of football. These initial contacts went well and, in October 1977, FASA agreed that it 'may be merged with those of the Federation'.<sup>31</sup> Motivated by the recent FIFA expulsion and the NFL's demise, FASA and SASF held another meeting in January 1978 where the whites 'accepted the basic principle of non-racial soccer from grass-roots level' and to 'subscribe to the principles of the SASF'.<sup>32</sup> However, in a remarkably quick reversal, FASA backed out of these agreements in order to 'retain their identity'.<sup>33</sup> White football administrators' retreat on racial integration was the final straw for the South African Council of Sport (SACOS), the parent body of the SASF/FPL and the leading edge of the sport boycott movement inside the country. SACOS viewed any cooperation between the NFL and FPL as collaboration with apartheid and thus expelled the latter from its ranks in 1979, a penalty that was deemed so harsh that it was rescinded a number of months later.

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<sup>30</sup> Lusitano, another white team, won the 1978 Castle League. In one league match the side fielded the Mozambican-born Portuguese superstar Eusebio, who also appeared for Moroka Swallows against Orlando Pirates. Other Europe-based stars made appearances in South Africa at the time, including Liverpool's Kevin Keegan in a friendly match for Cape Town City in 1978 against Highlands Park.

<sup>31</sup> FASA, Special General Meeting, 29 October 1977, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>32</sup> FASA Minutes of the Executive Meeting 1 April 1978, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>33</sup> FASA Minutes of Executive Meeting, 3 March 1978, FASA Archive, AG3827. In March 1978, FASA withdrew from the Football Council only to rejoin in 1981.

South African businesses overwhelmingly in white hands, sought to profit from the growing antagonism between black football organizations across the political divide. For example, Seven Seas (a brand of the Distillers group), provided a R50000 in sponsorship to the FPL in 1979 in response to the sizeable investment made by Mainstay, a rival in the domestic cane spirit market, in competitions of Thabe's Football Council. SAB took on an increasingly interventionist role in the running of professional football. Paul Winslow of SAB argued that the African-only NPSL and the nonracial FPL immediately seek a rapprochement, emphasizing that, 'the well-being of South African soccer clearly demands the pooling of NPSL and Federation resources into a single non-racial league'.<sup>34</sup>

The intersecting interests of private capital, black and white football, and reformist politicians were discussed in May 1978 at a meeting in Cape Town that included Winslow, Taylor of FASA, Middleton of SASF, Thabe of SANFA, and Minister Koornhof. It was suggested that a single controlling body could be established and further talks were proposed for June 1978 at SAB headquarters in Johannesburg. But this meeting never took place as SASF withdrew and called on FASA to disband and join their ranks. SANFA in turn demanded FASA repudiate their association with the SASF. In this fluid and unpredictable context, a handful of white clubs fought for financial survival by either joining the NPSL or moving to the anti-apartheid FPL, the successor of the racially mixed South African Soccer League of the early 1960s. As Norman 'Silver Fox' Elliott, chairman of white Durban City, intimated, such a move was a gamble for

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<sup>34</sup> Gleeson, 'History'.

some clubs but was deemed as a risk worth taking because it at least offered the potential of increasing match attendances and revenues.<sup>35</sup>

Large corporate sponsors of football, while disappointed by international isolation and administrative chaos, hedged their bets. SAB and UTC (today British American Tobacco) were black football's oldest corporate sponsors going back to at least the 1940s. The brewing giant enjoyed a 'virtual monopoly in "clear" beer production' and from this position of strength decided to sponsor *both* the NPSL and the FPL, paying R75000 to the former and R55000 to the latter for naming rights.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the UTC sponsored competitions like the NPSL's John Players Special tournament and the FPL's Benson & Hedges Cup. White capital's ravenous appetite for black consumers of beer, tobacco, and other goods transformed the politics of South African football. By the end of the 1970s, attempts at uniting the disparate associations in the country revolved as much around acquiring control of the increasingly lucrative professional game than ending apartheid and gaining readmission to FIFA.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Commercialization of South African Football**

The television revolution powered South African soccer's commercial boom. Television service arrived quite late in South Africa due to the apartheid regime's censorship policies and its desire to control information. In January 1976, however, the state-run South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) finally launched a television service.

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<sup>35</sup> Archer and Bouillon, *The South African Game*, 253.

<sup>36</sup> I. M. Wright 'Is it good for soccer?' *South African Soccer* (October 1978): p. 5. The quotation about SAB is from A. Mager, "'One Beer, One Goal, One Nation, One Soul': South African Breweries, Heritage, Masculinity and Nationalism, 1960-1999," *Past and Present* 188 (2005): 184.

<sup>37</sup> Football Council representatives attended the 1982 World Cup in Spain and met with João Havelange of FIFA and Yidnekatchew Tessema of CAF. In the meeting with Tessema, Thabe was joined Kaizer Chiefs owner Kaizer Motaung. Thabe proposed a CAF commission visit South Africa, but it fell on deaf ears. Football Council of South Africa Report of the Officers on the Madrid – FIFA trip August 1982 FASA Archive, AG3827.

The following year, SABC-TV broadcast a football match between black teams to South African audiences and four years later it began to show live games. When the SABC added a second channel in 1982, its regular Saturday prime-time schedule featured a tape-delayed ‘match of the day’ as well as a dozen more live matches. George Thabe’s NPSL capitalized on the television revolution by selling broadcasting rights for the Castle League to the SABC for R250000.<sup>38</sup> Companies relished the advertising potential of football on television—a mass medium that allowed potential access to millions of black households at a time when consumption among white households had slowed considerably compared to the boom of the 1960s.

SAB was at the forefront of a broader trend blurring the boundaries between race, politics, football and big business. Between 1978 and 1982 SAB dramatically increased its NPSL Castle League sponsorship from R75000 to R325000.<sup>39</sup> New marketing efforts in black-dominated football extended beyond traditional sectors of support like alcohol and tobacco producers to include energy companies, car manufacturers (especially American), and firms in the consumer retail sector. With televised football reaching an expanding audience, unprecedented sums of money from white firms flowed into the coffers of an African sporting organization and, as a result, in 1982 the NPSL reported revenues of nearly R3,2 million and a net profit of R321000. Emboldened by such record revenues, Thabe tightened his control over domestic football and opportunities for capital accumulation that came with heightened commercialization. In July 1984 he dissolved the Football Council and transferred its operations to SANFA. FASA refused to abide by Thabe’s order to join SANFA, noting that ‘it would not be practical or possible for any

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<sup>38</sup> Gleeson, ‘History’, 36, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Gleeson, ‘History’, 28, 38, 54, 68.

one governing Association to control all soccer in South Africa . . . [and that SANFA] is mainly concerned with the . . . [NPSL] which generates a large amount of money each year, both from gates and sponsorships'.<sup>40</sup> FASA was not alone in its dissatisfaction with George Thabe's leadership and wealth accumulation.

Thabe ruled by decree while critics identified the NPSL's accounting flaws, irregular match schedule, administrative incompetence, disinterest in training referees and coaches, and overcrowded and unsafe stadiums.<sup>41</sup> Kaizer Chiefs founder and chairman Kaizer Motaung openly called for Thabe's resignation, who responded by charging Motaung with bringing the game into disrepute and issuing a gagging order on the league public relations officer, Abdul Bhamjee (who had left the SASF for the NPSL in 1983). As these power struggles intensified, in 1983 Jomo Sono, a dominant player in the 1970s, bought a white football powerhouse, Highlands Park, and renamed it Jomo Cosmos. This historic event signaled the growing assertion of black power in South Africa, which was most visible in the growth of militant unions and the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983—crucial forces in persuading the government to move toward the negotiating table.

In this shifting political context, the time was propitious for Sono, Motaung, and other major black football impresarios to break away from the NPSL. After Thabe ignored a petition in early 1985 by NPSL Castle League clubs and thirty second division clubs demanding his resignation, the racially integrated South African Soccer Association (SASA) was established to challenge SANFA's grip over black amateur football.

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<sup>40</sup> FASA Circular No. 49, Report on matters affecting the Football Council of South Africa, 23 August 1984, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>41</sup> NPSL, 'Operations Review of the National Professional Soccer League' (August 1983), Papers of the Football Association of Natal and KwaZulu, Alan Paton Centre (APC), University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, APC 114/1/8/1.

Simultaneously, fifteen clubs abandoned the NPSL, an exodus engineered by Motaung, Bhamjee, and ex-NPSL general-secretary Cyril Kobus.<sup>42</sup> Encouraged by a substantial financial commitment from SAB of R400000 in exchange for naming rights to the league, an eighteen-team Castle League governed by the new National Soccer League was born on 1 February 1985.

Six months later, NSL officials wisely stated that they would not support South Africa's readmission to FIFA unless apartheid was dismantled and a single, united, nonracial and democratic football association was in place.<sup>43</sup> This shrewd stance earned them the sympathy of the African National Congress, the trade union movement, and many rank-and-file members of the liberation movements. Still, the NSL's growth could not happen without the support of state media and, in fact, SABC paid R450000 for the Castle League's broadcasting rights in 1986 and then increased the amount to R800000 the following year. SAB shared the state broadcaster's enthusiasm for football. In 1988 it announced a R2135000 Castle League sponsorship deal over three years. In an unambiguous statement of government support for elite football's racial integration, Pretoria went so far as to allow the NSL to buy land at Crown Mines between Johannesburg and Soweto to build the country's first and largest football-specific stadium: Soccer City (capacity 76,000). First National Bank, a major financial institution with strong links to the white liberal business community, underwrote the R65 million construction costs.<sup>44</sup> But Soccer City's formal opening came nearly four years after the

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<sup>42</sup> Within weeks, the only club holding out, Moroka Swallows, joined the NSL.

<sup>43</sup> Gleeson, 'History.'

<sup>44</sup> Opened in 1989, Soccer City has been extensively renovated and its capacity expanded to 94,000 seats. It will host seven 2010 World Cup matches, including the opening match and the final.

first formal ‘unity talks’ between South Africa’s numerous and bitterly divided football associations.

### **Paths to Unity, 1985-1991**

The founding of the NSL challenged SANFA and Thabe, who agreed to meet with SASF in December 1985 and January 1986 for the purpose of discussing a possible merger.

According to SASF, these initial unity talks collapsed mainly because Thabe’s conservative camp disingenuously presented itself as ‘apolitical’ while labeling representatives of anti-apartheid football as members of a larger ‘political’ organization (SACOS) that used sport to pursue its strategic goals which revolved around dismantling apartheid.<sup>45</sup> Against a backdrop of rising mass militancy, brutal counterinsurgency campaigns, and economic crisis and growing international pressure, secret talks began in prison between Nelson Mandela and the government, followed by meetings in 1987 between the ANC, white business leaders, and Afrikaner intellectuals, first in Dakar, Senegal, and then in Lusaka, Zambia—the ANC’s headquarters in exile.

With the state and the resistance movements locked in a stalemate, football negotiators recognized an opportunity to move the unity process forward. In October 1988, a delegation comprised of NSL chairman Rodger Sishi, Abdul Bhamjee, and Kaizer Motaung, as well as Solomon Morewa (head of the amateur South African Soccer Association), met in Lusaka with ANC National Executive members, including future South African president Thabo Mbeki. It was also in Harare, Zimbabwe, in October 1988 that Mbeki and future Minister of Sport Steve Tshwete reached out to white rugby

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<sup>45</sup> SASF, ‘Pursuing Unity in Football: Challenges and Constraints in the Way to Unity’ (1988), Papers of the Western Province Association Football Board (WPAFB), Mayibuye Archive, University of the Western Cape.

bosses Louis Luyt and Danie Craven as part of a broader diplomatic strategy to use sport to thaw relations between the white establishment and the liberation movement.<sup>46</sup> In a joint communiqué, the political and football leaders stated that, ‘The delegations agreed that it is necessary within our country to unify soccer, strive for the establishment of a unitary non-racial controlling body and integrate soccer at the grassroots level’.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, the Lusaka meeting reaffirmed support for the sport boycott by pledging to seek readmission to FIFA only after apartheid’s removal from the statute books. This mutually beneficial outcome formally aligned the biggest and most popular clubs in South Africa with the ANC and the main liberation movements.

About two weeks later the ANC and the SASF met in Lusaka. While these long-time allies fully appreciated that apartheid was the principal cause for administrative fragmentation in domestic football, they still expressed ‘serious concern’ about it and advocated the ‘creation of a single non-racial football body’ to solve the problem.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the ANC and the SASF agreed that any unity talks between antagonistic sporting groups had to be based on a shared acceptance of the principle of nonracialism among all participants, and ‘that the boycott against racist sport in South Africa should continue as it was an important tool in the struggle for the destruction of apartheid.’<sup>49</sup>

The two meetings with the ANC in exile provided the basis for the next stage of the unity process. Representatives of SASA, NSL, SASF and FPL opened a new round of unity talks in April 1989 in Durban. In May 1989 FASA and SANFA attended the next

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<sup>46</sup> S. M. Ndlovu, ‘Sports as Cultural Diplomacy: the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa’s Foreign Policy’, *Soccer and Society* 11, 1 (2010): 145. See also D. Black and J. Nauright, *Rugby and the South African Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> Joint Communiqué of African National Congress, National Soccer League, and the Soccer Association of South Africa, Lusaka, 19 October 1988, WPAFB Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Joint Communiqué on the Meeting of the South African Soccer Federation and the African National Congress, Lusaka, 5-6 November 1988, WPAFB Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Joint Communiqué on the Meeting of the SASF and the ANC.

meeting which also included the National Sport Congress (the sporting arm of the ANC), the Mass Democratic Movement, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) amongst others. Participants at this May 1989 meeting agreed to establish a commission to bolster the broader quest for unity.

Despite this growing commitment to continue the dialogue between rival associations, narrow self-interest, lack of trust and political differences had not dissipated. FASA, for example, noted in a circular to the membership that, 'serious reservations exist about the nature of the talks especially the political line taken by certain "non football delegates"'.<sup>50</sup> Anthony Wilcocks, president of FASA, admitted that the anti-apartheid football bodies like the SASF, NSL, and SASA had initiated the unity talks. In private correspondence Wilcocks wrote that, 'we missed the boat many years ago to lead the football fraternity . . . FASA has, however, been instrumental in closing down the Football Council'. Wilcocks suggested FASA had nothing to lose by participating in unity talks, but some uncertainty remained judging by his subsequent observation that, 'there are certain structures and philosophies that we want to retain in FASA'.<sup>51</sup>

FIFA kept abreast of football related developments taking place in South Africa. For example, in May 1989 a delegation from NSL/SASA was invited to meet with FIFA General Secretary Joseph 'Sepp' Blatter at FIFA House in Zurich. SANFA's anxiety over its ongoing marginalization in football affairs was evident in a letter from SANFA's new

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<sup>50</sup> FASA Circular No 43, Memorandum to Presidents of all members 19 June 1989, FASA Archive, AG3827.

<sup>51</sup> Confidential Letter to Colin Trader from Anthony Wilcocks, 1 December 1988. Chris Bolsmann collection. Thanks to Anthony Wilcocks for giving access to this document.

president, Goba Ndhlovu, to Blatter, in which the former complained that the meeting gave the appearance of ‘a shift in FIFA policy concerning South African football. . . . On what basis is FIFA now willing to meet with South African football officials in the different associations and leagues?’ asked Ndhlovu.<sup>52</sup> In a curt five-sentence reply, Blatter simply stated that, ‘The visit of the National Soccer League (NSL) representatives was not a formal meeting but an informal get-together and it had nothing to do with a change in FIFA’s policy’.<sup>53</sup>

With FIFA now unofficially backing unity, the ground was ready for the convening of the aforementioned Soccer Commission to consider the formation of a united and nonracial football body. The July 1989 Commission featured officials of the SASF, FASA, SASA and SANFA and was chaired by Krish Naidoo of the National Sports Congress. A second Soccer Commission met in December 1989, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to address membership issues and the structure of the controlling body. The third Commission gathered the month following the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners and the lifting of the ban on the ANC, Pan Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party in February 1990. Given this historic turn of events, a third Soccer Commission sat in March 1990 and embraced the real possibility that South Africa might soon re-enter world sport (football included) and, in the process, help propel the negotiated revolution forward.<sup>54</sup>

A major unity meeting was held in Gaborone, Botswana, on 20 April 1990, under the chairmanship of Sam Ramsamy of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee

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<sup>52</sup> Letter from Goba Ndhlovu to J. S. Blatter, 2 June 1989, FIFA and South Africa Correspondence, FIFA Archives (reproduced in *FIFA and Africa* DVD 1).

<sup>53</sup> Letter from J. S. Blatter to Goba Ndhlovu [SANFA], 29 June 1989, FIFA Archives.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, SANROC Press Statement by Sam Ramsamy, 11 July 1990, FIFA Archives.

(SANROC), between representatives of SASF, FASA, SASA, Ismail Bhamjee of CAF, Tommy Sithole of the Southern African Zonal Olympic Committees, Steve Tshwete and Monde Kete of the ANC, but nobody from SANFA.<sup>55</sup> A press statement revealed that ‘It was tentatively agreed that the three associations unite as a matter of urgency. . . . the modalities of doing so will be worked out by the three associations’.<sup>56</sup> CAF pledged to assist the unity process and ‘prepare the country for when it will be accepted into international football’, a stance reiterated to FIFA in November 1990 by CAF president Issa Hayatou of Cameroon.<sup>57</sup> Ramsamy, however, warned that these important developments ‘should not be misinterpreted to imply that the country will be automatically re-admitted to FIFA’.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, ‘we are not fighting South African soccer’ Bhamjee remarked, ‘but we cannot talk to four different soccer bodies’.<sup>59</sup>

In September 1990, after meeting thirteen times over the previous two years, SASA, SASF and FASA finally agreed to form a nonracial controlling body to be known as the South African Football Association (SAFA) and that this body would be inaugurated in the following year. In addition, the professional leagues of the NSL and FPL agreed to merge and become a special affiliate of SAFA. This exciting prospect, according to Wilcocks, made football delegates at the Harare Conference on 3-4 November 1990 stand out as ‘the “good guys” of South African sport’. Wilcocks went on,

Football has definitely made the most progress in the normalization and unification of its sport . . . Wild dreams of international participation must be tempered by patience and understanding by sports administrators. Efforts

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<sup>55</sup> Press Statement, 20 April 1990, FIFA Archives.

<sup>56</sup> Press Statement, 20 April 1990, FIFA Archives.

<sup>57</sup> Issa Hayatou, Letter to J. S. Blatter, 12 November 1990, FIFA Archives. On the role of CAF in the struggle against apartheid, see P. Alegi, *African Soccerescapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game* (Athens, OH, and London; Ohio University Press and Christopher Hurst, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Kwenaita, ‘Some light at the end of the tunnel for SA soccer’, *Sunday Star*, 22 April 1990.

<sup>59</sup> Vivian Reddiar, ‘SA soccer bosses told: Unite or else!’, *City Press*, 22 April 1990.

must rather be channeled in to the need to develop sport at local level at all levels. International sport is the prize for success at home.<sup>60</sup>

The unity process in South African sport received a major boost in April 1991 when the International Olympic Committee conditionally agreed to invite a South African team to participate in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.<sup>61</sup> FIFA supported the position adopted by the IOC but reiterated that a single non-discriminatory association needed to be formed to control the local game.<sup>62</sup> In July 1991, the IOC conditionally recognized the Interim National Olympic Committee of South Africa (INOCSA) with the proviso that apartheid be abolished, the Olympic Charter respected, relations built between South African and international sporting federations, continuation of non-racial sport and the normalization with sports organizations in Africa would occur.<sup>63</sup>

Against the backdrop of the normalization of international sporting relations, SANFA applied for FIFA membership.<sup>64</sup> SANFA justified their withdrawal from unity talks in South African football because ‘the intended united soccer body would be politically aligned to a particular political party’ in this case the ANC. As a result of SANFA’s intransigence, the embryonic SAFA refused to include them in ongoing unity talks while SANFA, without any chance of success, appealed to FIFA and requested membership due to its marginalization in the negotiation process. In July 1991 CAF sent an Investigative Commission to South Africa to survey the organization of domestic football. (Two months later, CAF conditionally readmitted South Africa, an important step on the way to ending isolation). Issa Hayatou suggested that FIFA conduct an

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<sup>60</sup> FASA Circular No 107 The Significance of the Harare Conference, 8 November 1990.

<sup>61</sup> Memo, April 15 1991, FIFA Archives. Zurich.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Afrique du Sud’ statement, April 18, 1991, FIFA Archives.

<sup>63</sup> IOC Press Release, 9 July 1991, FIFA Archives.

<sup>64</sup> SANFA, Letter to FIFA, 27 May 1991, FIFA Archives, Zurich.

inspection visit to South Africa to gain a better sense of the state of the local game and assist the unification process, thereby clearing the final hurdles to reentry into world football.<sup>65</sup>

In December 1991, a few days before the Convention for a Democratic South Africa in Johannesburg opened to begin discussions about a post-apartheid constitution, the South African Football Association (SAFA) was formed in Durban. (At a meeting held in Dakar in January 1992, CAF recommended it be readmitted as a member of FIFA. SAFA then formally applied for readmission into FIFA with the endorsement of the National Olympic Committee of South Africa (NOCSA) and the ANC. FIFA President Havelange and General Secretary Blatter travelled to South Africa in April 1992 to meet with SAFA officials.<sup>66</sup> The last step was taken on 3 July 1992 in Zurich when SAFA was welcomed back into the FIFA fold. To celebrate the occasion, on 7 July 1992, South Africa played their first international fixture as a nonracial team beating visiting Cameroon 1-0 at King's Park Stadium Durban.

## **Conclusion**

The end of international isolation and the achievement of unity in football—the most popular and genuinely representative major sport in the country—were the result of an organic transformation that occurred between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s. The gradual deracialisation of football stemmed mainly from three inter-related factors: (1) the lengthy global struggle against racist, segregated sport in South Africa waged by local and exiled progressive and liberal blacks (and some whites) with the help of international

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<sup>65</sup> Hayatou letter to Havelange, 24 September 1991, FIFA Archives, Zurich.

<sup>66</sup> FIFA Media Release, 16 January 1992, FIFA Archives.

allies; (2) Pretoria's attempts to reform apartheid sport as a bulwark against rising black militancy and gain readmission to FIFA; and (3) white capital's decision to sponsor integrated professional football to access the profitable black consumer market and project a constructed image of corporate social responsibility.

Given the legacy of apartheid inequalities and three decades of isolation, it seems remarkable that a former pariah of the world went on to become the first African nation to host the FIFA World Cup finals in 2010. Yet, as this study has shown, unity in South African football came more than two years before the first democratic elections and, unlike rugby and cricket, symbolized successful institutional democratization under black leadership at a time of great political uncertainty in a sharply divided, wounded society. In doing so, the game of football captured the nation's euphoria in winning the franchise and acquiring global citizenship, and embodied the seemingly boundless potential of a liberated and united South Africa ahead of the first democratic elections in April 1994.

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