Playing With Apartheid: Introductory Summary

The exploitation of sport to enhance the image of repressive regimes has a long – and disturbing - history. The most egregious early example is Nazi Germany's attempt to use the 1936 Berlin Olympics to justify ideologies of 'racial' superiority and deny local Jewish athletes the right to represent their country. After the war, as European colonialism and systemic racism came under unprecedented pressure, Apartheid in South Africa triggered bitter international protest, centred on white majority rule, systemic segregation, racial separation and separate development – a euphemism exclusion of people of colour from equal rights to land, education, housing and employment. Sport mirrored apartheid's brutal mechanisms of discrimination and segregation. In uniquely important ways sport defined the apartheid state and connected it to the outside world.

Struggles over racism penetrated - and influenced - every aspect of international sporting interaction and contest with white South Africa during the apartheid era, 1948-1994. Australia, white South Africa's closest international friend and apologist, was more deeply implicated in the ethical contests provoked by playing with apartheid than was any other nation.

'Sports-washing' was endemic during the long decades of Apartheid - even before the watershed anti-Springbok protests in 1971; 'No Tours' boycotts in test-match Rugby and Cricket and widening UN and Commonwealth endorsed sanctions.

After the infamous massacre of civilian protesters at Sharpeville in March 1960 and white South Africa's immediate expulsion from the Commonwealth, apartheid was defended abroad by an elaborate propaganda campaign and heavy funding promoting sporting competition at the highest international level. In 1967, as anti- Apartheid protests erupted in the UK and Ireland for example, all white South Africans travelling abroad were issued with booklets enabling them to 'correctly answer' all questions about 'separate development'. At the same time, travel and information available to politicians, business and sporting representatives visiting the segregated Republic was tightly restricted. Until, the Soweto Uprising in 1976, information and news from, South Africa was heavily censored and 'managed'. Those seeking to understand apartheid, or the reasons for opposition to it, were obliged to wade through an unpalatable swamp of misinformation and propaganda, orchestrated by local diplomatic posts and approved media stories and news images.

Pretoria's exhaustive propaganda campaigns boldly defended 'separate development' and told the world that its human rights record was misunderstood. The apartheid state maintained tight authority over every aspect of 'reform' and controlled the release of all information about it. Typically, embassy media releases spoke of South Africa as a democratic state, albeit a complex multiracial society built on principles ensuring that social groups were separate but equal. (A similar doctrine had underpinned segregation in the American South until the Supreme Court ruled, in 1954, that separate facilities were inherently unequal.) It was claimed that sporting contacts and a supportive bilateral relationship more broadly, not sanctions or sporting isolation, would encourage dialogue, limit the possibility of communal violence, and avoid a "racial bloodbath". African opponents of apartheid, most notably leaders of the ANC—including Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo—were routinely painted as 'communists', 'terrorists' or 'black thugs'.

More subdued arguments defended rebel competitions and advocated that bilateral sport be resumed, especially test level rugby and cricket.
In the wake of Sharpeville apartheid in sport quickly became a fault-line in international campaigns against racism. Isolation from the highest levels of competition became the most effective lever of action against the apartheid regime. Sanctions in sport became the focus of larger struggles, African American tennis star Arthur Ashe suggested, because they were the tactic most likely 'to put a crack in South Africa's racist wall'.

In 1971, Springbok rugby players – self-proclaimed 'ambassadors of apartheid' – toured Australia. As the 'whole world watched', pitched battles erupted wherever the Springboks played, or stayed. In no country were contests over racism in sport more bitterly fought, more protracted, or important, than in Australia. Conflict was most fractious in rugby and cricket, but tennis, surf-lifesaving and golf were also catalysts of protest.

After the "Pitched battles' during the 1971 Springbok tour, a torrent of (mis)information was distributed through the South African embassy or recycled by sympathetic media, right-wing political groups, and disgruntled sporting associations. Increasingly, those determined to promote and defend rebel sport, most prominently cricket promoter Bruce Francis, spearheaded the drive to defend apartheid. For example, Francis told newly elected Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser—and all major local media outlets—that a number of sports—including cricket— were now 'completely integrated'. No disinterested observers accepted such claims in relation to any major sporting code. Canberra openly rejected Pretoria's widely publicised assertions about 'multiracial' sport as 'nothing more than cosmetic change'. Frustrated with censorship and misinformation, Edwin Ogebe Ogbu, Chair UN Special Committee on Apartheid,

observed that 'Pretoria has sought, by propaganda and repression, to silence non-racial sports organisations lest it suffer the opprobrium of further international isolation'.

Despite the successes of the watershed anti-apartheid *No Tours* campaign, after 1971, so-called 'rebel' athletes from virtually every major sporting code refused to support sanctions or to stop playing against white South Africans, individually or in sponsored team competition. They were swayed by Pretoria's money, not by human rights principles enshrined in the charters of the UN or the Olympic movement. They happily flouted the comprehensive protocols agreed - with great fanfare - at Gleneagles in 1977. They accepted handsome financial inducements to play in South Africa or against individual white South Africans abroad. They were little troubled by the deep moral and political questions raised by racism and systemic human rights abuses in a country labelled a pariah state.
At home, Pretoria's response to sporting sanctions was cynically calculating. It welcomed, and funded, visits by 'rebel' players in virtually every code of sport. Funding to all-white sporting bodies increased. Local sport was celebrated and overseas sport little reported in media tightly controlled by the whites- only minority government. Elite-level fixtures, where local whites played alongside or against well-funded international visitors - especially in rugby and cricket - increasingly dominated the nation's local sporting calendar. International competition abroad was little reported. Visits by so-called rebel teams and individual competitors in minor sports like lawn bowls, surfing, sailing and squash were generously funded by Pretoria. World class individual athletes and players were encouraged to participate abroad, as individuals not as official representatives of white South Africa. At the same time a sophisticated and expensive international publicity campaign promoted claims that integrated sport was being introduced, if gradually, at all levels of domestic competition. Old so-called Empire sports – cricket, rugby, golf and tennis – were at the centre of this elaborate marketing campaign.

The ethical implications of ignoring White South Africa's endemic human rights abuses and accepting sponsorship to play under apartheid's discriminating laws were ignored by many sportsmen and women, in Australia and globally. Rebel cricketers who accepted white South Africa's lucrative inducements to break sports boycotts agreed - with great fanfare - at Gleneagles in 1977, were labelled the 'Dirty Dozen'; paid to play in a uniquely racist state by 'dirty money'. The *SMH* editorialised that Pretoria's cash for play strategy was sponsored by 'the same people' responsible for 'the Sharpeville massacre' (the enduring symbol of Apartheid repression). In the decades of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment on Robben Island, Australia remained South Africa's closest friend and supporter (although Rugby-obsessed NZ followed close behind).

When Apartheid was finally overthrown (1990-1994)more than 2500 athletes and officials were included on the UN Register/ 'Blacklist' for playing in whites-only competition with or against South Africans, or for refusing to pledge to not play in the Apartheid Republic. Many others, including Indigenous tennis star Evonne Goolagong, controversially accepted the status of 'Honorary White' to compete for generous prize money. Many cricketers joined so-called rebel teams to compete in or against white South Africans both at home or abroad. Nonetheless, during the 1980s alone more than 120 Australians, prominent in cricket, rugby, squash, surf-lifesaving, tennis and golf, were named in a special UN "Register" for defying sporting sanctions and playing in the apartheid state. Those who openly defied sanctions included Greg Norman, Pat Cash, Glen Ella, David Campese, the three Chappell brothers, Kim Hughes, and Terry Alderman. Yet, from the early 1970s many leading sportspeople followed the example of the much-celebrated 'Rugby Seven' and refused to play with apartheid - including Lionel Rose, Alan Border, Geoff Lawson, Dean Jones, Greg Matthews, Mark and Gary Ella, and Nick Farr-Jones. John McEnroe was perhaps the most famous international sportsperson to refuse Pretoria's money, and like his countryman Arthur Ashe, become an outspoken critic of apartheid and racism in sport. (Somewhat perversely, the names of rebels who were 'blacklisted' form part of the public record; while the names of a much greater number who refused to play with apartheid are little known.)

Unsurprisingly, Pretoria's much publicised 'reforms' in sport (most notably the New Sports Policy proclaimed in 1976) were shallow concessions to international protest. They did little to dull condemnation of apartheid generally, or to reduce criticism of individuals or sporting codes willing to play-for-pay and defy sanctions. Nor did the 'reforms' convince Australia or other Commonwealth countries to modify boycott policies. A decade after the 'new sports policy' was announced Australia's Foreign Affairs department judged that only one code, the 'non-establishment' sport of soccer ('which is easily the most popular code in South Africa') had made genuine progress towards 'normalisation' ('deracialisation').

Policies followed by all Labor and Coalition governments from the early 1970s were consistently predicated on the view that sport in South Africa was 'manifestly subject to the inequalities of apartheid'; that the apartheid system itself must be dismantled before genuine sporting reform was possible. Human rights advocates repeatedly asserted the truism that 'it was quite simply impossible for non-discriminatory sport to emerge from such a racially disfigured foundation' as apartheid.

In 1986, as SA President Botha relaxed the pass laws and foreshadowed greater integration of sport, activists continued to describe such proposals as cynical and

‘cosmetic’—announced to again mask ‘increasing unrest and harsher repressive measures’ by SA security forces. PM Bob Hawke’s Labor cabinet was advised two years later, as the global assault on apartheid accelerated, that in the powerful ‘establishment’ codes—cricket, tennis, rugby, and golf ‘complete “deracialisation” of sport’ would not be possible while ‘race remains the organising principle of society’ and ‘basic apartheid legislation remains in place’.

Efforts to isolate SouthAfrica from international competition were irreparably compromised by sanctions breaking and rebel competitions: international agreement against the apartheid regime were undermined. Pretoria happily acknowledged its ‘profound appreciation’ for the opportunity to continue playing against international sporting teams or individual athletes. This partly open window was, the South African minister for sport proclaimed, ‘an important blow not only in the sporting field but also in general against the concentrated efforts to isolate South Africa’.

While ever Australian sportsmen and women defied the international drive against white South Africa, sport would remain a touchstone for contests over race and racism at home; playing with apartheid would remain an uncomfortable reminder of racism that also defined the white Australian nation.