

Playing With Apartheid: Preface

In 1948 the extremist National Party won power in South Africa. Victory foreshadowed comprehensive legislation formalising ‘cradle to the grave’ ‘apartheid’ across the multiracial Dominion. Afrikaner rule provoked division and protest, both at home and abroad. ‘Apartheid’ has ignited ‘racial explosions’ that are echoing ‘round the world’, a *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent in Johannesburg observed as ‘white supremacy’ was consolidated. In uniquely important ways sport defined the apartheid state, connected it to the outside world, and helped defend it from international censure. South African sport mirrored apartheid’s vast mechanisms of discrimination. There were no equal playing fields under apartheid. More than perhaps any other aspect of apartheid, discrimination in sport attracted international attention, arousing widespread moral condemnation and political activism beyond South Africa’s borders - especially in the other ‘Sister of the South’, post-war Australia. Racism in sport quickly became a fault-line in the international struggle. Isolation from the highest levels of contest became the most effective lever of action against the apartheid regime. Sanctions in sport became the focus of ‘a larger struggle’, US tennis star Arthur Ashe commented on the eve of the Mexico Olympics, because they were the protest tactic most likely ‘to put a crack in South Africa’s racist wall’.¹

The arenas of sport became, from the late 1950s, sites of deep political contest. *Playing with Apartheid* explores these struggles, both on and off the field. It traces the pivotal - if contradictory - role of Australian sport in the protracted international struggle to end white rule in South Africa. It uncovers and documents an important, if neglected, chapter in the wider historiography of race-politics in post war Australia. Anglo-Celtic Australia’s troubled relationships with white South Africa were shaped across generations by overlapping ideologies of race and broadly shared patterns of racial discrimination. The very fabric of competition in virtually every sporting code at virtually every level reflected the wider racialised histories of each so-called ‘white country’. The politics of race penetrated - and influenced - virtually every aspect of sporting interaction and contest between Australia and South Africa throughout the apartheid era, 1948-1994. More powerfully than any other issue, the interwoven politics of race and sport defined the difficult, always fluid, bilateral association. Sporting exchanges with white South Africa also stimulated powerful reactive currents of anti-racism and human rights activism in Australia. *Playing With Apartheid* explores the impact of these contradictory impulses within the wider arc of the global assault on racism after WWII.

Racism casts a long shadow over Australian sport. Contests centered on

discrimination and segregation in white supremacist South Africa inevitably drew attention – as anti-racism activists emphasized – to systemic inequality in Australia’s ‘own backyard’. The evils of racism abroad invited morally troubling comparisons with racism at home. Pretoria’s insistent defence of apartheid focused international opinion on the underside of race-relations in Australia. At the same time, an unrelenting propaganda campaign orchestrated by Pretoria portrayed social separation in Southern Africa as common to many settler societies—most notably Australia - where overlapping histories of European domination had long justified segregation and exclusion based on ideologies of ‘race’ and ‘difference’. Paradoxically, the charge of racism provoked demands for reform. The rise of a vigorous anti-apartheid movement in Australia can be explained, in part at least, by growing concern about Australia’s reputation abroad; by concern that it was perceived internationally as ‘(an)other state of apartheid’. While a burgeoning transnational movement sought to end or at the very least reform fundamental aspects of apartheid, a radicalised local movement was simultaneously determined to expose racism at home and to challenge the identification of their country with racist South Africa. In no field was this perception stronger than in sport.

Rising international protest against apartheid did not disrupt the benign relationship between the so-called ‘Sisters of the South’. Indeed, as apartheid was brutally extended, no country fought harder to defend South Africa’s sovereignty, protect its security interests, or maintain sporting and cultural exchanges with it, than did Australia. Reflecting on the life of Nelson Mandela, anti-apartheid activist Meredith Burgmann wrote rhetorically in 2013: ‘Why was the anti-apartheid struggle so important for Australians? Because we were seen as apartheid South Africa’s great white brother across the sea’. In the troubled aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre in early 1960, South Africa’s leader Verwoerd told prime minister Robert Menzies that Australia is ‘the best friend South Africa has’. A decade later, on the eve of the infamous Springbok rugby tour, anti-apartheid campaign leader Peter Hain, told his Australian audience that ‘in the eyes of the sporting world’ Australia was seen ‘as South Africa’s white friend and greatest ally’.²

Readiness to voice moral concern while steadfastly refusing to support tangible action that might isolate Pretoria and reform or end apartheid, left a vast gap in Australian foreign policy - a gap filled by the actions of the anti-apartheid movement and campaigns focused on stopping all connections with sporting representatives of white South Africa. Yet if the vigorous Australian anti-racism movement was motivated primarily by opposition to apartheid abroad, it was also born out moral and political concerns about racism at home: in, as Indigenous activists emphasized, white Australia’s own backyard. As global condemnation of apartheid widened,

Australia too was censured. While ever it refused to differentiate itself from the apartheid state, Australia was exposed and judged as complicit with it. While ever it continued to play with apartheid, whether officially or in privately sponsored rebel competitions, it could not shed its tarnished reputation as apartheid's special friend and ally.

Intervention to sever traditional sporting competition – whether through public protest or conventional political pressure – became the marker of Australia's increasingly fractious relationship with white South Africa. After disturbing images of the massacre at Sharpeville were published across the world early in 1960, efforts to block white South Africa's participation in international sport assumed centre stage as efforts against apartheid accelerated. Ironically, the failure of efforts to sanction the apartheid regime in other fields – economic, cultural, military-strategic – greatly elevated the importance sporting sanctions in anti-apartheid strategies, both in Australia and abroad. In the absence of concerted international action or effective economic sanctions, protest over racism in sport – especially the Olympics and so-called 'white man's games of cricket and rugby – became the spearhead of campaigns to end apartheid. Sporting boycotts – stopping the tours – stumbled on the rocks of alliance politics during the Cold War, but had a singularly dramatic impact on the international campaign to sanction and isolate white South Africa.

My study, then, explores the critical role of sport in bilateral relations between two so-called daughters of Empire – two European-dominated settler nations defined by narratives of racism and the politics of white supremacy. It maps the evolution of Australian reactions to apartheid – and the pivotal role of sport in these contests – against an international landscape changed inexorably by struggle against colonialism and its racist legacies. Politics infused virtually every aspect of struggle against discriminatory racism – and indeed against the very concepts of 'race' and 'racial difference'. From the early 1950s, contest over white minority rule in South Africa was centered on the UN and the Commonwealth – multilateral associations themselves transformed by decolonisation and the international drive against racism. Government-to-government relations were woven into the broader fabric of global contest. More gradually, related contests over race and rights brought social division and mass protest to Australia. It, too, was fractured by waves of conflict triggered by apartheid and white minority rule abroad. Australian governments, political organisations and social groups, at federal, and local state levels, were entangled in the wider international struggle to end apartheid. As the following book suggests, nowhere were these contests more divisive – or protracted – than in sport. Racism, and anti-racism, in Australian sport, are here explored through the unique lens of sporting contest, on and off the playing fields of each country, during the turbulent

decades of apartheid in South Africa, 1948-1994.

The early chapters of *Playing With Apartheid* cover issues and events leading to the fractious anti-Springbok protests in Australia in 1971 and the introduction of sporting boycotts against white South Africa. These chapters draw heavily on my recent study, *In Apartheid's Shadow: Australian Race Politics and South Africa, 1945-1975*, which argued that protracted international conflict over apartheid encouraged significant ideological shifts, as well as important political change, within the white Australian nation. It was inextricably entangled in the international contests buffeting South Africa and these had provocative - if largely unanticipated – consequences in Australia. In short, my earlier study explored the wider implications of apartheid in South Africa for the politics of race and identity in ‘white Australia’. In contrast, *Playing with Apartheid* explores the tortured bilateral relationship through a window framed by the politics of racism in sport across more than four decades of apartheid, 1948-1994. As the titles of later chapters suggest, this study explores the contradictory role of sport and sanctions in the broader struggle that led to Mandela’s freedom, the collapse of apartheid, and birth of the Rainbow Republic.

¹ RT Foster, ‘Apartheid is popular but ...’, *SMH*, 27/9/1952; Ashe in *Cape Times*, 25/2/1971.

² Burgmann, Why Mandela Mattered..., *SMH* 7/12/2013 Hain, quoted Australian HC Lagos cable number 229, ‘Australian Sporting Competition with South Africa’, 11/5/1971, NAA A9421 206/17 pt 1. [SEP]