

THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH REBEL CRICKET TOUR TO SOUTH AFRICA, 1989/1990, AS A FACTOR IN THE DISMANTLING OF APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICAN SPORT¹

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s South African sport was involved in two separate international tours which had far-reaching effects for the boycott actions against apartheid in sport. The Springbok rugby tour to New Zealand in 1981 and the English cricket tour of South Africa during the 1989/90 season were in many ways very different, but have since been identified by many sports historians as the two most violent tours in the history of South African sport.

In 1981 the sports mad South African public was shocked with scenes of violence that marred the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand.² Although these scenes were broadcasted over the radio and television, it was a new experience for the South African rugby public. The tour of New Zealand was the first to be televised live to South Africa. It therefore came as a shock for the South African public to experience the nature and velocity of actions against South African sport at first hand.

Since 1969 South African sports tours abroad faced stern resistance, protest and demonstrations.³ After 1969 these actions became a habit, mainly due to the fact that the policy of apartheid of the National Party government was preventing South African sports people to participate at the same level.

The competitive nature of participants in South African sport got the upper hand and shortly after the 1981 tour the white sports administrators already started planning numerous sporting tours to South Africa. Various so-called rebel sport tours to South Africa took place during the 1980s. Both cricket and rugby enjoyed

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² R Palenski, **Graham Mourie, captain** (Auckland, 1982), p. 27.

³ The first rugby team of the University of the Free State, the Shimlas, was the first South African sports team to face demonstrators during their tour of Britain in 1968. F Van Rensburg, *Shimla* 25, p. 35.

tours to South Africa by international teams that were, after these tours, suspended by their governing bodies for undertaking such tours.

The isolation of South African sport internationally and the campaign against apartheid in South African sport can be seen as two of the contributing factors for these tours to take place. South African sport was starved of international competition and therefore huge amounts of money, usually in the form of sponsorships, were used to arrange rebel tours.

The predominantly white South African Cricket Union (SACU) and South African Rugby Board (SARB) arranged these tours in order to ensure that the "white elite" of sport in South Africa could participate internationally, regardless of the boycotts.⁴ The rebel tour groups visiting South Africa were usually paid large sums of money to play here, but on their return home they faced stiff sentences and most of them were banned from the specific sporting code for visiting South Africa.

The 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand made the front pages of most of the international newspapers⁵ mainly due to the negative impact it had on the New Zealand society and the violent nature of the resistance against the tour in both South Africa and New Zealand. Although this tour was not a rebel tour, the impact of it on both the New Zealand and South African societies, was instrumental in the development of the sports boycott against South Africa during the 1980s.

Very few of the rebel tours had any impact on South Africa in the sense of local resistance or boycott actions. It was only with the protest actions and demonstrations during the English rebel cricket tour to South Africa in 1989/90 that the white sporting public became aware of the power of the local actions against apartheid in sport.

At the time of the tour, under the captaincy of Mike Gatting, the political situation in South Africa was much different to that of 1981. Apartheid was busy crumbling under the weight of the boycott actions and the anti-apartheid structures in sport were putting in place a sport structure which could more successfully challenge the idea of rebel tours to South Africa.

THE FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL SPORTS COUNCIL (NSC)

In 1989, at the time of the planned Gatting tour, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was in the process of setting up a new sporting structure in South Africa

⁴ J Nauright, *Sport, cultures and identities in South Africa* (London, 1997), p. 28.

⁵ *Evening Post*, 2 October 1981.

with the idea of unifying sport in the country. The plan of creating a National Olympic and Sports Congress (NOSC) emanated from talks within the ANC ranks to ensure the normalisation of sport in South Africa.⁶ At first the idea was that the NSC would act as a support structure for the South African Council on Sport (SACOS), which was one of the leading role players in the struggle against apartheid in sport. The NSC later surpassed the SACOS and other similar organisations to become the major sporting structure in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The first test the NSC would face was setting in motion the actions against the Gating tour that took place only months after the formation of the NSC.

THE PLANNING OF THE GATING TOUR

The Gating tour was finalised during a visit of the executive board of the SACU to the Lords cricket ground, the traditional home of cricket in England, during the South African winter of 1989. While Geoff Dakin, the president of the SACU, was having cocktails with other members of the International Cricket Council (ICC) in one of the boardrooms at Lords, Ali Bacher, the director of the SACU, met with various English test cricket players behind the main stand at Lords. Bacher met with them to convince them to be part of the tour to South Africa.⁷ Bacher had drawn up the contracts of playing conditions and compensation beforehand and during this secret meeting the players signed these contracts.

In September 1989 the news of the planned tour was leaked to the South African media. Ngconde Balfour, who was imprisoned as political activist for the role he played in the struggle against apartheid in sport, flew to London two days after his release from Polsmoor prison to try to convince Mike Gating not to bring a touring side to South Africa.⁸ Krish Mackerdhuj, who succeeded Hassan Howa as the president of the non-white South African Cricket Board of Control (SACBOC), accompanied Balfour on his visit to London. They met with Gating and John Emburey, a senior member of the Gating team, for more than an hour, but they could not convince Gating and Emburey not to travel to South Africa.

Although Balfour and Mackerdhuj's mission in London failed, their visit to Lords personified a new image of non-white sport in South Africa. Both Balfour and Mackerdhuj were members of the African National Congress (ANC) and while Balfour was a political activist, Mackerdhuj had been involved in the administration of non-white sport in South Africa for many years.

⁶ The word "Olympic" was later taken out of the name and the word "congress" was replaced by the word "council". Interview with Mthobi Tyanzashe, 14 June 2002, Johannesburg.

⁷ Interview with Ewie Cronjé, Bloemfontein, 14 May 2002.

⁸ M Bose, *Sporting colours. Sport and politics in South Africa* (London, 1994), p. 204.

Many previous attempts by the SACOS to bring similar visits to Lords had failed in the past, mainly due to the fact that the National Party government refused to issue a passport to people such as Howa to travel abroad. Another difference between this visit and SACOS attempts in the past, was the fact that the NSC not only made use of sports administrators to negotiate a settlement in South African sport, but they clearly indicated that they would make use of political activists to reach their goals in sport.

With the establishment of the NSC in 1989 it was clearly stated that the main aim of this structure was to monitor the process of unifying sport in South Africa and to ensure the creation of non-racial structures in all sporting codes in the country.⁹ From within the NSC there were concerns that the planned tour to South Africa would jeopardise the process of unifying sport in South Africa.

CONFLICT DURING THE GATTING TOUR

In November 1989 the NSC met with the SACU to discuss the planned English rebel tour to South Africa. At this meeting the NSC was represented by Krish Naidoo, Harry Naidoo, Ngconde Balfour, Bill Jardine, Mthobi Tyamzashe and Muleleki George. The SACU delegation consisted of Geoff Dakin, Ali Bacher, Peter van der Merwe, Willie Basson, Julian Thornton, Ewie Cronjé, Don McCloud and Robbie Muzzell. The NSC made requests and threats for the tour not to take place. They warned that if the tour would go ahead, it would lead to chaos in the country.¹⁰ The NSC had planned various protest actions against the tour and threatened that they would bring them into action if the tour should go ahead.

The meeting was adjourned without any decision being reached. According to Bose some of the members of the SACU were not impressed by the NSC delegation. The SACU were used to the empty threats made by the SACOS in the past and believed that the NSC threats would also come to nothing. Bose describes Ewie Cronjé's point of view on the NSC during the meeting as follows: "I knew very little about the NSC. I don't think they have much of a standing. They made it out we should not carry on with the tour and that it would be a wrong thing. I thought these chaps were just threatening and they had no power."¹¹

⁹ Nauright, p. 154.

¹⁰ Interview with Ewie Cronjé.

¹¹ Bose, p. 206.

According to Cronjé the NSC could not convince the executive board of the SACU that the tour should be abandoned, therefore the SACU decided that it should continue.¹² After the meeting Tyamzashe, George and Muzzell were on the same flight back to East London. George made a remark about the SACU's decision and stated: "If you decided negatively, you will feel the wrath."¹³

With this statement George emphasized the plans of the NSC to demonstrate against the tour. The SACU thus clearly knew beforehand that the NSC was planning to disrupt the tour. Notwithstanding the warning from the NSC, the SACU was determined to continue with their plans for the tour.

Although no understanding was reached during the meeting, Tyamzashe was convinced that the NSC was on the right track. He motivated this by saying: "At this meeting we identified a guy called Willie Basson (an executive member of the SACU) who I thought saw the light very much earlier than the rest of his delegation. At lunchtime he walked past us and said: 'I think you guys are onto something, I think you are good'".¹⁴

Seen against the backdrop of the changing political situation in South Africa, the SACU took a big risk in deciding that the tour should take place. What happened during the next couple of weeks is a clear indication that the SACU underestimated the powers of the NSC, because the NSC orchestrated a well-drilled protest action against the tour.

The flight from London, bringing the English team to South Africa, was delayed due to a bomb scare. This was the start of a long and emotional attempt from the NSC to show the world that apartheid no longer had any place in South African sport.

The most important actions of the NSC and their allies during the tour can be summarised as follow:¹⁵

- On 23 January 1990 about 300 members of the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union held a protest march in front of the hotel in Sandton (Johannesburg) where the English touring team stayed.

¹² Interview with Ewie Cronjé.

¹³ Bose, p. 206.

¹⁴ Interview With Mthobi Tyamzashe.

¹⁵ C Cooper, *et al.*, *A race relations survey, 1989-90* (Johannesburg, 1990), p. 25.

- On 24 January 1990 the police intercepted two buses on the way to Alexandra with about 70 demonstrators, furnished with banners and posters they wanted to use in protest marches in front of the hotel in Sandton.
- More than 1 000 demonstrators sang and danced in front of the English team's hotel in Kimberley. They also presented Gating with a letter stating their views about the tour.
- During the first match of the tour on 26 January 1990 the police prevented more than two thousand young demonstrators from gaining access to the De Beers Country Club in Kimberley where the match would be played. During their march to the stadium, the demonstrators smashed the windows of cars and businesses in the city. More than thirty demonstrators were later questioned about these incidents. At the end of the day Bacher intervened and obtained permission from the Kimberley magistrate that a peaceful protest march could take place outside the stadium on 27 January 1990, the day on which the match would take place.
- On 30 January 1990 Bacher obtained permission from a Bloemfontein magistrate that a peaceful march could take place at the time of the next match of the tour in Bloemfontein. More than eight hundred demonstrators took part in the march outside Springbok Park, while just more than 150 spectators were inside watching the game!
- On the same day more than two thousand anti-tour demonstrators met at the Mangaung Community Hall. The police saw the gathering as illegal and dispersed the meeting with teargas; eighty people were arrested.
- About 1 000 demonstrators sang and danced outside Springbok Park on 31 January 1990 without any interference from the police.
- In Pietermaritzburg hundreds of demonstrators gathered in a protest action outside the Jan Smuts stadium on 3 February 1990, protesting against the rebel team's game on that field.
- Similar actions were prevented at the Wanderers stadium in Johannesburg on 8 February 1990 when more than two thousand school children from Alexandra were prohibited from taking buses to the stadium.

At the time of the first tour match in Kimberley Krish Naidoo arrived at the De Beers stadium and warned members of the executive board of the SACU that a group of demonstrators were approaching the stadium from the centre of town.

Bacher, on hearing this news, immediately left the stadium for the place where the police blockade was set up. On his arrival there Bacher held talks with the Police and then phoned the Minister of Sport¹⁶, Dr Gerrit Viljoen. Viljoen requested Bacher to phone the Minister of Police, Adrian Vlok in order to get authorisation for the protest march.¹⁷ Bacher was granted permission for a peaceful march to take place, and the police blockade was lifted, letting the demonstrators through.

Bacher's actions in this situation were very interesting, because although the SACU had arranged the rebel tour, Bacher as director of the SACU, obtained permission for the demonstrations against the tour to take place in Kimberley. In this regard Cronjé emphasises that Bacher received various death threats during the tour and was put under a great deal of pressure by the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) and members of the ANC recently being freed from jail,¹⁸ to cancel the tour.¹⁹ This emphasises the fact that the SACU was continuously being put under extreme pressure by the resistance groupings to call off the tour.

Bose differs in opinion from the statement made by Cronjé. According to Bose Bacher took the wind out of the sails of the NSC. Tyamzashe was furious about Bacher's "unlawful" actions in obtaining permission for the NSC to continue with their protest march.²⁰ He described his anger in saying: "He (Bacher) took the wind out of our sails, because now we could not get angry about being refused the right to demonstrate."²¹

The peaceful march during the match in Kimberley introduced a new era in the struggle against apartheid in South African sport. Up to the Gatting tour South Africa had never experienced actions like these by demonstrators. Bose describes the Gatting tour as the most violent sport tour ever in South Africa.²² Although the demonstrations during the 1981 rugby tour to New Zealand were closely followed on television, this was the first time that demonstrations of such magnitude were experienced in South Africa. Bacher's actions that led to the approval of demonstrations during the tour, introduced a new sporting and political phenomenon in South Africa - that of lawful demonstrations and protest actions.

¹⁶ Due to the fact that the government wanted sport to develop autonomously during the 1980s, sport had no separate ministerial portfolio in cabinet, but it was part of another portfolio, in this instance that of Education. P.G.J. Koornhof Private Collection, PV 476, PS 4/2/41.

¹⁷ Bose, p. 209.

¹⁸ Various ANC members, who were classified as security prisoners, were released during the later part of the 1980s as part of the National Party's policy of change and reconciliation. A Ries, and E Dommissie, *Leierstryd* (Cape Town, 1990), p. 43.

¹⁹ Interview with Ewie Cronjé.

²⁰ Bose, p. 209.

²¹ Interview with Mthobi Tyamzashe.

²² Bose, p. 208.

In Bloemfontein, during the second match of the tour against the South African Universities, the demonstrators protested at the northern side of Springbok Park, but to no avail, so they moved to the southern side of the stadium to continue their protest action behind the main pavilion.

The British media members that attended the match were not really sports journalists, but rather followed the tour to report on the political situation in South Africa.²³ At the time of the demonstrations behind the main pavilion, the members of British media were in the roof garden on the roof of the main pavilion. From there they took photos of the singing and dancing demonstrators. During the course of the match Gattling also spent some time in the roof garden, where the British journalists interviewed him about the tour. Gattling was cautious not to be dragged into a political debate about the tour, but tried to answer all the questions on the state of cricket in South Africa and the well-being of the English touring team in South Africa.²⁴ The workers at Springbok Park and the Free State Cricket Union provided the demonstrators with water throughout the match, because of the intense heat. This was widely applauded by the British media as an act of support to the demonstrators.

After the matches in Bloemfontein and Pietermaritzburg, where demonstrations took place on a very large scale,²⁵ the first five-day test took place at the Wanderers in Johannesburg. This test was played in abnormal conditions with police helicopters and Caspir vehicles circling the field to protect the players and preventing the demonstrators from storming the playing-field.²⁶

The test was over in three days, mostly due to a very lively pitch. It ended on the Saturday afternoon and on the Sunday morning most of the SACU executive members who stayed outside Johannesburg took flights back to their respective homes. On the Sunday evening they were informed that they had to be back in Johannesburg for an urgent SACU meeting on the Monday morning.²⁷

²³ Interview with Ewie Cronjé.

²⁴ Interview with Mthobi Tyamzashe.

²⁵ More than ten thousand people formed part of the demonstrations against the tour during matches in these two cities. Bose, p. 210.

²⁶ Interview with Ewie Cronjé.

²⁷ Ibid.

At this meeting Bacher told the executive members of the SACU that an influential Afrikaner businessman had phoned him from London and had asked him to stop the tour. In return Bacher had been promised that, if the tour was to be stopped, South African cricket would be back on the international scene within two years.²⁸ Cronjé was convinced that Bacher was calling a bluff and that he had never received such a phone call. Tyamzashe, on the other hand, confirmed that Bacher had spoken to somebody in London, but it was not a wealthy Afrikaner as Bacher had indicated. Bacher had spoken to members of the ANC in London, who had pressurised him into stopping the tour.

The fact that South African cricket could be back in the international arena within the next two years convinced the SACU to cancel most of the remaining matches of the tour. Only two one-day tests, in Johannesburg and Bloemfontein, as well as the match against South Africa A in Pietermaritzburg would still go ahead. Without consulting the other executive members of the SACU, Bacher announced that the second leg of the tour, scheduled for the 1990/1991 season, would not take place.²⁹ Cronjé and Tyamzashe differ in opinion concerning the cancellation of the second leg of the tour.

According to Cronjé Bacher made the public announcement about the cancellation of the tour, scheduled to take place during the 1990/91 season. Tyamzashe says that the NSC saw an opportunity for political gain in the situation. Before making the announcement public, Bacher had told the executive members of the NSC that the second leg of the tour would be cancelled. Krish Naidoo then made a public announcement in this regard, forcing Bacher to confirm the cancellation of the second leg of the tour.

On 14 February 1990 Bacher announced that the Gating tour would be shortened in support of the dramatic political changes that had been announced by President FW de Klerk on 2 February 1990. Bacher defended his announcement by saying that the SACU and the NSC had come to an agreement regarding the remainder of the tour. The decision to shorten the tour was a moral victory for the NSC. Although only in existence for a couple of months, the NSC had forced cricket, one of the strong establishment sporting codes, to do away with rebel tours. The NSC made good use of the changing political climate in South Africa at that stage. The speech made by FW de Klerk on 2 February 1990 basically signalled the end of apartheid, and the decision to shorten the tour was made bearing this in mind.

²⁸**Ibid.**²⁹

Interview with Mthobi Tyamzashe.

According to the agreement between the NSC and the SACU, various matches, including test matches, would be cancelled. In return the NSC promised that no more demonstrations and protest actions would take place at the remaining couple of matches.³⁰ For Bacher the remainder of the tour was of little value, because with the political changes taking place in South Africa, rebel tours were no longer needed to ensure international participation in sport.³¹ The outcome of the tour showed that the newly formed NSC would not take any nonsense in the normalisation of sport in South Africa. If the momentum with which the political changes had been announced and accepted could be maintained, South African sport could break free from sports isolation in the very near future.

IN CONCLUSION

The events during the Gatting tour signalled the end of a frustrating era in South African sport. Started by the unpleasant sight of demonstrations during the 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand, South African sport entered the 1980s as an abandoned and rejected sporting country. Although various attempts were made to ensure international participation for South African sport, the international boycott action grew stronger as the decade progressed.

This rejection frustrated South African sport, because various sporting codes made serious attempts to normalise their codes to ensure international competition. Procter found it difficult to believe that, after all the changes that had taken place in South African cricket, the ICC still would not reconsider the country's readmission to the international governing body.³²

On the other hand organisations such as SACOS, with their policy of "no normal sport in an abnormal society", was determined to ensure that the sport boycott would continue until apartheid was abolished in every form. They were willing to sacrifice international participation to ensure equal rights for all South Africans, regardless of the colour of their skin.

The timing of the Gatting rebel tour could not have been worse, because the changing political situation in South Africa clearly indicated that there was no longer any place for such tours. The formation of the NSC and the speech of FW de Klerk a few months later, formed a deadly combination in stopping the tour in its tracks. The demonstrations during the tour came as a shock to the sporting public,

³⁰ *The Citizen*, 14 February 1990

³¹ *The Star*, 14 February 1990.

³² M Procter, *South Africa. The years in isolation and the return to international cricket* (Durban, 1994), p. 135.

and re-awakened the bad memories of the New Zealand tour in 1981. For the South African cricket authorities though it was a total different experience.

Bacher had realised before the tour that this would be "the tour to end all tours".³³ Given the circumstances in which the tour took place, it was clear that time had caught up with apartheid as government policy. It was also clear that the impact of the changing political situation in the country would change the face of South African sport for ever.

The meeting between the NSC and the SACU at the time of the Gatting tour can be seen as a historic occasion, because it paved the way for further discussions between the two groups and other stakeholders in South African cricket. This in turn led to the merging of the black and white cricket unions in South Africa and the establishment of the non-racial United Cricket Board of Control (UCBSA).³⁴

South African cricket became one of the leading sports among the establishment codes to unify and work towards total integration after the fiasco of the Gatting tour. Setting up a strong relationship with the NSC, which became the pivotal structure in South African sport, cricket set the example for other sporting codes in the country on the way to get rid of the shackles of isolation and apartheid in sport.

³³ Bose, p. 212.

³⁴ F Cleary, *The Jimmy Cook story* (London, 1993), p. 150.