

Sport: The Continuation of Politics by Other Means¹



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By the time this article goes to print, the World Cup in South Africa will have come to an end, the vuvuzelas stored away and the throngs of international supporters returned home. The general consensus is that South Africa organised and hosted one of the most successful World Cup tournaments ever. FIFA estimates a surplus of R15 billion for its coffers². This, in spite of the global financial crisis, the negative international sentiment espoused from some corners of the world and the barrage of negative media reports.

Politics and sport inhabit a very special place in the South African psyche. Sport was used masterfully by Nelson Mandela as a political tool, to bring white South Africans into the fold after the first democratic elections in 1994. In the same way Mandela used sport to bring a nation together, so the Anti-apartheid movement had successfully worked towards getting South Africa banned from participating in international sporting competition for close on two decades, this, along with the crippling economic sanctions and the disinvestment drive made South Africa's role in international relations a difficult one.

In 2000 Mandela had this to say about the power of sport:

"Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else can. Sport can awaken hope where previously there was only despair³".

Since South Africa's readmission to international sporting competition and the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has hosted numerous sporting events – including the Rugby World Cup (1995), the Africa Cup of Nations (1996), the Cricket World Cup (2003), the ICC Champions trophy (2009), the Indian Premier League Cricket (2009), and the Confederations Cup (2009). In 2004, underpinned by a major financial guarantee from government, South Africa was awarded the hosting rights of the FIFA Soccer World Cup. Clearly politics and sport overlap in significant ways, and even more so in the age of globalisation.

The World Cup helped South Africa to further extend its reach and influence onto the global playing field that is international relations. The hosting of such an event is a major undertaking and one which requires all stakeholders to sing from the same hymn sheet. In the lead up to the grand opening, South Africa was doing battle in the international arena, constantly having to defend its claim to host such an international event. This

signals a certain degree of continuity with the perceptions held by the international community as to the ability of developing countries to host such mega events.

The World Cup was a welcome respite for many, if not most, South Africans from the months of political headaches which engulf our everyday lives. If the World Cup team and everybody involved in the successful planning, organisation, management and hosting of the event can get such a monumental task right, then why is South Africa still only able to muddle from one semi-disaster to another, both domestically and internationally? Commentators have argued that South Africa lacks a coherent foreign policy, is devoid of a growth policy which will create jobs for the millions of unemployed, is failing to provide quality healthcare and education, has an overpaid and unproductive public sector and is still determined to place ideology and narrow political and sectoral interests above open, transparent, accountable and responsive government. While this may be the case, some may ask, what does all of this have to do with sport and in particular the World Cup?

Sport and Globalisation

For one, international sport can and should be viewed as another pillar of a country's foreign policy arsenal⁴. The globalisation of sport has opened up a whole new arena of international relations, where power, resources and influence play just as an important a role as they do in the multilateral international political system. Some have argued that 'the changing characteristics of sport will reflect something of the general developments in international relations'⁵. There is a certain degree of truth in this statement given the proliferation of International institutions after the Second World War. The objective of these institutions was to setup and enforce an international framework of cooperation between nation-states, and in particular, to frame the tension between the United States and USSR in a system regulated by key international institutions and treaties. The spread and influence of international sporting bodies is merely an extension of this mandate. These sports institutions help to promote the same underlying message as their political and economic counterparts in the United Nations and World Bank, albeit through the use of sport as a driving force for economic development and cooperation between states.

The relevance of this to the sporting world is evident in the growth and expansion, on a global scale, of sport in general and certain sporting codes in particular. The global federations – tasked with the control and supervision

of their respective codes – which now exist include the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) and the International Rugby Board (IRB). These institutions are global in reach, multicultural in nature, supranational in organisation and effective political players inasmuch as they command the attention of political elites and ruling governments who seek to use the hosting of such events for their own political purposes.

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The influence that FIFA or the IOC is able to wield as an international NGO is impressive. Especially, when one considers the costs associated with hosting the Olympics or the Soccer World Cup and the increasing demand by governments, the world over, to have their nations act as hosts. Due to the influence of these organisations it is clear that international sport and international relations intertwine to become yet another key area of engagement within the international system. The institutions which make up the international political economy, essentially, have a common message or set of values inherent in their outlook. The international sporting institutions are no different. Sport is the means by which continued cooperation and economic development of a 'special type' is transmitted across the globe. Sport becomes a vehicle for diplomacy, ideology, nation building, access into the international arena and commercial gain⁶.

The impact of globalisation on the world of sports has moved it up the domestic and international political agendas. Arguably, this creates conditions whereby national sports organisations come to play an increasingly active role in policy making, albeit in certain limited contexts⁷. Huntington argues that cultural distinctions are the dominant element of differentiation in a post Cold-War era. His 'civilisational paradigm' has distinct implications for international sport if one examines the voting patterns – all followed civilisational lines – which awarded the 2000 Olympics to Sydney instead of Beijing. This line of argument is presented in the context

of the aftermath of the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. China had been successful, through a co-ordination of non-western interests, in blocking a number of decisions on human rights which were contrary to its own interests. The Sydney decision is generally presented as the ‘the revenge of the West’⁸. International sport becomes another means by which power is exercised in the international political economy.

International sport, and the fans who travel the globe in support, bring into sharp focus notions of nationalism as expressed through support for a national team. ‘(S)porting events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup constitute, in a visible and regular manner, the only time nation-states can rally in times of peace’⁹. These events allow competing nations to confront one another without resorting to violence – World Cups instead of World Wars¹⁰!

Ping Pong Diplomacy

Much of the literature on the relationship between sports and politics concerns itself with the ways in which nation-states seek to promote themselves, or simply carry out their business, using sport as the most widely and highly visible means available to them¹¹. Nation-states invest an incredible amount of time, energy and resources into acquiring the rights to host such events. The aim of hosting is to self-promote the country and in particular the political elite¹², who put themselves across as the ones responsible for delivering an event. This is no more evident than the 1936 spectacle of the Olympic Games in Berlin, under the iron grip of the Nazis. Hitler attempted to use the Games to promote his narrow political ideology through the use of the games as one of many propaganda tools highlighting the invincibility of the Third Reich. Jesse Owens, the black American athlete, somewhat laid waste to that idea. Moreover, in the 1960s, American attempts to improve relations with the Peoples’ Republic of China were carried out by establishing contact through the use of table tennis players as envoys. This practice became known as ping pong diplomacy¹³.

South Africa was awarded the right to host the FIFA World Cup back in 2004. In order to win such a bid there is a fair amount of negotiating and lobbying which plays itself out behind closed doors. The government has to be intricately involved in the proceedings because they (in effect) must provide the financial guarantee that funding will be available, and that effective systems will be in place which deliver the successful completion of projects. This is a major undertaking for a country which suffers close to 40 percent unemployment, and is one

of the most unequal country’s in the world. Estimates of government expenditure have been put at between R30bn – R40bn, which was largely spent on improving infrastructure and capacity. However, studies carried out to determine the precise economic spill-over effects for host countries agree that these benefits are negligible, and often over emphasised and sensationalised. Promoters of the benefits of these events often rely on studies which do not use scientific methodology, and simply rely on Keynesian multipliers¹⁴.

The hosting of the World Cup in South Africa certainly had its positives. It was the first World Cup ever to be hosted on the African continent. In view of changing global power relations, this indicates a step forward. Africa, for too long, has been on the periphery of both the global political scene and the global economy.

Whether the money was well spent or not is another debate. The hosting of the World Cup in South Africa certainly had its positives. It was the first World Cup ever to be hosted on the African continent. In view of changing global power relations, this indicates a step forward. Africa, for too long, has been on the periphery of both the global political scene and the global economy. Just as China used the Olympics in 2008 to announce its re-emergence as a powerful international political and economic player on the world stage, so too has South Africa attempted to use the first World Cup on African soil to announce to the world that Africa, and in particular South Africa, are repositioning themselves to become more significant contributors to, and players in, the great game of international relations. Whether African leaders and their South African counterparts are up to the task remains to be seen. There is still a mountain of challenges which Africa, as a continent, and South Africa in particular, need to overcome, in order to change international perceptions about its long term sustainability.

International sport has the ability to bring people together from all corners of the globe; it is one of the best examples of the free movement of labour – as players and administrators are constantly on the move to new clubs or to represent their countries in different international tournaments – and the most internationally focused in

outlook. However, the deep inequalities experienced by developing countries, with regards to their terms of trade and the exacerbation of dependency-forming relationships, are also evident in the movement of sports people from the developing nations to the wealthier developed nations' leagues. Qatar, an oil-rich Middle Eastern country, has effectively bought its national sports team. African football players continue to seek employment in the rich European leagues and the lion's share of Argentina's National Rugby team ply their trade in the French and English rugby leagues. This obviously has significant adverse effects on the domestic leagues of those countries. The increasing turnover and the growing international mobility of athletes continue to be felt and annually destabilises the manpower of sports teams¹⁵. A number of South African clubs raised their asking prices in order to deter foreign clubs from poaching their best Bafana Bafana stars. The problems experienced in many developing countries have to do with the underdevelopment of sports and physical activities: these can be exacerbated by the loss of human capital to 'greener pastures'.

South Africa and the World Cup

In South Africa's case, due to the World Cup, a massive investment in sporting and related infrastructure took place in order to meet FIFA requirements. This certainly bodes well for South Africa's sports men and women, if these investments are utilised properly and in accordance with a development programme aimed at making South Africa a regional contender, and in time a global competitor.

At the international level, South Africa scored. These types of mega events provide the host nation with an unprecedented level of international publicity and a wealth of marketing opportunities in parts of the world otherwise untapped. These events also bring into sharp focus the nexus between sport and politics. The opening ceremony of the World Cup provides the perfect platform

for the host nation to invite and host visiting heads of state and pre-eminent leaders, allowing important issues to be raised in less formal surroundings.

President Zuma hosted a number of foreign dignitaries, including members of the various European royal families and heads of state from many of South Africa's strategic trading partners. Occasions such as these allow the South African government to strengthen its ties to its traditional trading and strategic partners. President Zuma hosted senior government officials, including heads of state, from Germany, the United States, and Brazil. It also affords government the opportunity to cultivate new relationships and strengthen existing ones. These are important relationships to foster and are aimed at giving life to South Africa's foreign policy and increasing its presence and influence on the international stage.

Conclusion

The proliferation of international institutions in the wake of the Second World War is coupled with the increasingly powerful role sports institutions have come to play in a globalised world. Along with the key international relations framework, which seeks to control and regulate interaction between nation-states so as to promote mutual cooperation on a number of global issues, these sporting bodies work to promote the same ideals through the use of sport. These institutions play an integral role in the conveyance of key human rights messages, in line with Western notions of cooperation and competition. The events these institutions hold highlight the nexus between big business, government and sport.

South Africa scored a major victory in the ongoing game of international relations by winning the right to host such an event. The South African government was under siege in the lead up to the opening match due to continuities in the way Africa is perceived internationally. The successful hosting of the event has done much to chip away at those prejudices, but much more remains to be done.

NOTES

- 1 A reworking of von Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is the continuation of politics by other means".
- 2 Player and Referee: Conflicting Interests and the 2010 FIFA World Cup, Institute of Security Studies, 2010
- 3 Nelson Mandela, Laureus Sports Awards Ceremony: 2000
- 4 Beacon, A. "Sport in International Relations: A Case for Cross-Disciplinary Investigation", *The Sports Historian*, 20, 2, 2000, 1.
- 5 *Ibid*, 1
- 6 *Ibid*, 4
- 7 *Ibid*, 7

- 8 *Ibid*, 11
- 9 Boniface, P., *Football as a Factor (and a Reflection) of International Politics*, 2002, 7.
- 10 *Ibid*
- 11 Bairner, A., *Sport, Nationalism and Globalisation: Relevance, Impact, Consequences*, 2008, 45.
- 12 *Ibid*
- 13 *Ibid*
- 14 Andreff, W. *Globalisation and the Sports Economy*, 2008, 15.
- 15 *Ibid*, 21