Sport at the Center of Power: Rugby in South Africa During Apartheid

John Nauright
The University of Queensland

David Black
Dalhousie University

For white South Africans generally, sport is much more than mere escapism or an opportunity to demonstrate individual or team excellence. It is more than a religion, it is a total strategy against a total onslaught; it is the guardian of our national character; the barometer of our despair or hope.


There are few national societies in which the cultural centrality of sport has been more readily apparent than South Africa. Rugby, in particular, has held a position of prominence and symbolic importance for the white South Africans who dominated society during the development and entrenchment of modern sporting structures. Although sport has been tied to power in South Africa, such links are not unique. Where apartheid South Africa varied from other Western countries in the post-World War II era was in attaching sociocultural meanings to sport that remained linked to official racist ideologies and policies. Indeed, the importance of sport as a dominant popular cultural practice is a worldwide phenomenon, despite interesting variations in intensity and character. More elusive are substantial conclusions regarding the political roles and significance of dominant sporting practices, both within and across particular communities.

Along with the other British Empire settler societies of the Southern Hemisphere, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, white South Africa
has been frequently described as “sports mad.” The extent and variety of sports participation and enthusiasm run high, particularly among males, but no sport comes near to rivaling rugby for white as well as some black South Africans. Rugby has developed in the twentieth century as the sport most closely associated with white, and more specifically Afrikaner, nationalism and power. It is not that other sports were unimportant in South African sporting politics; rather, it is the way they related to and interacted with rugby that was historically significant. The particular primacy that the Afrikaner elite attached to rugby is reflected in the fact that their efforts to control rugby administration long predated those in other sporting codes, and remained most successful in the former. Indeed, it was largely the continuing pervasiveness of Afrikaner influence in rugby leadership, as well as its close identification with Afrikanerdom, that so bedeviled its adaptation to the new norms and expectations forming in post-1990 South Africa, notwithstanding the genuine, though short-lived, outpouring of transracial national identity surrounding South Africa’s 1995 Rugby World Cup victory.

The role of rugby in apartheid South Africa is one of the most striking cases of the way that specific sports can have central roles in the power structures of society. Rugby union was important as an activity in the English-speaking private schools in South Africa and as a club game in most towns, among most “Coloured” (i.e., mixed race) men, and for Africans on mission stations in the Eastern Cape region. Beyond this, though, rugby developed into the Afrikaner game by the beginning of the apartheid era in 1948. As a result, rugby became highly political, both in defending white culture from attack and in international attempts to wrest concessions or eliminate the apartheid order. Recognition of the salience and sensitivity of sport during the apartheid period (1948–90) energized the international sport boycott movement, especially from the mid-1960s, and prompted widespread commentary from activists and scholars. Partly due to mounting external pressure, sport in general, and rugby in particular, received increasing attention at the highest reaches of political power in apartheid South Africa, engaging the attention of the closely interlinked Broederbond and the National Party government. What has received less attention, however, is the important distinctions between the cultural and political significance of different sporting codes and practices. It is impossible to understand either the impact of the sport boycott or the policy responses of South Africa’s power elite without recognizing these distinctions and the particular role of rugby.

Because of its extraordinary cultural and symbolic significance for Afrikaners, rugby played a unique role in the calculations of the political elite concentrated in the Broederbond, a secret society of Afrikaner men founded in 1918, and the National Party (NP). A high level of interpenetration existed between the leadership of rugby and these organizations, who also made an active effort to gain control of the sport. As external and internal pressure on South African sport grew during the 1960s and into