'Teach the Native to Play': Social Control and Organized Black Sport on the Witwatersrand, 1920–1939

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Abstract: The present analysis constitutes an historical study in the geography of sport. Against a backcloth of burgeoning Black urbanization and of rising levels of unemployment, crime and political militancy, a concerted effort was initiated on the Witwatersrand to promote the growth of sport as a lever of social control. The actors and actions involved in the organization of Black sport on the Witwatersrand between 1920 and 1939 constitute the focus of discussion. The case illustrates that the geographical spread of sport is not merely the result of 'spontaneous diffusion' but may be the outcome of an organized diffusion with the explicit objective of social control.

The Geography of Sport

The development of geographical research on issues surrounding sport is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, the first geographical forays into the sports arena occurred only at the close of the 1960s (Rimmer, Johnston 1967; Rooney 1969). Sport was discovered as an area ripe with spatial variation and readily amenable to the deployment of the discipline’s new arsenal of quantitative techniques. Pioneer sports research in the USA investigated, *inter alia*, areal variations in the production and consumption of American football players (Rooney 1969; 1974), the ‘fan regions’ of major league sports teams (Rooney 1975) and even the geographical origins of stock car race drivers (Pillsbury 1974). The appearance of two volumes by Rooney (1975; 1980) examining the geography of baseball, basketball and American football and the recruitment of sports professionals confirmed the establishment of sport as a distinctive focus for geographical endeavour. Moreover, it was asserted that research in the geography of sport could “provide answers of prescriptive value. For example, where and how should amateur sport be expanded? How will sports be received in different areas?... How can the geographic organisation of sport be altered at high school, collegiate and professional level to provide equal opportunity for participants and spectators alike?” (Rooney 1975, p. 113).

Beyond the USA, the most notable geographical investigations on sport have flowed from the prolific writings by Bale on aspects of sport in the Western European context generally and the United Kingdom in particular. Essentially, the thrust of much of Bale’s early research closely parallels trends in the American literature, with investigations of the spatial diffusion and adoption of professionalism in soccer (Bale 1978; 1980a) and cricket (Bale 1981a), the geography of world-class athletics (Bale 1979a; 1979b) and the regional origins of professional soccer players (Bale 1983). The horizon of sports research has widened, however, to encompass the soccer ground as a noxious locational facility (Bale 1980b), the effects of the feminist movement on the spread of women’s soccer (Bale 1980c) and the role of sports in geographical education (Bale 1981b). In addition, fresh methodological ground was broken with the incorporation of behavioural perspectives into an exploration of ‘sports image regions’ (Bale 1984). Notwithstanding these innovations in geographical sports research, recent research publications (Bale 1982; Bale, Jenkins 1983; Connell 1985) affirm the primary commitment of geographers of sport to quantitative description and a preoccupation with surficial patterns rather than processes. Dissatisfaction with the current state of sports research by geographers prompted Bale to aver that “although interesting in its descriptiveness, (the geography of sport) has failed to follow philosophical
trends in geography, notably of a behavioural and structural perspective" (Bale, personal communication).

In a critique of geographical studies of leisure, Kirby underlines the fact that aspects of "leisure cannot be fully addressed without a consideration of the role of the State" (Kirby 1985, p. 68). It has been demonstrated, for example, that sport and the State are conjoined in the political sphere with international sporting prowess serving as an advertisement for certain political ideologies (Hoberman 1984). More contentious is the role of both the central and local State in the provision of recreational facilities as an element of social control (Kirby 1985). Although the concept of social control has engendered considerable criticism and debate amongst the community of social historians (Stedman Jones 1977; Yeo 1981), it remains a useful tool for interpreting the historical evolution of sports activities especially in the context of colonial societies. Illustratively, in his seminal study of social life in the mine compounds of colonial Zimbabwe, van Onselen (1976) chronicles the use of organized sport, alongside alcohol, prostitution and religion, as a vehicle of social control over the lives of Black workers.

In the present analysis it will be argued that the development of organized Black sport on the Witwatersrand during the 1930s was inseparable from the object of urban social control. Accordingly, this study represents a contribution to the little cultivated field of the geography of sport in South Africa. Surprisingly, despite the enormous controversies surrounding apartheid sport and the country's participation in international sporting events (Lapchick 1975; Archer, Bouillon 1982), the extant literature contains only one study, viz., an investigation of the regional origins of rugby players (Marais 1979). The historical growth of organized Black sport in South Africa's leading metropolitan centre contributes also an additional piece to the country's relatively undeveloped historical geography (Christopher 1984), more especially with regard to the world of South Africa's common people, the world of the Black peasant, proletarian, domestic servant or casual poor (Crush, Rogerson 1983). Our argument is structured in three major sections of analysis. First, the motives underpinning the organization of Black sport on the Witwatersrand are explored in the context of rapid urbanization. In the second section the actors and actions taken to promote Black sport are reviewed with particular reference to the growth of soccer. Finally, the role of sport as an agent of urban social control in South Africa is addressed.

Black Urbanization — Origins, Growth, Conditions

Although an urban tradition of considerable magnitude existed among the indigenous populations of West Africa, the urban areas of South Africa were largely the product of capitalist penetration and associated White settler-colonial initiatives (Davenport 1969; Fair, Browett 1979). During the nineteenth century the seeds were sown for the growth of an urbanized Black community in South Africa by the destruction of African peasantries and the associated unleashing of forces of proletarianization (Bundy 1979; Crush 1984). With the establishment of a migratory labour system and the progressive decline of the economies of the rural 'reserves', the first steps were taken "towards the later detribalized and landless urban proletariat of South African industrial towns" (de Kiewiet 1941, p. 91).

The majority of the earliest Black townsfolk of South Africa were circulating labour migrants who returned to their rural domicile after a period of temporary work in urban areas. Capitalist penetration and the opening of mines and early industries avaricious for cheap labour strengthened the permanency of Black urban settlement. The trek to South Africa's growing towns, most importantly to the gold-mining settlement of the Witwatersrand, was further encouraged by the deterioration and subsequent collapse of Black peasant economies (Crush 1984). While official policy held to the view that Blacks were not permanently urbanized, as early as the 1900s there existed in virtually every urban area, communities of Blacks who regarded themselves as 'townsmen' and no longer looked upon the countryside as 'home'. Notwithstanding the initiation of the notorious 'influx control' regulations designed to impede permanent Black settlement in 'White' South Africa, the pace of Black urbanization accelerated rapidly between 1900 and 1930. In spatial terms, the growth of this urban Black population was markedly uneven; of the 1.1 million urban Blacks recorded in the 1936 census, half were concentrated on the Witwatersrand.

By the early 1930s it was evident that there was a growing community of structurally unemployed Blacks living around the Witwatersrand. The depression years were associated with reports of "widespread worklessness among Natives" especially in the Johannesburg area (Report of the South African Institute of Race Relations 'Distress and Unemployment among Natives' 1932, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Historical Papers AD843/B71.1). At a conference of Witwatersrand municipal authorities in 1935 it was declared that "the chief problem with which local authorities have to contend is the influx of unemployed natives" (Rand Daily Mail 5/2/1935). And, two years later a police census revealed a total of almost 100,000 unemployed Blacks "having no visible subsistence" (Rand Daily Mail 21/1/1937). Behind this burgeoning mass of unemployed Blacks on the Witwatersrand was the outworkings of proletarianization processes in rural areas and the operations of state policies which encouraged the employment of 'civilized poor Whites' at the expense of 'uncivilized' (Black) labour (Rheinallt Jones 1935; van der Horst 1935). The latter