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Sports as Politics: The Battle of Båstad and ‘Stop the 70s Tour’

Introduction: student activism and sports as politics

In the late 1960s, a new generation of activists entered the anti-apartheid movement, extending its action repertoire. In this phase, the solidarity movement moved from opinion making by conventional means to extra-parliamentary actions of civil disobedience as the new generation introduced themselves through campaigns against sports events in which South Africa was involved.1 When the South African cricket team toured in Britain in 1965, the AAM organized demonstrations outside every ground where a game was being played. Action against sports in Britain did however enter a new level after the cancellation of the British cricket tour in 1968, which was caused by the South African government’s refusal to accept that the British team included the coloured Basil D’Oliveira. It culminated with the Stop the 70s Tour, which caused a huge debate on the anti-apartheid movement and about the relations between apartheid politics and sport in the British press.

Before we go into this debate we will take a look at the protests that stopped the tennis game between Sweden and Rhodesia in Båstad in May 1968. At the time, it was the largest and definitely most successful social movement direct action in Sweden during the post-war era. Regarded as sensational by the Swedish media, this was as close as the Swedish student movement would get to what happened in Paris the same month or in Chicago during autumn in the turbulent protest year of 1968. If the protest was not related directly to South Africa, it is still relevant here for two reasons. First, the organizers were the same people that formed the core of solidarity activism related to South Africa, and second, because the fact that the attention that the events gained meant that new activists were recruited to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.2
May 1968: the battle in Båstad

Båstad is a small town on the West Coast of Sweden, south of Göteborg. In addition to it being a spot for summer tourism, it is known for its tennis tournament, sometimes called ‘the Wimbledon of the Nordic countries’. When Sweden was to meet Rhodesia in Davis Cup in 1968, between 3 and 5 of May, Båstad was not the obvious choice as the place for the game because the summer season had not begun. But since protests against the game were expected, the Swedish National Tennis Association (NTA) decided to go for Båstad after advice from the Swedish National Police Commissioner.3 A matter of relevance is that the non-socialist coalition was supported by an overwhelming majority of the Båstad constituency and that the city is known as a place of gathering for the uppermost Swedish economic elite. Further, of those who had a daily morning paper in Båstad, 73 per cent subscribed to the extremist right wing Nordvästra Skånes tidningar (mentioned in Chapter 5 for its defence of the apartheid regime after the Sharpeville shootings).4

However, Båstad is also close to the university town of Lund, at the time known for its radical student activism. Among the many left wing groups that had its base in Lund at the time was one of the most active of the Swedish South Africa Committees, who published the nationally distributed information bulletin Syd- och Sydväst-Afrika. Of those who participated in a survey made after the demonstrations in Båstad, nearly 50 per cent were active in the South Africa Committees (while two thirds were active in FNL, the leading Vietnam solidarity organization).5

The month before the game, a debate broke out in the Swedish media about whether the NTA was right in participating in a game against Rhodesia, a country that oppressed its black population, just like South Africa, who because of this was no longer allowed to participate in the Olympic Games. NTA defended its position to invite Rhodesia by making a distinction between Rhodesia and South Africa. The coach of the team Mats Hasselquist argued in Kvällsposten that ‘when people speak about apartheid policy in Rhodesia, it is wrong. Such policy is prohibited in Rhodesia!’6

The press had their eyes on the actors that played the key roles in the build up of the protest drama that was expected to occur in Båstad. On 25 April, in a first page article in Aftonbladet (AB) titled ‘Students Stop the Rhodesia-Game’, it was reported that a coalition of left students in a meeting in Lund had decided to go for action against the game. The article quoted representatives from the group stating that ‘we will use all means except hand grenades’. Further, it was reported in several papers