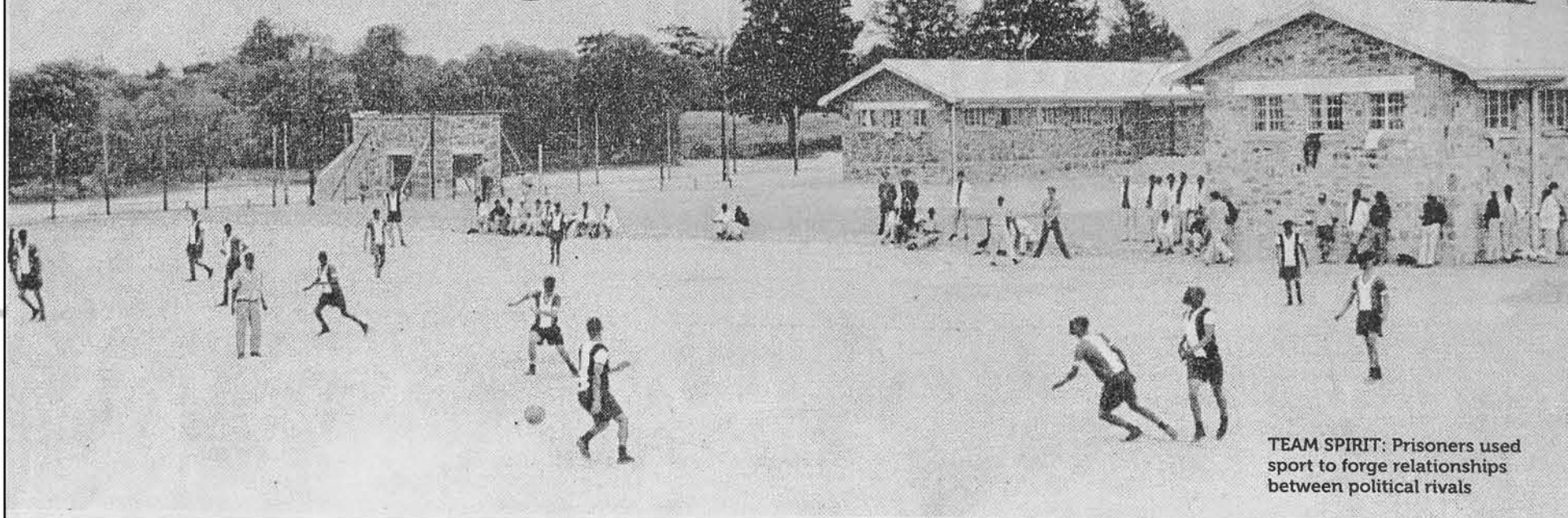


ISLAND RULES



TEAM SPIRIT: Prisoners used sport to forge relationships between political rivals

When Nelson Mandela united black and white during the 1995 Rugby World Cup, he was implementing lessons learnt on Robben Island. By *Liz McGregor*

BROWSE through the Mayibuye Robben Island archives long enough and you will come across the constitution of the IRB — not the International Rugby Board, custodian of global rugby, but the Island Rugby Board. It is a poignant document — 20 pages on rough, lined paper — covered schoolbook-style in brown paper and plastic. Dated January 1972 and neatly hand-written in ballpoint, it is signed off by the late Steve Tshwete, the first IRB president.

Subsequent trials brought in successive waves of new prisoners, many of them, like current COPE leader Mosisua “Terror” Lekota, energetic young men who had suddenly found their hectic, driven lives brought to a full stop.

Flung together were the leaders of such disparate parties as the Pan African Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement, the Azanian People’s Organisation (Azapo), the Liberal Party, the Trotskyite Non-European Unity Movement, the South African Communist Party, the South West African People’s Organisation, and the ANC.

Lekota explains how fraught this enforced proximity was. “Not only was there tension between white warders and black prisoners but also profound tensions between the different liberation organisations. Outside prison, they had little in common with each other. They had very different ideologies and very different visions for the future of South Africa. When you put them all together, you can imagine the tensions, which could boil over into open conflict.

“During the day, the prisoners faced their captors but, in the evening, it was the other prisoners.”

The consequences for the country of unresolved tensions were brought sharply home by Azapo prisoners who arrived with information from their Zanu allies in the then Rhodesia: the government had had to keep Zanu and Zapu in separate prisons because the animosity between the rival liberation parties was so intense. This served only to deepen the mutual antagonism. The result, says Lekota, was the Matabeleland massacres of the early ’80s, in which thousands of anti-Mugabe dissidents were killed.

“Our leaders realised they had to make a plan to stop this happening in South Africa after liberation. We had to have some things that made for mutual understanding; things we could share across political formations. That was where the idea of sporting activities came in.”

Team sports were the obvious choice. Prisoners who came from the north tended to prefer soccer. “The Cape and Natal had been British colonies so rugby thrived there. And of course, the prison warders were rugby people. We divided ourselves into groups that transcended political groupings — so each group had to contain members from the ANC or PAC and so on,” explains Lekota. “Each group then held a meeting and chose a name. When this

process was over, we had six teams and they then formed a league.”

One of the many team lists laboriously hand-written and preserved in the Mayibuye archives names Lekota as prop. He laughs about this now. “The team I was chosen for needed a prop and a kicker. They

thought because I had played soccer I would be able to kick but of course, it is a very different type of kicking. So I became the prop who also kicked but it meant we missed all our conversions!”

One thing the prisoners had in abundance was time, which was useful as all these advances took years of haggling and negotiating with the prison authorities.

“Prisoners had to do these things by stealth — they would grow grass quietly themselves in stages, in clumps alongside the cells, until we had enough to cover the pitch. We had to build long benches so that people could sit and watch games. So when we were given building jobs, we would take a bit of extra sand and cement.”

They had long- and medium-term plans, all of which helped to give meaning to prisoners’ lives and create a common goal. One of the long-term goals involved building a tennis court. “So, when you see a flat, cemented patch now, you know it was mostly built with stolen cement.”

They would work out what they needed and then surreptitiously build it into the next job. “So, if we had to paint windows, say, we would keep some to paint lines.”

Lateral thinking was required. “For example, there was only one field for both

soccer and rugby. A rugby field is longer than a soccer field, so rugby’s 22m lines would be the outer lines for soccer, and we’d put the poles there. Then we got the authorities eventually to allow moveable poles. For nets, we would take ropes we found that had been discarded by ships and we would knit them together. We took lime to designate different areas.”

The shared rugby/soccer field threatened to introduce new tensions — between the soccer-inclined prisoners from the north and the rugby-lovers from the south. “So we discussed it and came to an agreement that it would be one weekend for soccer and one for rugby.”

This led to further expansion of skills. “Young people have energy,” said Lekota. Soccer players did not want to sit out every other weekend so they started learning the other game so they could participate every weekend.

“The rugby guys showed you what to do — you push the guys away from the ball. So many of us who came from upcountry became outstanding rugby players, and rugby guys learnt soccer, so we learnt to appreciate each other.”

Eventually they drew in the warders and, in the process, discovered a common humanity.

“Some of them became referees and it helped relieve their boredom too. These whites were also imprisoned on Robben Island. Once a fortnight, they could go to Cape Town to visit their families and girlfriends.

“In the early days, the government tried to recruit guys who were married and came with families. In the later years, they had to send young guys. They took them from orphanages and trained them in Kroonstad, my home town.”

Through the mutual understanding gained through shared sporting activities, the prisoners also came to see the human being in their captors.

“They were being used to control us. The young of South Africa were made to fight each other. On both sides, we were young, poor people. They were told we were terrorists and communists and they were not allowed to speak about politics with us. Because the authorities realised that, if they were exposed, this would open their minds.”

The shared interest in sport opened up other avenues for empathy.

“We were not allowed news from outside but when the warders went to Cape Town, they would watch, say, Western Province ... and they would tell us what was happening. In due course, we would ask them to check soccer and rugby scores. There was always news hunger among us.

“So from that we learnt that sport was an activity with high potential for reconciling people; for learning to appreciate each other’s talents and creating mutual respect. So even though warders were told we were terrorists and communists and black people were less intelligent, they saw we were not.”

It was the Robben Island experience that probably inspired Nelson Mandela to make the leap at the Rugby World Cup in 1995. He was ahead of his own party on this and stuck his neck out to make the ultimate gesture of reconciliation to the white community.

Verne Harris, director of research at the Nelson Mandela Foundation, says he remembers SA Council on Sport people in the early ’90s “being very hurt and feeling betrayed”. “The feeling was that we were being rushed back into international sport before proper transformation. We had one black player in the 1995 team and in 2007, we had two black players in the team that won the Rugby World Cup. So I don’t think the rugby establishment repaid that gesture.

“I think Madiba’s argument was that with such gestures — like including bits of *Die Stem* in the national anthem — you show generosity and you will evoke a generous response

and we need that flow of positive energy if we are to get through this difficult period for reconciliation.

“It was a strategy he used in different guises throughout his life — treating the prison warders with respect, learning their language and writing letters in Afrikaans. Even letters of complaint had a basic courtesy.

“One of his attributes as a leader was that he could act decisively and immediately — and he has so often got those moments right,” says Harris. “It is a quality most great leaders have.”

● McGregor is author of *Springbok Factory: What it Takes to be Bok* (Sunbird, R200)

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