

# THE POLITICS OF SOUTH AFRICAN CRICKET

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JON GEMMELL

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# Sport in the Global Society

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General Editor: J.A. Mangan

## THE POLITICS OF SOUTH AFRICAN CRICKET

# SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY

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To:

Mike — *the inspiration*

Stephen — *the encouragement*

James — *the coaching*



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# Abbreviations

ACB	Australian Cricket Board
ANC	African National Party
COSATU	Confederation of South African Trade Unions
FIS	Freedom in Sport
HNP	Herstigte Nasionale Party (Restored National Party)
ICC	Imperial Cricket Council (became International Cricket Council in 1965)
IOC	International Olympic Committee
MCC	Marylebone Cricket Club
MDM	Mass Democratic Movement
NP	National Party
NSC	National Sports Congress
PAC	Pan African Congress
SACA	South African Cricket Association
SACB	South African Cricket Board
SACBOC	South African Cricket Board of Control
SACOS	South African Council on Sport
SACTU	South African Council of Trade Unions
SACU	South African Cricket Union
SADF	South African Defence Force
SASA	South African Sports Association
STST	Stop the Seventies Tour
TCCB	Test and County Cricket Board
UCBSA	Union Cricket Board of South Africa (also known as UCB)
UDF	United Democratic Front
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific & Cultural Organisation

## Series Editor's Foreword

The opening sentence of Jon Gemmell's Introduction sets the tone for *The Politics of South African Cricket*: 'It should be stressed from the outset that this book is not about cricket – at least not in the conventional sense.'<sup>1</sup> This old tune played on a new whistle brings a loud cheer from this Series Editor, who shares the same approach to the general study of sport. In my preface to *The Games Ethic and Imperialism*, I expressed the wish that 'I would not like this study of cultural diffusion to be naively and erroneously catalogued under "Games". It is concerned with much more: with ethnocentricity, hegemony and patronage, with ideals and idealism, with educational values and aspirations, with cultural assimilation and adaptation and, most fascinating of all, with the dissemination throughout the Empire of a hugely influential moralistic ideology.'<sup>2</sup> To indulge in one further metaphor, from his 'South African Pulpit' Jon Gemmell preaches to at least one of the converted.

Gemmell remarks that *The Politics of South African Cricket* is about the game as it has reflected South African society. It is concerned with what lies 'beyond the boundary'. He makes two further unequivocal points: recent (South African) sport has been political and sports policies in Apartheid South Africa were designed specifically to ensure its perpetuity.

These observations are hardly original but his concentration on South African cricket as a case-study, is. Here is the value of *The Politics of South African Cricket*.

Gemmell's concern with more general analysis 'in the round' is equally praiseworthy. One illustration of this is his interest in economics, which he argues with some truth, 'ultimately determines the politics of individual states'.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, Gemmell suggests convincingly that the term 'interdependence' is the password allowing access to an understanding of the politics of South African cricket which requires a consideration, as he repeatedly states, of more than just the game. The interdependence forged between racism, a *laager* mentality and economics, created a gross inequality which, as he frankly admits, still exists. This, in turn, determined (and determines) access, participation and opportunity in South African sport. Now, however, there is an inextinguishable desire for change. Thus Gemmell points out that cricket, as in the Apartheid era, still has a political role – albeit very different now. It has been assigned a part in the construction of a democratic, non-

racial South Africa. South African sport, which has always 'known politics', still 'knows' politics!

To paraphrase a great English writer,<sup>4</sup> *The Politics of South African Cricket* reveals an independent mind, freed from convention and committed to originality, and it is an admirable companion volume to the earlier *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa* by Douglas Booth, also published in the series Sport in the Global Society.

J. A. Mangan  
Director, IRCSSS,  
De Montford (Bedford) University

# Introduction

It should be stressed from the outset that this book is not about cricket – at least not in the conventional sense. The contest between bat and ball, with all its complexities, intrigue and insights into character, serves no purpose to the political scientist beyond mere aesthetics. My primary concern is with what the game represents and its place in a model of society. This assumes that sports are subject to the extensive dynamics that shape our social and political environment. In this sense, I follow in the tradition of C.L.R. James, Rowland Bowen, Mike Marqusee and Hilary Beckles (to name a few), who set out to explore what exactly lay ‘beyond the boundary’.<sup>1</sup>

There are two principal aims to this exercise:

- to demonstrate that the development of sport is inextricably linked with that of politics;
- to show that sporting policy in South Africa was an important element within the ‘reform process’ and constituted a group of measures purposely designed to prolong the existence of apartheid.

The project is divided into three distinct sections, each adopting a different approach to the examination of the material. The first section provides the philosophical foundations for the subject matter. The instruments of the political theorist are deployed to examine what is meant when we discuss terms such as ‘politics’, ‘sport’ and ‘cricket’. Are they simply value-free phenomena, or does an individual’s perception of them dictate his or her insight into their interdependence, thus colouring his or her judgement on questions devolved from such interpretations? For example, it is often argued that politics and sport should not mix. From the perspective of the political scientist, an examination of such a statement can only accurately be made once it is clear what is meant by such terms. My reasons for adopting such an approach at the outset are threefold:

- Whilst there has been a considerable literature on the question of politics and sport, I feel that it has largely failed to establish a strong theoretical grounding in that it assumes the reader is aware of what is meant by ‘politics’.<sup>2</sup> ‘What is politics?’ is a question that has intrigued political scientists throughout the history of the discipline. The answer to this, for

me, will determine the individual's outlook on the relationship between politics and sport.

- To show that politics is about more than the analysis of institutions, the functions of the executive and the history of government. I have set out to construct a model that places politics in relation to the other social sciences, and then examines how this affects other channels and avenues of social life. I intend to show that, because of the interrelatedness between the subject matter, sport is part of this wider structure.
- To examine the 'ethos' of cricket, and to assess its contribution and influence to the world game. I am concerned with issues such as: Are differentials in class and race common throughout the history of the Test-playing nations? Does politics have a role in the shaping of the game? Has cricket been exploited for political gain? Has cricket, itself, influenced the development of politics? The reason for raising such issues is that they are comprehensively intertwined in South Africa's history. What I am interested in is whether 'cricket' can be analysed as a distinct variable, or can we simply dismiss the development of the sport in South Africa as unique to that country. To do this I examine the role of the sport in a number of countries other than South Africa.

The second section is concerned with a number of themes relevant to the political and social history of racially segregated South African cricket. It begins, as does the analysis of 'politics', with an examination of the executive and how it has formally legislated on the issue of sport. The enquiry ventures beyond the descriptive and seeks to determine external trends that may have pre-empted government initiatives. I am particularly concerned with economic developments as I hold that these ultimately determine the politics of individual states. Chapter 4, therefore, seeks to outline the processes or developments behind actual policy.

From this platform, the next two chapters of the section take up the arguments between the protagonists and sympathisers of white-led South African cricket. In this vein, Chapter 5 examines the history of racial cricket in South Africa. Nationalist politicians argued that any racial division in South African sport was principally a consequence of tradition; cricket, for example, had always been segregated into as many as four distinct racial groups. 'Tradition' is a key term for conservative theorists, and what interests me is from where and when such 'traditions' emerge: Are they politically manufactured? How are they maintained? Whose interests do they serve?

The official stance of the International Cricket Council (ICC) had been that South Africa had to create the conditions for genuine multiracial cricket to be recognised as the norm before the international community would re-engage in sporting relations with it. It was then argued that the steps taken by the government had slowly created an environment in which racial sport was no longer enforced, hence South Africa should be welcomed back into

the international fold from which it was excluded in 1961. The counter argument to this stance is that apartheid had penetrated every area of society, and – even if legislation enabled mixed sport at the highest level – the wider framework of legislation had created such a society that equality of opportunity was certainly an illusion. Therefore, merit selection would still result in all-white teams.

‘No normal sport in an abnormal society’ became the rallying cry of the opposition to white-led cricket. Pressure was to be maintained, both at home – by directly challenging the white authorities within the overall political opposition – and overseas – by maintaining a sporting boycott on South Africa. In general, those who wanted to play against South Africa argued that the two variables – sport and politics – should not be mixed, whereas those intent on isolating the Republic did so on an appreciation of the intimate association between them. Thus, Chapters 5 and 6 are crucial in demonstrating the interrelatedness of sport and politics.

The seventh chapter, on the sports boycott of South Africa, concludes the thematic section by attempting to draw conclusions from the preceding chapters and placing them within an international context. Isolating South Africa from normal sporting relations was an important psychological weapon in the campaign for liberation. This body blow to the regime was increasingly supported by governments, both European and African, though perhaps not by all sporting organisations. This chapter is concerned with the nature and the strengths of the debate, and considers the argument of ‘bridge-builders’ who claimed that links with South Africa needed to be maintained in order to influence and assist reform. This was an extension of the classical liberal position which insisted that capitalism would eventually corrode apartheid.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Chapter 7 analyses the political influence of countries from Africa and the Caribbean who found themselves with a voice and a newly discovered influence on the world stage. What effect did that have on ‘white’ nations such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand? Why was the boycott of South African cricket so solid?<sup>4</sup> I am also interested in the role isolating South African sport played within the whole context of the struggle for sanctions. Were governments willing to pressurise sporting bodies against playing with South Africa in order to provide a smokescreen to disguise their maintenance of economic relations? In other words, were they prepared to condemn apartheid through one illuminating action, but not at the cost of economic well-being?

Section three explores the politics of South African cricket. It focuses on the role of the government and the state in the development of the sport. Analysis centres on four case-studies, each being a pivotal moment in the evolution of cricket in South Africa. Starting from the Springboks departure from the ICC – due to South Africa declaring itself a Republic, then considering the infamous ‘Basil D’Oliveira Affair’, the abandoned 1970 Springbok tour to England and South Africa’s subsequent isolation from international cricket, and finally the 1980s ‘rebel tours’ – the last of which ran parallel to



the formal abolition of apartheid – I intend to highlight the defining role of politics in cricket. This is scrutinised in an ‘institutional’ form that observes the functions of the government and counterbalances their strategy with the reaction of the opposition, both at home and overseas. Theoretical concerns are thrust into the forefront by the evaluation of reactions to these events. The cancellation of the 1970 South African tour to England, for example, had a seismic effect among conservatives in both Britain and South Africa as authority and law and order were perceived to be undermined. What ultimately interests this study, then, is how sport became such an important component of the struggle between opposing camps in South Africa, each striving to become the dominant hegemonic power.

I conclude by turning the initial theme of the book – the impact of politics on cricket – on its head by analysing the impact of the game on apartheid and the part that ‘multiracial’ sport played in undermining that system, thus leading to its demise. Protagonists of the ‘bridge-building’ argument claimed that by encouraging South African cricket you would, in effect, be destabilising the social fabric because of the advances made towards multiracialism, and thus forcing the regime into reform. This is a comparative study in that psychological assaults against the ruling order have to be weighted in relation to other contributing phenomena, permitting the political scientist to examine the elements that ultimately determine a country’s political direction. The reversal of themes also allows for a more thorough review of the place of sport in the social structure.

A short examination of conservatism clarifies the notion that a definition of ‘politics’ is subject to certain ideological constraints. The argument that the two variables are independent of each other and so should not be considered in an academic context is by its very nature a political statement. Political science is not like the study of biology and chemistry, whereby ‘maps’ determine what is in the sphere of interest. If we are studying politics in order to gauge an understanding of the political process that is central to most of our lives, then we have to consider the effects of policy. A study of the civil service or of the qualities that make a minister tell us nothing about the society in which we live; the influences behind government, the forces that mould a counter-force to the dominant hegemony and an examination of legislation in a social and economic context do. Although disjointed, there are a number of features that allow an assessment of a conservative philosophy. Disdain for extra-parliamentary activities, an emphasis on law and order and respect for authority (core beliefs which were promoted in cricket) are all central components, and are exposed to scrutiny in the study of South African cricket. While it is difficult to show that the Conservative Party in Britain supported apartheid, the evidence suggests that many conservatives were sympathetic to South Africa. Sport provided an indicator of this support, especially when considering the reaction to the 1980 Moscow Olympics, when suddenly it was deemed acceptable by many conservatives to locate sport within a political context.

Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language constitutes a system in which no element can be defined independently of others.<sup>5</sup> This interdependency is certainly true of the politics of South African cricket, which requires an understanding of much more than simply cricket: racism, economics and a laager mentality all combined to create immense and substantial inequality, which, in turn, determined access to and participation in sport. Having already remarked on the interpretation of 'politics', 'sport' and 'cricket', a theoretical understanding of 'apartheid' and 'segregation' in the period before 1948 is required in order to apply the original concepts to the social and political entity that is South Africa. Thus, this book is influenced by the techniques of investigation advocated by discourse theorists. Academic texts on South African cricket are limited as most studies relate to South African sport in general – and cricket has probably played 'second-fiddle' to rugby, the game associated with Afrikaners. The data for this study stems largely from the actors themselves: newspapers for assessments of both political developments and reports on cricket; specialist cricketing publications such as *The Cricketer*, *Wisden Cricket Monthly* and *Playfair*; biographies of individual cricketers; as well as an exploration into the vast literature on cricket. Of course, there is a wealth of knowledge available on the South African political economy, as well as theoretical studies on matters such as political philosophy. These have all been consulted, as have an extensive number of articles in academic journals. However, I claim originality on three fronts:

- an examination of sport in society has, in the main, been attempted through the disciplines of sociology and sports studies, rather than that of political science;
- there has been no academic study of cricket in South Africa;<sup>6</sup>
- academic texts on sport that include cricket are written in the interests of politics;<sup>7</sup> reference to specialist cricketing material such as magazines, histories and biographies have enabled an analysis of cricket's role in the political process.