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Book review

Following the ball: The migration of African soccer players across the Portuguese colonial empire, 1949–1975

By Todd Cleveland. Athens, OH:
Ohio University Press, 2017.

In *Following the Ball*, Todd Cleveland meticulously unpacks the history of African soccer players' migratory journeys across the Portuguese colonial empire. While this book makes an invaluable contribution to what is a nascent body of literature on the migration of African football players, it also represents a telling addition to our understanding of the encounters between coloniser and colonised and how these played out specifically within the Portuguese colonial project. In doing so, Cleveland's book is further testament to the value of drawing on sport, football in this case, as a lens through which to better understand how Africans experienced, responded to and navigated their way through European colonialism. The scholarship throughout the book is first rate. It draws on a range of archival and media sources to piece together the historical detail on players' mobilities and migratory experiences but the real strength of this study, from

a methodological perspective, can be found in the oral testimonies from players, coaches and a range of other intermediaries or actors who were engaged in either making or facilitating these journeys. Cleveland has done an exceptional job in tracking down and interviewing these actors and in weaving their voices through what is a vivid and thoroughly engaging narrative.

The opening chapter sets the context for the rest of the book by exploring the history of the Portuguese empire in Africa and the nature of everyday life in the colonies. This is no mere description of a well-rehearsed history. Cleveland's account is enlivened by skilfully threading migrant players' biographies through the narrative in ways that starkly exemplify the day-to-day realities of life under Portuguese rule. Thereafter, attention switches to the introduction and popularisation of football in the Portuguese colonies and in particular, the consumption of football clubs and competitions from the metropole by indigenous populations. The accounts of how allegiances to metropolitan clubs developed and were fostered are rich, vivid and fascinating. The same is true of the analysis of metropolitan clubs' summer tours to the colonies which illustrates how the game was utilised by the Portuguese regime for their own ends as they sought to deepen and justify their control.

Chapter 2 switches attention to how Africans in the colonies engaged with football and the meanings they attached to it. The racial desegregation of colonial football is a central theme in this chapter and Cleveland's analysis shows how this process, uneven as it was, provided opportunities for African players to acquire the sort of visibility as well as the cultural, sporting and linguistic traits that would subsequently aid their onward migration to Portugal. Chapter 3 begins by explaining how football in the metropole was opened up as a migratory destination for African players and how they were recruited. Thereafter, the focus shifts to detailed and insightful accounts of the calculated nature of players' migratory decision making, the demanding nature of their initial journey to the metropole and their subsequent transnational adjustment. Cleveland explains that while for some this latter process was relatively smooth and seamless, for others it was fraught with difficulty. The analyses here reveal a range of motivations and creative strategies as players and their families weighed up options, considered potential destinations and made their moves. In foregrounding their active engagement in these processes, Cleveland positions agency at the centre of his accounts of African football migration, a trend that is increasingly prevalent in the scholarship on this process.

The penultimate chapter charts the significant on and off field challenges that players encountered beyond their initial period of adjustment in Portugal, including a careful and nuanced analysis of the ways in which these players encountered racism. On this issue, Cleveland concludes that while players

experienced minimal overt racism in Portuguese society and football through for example unequal salaries, 'stacking' or racial abuse from fans, they were subject to racialised commentary in the Portuguese media. Against this backdrop and the strict control that metropolitan clubs and the Estado Novo regime exercised over African football labour, the creative strategies that these individuals employed and the resilience and resourcefulness they showed in navigating metropolitan life and football is writ large across the pages of this chapter. Beyond the social bonds that they developed with other African migrant athletes, they drew on the intercultural skills that they had begun developing in the colonies to negotiate their new environs, to cultivate social, sporting and, at times, romantic relationships across the racial divide and to embrace metropolitan culture. As the chapter demonstrates, all of this combined to enable many migrant footballers to achieve success, materially, in sporting terms and in relation to post-career occupations. Indeed, the latter part of the chapter explores the ways in which players pursued secondary migration to other clubs as a means of improving their prospects of securing longer-term livelihoods.

The final chapter, and for me the highlight of the book, focuses on perhaps the greatest challenge and set of dilemmas that migrant players experienced during their careers in the metropole – negotiating the politically charged atmosphere that prevailed from the early 1960s onwards following the outbreak of the wars of independence in Angola, Guiné Bissau and Mozambique. Cleveland argues that football was deeply implicated in this atmosphere, politicised by a regime that sought to use it to advance 'one nation' Portuguese national unity and the idea of Lusotropicalism. African footballers were caught up in these processes and attempts were made by the state to co-opt them as exemplars of Portuguese nationalism and integration. The rest of the chapter details how many players employed an 'outward apoliticism' and 'calculated conciliation' to survive and prosper in this environment. This is not to suggest that these migrant athletes were without political consciousness or that they did not reflect on or care about the liberation struggles at home. While some of the players interviewed for this book appeared to remain avowedly apolitical, not least Eusébio, others were happy to discuss how they became politicised in the metropole, particularly those who played for Académica and regularly mixed with left-leaning students from the University of Coimbra, which became a hotbed of anti-colonial sentiment in Portugal. Indeed, it is no surprise that the four players who did return to the colonies to fight in the wars of independence were all Académica players. While others chose to remain in Coimbra, this club, and those Africans who continued to represent it, rose to the forefront of more symbolic, political forms of resistance against the regime's intransigent stance over its empire. The dramatic account of the 1969 Portuguese cup final between Benfica and Académica illustrates all of this in a visceral manner. At the same time however, these players continued to

be viewed by the most radicalised elements of Coimbra's student body as agents of the regime, illustrating further layers of the dangerous, uncertain terrain that they had to tread. The chapter closes with an account of the surveillance and controlling strategies employed by Portugal's secret police and in these accounts we see starkly the unenviable positions in which migrant players were placed and had to traverse during this turbulent period.

The book ends with a brief epilogue which sketches out the career and life trajectories of a number of African football migrants following the collapse of Portuguese colonialism in 1974. Cleveland laments that 'space limitations preclude the inclusion of the post-footballing trajectories of each of these former players' (p.212). In doing so, and in the context of recent calls to examine the post-career lives of migrant athletes (Agergaard and Ungruhe, 2016), I hope that he has set out the bones of a future research project.

The contribution of this book to the historiography of African football, to our understanding of the lived experiences of migrant African athletes and life in the Portuguese Empire is indisputable. While in no way wishing to diminish the quality of this study and its timely contribution to the field of African sports, I did have some relatively minor quibbles with interpretation and argument at various junctures in the book and I finish this review with three.

The first relates to Cleveland's criticism of the suggestion in my own work that the promotion of and encouragement of affinities with metropolitan football through, for example, radio broadcasts (Darby, 2007) might be read as part of the broader use of football in the drive to promote colonial hegemony. Cleveland contends that my assessment here is problematic because it reduces indigenous fans to 'unknowing, helpless victims of hegemonic pressures' (p.39). I would contend that the enthusiastic embrace of cultural forms that were used as part of a wider process of cultural imperialism does not automatically imply helplessness, passivity or unthinking acceptance on the part of indigenous populations. I accept Cleveland's implied criticism of my neglect of Lusophone African perspectives/voices on the game's diffusion but, as I have argued elsewhere (Darby, 2002), indigenous football aficionados in colonial Africa were active participants in their engagement with football and indeed, successfully Africanised it in ways that served their own ends, often in the face of its infusion with imperialist intent.

The second issue is Cleveland's rejection, in Chapter 2, of the possibility that African organised football in the Portuguese territories could be considered political or imbued with any significant anti-colonial sentiment. His position on this issue is rooted in his 'eschewing of the tendency among scholars of Africa's past to locate "resistance" in seemingly every aspect of colonial life' (p.58). For Cleveland, the establishment of African leagues and clubs in Lusophone Africa

was much more benign and oriented primarily around enjoyment of the game, opportunities for sociability and, for the most talented, building a career. While all of this undoubtedly played out in the local organisation of the game, my feeling is that he may have been too hasty in writing off the game's counter hegemonic potential in Lusophone Africa. I say this not least because he himself acknowledges that 'political discourse certainly circulated within these clubs' and that many Africans who played for teams in African organised leagues 'would go on to join the various nationalist movements' (p.58). This to me suggests the presence of at the very least 'small p' political currents within indigenous leagues and clubs. While these were not necessarily formalised or concretised into formal anti-colonial politics in the way that we saw in colonial Ghana or Nigeria, in the context of the subjugation, pacification and segregation that undergirded Portuguese colonial rule, the mere act of establishing African leagues and clubs merits being interpreted if not as resistance, then certainly political. In his fascinating account of the informal engagements with football in local neighbourhoods that preceded the establishment of formal African leagues and clubs, Cleveland argues that 'In these modest sites, local cultural emphases and creativity blended with a *rejective spirit* to produce novel playing styles' (p.49). If a 'rejective spirit', by which I presume refers to a rejection or resentment of Portuguese authority, was stitched into the styles of play that emerged in local neighbourhoods, then why might this same spirit not have been evident in the establishment of African clubs and leagues?

My final quibble concerns Cleveland's framing of his book as one that moves the focus on African football migration away from the discourse of exploitation, victimisation and passivity that he argues typify or are recurrent themes in the existing scholarship. In doing so, he contends that '...my study echoes the work of scholars who have dismissed reductive characterisations of African migrant footballers in Europe as "merely tools of European owners" (citing Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001), thereby dispelling notions of these athletes as casualties of alleged exploitation' (p.16). There is no doubt that this book is successful in challenging such characterisations and Cleveland is also on firm ground in pointing to the limitations of the scholarship that examines African football migration from a macro, historical-structuralist perspective. However, in seeking to position his work in this way, he seems to ignore the fact that there has been almost a decade's worth of research that foregrounds the experiences of migrating African footballers (or at least those who aspire to migrate through football) and the forms of agency they exhibit. None of the recent single and co-authored work by Sine Agergaard, Itamar Dubinsky, myself, James Esson, Mari Eng, Christian Ungruhe, and Nienke van der Meij is mentioned and alluding to it would have better enabled him to more accurately position his study in the wider shift in the scholarship on football migration to a more player-centric perspective.

Having said all of that, *Following the Ball* represents a timely, unique and wonderfully rich tome that not only advances our insights into African sports and the mobility of African athletes but makes significant scholarly contributions far beyond. It deserves to be read by students and researchers in a range of fields including, but not limited to, African/colonial history, Portuguese colonialism, sports history, and sports/football migration. In producing a book of this scope and quality, Todd Cleveland should be thanked and congratulated in equal measure.

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