

Tarminder Kaur

Post-Doctoral Fellow,
Department of
Anthropology, University
of Johannesburg,
Email: tarminderkaurw15@
gmail.com.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/SJCH44.v2.9>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)

Southern Journal for
Contemporary History
2019 44(2):144-147

© Creative Commons With
Attribution (CC-BY)



BOOK REVIEW:

Exploring decolonising themes in SA Sport History: Issues and challenges, Cleophas, Francois Johannes (ed.), Bloemfontein, African Sun Media, 2018. 154 pp, ISBN 978-1-928357-94-0.

The volume, *Exploring decolonising themes in SA Sport History* does exactly what it portends to do; it explores some of the overlooked themes in South African sports history. The goal of the book is to shed light on black sporting culture, which was, and as many of the contributors argue, continues to be, pushed to the margins by the dominant sport discourses. In pursuing this goal, the volume takes an experimental approach, in which the book opens with a set of reflections, followed by the two main parts, which includes six papers by social historians and eight personal narratives of sportspeople and administrators. The book presents a collection of historical analyses, which argue for giving prominence to the black sporting history of South Africa and set out lines of inquiry and archives to pursue further research. This review offers a short critical appraisal of the book, teasing out key themes that may interest researchers and historians of South African sports.

The collection opens with Andre Odendaal's *reflections on writing a post-colonial history*, followed by *notes from the editor*, Francois Cleophas, and Lesley Le Grange's thoughts on *decolonising sport* (pp. 1 – 21). These three short chapters point to the “absences” or “silences”, arguing for broadening the scope of historical research on South African sports. Odendaal, to this end, succinctly puts it, “this process of redress requires, not so much band-aid patchwork on the past (often shallowly empirical) narratives by adding some examples, in changing context, to prove that black South Africans do indeed have a sports history, but rather a full-

scale re-imagining and rewriting of the history of sport in this country” (pp.1-2). Although this quote refers to his co-authored four-part series on *The History of South African Cricket Retold* (p. 2), such a process would certainly enrich understanding of all the different sporting codes that make up the social and political lives of South Africans. However, the collection under review falls short of such an ambitious proposition. This is partly because the editorial notes are, well, just notes. In particular, the volume lacks a thorough introduction that engages with and builds on the state of the research in the field, laying out the debates, omissions, representations and misrepresentations in the existing historical writings on South African sports.¹ If indeed, the aim of decolonising sports is to “dispel myths that blacks had no sports significance prior to 1994” (p. 9), then interrogation of the location and origin of such myths would have been a useful first step in conceptualising this intervention. In the absence of a rigorous analysis of sources and writings that continue to produce myths or centres a single and inaccurate historical narrative, the text reads more like a collection of slogans and ideas to be acted upon in the future research. Although a theoretical framework to define and examine decoloniality or decolonisation of South African sports is professed in the early chapters, these concepts are presented as conclusive rather than probing. As a whole, the book seems to answer the questions yet to be articulated and investigated.

The first part, entitled *Accounts from the Arena*, offers fascinating micro-histories of a rugby fan, of Cape’s black athletes and organisations, sportswear, professional football, mountaineering, and baseball (pp. 23 – 89). Each of these chapters attend to the struggles and conflicts within and between the structures of power shaped by race, religion, gender, social class, politics and practicalities, within which groups and individuals carve out their own identity, agency and space amidst the times and politics of discrimination. Hendrik Snyders’ reinterpretation of a Springbok rugby fan, Gasant Ederoos Behardien, is an attempt to complicate this flamboyant historical actor. Pushing beyond the single imagery of a coloured fan of white sport, highlighting the personal-social-economic-class history of Behardien, and placing it squarely in the era

1 A Desai, *The Race to Transform: Sport in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010); A Desai, “Reverse Sweep: A Story of South African Cricket Since Apartheid”. (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2016); C Merret., *Sport, Space and Segregation: Politics and Society in Pietermaritzburg* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009); A Odendaal, *The Story of an African Game* (Claremont: David Philip, 2003); BK Murray (eta I), *Empire & Cricket: The South African Experience, 1884-1914* (Johannesburg: UNISA Press, 2009); CC Thomas and SASR, *Sport and Liberation in South Africa: Reflections and Suggestions* (National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre, University of Fort Hare, 2006); D Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa*, Volume 4 (London: Routledge, 1998); R Archer and A Bouillon, *The South African Game: Sport and Racism* (London : Westport Conn., 1982); P Alegi, *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa*. Scottsville (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004.

of racial segregation, Snyders sets out the premise on which an elaborate and in-depth biography of the man could be constructed. In the following chapter, Francois Cleophas lists the key black athletes and organisations based in the late 19th to early 20th century Cape colony, once again opening up avenues for further biographical research that may inform the social and class makings of this racially excluded group. Nuraan Davids' chapter, on the other hand, offers a novel look at how projections by a major sports brand of a religious identity marker (Nike's Pro *hijab*) may serve as a platform to debate the symbolism and ignorance that objectifies Muslim women. By focusing on a popular trend, Davids points to the conflicts at the intersection of religious identity, gender and sports.

Attending to the 1978 season of the professional football league(s), Gustav Venter tells the story of how ideology of non-racialism and practicality to maintain competitiveness of a sport were contested. By shifting the focus away from racialised subjects to the struggles over power, prestige and "professionalism", he shows how specific and localised forms of conflicts may reflect the struggles of the historical present. Farieda Khan builds on her archival and oral history work to situate the story of the Cape Province Mountaineering Club, a club that catered for and was autonomously run by the Cape's coloured population. This rendition reflects on the making of race relations, how racial prejudices were practiced and the life it took on in the context of recreational use of the mountain. Finally, the second contribution by Snyders attends to the colonising history of baseball, in which the racial "others" were not only excluded from participation, but also omitted from the historical records. While Snyders hints at the presence of active baseball clubs run by Cape's coloured population, the chapter mostly argues how baseball in South Africa was maintained white. It is in the reflections of Andre Alexander, in the next section, that the readers get a glimpse into the world of black baseball (pp. 131-135).

In the *Accounts from the Coalface*, short personal narratives of individuals involved in sports participation, administration, research and writing are presented with accompanying memorabilia from the narrators' personal collection. These short stories, many of which are autobiographical in nature, responds to the desire to compile and acknowledge achievements of black sportspeople and organisations. For example, William Pick shares his experiences of putting together the history of the Maitland-Parow and Districts Cricket Union. In doing so, he offers a glimpse into his monograph *One for the Chuck*. Sigi Howes' reflections on the *interrelatedness of "random" events* is, perhaps, a bit unrelated to the project of decolonising sports history; the significance of drawing connections between three noted historical figures to the broader aims of this book remains unclear. Attending to cycling and athletics, Charles Beukes and Dewald Steyn respectively, share their experiences and struggles in recording and reporting on black sports history, pointing particularly at the limitations of

available archival sources. However, it is autobiographical narratives presented by Andrew September, Andre Alexander, Shaun Vester, and Robin April that confirm the significance of sports in making sense of the complex social and political life of South Africans. These reflections, I hope, will inspire building of a larger-scale, broader and richer archive of oral histories.

Although this volume falls far short of Odendaal's proposition of "a full-scale re-imagining and rewriting of the history of sport in this country" (p. 2), it does open up many potential avenues to dig deeper and think through a substantial oral history project on South African sports history. In 1979, the University of the Witwatersrand undertook a large-scale research, The *Oral Documentation Project* (ODP). The significance and lasting imprint of this project are evident in the seminal monographs produced from this research by Belinda Bozzoli and Charles van Onselen.² *Exploring decolonising themes in SA Sport History: Issues and challenges* provides a peek into the potential for serious historical research into some of the understudied sports themes, and the authors of this volume, as well as, sports scholars more broadly will do well to learn from the ODP.

2 B Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991); C Van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (Capetown: David Phillip, 1996).