

## **Sport and recreation on Robben Island**

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### **Abstract**

The article provides insight into an important part of South Africa's sport history that has not been explored yet: What was the role sport and recreation played on Robben Island in the days when it served as political prison? The research has been a collaborative project of the Department for Cultural Affairs and Sport, Western Cape Sports Council, Mayibuye Centre and the University of the Western Cape's Interdisciplinary Center for Sport Science and Development. Facilitated by the establishment of a 'Robben Island General Recreational Committee' in the 1960s, sport and recreation took a very special form on the Island. Unknown to South Africans and the world, during Apartheid, sport and recreation on Robben Island were used as a vehicle to unite people and to promote values of respect, integrity, dignity, teamwork and fair play as an integral part of a holistic person. Leisure activities became a place of triumph of human spirit, body and soul. The research facilitated the process of digitisation of archives from the Island. Numerous sources were discovered, giving an insight into the role of sport and recreation for many of South Africa's past and present leaders. The study also highlights the role sport and recreation played in the unique journey to freedom and democracy.

In October 2010, the Commonwealth Games were held in Delhi, India. Starting the event, the Commonwealth baton was passing through all Commonwealth countries as it has been done since 1958. In Cape Town, the baton was carried from the airport through historically disadvantaged communities, townships and the city centre. The final stop was Robben Island, the island off the coast of Cape Town which during the years of Apartheid in South Africa served as a maximum security prison for political prisoners and had incarcerated there many of South African past and present leaders, including South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, who spent 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment there. The Commonwealth baton had never been to Robben Island before, and taking it there signified a triumph to the world in recapturing the spirit that embodied the steely determination the prisoners possessed to overcome the harsh conditions of their incarceration.

This gesture inspired then Chairperson of the Sport Council and now Chief Director of Cultural Affairs and Sport, Advocate Lyndon Bouah, to examine the archives of the Island to determine what role sport and recreation had played in the lives of many of South Africa's leaders while held prisoners there, and the idea of the Robben Island Legacy Research Project was born. In 1997, Nelson Mandela said, 'Robben Island is a vital part of South Africa's collective heritage'.<sup>2</sup>

The research project started in 2012 with the digitalisation of archives on sport and recreation as a collaborative initiative of the Department for Cultural Affairs and Sport (DCAS), the Western Cape Sports Council (now Confederation), the Mayibuye Centre and the University of the Western Cape's (UWC) Interdisciplinary Centre for Sport Science and Development (ICESSD). It involved students and staff from both institutions and the Mayibuye Centre; interviews were conducted with former prisoners as part of the study. In 2012, the first exhibition on the role sport and recreation played on Robben Island, for many years mostly unknown, was held at the Mayibuye Centre.

Coinciding with the celebration of human rights day in 2013, South Africa remembered the role of sport in the struggle by way of a national exhibition of photos and stories of prominent South Africans and significant events. The exhibition was entitled 'Remember Sport in the Struggle: A Human Rights Perspective'.

Sport's role in the country is undoubtedly a unique one, and numerous publications exist about its role during Apartheid.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on the non-competitive side of sport: sport as a form of leisure and recreation. Has it played any significant role similar to sport in our history? Has it made any contribution to South Africa's way to democracy and if so how? The research project commissioned by DCAS brings the public very close to Robben Island, the geographical setting that is known as an important part of South Africa's political history but that has not yet been

explored for sport and recreation's impact. The Robben Island Legacy Research is trying to address this gap.

## **Historical context**

Historically sport played a crucial role as a dynamic vehicle of civil society in the abolishment of the Apartheid regime and in facilitating South Africa's road to democracy. As early as the 1950s, Black South African sport organisations were pointing out to the world that the racial exclusivity of 'White' sport organisations violated the principle of equality as enshrined in the Olympic Charter. This contributed to the exclusion of South Africa from the Olympic Games at the 1953 conference of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) held in Baden-Baden due to its Apartheid policy which included the complete racial segregation of sport by law in South Africa.

This meant that South Africa was not present at the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964. After an IOC commission had visited South Africa, the country was allowed to take part in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico; however, this decision resulted in a boycott of many African countries with the result that over 40 countries threatened to stay away from the Games. In order to prevent this boycott, the IOC reversed its decision and excluded South Africa again. South Africa was not allowed back to any Games thereafter. In 1976 for the Olympic Games in Montreal, 16 African States asked for the exclusion of New Zealand from the Games as it continued to keep sporting relationship with South Africa. When the IOC did not follow the request, 22 countries from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean boycotted the Games. This meant that in Montreal, compared with the previous Munich Games, 34 fewer nations and a thousand less athletes took part.

During those years, it was solely the 'White' sport structures in South Africa that had the support of a 'White' government with the consequent favourable conditions conducive for their development, progress and growth. The history of 'non-White' sport was an unhappy one of oppression, interference and

forced relocations (particularly in the twentieth century), the effects of which are still to be felt today. The White Paper of the Department of Sport and Recreation notes that in the apartheid era more than 30 million South Africans were never taken into serious account when it came to sport and recreation.<sup>4</sup>

Principles such as ‘Whites and Non-Whites must organise their sport separately’, ‘No mixed sport will be allowed within the borders of South Africa’ and ‘International teams competing in South Africa against White South African teams must be all-White according to South African custom’ officially guided government policy until 1971. In reality, however, these principles were instituted far beyond 1971 in an informal manner.<sup>5</sup> In the following two decades, a whole array of factors forced the apartheid government to modify its stand on segregation: first, the principle of equality with reference to race, religion or creed in international sport; second, the great social importance of sport to ‘White’ South Africa; and last but not least, the effective campaign of the South African Council of Sport (SACOS) for the international isolation of South Africa’s racially exclusive ‘White’ sport associations.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, in the 1980s and 1990s, the opposition against apartheid in sport had gathered enough national and international momentum to gain a victory over segregation in sport. South Africa was allowed back to the Olympic Games in 1992 under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. In 1994, for the first time, the new government’s ‘(Draft) White Paper’ on Sport assured access to sport to all sportsmen and women in South Africa regardless of their skin colour.<sup>7</sup>

While South Africa’s struggle for democracy and the role of its sport on the mainland is known, what has been not known is the role sport and recreation played during those years on Robben Island and the struggle of the prisoners on the Island for sport

and recreation

### **Moralising and humanising leisure time?**

By looking at leisure form, leisure space and leisure time on Robben Island, the vital impact of sport and recreation on the human spirit becomes evident. As Sadick Isaacs notes, 'The human need for recreation is innate and must be fairly basic in a hierarchical list of human needs if there is indeed such a hierarchy'.<sup>8</sup> For many prisoners on Robben Island, however, this basic need was not met in the normal sense due to the arbitrary actions of the prison authorities and the wardens.

Towards the beginning of the 1980s, Tim Couzens created the concept of 'moralizing leisure time',<sup>9</sup> which according to Cornelissen and Baller describes how missionaries, mining industries and colonial administrations used leisure as a means to 'educate' African elites according to their own norms.<sup>10</sup> This concept can also be compared to Phyllis Martin's observations in Brazzaville where leisure activities such as drumming and noisy dancing were 'limited in space and time' by the colonial powers in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of leisure time and activities on Robben Island, Couzens' concept can be juxtaposed to a different concept to 'moralizing leisure time', the concept of 'dehumanising leisure time'. This concept describes how wardens and prison authorities used leisure as a means to 'educate' prisoners according to their norms, including punishing them by withholding or prohibiting leisure time and sport and recreation activities in order to enforce those norms and standards, or in some cases turning leisure activities into forced labour.

Couzens' concept can also be juxtaposed to the concept of 'humanising leisure time', which describes how prisoners used leisure as a means to 'educate' wardens and prison authorities

according to their own norms. This is similar to Martin's findings where within their limited means and within constraints imposed by a colonial administration, people in Poto-Poto and Bacongo took initiatives to organise space in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, this article looks at various aspects of the creation, organisation, use, performance and challenges of sport and recreation as leisure on Robben Island, and the unique role it played in the lives of the prisoners. As such, it will provide an important part of South Africa's sport history that has not been explored yet.

### **The Robben Island collection**

The last political prisoners were released from Robben Island in 1991, and the prison closed in December 1996. Upon their release, many documents were collected, all produced during the time of incarceration. The documents give evidence of prison life. A guide to the collection explains, 'Prisoners were usually released carrying their possession in cardboard boxes, often apple boxes. This is how the prisoners' papers came to be called the Apple Box Archives'.<sup>13</sup> The materials are today housed in the Robben Island Mayibuye (RIM) Archives at the UWC, which is the official collection management unit of RIM, UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the papers were banned under Apartheid. Many document the major political events and turning points that culminated in the unbanning of political organisations and the release of Nelson Mandela and other leaders in February 1990 and the country's first democratic elections in April 1994.<sup>15</sup> Among the important components of the Archives are the personal writings of Desmond Tutu and Ahmed Kathrada, and the documents of the General Recreation Committee<sup>16</sup> from the late 1960s onwards.

Important organisational documents include those of the African National Congress, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, the Women's National Coalition, the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee and the General Recreation Committee with its constitution and recreation plans, to mention a few.

The first recorded sport and recreational activities on the Island go back to the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1971, the first constitution of the Robben Island Sports Board was drawn up and signed by the late Steve Tshwete, then President of the Robben Island Sport Board, and later the first sport minister of a democratic South Africa. A big bulk of the records comes from official records of the Robben Island General Recreation Committee which existed from the late 1960s through to the final releases in 1991.<sup>17</sup> The present research focuses on the documents from this committee.

## **Methodology**

The research examined the Robben Island General Recreational Committee Archive, MCH-64, which is a special part of the museum's historical collection housed at the Mayibuye Centre at UWC and which contains material dating back to 1966. The collection comprises 83 boxes of material, notes and reports, recorded and maintained by the former prisoners including internal correspondence, minutes of committee meetings and sport clubs, discussion papers, reports and orders for equipment. Documents were penned by authors such as Sedick Isaacs, Tokyo Sexwale, Indres Naidoo, Abel Chiloane, Solomon Mabuse, Moses Molefe, Hector Ntshanyana, Simon Brander, George Naicker, Michael Ngubeni and Philip Silwana.

The archived materials fall into three categories. The first category comprises records related to sports activities and the organisation and maintenance of the sporting activities on Robben Island. Many of these documents were extravagantly duplicated

and were widely distributed to various individuals and sports clubs. These copies became an integral part of every organisation's records.<sup>18</sup> The second category includes forms of recreation and entertainment on Robben Islands especially from the late 1970s onwards. The last category provides an insight into the education of prisoners by prisoners' primary and secondary schooling, political education as well as 'Mrabulo materials', components of various political parties and theories, used to quickly educate prisoners who were about to be released.

Research methods used included a digitisation process, sorting according to themes, the assigning of accession numbers, scanning, the capturing of metadata and the compiling of a database. They also include primary interviews and secondary sources of interviews with former political prisoners.

### ***Digitisation process***

Paper was a scarcity in prison in the 1960s and most of those handwritten documents reflect the sense of confinement through the quality of paper and type of material used. Digitisation makes the historic collection searchable. Low-resolution images with watermark cannot be reproduced and thus ensure the safety and integrity of the original collection, while high-resolution digital format help reduce the handling of originals that are in a frail state. This method is used to help ensure preservation and conservation of these historical sources as well as to ease access. The 2012 research project facilitated the process of digitisation of archives comprising 45 boxes of historical papers from the Island. On average, each box contained 200 items. Each box was sorted chronologically and according to a theme. Each item in each box was assigned an accession number. These numbers are permanent and unique identification numbers and serve as a primary identification key in the database.



### ***The capturing process***

The documents were sorted according to a catalogue, assigned accession numbers and scanned at 600DPI according to international archival standards. The scanning of each document was a challenge in itself as pages varied very much in size and condition. Once scanned, the papers were assigned metadata.

It was during the assigning of the metadata that themes emerged which had to be explored in greater detail. Every document was analysed to determine title, keywords, authors, date, relationship to any other documents, type of document and the condition of the document. From the captured boxes, it was possible to identify multiple organisations with clear rules, codes of conduct and policies that were applied by the organisations on Robben Island related to sport and recreation. Themes included inter-organisation relations, sport generating alliances, financial systems, dispute management, training of members, administration skills of those running the association, interaction with commanding officers, value systems of prisoners, disciplinary approaches, team issues, challenges of the association and camaraderie through sport and recreation.

The scanned documents and metadata were then transferred onto the database to create a digital library using the UNESCO-endorsed Greenstone software, an open source tool. The digital library allows users to search using a single word or a combination of words to find relevant information within the collection and across other collections that will be captured.

### ***Interview***

A follow-up interview conducted with the late Sedick Isaacs, who was the Chairman of the Education Committee on the Island and the sports administrator for the Sport and Recreation Committee, provided more clarity on the organisational and social set-up of sport and recreation on the Island. The interview also added another dimension by giving more complete understanding of the prisoners' experiences on the Island. It furthermore provided a comparative perspective on the role sport and recreation played on

the Island during Apartheid, as well as its role in present-day South Africa. The interview with Sedick Isaacs took place on August 31, 2012; he passed away on October 18, 2012.

### **Sport and recreation as a privilege**

Pushed by the International Red Cross, the 1960s marked the start of some form of sport and recreational activities on the Island. Sedick Isaacs remembered:

Sport on the Island didn't take off right away. Saturdays we were able to walk around and not do any work, we requested having some recreational sport as a form of exercise. Authorities brought in a huge roller which had to be pushed up and down to flatten an area. This inadvertently led to the creation of a level soccer area but without any other equipment. We petitioned the International Red Cross to sponsor a soccer ball. We started kicking the ball in the cell initially and were eventually allowed to play soccer outside on this field over the weekend. We structured it into clubs and formed an association and that is how our soccer started.<sup>19</sup>

According to Isaacs, 'besides soccer, indoor games evolved fairly early during our stay on Robben Island. Ludo and draughts boards were drawn using soap on blankets, and shells and stones were used as pieces. Chess was also played using cardboard pieces with the relevant pictures of the king, knights, and so on drawn on it'.<sup>20</sup> However, as Marobe pointed out:

Everything on Robben Island was a privilege, there were no rights. Even recreation was not treated as a right ... However, more than anything political prisoners created an environment which brought a feeling that they were even outside of prison though their involvement and participation.<sup>21</sup>

The late Steve Tshwete maintained:

They (the prison authorities) were resisting recreation; they would have preferred to keep us in our cells even on weekends when we are not at work. That's what they did in fact we fought against that, that we were entitled to recreation.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson Mlambo remembered:

Times when there is a general onslaught against political prisoners and when sporting activities were taken away because they were regarded as a privilege and because of this and that thing which we did or you not supposed to we were then penalised.<sup>23</sup>

Even after the prisoners were given the right and access to have leisure time, they often still had to fight for it. Records demonstrate that the prison authorities knew how important the prisoners considered their leisure time and used it by withholding activities or by more severe punishments. Sport and recreation were also often used as a bargaining or even a blackmailing tool by the authorities or were offered with conditions attached by the prison authorities.

When asked if a prisoner did anything the wardens were not happy with whether they would remove the sport and recreational activities or limit prisoners' ability to part take, Sedick Isaacs answered:

Yes, they would. With me, I wound up in solitary confinement cells. So that's how they limit you in sport and all other things. Some of the heads of prison tried to control us by saying that if you don't work hard enough in the quarry there would be no sport for you over the weekend. We countered this by arguing that we did not play

sport with conditions attached to it as it was never introduced to us in this manner.<sup>24</sup>

Isaacs also maintained that the challenge of dealing with the wardens and the Officer Commanding to have sport and recreation activities was a unifying one. 'It was unifying; the fact that sport was being threatened was always a unifying thing'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Sport and recreation as an escape to normal life and as therapy**

For the prisoners on the Island, sport and recreation and the concept of leisure and leisure time were seen as a route to escape – an escape to 'a normal life'. In 1976, Murphy Marobe maintained: 'So in a sense we tried to bring normalcy as much as we possibly could in a very constrained environment'.<sup>26</sup> The records demonstrate the political prisoners' efforts to turn the prison into a 'normal community space' within abnormally harsh conditions of racial hatred through sport and recreational activities which 'became a tool of physical, spiritual and mental therapy to maintain focus to the course of the struggle for liberation and withstand cruelty of the apartheid regime from 1967 to 1991'.<sup>27</sup>

Solomon Musi had his own view on how sport and recreation on Robben Island made the prisoners forget about their real situation of the apartheid prison:

The sport activities played a very important role in terms of relaxing the mood including the conditions of arching and suffering. I think it was the only time away from the hard labour where one can dwell on it some kind of realisation. We played freely.<sup>28</sup>

Tokyo Sexwale acknowledged that soccer fans on the Island made the

games an ‘interesting aspect of entertainment’ for those who could not play which also let them forget their conditions for a short time while they were able to enjoy sport as spectators and fans:

The biggest, biggest, biggest advantage of all is spectating. For those who were not partaking in the actual playing, they wanted to observe and there was nothing more pleasing for other prisoners than to come and watch a soccer game or rugby or tennis for that matter. I learnt to play tennis by watching it and then engaging my first strokes and then playing and losing all the time . . . I have never won a match – I always lost matches on Robben Island.<sup>29</sup>

### **Sport and recreation for unity in diversity**

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, sport and recreation served as a tool of healing the political and ideological divides, especially between members of the two political parties, the Pan-African Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress. Harry Gwala remembers: ‘The outdoor games and indoor games did a lot to bring us together, PAC or what. We formed clubs not according to our political lines, we formed them’.<sup>30</sup> Marcus Solomon stated that ‘the Chinese approach’ was used in this regard, meaning:

the Chinese was very much a dominant approach, you know we play because we want to create friends and it’s not to win, it’s to create a new human relationship, a new social order and sport must in that way contribute to that. So the whole range of activities for example we had the cultural associations.<sup>31</sup>

The inclusion of various recreational activities also resulted in a comradeship among the inmates. Tekiso Mogoerane remembered:

I got to be good at volleyball, too others I will take a chance

like monopoly maybe another chance or darts, but a lot of games ... I opened up to those things when I got off the Island and opening up to other people. It's the first time I felt opening up and at this time there was this comradeship. I am worried now it's like people are on their own ... But at that time comradeship was comradeship it was like revolutionaries you would feel this one's spirit this oneness helping each other.<sup>32</sup>

The prisoners realised therefore that the formation of clubs hindered them in that regard and they started to form houses. Methane stated:

Every year you create a new set up, new groups and rotating players and so on so at one point I belonged to a house called Ship ahoy ... and then the one point Komeshu. I didn't know what does Komeshu mean but it'd one of the dialects of Namibia.<sup>33</sup>

Sedick Isaacs recalled that people worked together from across the political fields and age groups or, if there were challenges:

Well, we asked people to think of themselves as a member of the community and not as a member of an organisation. So of course they had a choice, they had special times when they were members of organisations, especially on Sunday late afternoons. It is also a psychological fact that when people are under threat they tend to lose their differences and react as a unit, but once the threat goes away then people split up again.<sup>34</sup>

When asked whether sport improved relationships between prisoners and the wardens, Sedick Isaacs remembered:

Yes, I saw that, especially with Rugby. They were all Rugby players and they came and watched our Rugby. They would try and advise us about how to pass the ball, but the problem was of course that the prison authorities would remove warders that got too close to us. So they were transferred to another place on the Island or they were taken away from the Island. Wardens were also monitored to avoid relationships being formed.<sup>35</sup>

### **Sport and recreation as a school for administration, management and leadership skills**

Based on the evidence of records comprising the documents of clubs, the referees union, the constitution committee, the disciplinary committee and appellant division, it can be suggested that Robben Island Maximum Security Prison became a 'School of Administration and Management'.<sup>36</sup> Numerous former prisoners, such as Tokyo Sexwale, Phila Nkayi and Naphtali Mamana, extended their appreciation on the role of organised sport and its influence in capacitating them in management and administration.<sup>37</sup> Tokyo Sexwale recalls:

I became the leader of that recreation committee which represents all Robben Island, therefore, decision making was centred in this one body which was recognised by the authorities for the first time ... so we used it as a kind of government of the prisoners and there we could discuss together how many tennis balls are needed for the whole jail this time.<sup>38</sup>

Phila Nkayi reflects: 'I think a lot of people have learned administration there, Steve (Tshwete) with Rugby, I think he had learnt something. I also learnt in those times, just running

administration'.<sup>39</sup>

Among the famous leaders today who were involved then in sport and recreations are: Dikgang Moseneke, Chairman of the Makana Football Association (MFA) in 1969 and later the Deputy President of the Constitutional Court of South Africa; Steve Tshwete, the first and long-serving Secretary of the Robben Island Sport and Recreation Committee who became the first Minister of Sport in President Mandela's Cabinet; and Tokyo Sexwale, who served as member of the executive committee of the Sport and Recreation Committee in 1964 and who later became the first Premier of Gauteng and then the Minister of Human Settlement. Others include Murphy Marobe, who served as a player and in various sports structures on Robben Island and later served in various government departments including the office of the President under Nelson Mandela, and Sbu Ndebele, who was a Librarian on Robben Island but also involved in the Summer Games and who became Minister of Transport after 1994, a Premier of KwaZulu-Natal under former President Thabo Mbeki and who is Minister of Transport in the Zuma government. These are just a few examples demonstrating how prisoners, while on Robben Island, played a vital role in the sport and recreation structure and how they, after their release, played an equally vital role in building and strengthening the leadership of the new democratic South Africa.

The following will look at a few of these structures on the Island. Various committees were established to ensure that skills were passed on. The Protest and Misconduct Committee (PMC) was established to ensure all involved in sport and recreation behaved accordingly. Democracy and accountability were the rules of the game. Any decision taken had to be constitutional and accounted for.<sup>40</sup> The Referees' Union (RU) was one of the constitutional bodies on the Island and had as its motto 'Service before Self'. It was a respected unit among all prisoners. It held lectures fortnightly to build capacity.<sup>41</sup>



## **Sport and recreation structures on Robben Island**

Sport and recreation activities were organised and structured similarly to modern free organisations and they functioned based on defined structures by the prisoners. Activities included soccer, athletics, rugby, boxing, volleyball, lawn tennis, table tennis, indoor games, chess, draughts and checkers, dominoes and Carrom. Sport and recreation organisations founded by the prisoners included the Sports and Recreation Committee, the Sports Coordination Committee, the Robben Island Amateur Athletics Association (RIAAA), the MFA, the Rugby Board, the Table Tennis Association, the Lawn Tennis Association, the Draughts, Checkers, Chess and Carrom Association, also known as the Indoors Committee, the RU, the PMC, the First Aid Unit, the Film Committee and the Record Club, to name just a few. All activities related to sport and recreation were run under the auspices of the Robben Island Sport and Recreational Committee and its executive committee:

... the executive committee was the highest decision making body after the Sport and Recreation Committee of the political prisoners which was responsible for coordinating all cultural activities and liaise with prison authorities.<sup>42</sup>

When asked how the structures work, Sedick Isaacs answered:

It was all a joint effort; the committees were made up of members of different organisations and were completely neutral. If you were a member of a committee you served the community and nothing else.<sup>43</sup>

Organisation and administrative skills as well as the values of the prisoners can be seen through the various organisations' and individual soccer clubs' constitutions and founding statements. It is

possible to see through draft and final constitutions how a community reached a consensus about what their club stood for. The draft constitution for the Sports Recreation Committee, for example, has the organisation's name as the 'Robben Island Recreational and Cultural Committee' but refers to itself as the 'Recreational Committee'.

### ***The Robben Island Sport and Recreational Committee***

The first Sport and Recreation Committee on the Island was founded in 1967, disbanded in the following year and restored again in 1969. It was a form of umbrella organisation that governed the administration of all prisoners' recreational activities on the Island. It was a democratically elected body with a constitution as its guiding document. The committee was responsible for the liaison between the prisoners and the prison authorities. All activities had to be permitted and authorised by the prison but were often not approved. The committee needed a legitimate mandate, and so Steve Tshwete, as Secretary General of the committee, wrote the following note on October 14, 1967 inviting all sporting codes and cultural codes on the Island for comment:

This committee wishes to advise your Association that on the 21<sup>st</sup> a meeting comprising of two delegates from each of the sporting and cultural associations and clubs shall be held at 'B Section' immediately after lunch. The sole purpose for the meeting is the submission of the Recreation Committee's constitution for discussion and adoption by all sporting codes and cultural codes set up under the auspices of above named Committee.<sup>44</sup>

This process shows the extent of consultation and democracy that was followed and the constitution was seen as a 'symbol of respect of law and order'.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, all sporting and cultural codes and clubs were requested to submit their respective constitutions and

associations for recognitions to the committee as well as to the prison authorities.

The aims and objectives of the Recreational Committee included the inculcation of the spirit of sportsmanship and cooperation among the Robben Island prisoners and provision of guiding principles for dealing with possible complaints and disputes with the prison authorities. The committee's role was also to serve as an arbitration committee for any cultural or recreation association, club, organisation or of any of its members. It was established to provide assistance in drawing up sporting programmes and to serve as a liaison between the prison authorities and all recreation and cultural clubs and associations within the mandated framework of the Sport Recreation Committee. Sedick Isaacs remembered:

Stephen Tshwete was the chairman and I was the secretary and we took turns to go and negotiate because it was very tiring, going down to the head of prison and saying we want this and we want that, and he argued with us. Stephen would come back and say I'm sick and tired of all this negotiating now, it's your turn. And then I'd go down and negotiate and so it went on until we ultimately got what we needed. But the prizes were the source of the biggest negotiation.<sup>46</sup>

### ***The Robben Island Summer Games***

Athletics was particularly interesting and was analysed further in terms of sporting codes and annual special event as the RIAAA hosted a yearly event, the 'Summer Games' which were organised by the prisoners with the permission of the Officer Commanding. The Summer Games were governed through the model of the Olympics:

They were celebrated by most of the prison community. The

event filled a vacuum that could have been created by the closure of the MFA soccer season every December and mid-January month ... The summer games did not only encourage and mobilise inmates to display their skilled and talent but brilliant art creativity was the name of the game.<sup>47</sup>

Another important component was music. Naphtali Manana remembered:

Oh those were very, very nice days there of course it is a big thing for us ... Also I was a music player you know during the summer games we will go to entertain them you know after everything has been completed we go to a concert and I will play for them music and so I had a group of musicians that were playing together, that were playing African jazz and James Mange, Rasta.<sup>48</sup>

Within two years, the Summer Games was such a hit with the prisoners that Sedick had to expand it to include a number of indoor games. There were four divisions of draughts, three each of dominoes, chess and bridge, and three each of both singles and doubles table tennis.<sup>49</sup> Isaacs described the Summer Games in his biography as follows:

Athletics, when it was finally approved was a source of great fun. I called it the 'Summer Games'. Besides the more serious events such as the one kilometre medley relay, the shot put, discus and the triple jump, I also introduced the egg and spoon race, the sack race and the three legged race. The problem was that the rules with judgment criteria for each event had to be carefully documented. This I did with great care. I drew the plans for the tracks with starting points correctly off set to balance distance between the lanes round the curves. We drew

lines for the athletic lanes with lime obtained from the quarry. A team of judges was appointed and an arbitration panel to settle disputes in the sand was selected. I organized sand for the jumping pit to be delivered from the building group.<sup>50</sup>

When asked how the Summer Games affected the morale of the prisoners Sedick Isaacs answered:

The morale, it helped the morale tremendously. Remember there were prizes that were given out to the first prize, second prize and third prize but at the end of the day it was all pooled together and divided equally amongst everybody.<sup>51</sup>

The Summer Games embodied the values of fair play, teamwork and are a living testament of the spirited nature of the prisoners and their activities on the Island and of the inclusive concept of sport and recreation.

Overall the Archives and the Robben Island Collection provide us today with the unique opportunity of researching the role that sport and recreation played on the Island, as well as of individuals and their contribution not just on the Island but also to the anti-Apartheid struggle. When Sedick Isaacs was asked when he looks at today's sport organisation, what in his opinion they could learn from how the prisoners ran things on the Island, he answered:

Not knowing the problems they currently face it is difficult to say but I would think that there would be lots we could teach them . . . I think the most important thing is for people that organise sport to be aware of the needs of every single individual there. To make a decision that will satisfy everybody, to negotiate, if you want a decision to go well. To always develop and work on your negotiating skills. It is also important to remember just because you are the chief or the

presidents and above the rest you still serve the public or the sporting body.<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The research findings show the various forms of sport and recreation as leisure form. It also highlights the challenges with regard to leisure space and time on Robben Island. Unknown to the majority of South Africans and the world, on Robben Island, during Apartheid, sport and recreation were used as a vehicle to unite people and promote values of respect, integrity, dignity, teamwork and fair play as an integral part of a holistic person. The rare leisure activities became a route to escape into normality and engendered senses of triumph in the human spirit, body and soul. Facilitated by the establishment of a 'Robben Island General Recreational Committee' in the 1960s, sport and recreation took a very special form on the Island.

The Robben Island General Recreational Committee Collection shows vast records of sport and recreation organisations and events which the prisoners initiated on Robben Island. The digitisation of archives from the Island provided important insights of sport and recreation as leisure form on the Island. Unique sources were discovered that give insight into the role of sport and recreation for many of South Africa's past and present leaders. These sources also highlight the role sport and recreation played in the journey to freedom and democracy. The records show how over the years the prisoners on the Island changed the prison into a community space including a leisure space in spite of the harsh conditions they had to face, and how they used sport and recreation as a therapeutic tool. The impact of sport and recreational activities was therefore physical, emotional and spiritual. For Sedick Isaacs, for example, it broadened his perspective on leisure in general. When asked what the impact of sport on the Island was personally for him, he answered:

Well I think it broadened my perspective, not only sport but the cultural activities we had there. The art exhibition, the music, the choir exhibitions, and sport all added to broaden my understanding and my perspective of the world.<sup>53</sup>

The research illustrates the triumph of the human spirit using sport and recreation as a way of escape. The Robben Island Legacy Project shows us that sport and recreation are a reflection of any society's success stories and its miseries, its socio-economic challenges and its values. It also reminds us that how we organise and transform South African sport and recreation in the future need not be constrained by present conditions.

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### **Notes**

1. Cited in [Korr and Close](#), *More than Just a Game*, 145.
2. *Ibid.*; Heritage Day Address, Robben Island, Cape Town, September 24, 1997.
3. See, for instance, [Alegi and Bolsmann](#), *South Africa and the Global Game*; [Archer and Bouillon](#), *The South African*

- Game*; [De Broglio](#), South Africa; [Keim](#), *Nation Building at Play*; [Nauright](#), “A Besieged Tribe?”; [Ramsamy](#), *Apartheid, the Real Hurdle*; and [Roberts](#), *SACOS 1973–1988*, who researched and wrote on sport under apartheid.
4. DSR *Sport and Recreation in South Africa*, 2.
  5. [Archer and Bouillon](#) *The South African Game*, 46.
  6. [Keim](#), *Nation Building at Play*, 20–41.
  7. *Ibid.*, 2.
  8. [Isaacs](#), *Surviving in the Apartheid Prison*, 198.
  9. [Couzens](#), “Moralizing Leisure Time,” 314–17.
  10. [Cornelissen and Baller](#), “Call for Papers.”
  11. [Martin](#), *Leisure and Society*, 37.
  12. *Ibid.*, 60.
  13. [RIM](#), [UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives](#), *A Guide to the Collection*, 25.
  14. *Ibid.*, 4.
  15. *Ibid.*, 6.
  16. *Ibid.*
  17. *Ibid.*, 24.
  18. [RIM](#), [UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives](#), “General Recreational Committee Archives,” 1.
  19. [Isaacs](#), interview, August 31, 2012.
  20. [Isaacs](#), *Surviving in the Apartheid Prison*, 166.
  21. [Buthelezi](#), *Soccer and the Creation*, 61.
  22. *Ibid.*
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. [Isaacs](#), interview, August 31, 2012.
  25. *Ibid.*
  26. [Buthelezi](#), *Soccer and the Creation*, 82.
  27. *Ibid.*
  28. *Ibid.*
  29. *Ibid.*, 127.
  30. *Ibid.*, 91.
  31. *Ibid.*, 82.
  32. *Ibid.*, 12.
  33. *Ibid.*, 94.



34. [Isaacs](#), interview, August 31, 2012.
35. Ibid.
36. [Buthlezi](#), *Soccer and the Creation*, 84.
37. Ibid., 85.
38. Ibid., 86.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 44.
41. Ibid., 42.
42. Ibid., 85.
43. [Isaacs](#), interview, August 31, 2012.
44. [Buthlezi](#), *Soccer and the Creation*, 19.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 17–21.
47. Ibid., 29.
48. Ibid., 32.
49. [Korr and Close](#), *More than Just a Game*, 189.
50. [Isaacs](#), *Surviving in the Apartheid Prison*, 211.
51. [Isaacs](#), interview, August 31, 2012.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.

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