



Publication: Weekend Argus (Saturday) - Main
Title: Sport reflects SA society and drives social change
Publish date: 20 Jun 2026
Page: 8

Reach: 8389
AVE: R 40628.37
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BOOK

Sport reflects SA society and drives social change

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SPORT in South Africa has always been far more than mere recreation, competition, or entertainment. This is the arresting conclusion of *South African Sport and Nation*, a landmark new publication from the Jaap Durand Chair that shatters the comfortable, celebratory myths surrounding the country's playing fields.

Edited by Professor Hein Willemse, the book brings together 20 seminal papers first presented at a high-level seminar co-hosted with the University of the Western Cape's Faculty of Community and Health Sciences.

By drawing on the collective insights of leading scholars, sport historians, practitioners, and researchers, the collection offers a searing examination of how athletic pursuit has both shaped and reflected South Africa's tumultuous social, political, and cultural evolution.

Crucially, these writers challenge the romanticised, post-apartheid narratives that paint sport primarily as a magical lubricant for reconciliation and national unity.

Instead, the contributors expose sport as a fiercely contested arena where deep-seated arguments over race, class, gender, identity, and social justice continue to be fought. Several chapters trace the historical entanglements of athleticism and political power, demonstrating that sport functioned simultaneously as a cruel instrument of exclusion under colonialism and apartheid, and as a potent site of defiance during the liberation struggle.

The volume pays meticulous attention to the radical anti-apartheid sports bodies that weaponised the pitch for political change – most notably the South African Council



CONTRIBUTORS to a new book: *South African Sport and Nation*, expose sport as a fiercely contested arena where deep-seated arguments over race, class, gender, identity, and social justice continue to be fought. | AFP

on Sport and the National Sport Congress – alongside the devastating efficacy of the international sports boycott and the complex negotiations that eventually paved the way for democratic transition.

A powerful, recurring current throughout the work is the urgent reclamation of neglected histories. The authors actively exhume the buried experiences of black athletes, women, grassroots sporting communities, anti-apartheid activists, and political prisoners whose sacrifices were systematically erased from official record books.

Through the careful gathering of oral histories, community archives, and local memory initiatives, researchers are finally restoring historical visibility to marginalised

figures.

Yet the book's gaze is fixed firmly on the present and future, raising urgent alarms over the hyper-commercialisation of modern games, the distorting glare of media spectacles, and the encroaching dominance of corporate interests.

Against this commercial tide, the authors passionately defend sport as a vital public good inextricably linked to citizenship, healthcare, youth development, and social cohesion. True transformation, they argue, demands far more than the superficial tokenism of symbolic representation in national squads.

Sustainable, systemic change requires a radical redistribution of resources, ensuring equitable access to facilities, professional coaching,



SPORT in South Africa has always been far more than mere recreation, competition, or weekend entertainment, according to a new book: *South African Sport and Nation*, from the Jaap Durand Chair at UWC. | TIMOTHY BERNARD Independent Newspapers

and developmental opportunities across deeply entrenched racial, socioeconomic, and geographic divides.

Extending its scope into the twenty-first century, the book concludes by assessing how climate change and disruptive technologies will reshape the sporting landscape, demanding a future system that is both environmentally responsible and socially just.

Ultimately, *South African Sport and Nation* leaves an indelible impression of sport as an indispensable social institution.

By confronting past cruelties while engineering a fairer future, the playing field remains one of the most potent lenses through which South Africans must continue to negotiate the fragile realities of democracy, memory, and nationhood.



Prof Hein Willemse. | Supplied