

Darius Dhlomo: A Footballer in the Era of Apartheid

by Peter Alegi

This biographical study of Darius Dhlomo¹ begins to uncover the sporting past of a transnational and iconoclastic South African footballer and deepens our understanding of broader processes of change in South African football between the 1940s and the 1960s. In striking, even surprising ways Dhlomo's career brings to life key aspects of South African football's transformation from a local racially segregated amateur game to an increasingly mixed semi-professional sport linked to trends such as international tours and labour migration. Based primarily on two lengthy interviews with Dhlomo by the author, as well as archival documents, articles from the black press, and secondary sources, this biographical study of Dhlomo attempts to shed light on the extraordinary (yet largely hidden) sporting past of a transnational, polyglot South African iconoclast.

Childhood and youth²

Dhlomo was born in 1931 in the port city of Durban – the major outlet for the Witwatersrand's mining and manufacturing industries.³ He grew up in Baumannville, the city's oldest African township, located on the site of today's central railway station. Opened in 1916, it was a relatively privileged neighbourhood with many stable families – very unusual in a city where nearly 70 per cent of Africans were single male migrants working low-wage manual jobs. The Dhlomos were a Zulu speaking Christian, aspirant middle-class family. They worked extremely hard to pay for their children's mission schooling in the firm belief that Western education was the key to upward mobility. The Dhlomos' strategy was vindicated by their children's success in gaining access to the only "professions" Africans could aspire to due to the "job color bar":⁴ teaching, nursing and preaching.

In Baumannville, as elsewhere in colonial urban Africa, intense football games in dusty streets, sandlots and schools shaped the everyday lives of boys. «We started playing soccer because our parents couldn't afford buying shoes, football boots», Dhlomo told me; «so we started playing on the streets in the location barefooted. [It] was one of the sports we could do without having to pay any money!»⁵

As a teenager, Dhlomo liked to play goalkeeper. He did so with characteristic zeal, and in 1946 he joined Baumannville City Blacks.

Founded around 1939, City Blacks gained the eager affection of Baumannville's residents and quickly emerged as a contender in Durban football.

In 1947, at the precocious age of 16, Dhlomo's talent, fortitude and discipline between the goalposts earned him selection in Natal's representative team for the Moroka-Baloyi Cup – the most prestigious national football tournament for Africans.⁶

Football was neither Darius Dhlomo's only passion nor his only forte. He developed into a menacing boxer. Nearly six feet tall and weighing about 160 pounds, Dhlomo won the black national cruiserweight title (a category for men up to 40 pounds heavier than he), as well as the Natal middleweight title in the mid-1950s.⁷ Regrettably, the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act of 1954 prohibited inter-racial professional boxing matches (and sparring) so Dhlomo never fought against white boxers in South Africa.

Alongside football and boxing, Dhlomo cultivated a visceral love of music – particularly American jazz.⁸ «Duke Ellington and Count Basie and Nat King Cole: these were the models for us».⁹ Gramophones in the townships blasted recordings of Louis Armstrong and other American greats at weekend parties. Hollywood films heavily influenced black urban entertainment and sociability in Durban and elsewhere in colonial Africa.¹⁰ Hollywood films inspired Dhlomo and friends to form a vocal quartet. Music, like sport, carved out unusual possibilities for black self-improvement, raising self-esteem and acquiring social honour in a racist and appallingly unequal society.

«When I was still a young boy, eh, in the period of Apartheid, we had no other choice but to be creative», Dhlomo remarked. «And to be creative we pulled ourselves up, from the situation at the time of the Black American (...) The best way to survive is do something!»¹¹ That Darius Dhlomo came of age in the 1940s seems crucial. Fluidity, turbulence and uncertainty defined this important decade in South African history. «In no sense, other than the minds of its adherents, was the advent of Apartheid





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[in 1948] preordained», historians Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves noted recently.¹² The main reason for this flux was the Second World War.

The massive intensification of urbanization and the Allies' need for strategic and economic assistance led the South African government and the private sector to make some economic and social reforms. Most notably, «they eased the job colour bar, extended the industrial training facilities for Africans, raised black factory wages by a larger proportion than white wages, made Africans eligible for small old age and disability pensions, and increased the grant for African education and freed it from its dependence on African taxes. In 1942, they even relaxed the pass laws».¹³ For reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay, this reformist moment turned out to be “short and exceptional”, and by the time the Afrikaner National Party came to power in 1948 on a platform of Apartheid (“separateness” in Afrikaans), «the window of opportunity had closed».¹⁴

Maturity

As the white regime quickly enacted the legislative pillars of Apartheid, Dhlomo passed the high school matriculation (“matric”, or exit) examination. He weighed his options and, after completing his teaching training, took a teaching position at Lamontville High School.

The harsh and hostile environment of Apartheid education made teaching in black schools an enormous challenge, even for committed instructors like Dhlomo. «At the time every teacher had to give seven subjects. I taught geography of the world, history of the world, music, geography, physiology and hygiene, Zulu language», Dhlomo said.¹⁵ After school, Dhlomo went to football training or the gym.

Football's mass popularity did the most to boost Dhlomo visibility and social prestige in Durban. By 1950 he had made the switch from goalkeeper to midfielder. In 1952 the South African Football Association “national” team selected him for the inaugural Kajee Cup of the South African Soccer Federation – the pioneering anti-Apartheid football body founded the previous year. Thanks to the excitement and racial mixing of the Kajee Cup, the Federation went on to establish itself as the largest and most inclusive football organization in the country.

Dhlomo's rise to national prominence coincided with the “golden age” of the Durban and District African Football Association (DDAFA, founded in 1916). By 1959, when Durban's estimated African population climbed to 205,000, the association would count 264 teams and more than 5,000 registered players in its rank. Exceptional growth heightened competition and led to the develop-

ment of “hidden professionalism”, whereby top players received cash payments, jobs and other material benefits from African businessmen and community leaders. During this period, Dhlomo’s club, City Blacks, struggled to keep up with the Bush Bucks in Durban and Natal province.

The black popular press had a major role in stoking rivalries between clubs, including Bush Bucks and City Blacks. This age-old tactic not only sold plenty of newspapers but also responded to African fans’ voracious appetite for football. As black print media expanded in the 1950s with nationwide distribution of publications like *Bantu World* (*World* after 1956), *Drum* magazine and its sister weekly broadsheet *Golden City Post*, Durban clubs and players like Dhlomo were transformed from local celebrities into household names in the country’s teeming townships.

As the National Party zealously entrenched “total segregation” in South Africa in the 1950s, black footballers and sport administrators expressed a growing desire to play across racial and ethnic lines. This trend towards integration was not unique to football, as it manifested itself in black rugby and cricket, as well as in anti-Apartheid politics with the formation (in 1955) of the multiracial Congress Alliance.¹⁶ Dhlomo enthusiastically participated in racially mixed competitions. In 1956, he led the African “national” team in the Kajee Cup.

Dhlomo’s vigorous advocacy of racial integration extended to club football. In November 1956, for instance, he appeared before a DDAFA Appeals Board to challenge a decision to strip City Blacks of their first round points for having fielded three Coloured players. Dhlomo won the appeal by arguing that, (a) the DDAFA constitution did not preclude membership on the basis of race, and that (b) the Coloured players were duly registered members of his club.¹⁷

But at the same time that many African, Coloured and Indian (and a handful of white) athletes and sporting organizations came together to oppose segregation in sport, the South African government announced its first Apartheid sport policy. In a press statement on 27th June 1956, the Minister of the Interior, Dr T. Eben Dönges, stated that, «no mixed sport would be allowed within the borders of South Africa, that no mixed teams would compete abroad; that international teams competing in South Africa against white South African teams must themselves be all white, and that “non-white” organisations seeking international recognition must do so through the recognised white organisation in a particular sport».¹⁸ With the Dönges declaration, the South African state invaded the playing fields; for Dhlomo and other top black sportsmen and women, the windows of opportunity were now closed.

Europe beckons

Dhlomo was aware of an increasing number of Africans playing football in Europe in the 1950s, including three black South Africans: David Julius, Steve Mokone and Gerald Francis.

The widely publicized experiences of Julius, Mokone and Francis prompted Dhlomo to try his luck in European football. As a black man, he concluded that migration overseas was the only route to realize his athletic potential. Dhlomo wrote to clubs in Sweden and England to inquire about potential interest in him. There was none.

Dhlomo’s desire to leave Apartheid South Africa was also

Darius Dhlomo: un calciatore all’epoca dell’Apartheid



Questa biografia, attraverso la vita di Darius Dhlomo, calciatore prima in Sudafrica e poi in Olanda, boxer e musicista jazz, intende approfondire la nostra comprensione dei cambiamenti avvenuti nel calcio sudafricano e la sua trasformazione da gioco semi-amatoriale, rigidamente diviso per “razze”, a uno sport semi-professionale misto, legato a quei fenomeni globali, oggi estremamente evidenti, quali le migrazioni dei giocatori soprattutto in direzione dell’Europa.

Come la maggior parte dei giocatori africani, Dhlomo è passato dal gioco di strada anarchico nel quartiere al calcio organizzato nel suo caso presso i Baumannville City Blacks. Al di fuori del campo calcistico, durante gli stessi anni e la permanenza in Sudafrica, assorbì aspetti della cultura Afro-Americana attraverso dischi jazz e film hollywoodiani e rielaborò queste fascinazioni d’oltreoceano attraverso il suo gusto personale, i suoi bisogni e le sue aspirazioni.

Nella prima decade dell’Apartheid, questo portiere, divenuto poi centrocampista, divenne sempre più intollerante alla segregazione nello sport. Quando era ragazzo, capitanò la squadra della provincia del Natal e la sudafricana “Africans” in competizioni interrazziali come il Trofeo Singh e la Coppa Kajee. Il suo successo e la sua fama all’estero nella metà degli anni ‘50 non ne affievolirono l’adesione alle battaglie contro la discriminazione e i suoi effetti materiali e psicologici. Rifiutando d’insegnare all’interno del volutamente inferiore e diseguale sistema educativo bantu, e impossibilitato a competere liberamente con i migliori calciatori della nazione, a causa delle leggi e delle politiche dell’Apartheid, Dhlomo optò infine per la migrazione lavorativa in Europa, dove nel 1958 siglò un contratto con la Heracles Almelo nella “seconda divisione” olandese.

Con l’irrigidimento della “supremazia bianca” degli anni ‘60, Dhlomo decise di restare in Olanda anche dopo il suo ritiro dallo sport (calcio e boxe). Ritirandosi dallo sport, questo calciatore decise di lavorare come operatore sociale, mantenendo quindi un ruolo attivo nella comunità d’arrivo. Attraverso il racconto dettagliato di questa biografia sociale è possibile da un lato ricostruire un piccolo tratto del cammino verso la democratizzazione del Paese, dall’altro mettere in rilievo il ruolo attivo del Sudafrica nella globalizzazione economica e culturale del gioco del calcio.



motivated by a visceral disgust with Bantu Education – Apartheid’s educational system for Africans. Legislated in 1953 and implemented in the second half of the 1950s, Bantu Education brought African schooling (previously dominated by missionaries) under the control of the state. It imposed a basic curriculum that reflected racist ideology as well as the white minority’s need for a docile, cheap, yet adequately trained, black labour force.¹⁹

Dhlomo could not accept teaching an inferior curriculum that stressed «obedience, communal loyalty, ethnic and national diversity [i.e. racial and ethnic separation], acceptance of allocated social roles, piety and identification with rural culture».²⁰ «All my schooling was focused on being a teacher», Dhlomo explained, «But I said to myself: I can’t teach children things I know [have] nothing to do [with] their own development (...) I was just struggling at the moment with what should I do», Dhlomo continued, when in January 1958, «out of the blue came a letter from Almelo,²¹ in Holland, asking me if I was interested to come play soccer, professional soccer. I grabbed that as the motive why I had to resign from being a teacher».²²

Pleased about the impending move to the Netherlands, Dhlomo was also greatly relieved «because if I didn’t have any invitation from Almelo to come and play professional soccer then the police would have asked me: “why did you stop teaching?” Then I [would have] had to tell them “I’m against the rules of the government” and, you know what, then I wouldn’t be speaking to you now».²³

Before departing, however, Dhlomo had to apply for a passport – no easy task for a black person in Apartheid South Africa. There were two major hurdles to overcome in this bureaucratic process: a law that required blacks to pay a hefty £100 fee; and the government policy of not issuing passports to sportspeople whom it feared would pursue what Minister Dönges ambiguously defined as «subversive non-white activity abroad».²⁴

Adding to the pressure, Heracles, recently promoted to the second tier of Dutch football, wanted Dhlomo to arrive well in advance of the 1958-59 season due to start in August. Therefore time was of the essence. A series of benefit matches organized by both the Durban and Natal African associations raised the required funds. In February, Dhlomo duly submitted his passport application.

Months passed and the passport did not arrive.

As the interminable wait of 1958 dragged on, Dhlomo played the best football of his life. He won the Kajee Cup against the Coloureds (2-1) «in a clean and thrilling game» before 15,000 spectators at Athlone Stadium in Cape Town.²⁵

Finally, in November a breakthrough occurred in the passport ordeal. Dhlomo’s account of what happened is worth quoting at length: «At last my sister got a bright idea. She said, “Listen Darius. I am sick and tired of this waiting game. I’ve got a contact with a lawyer in Durban” (...) He was the secretary of the Party in Durban and the province (...) Within four days, I had my passport at home. Can you imagine that?».²⁶

Immediately, Dhlomo packed his suitcase and left Durban without saying goodbye to his parents and siblings. «I flew out on the same day I got the passport from the lawyer», he remembered. «I’m not going to wait (...) because you can never know what’s in the heads of those in Pretoria. They might say: “Oh, we made a mistake”».²⁷

Even more than escaping Apartheid’s racial oppression,

Dhlomo was tremendously excited about the opportunity to represent black South Africans abroad or, as he put it: «to show the people in Europe, in Holland, the black man [can] do something good». Migration to the Netherlands would turn out to be the turning point in Dhlomo’s life.

Sport migration and integration into Dutch society

The KLM flight from Johannesburg landed at Amsterdam Schiphol airport on Tuesday 11th November 1958. “Culture shock” unsettled him. It began immediately after disembarking from the aeroplane. Six members of Heracles’ board greeted him at the gate. One of the Heracles officials took off his winter coat and gave it to the shivering South African; then, once outside the terminal, the chairman took Dhlomo’s luggage and opened the car door for him. A white man acting with common courtesy and respect towards a black person seemed unimaginable to the African football star. «Am I dreaming or is this reality?», Dhlomo wondered.²⁸

Dhlomo’s labour migration was part of post-war European football’s gradual Africanization. Push and pull factors increased the number of African emigrants: North and West Africans tended to move to France; Mozambicans and Angolans to Portugal; and a few South Africans, Nigerians, and Ghanaians to England.²⁹ So Almelo residents were not alone in experiencing the novelty of an African playing for their hometown club. Given this historical context, Dhlomo acquired instant celebrity status in Almelo. But segregation and Apartheid had psychologically colonized Dhlomo: «Naturally, I was not used to, in South Africa, to undress with the white man in the same dressing room and to train with the white man», he recalled. This colonization of the mind extended to his performance on the training pitch. «I was still hesitating to make a body charge or to shoulder charge the white guys», Dhlomo told me.³⁰

Dhlomo felt comfortable competing in the second tier of Dutch football. His advanced technical, tactical and physical skills were well suited to this league. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Dutch football was startlingly unrefined, amateurish and tactically crude.³¹ Clearly, in the era before the emergence of Cruyff and Ajax’s “total football”, the Dutch game did not compare favourably with the elite leagues of England, Italy, Spain and France.

Having established himself as a footballer, in 1959 the indefatigable Dhlomo resumed his boxing career. Apparently, the enterprising trainer Theo Huisaandr had learned of Dhlomo’s boxing past and invited him to train at his gym in Rotterdam. The two men struck up a friendship. Dhlomo agreed to fight professionally with Huisaandr as his trainer and promoter, as long as the fights took place on Mondays – Heracles’ day off.

As he reached his early 30s, Dhlomo entered the twilight of his athletic career. He thought about life after professional sport. So Dhlomo polished his Dutch language skills at a local private school and made plans to enter a four-year professional programme in social work. He retired from professional football and boxing in 1962. Briefly put, in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa and massive state repression of anti-Apartheid activists and organizations, he decided to remain in the Netherlands.

Dhlomo integrated more deeply into Dutch society by marrying a Dutch woman and starting a family, as well as taking employment in Arnhem as a social worker. Dhlomo’s

migration and exile was tinged with irony: a black South African had fled Apartheid oppression and ended up as a social worker and community organizer among poor and working-class whites in the Netherlands. Dhlomo worked as a consultant for community groups until his retirement a few years ago.

Conclusion

Given that very few scholarly biographies (or autobiographies) of black South African athletes have been published, this work gives voice and historical agency to “ordinary” people.³²

Scholarly treatment of Dhlomo’s sporting past is important in its own right. Yet this essay also illustrates how it is significant and worthwhile because it deepens understanding of broader changes in South African football and society between the 1940s and the 1960s. Like most African players, Dhlomo graduated from anarchic street games in the neighbourhood to organized football with the area club: Baumannville City Blacks. Outside the football pitch, he absorbed aspects of African-American culture through jazz records and Hollywood films and then refashioned these transatlantic influences to suit personal taste, needs and aspirations. In the first decade of Apartheid, the goalkeeper-turned-midfielder grew increasingly intolerant of segregated sport. As a young adult, he captained Natal province and South African “Africans” in inter-racial competitions like the Singh Trophy and the Kajeje Cup. Dhlomo also staunchly defended the right of City Blacks to have Coloured members. His athletic success and countrywide fame in the mid-1950s could not blunt the material and psychological effects of brutal racial discrimination and financial struggles. Refusing to teach in the inferior and unequal Bantu Education system, and unable to compete freely with the best footballers in the nation due to Apartheid laws and policies, Dhlomo finally opted for labour migration to Europe, landing a contract in 1958 with Heracles Almelo in the Dutch second division.

With white supremacy hardening in South Africa in the 1960s, Dhlomo remained in the Netherlands after his retirement from professional sport. While an atypical case among contemporary black footballers, Darius Dhlomo’s career embodies key aspects of local football’s transformation from a segregated amateur pastime to a more racially mixed semi-professional sport linked to transnational trends. By telling this story more widely, this social biography makes a modest contribution to the ongoing democratization of South Africa’s historical record and highlights South Africans’ active role in the cultural and economic globalization of the world’s game.

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NOTES

1 - I would like to thank Jill Kelly for transcribing interviews and Chris Bolsmann for providing several images and helpful comments on earlier drafts of the essay. All interpretations are mine.

2 - This and other sub-headings are borrowed from Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*.

3 - This biographical information on Dhlomo comes mainly from two telephone interviews with the author on 12th February and 25th February 2003.

4 - Racial discrimination in employment was first legislated by the South African parliament in the Mines and Works Act of 1911 (revised in 1926), which excluded Africans from skilled (and better paid) labour in the mines. The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 extended the “job color bar” to other sectors of the economy (and also made African trade unions illegal).

5 - Interview with Dhlomo, 12th February 2003.

6 - For more details on the racially balkanized structure of South African football, see the introduction to this volume and Alegi, *La-duma!*

7 - Dhlomo was able to fight above his weight due to the lack of contenders in the heavyweight and cruiserweight categories in black South African boxing in the 1950s; see Fleming, *Marvelous Muscles*, p. 15. A scholarly history of black boxing in South Africa has yet to be written.

8 - On the connections between black American music and black South African music see, among others, Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*; Erlmann, *Black Stars*; and Masekela and Cheers, *Still Grazing*.

9 - Interview with Dhlomo, 12th February 2003.

10 - Ambler, *Popular Films and Colonial Audiences*; Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood*.

11 - Interview with Dhlomo, 12th February 2003.

12 - Dubow and Jeeves, *South Africa's 1940s*, p. 2.

13 - Thompson, *History of South Africa*, p. 181.

14 - Seekings, *Visions, Hopes & Views*, p. 61.

15 - Interview with Dhlomo, 12th February 2003.

16 - On black rugby see Odendaal, *The Thing That is Not Round: Black and Nauright, Rugby*, pp. 38-59; on black cricket see Odendaal, *The Story*; Desai *et al.*, *Blacks in Whites*; and Murray and Merrett, *Caught Behind*. On the history of political resistance, see Lodge, *Black Politics*.

17 - *Golden City Post*, 11th November 1956.

18 - Murray and Merrett, *Caught Behind*, p. 68.

19 - Soudien, *Teachers' Responses*, p. 213.

20 - Molteno quoted in Soudien, *Teachers' Responses*, p. 213.

21 - The letter was from the football club Heracles, based in the city of Almelo, in Holland. Heracles was founded in 1903, and changed its name to SC Heracles '74 in 1974, and then again to Heracles Almelo in 1998.

22 - Interview with Dhlomo, 12th February 2003.

23 - *Ibid*.

24 - Dönges quoted in Murray and Merrett, *Caught Behind*, p. 68.

25 - *Dhlomo leads second cup winning team*, in «Golden City Post», 31st August 1958.

26 - Interview with Dhlomo, 25th February 2003.

27 - *Ibid*.

28 - *Ibid*.

29 - For example, see Darby, *Out of Africa*; Poli, *Migrations and Trade*; Lanfranchi and Taylor, *Moving With the Ball*.

30 - Interview with Dhlomo, 25th February 2003.

31 - Winner, *Brilliant Orange*, p. 6.

32 - Some of the most insightful biographies of black athletes (none of whom are footballers) include: Nicholson, *Papwa Sewgolum*; Van Wyk, *Now Listen Here*; Osborne, *Basil D'Oliveira*. On the politics of historical production, see Minkley and Rassool, *Orality, Memory*; and Stolten, *History Making*. For a major government-backed initiative to rewrite South African history, see SADET, *The Road To Democracy in South Africa*.