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#### OREGON AND SOUTH AFRICA: THE SPORTING CONNECTION \*

Ву

#### Ed Ferguson

There was much news in the Oregon press this past summer about local opposition to a visit to South Africa by Oregon State University (OSU) wrestling coach, Dale Thomas. His plans to take a dozen OSU wrestlers to the "land of apartheid" from late August to early October was not known to the public until the African Students' Association at Oregon State University and the United States Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) wrote to the university president, Robert MacVicar, to protest the tour.

The proposed visit came as no surprise to local residents of Corvallis because Thomas was known as a person with longstanding ties to South Africa. His relations go back to the 1952 Olympics when he made contact with several wrestlers on the all-white South African team. 2 Since that time he had organized the Oregon Cultural Exchange Committee to foster international wrestling competition. The organization, founded in 1962, had made it possible for three Oregon teams to visit South Africa and three South African teams to visit Oregon by 1976.3 More recently, Thomas had hosted seventeen white South African "wrestling coaches" at his Oregon ranch in September 1980.4 Eight months later, in May of this year, he visited that country as a "special quest of the South African World Games" held to commemorate the 21st anniversary of the date South Africa severed its ties with the Commonwealth of Nations because of mounting criticism of its policy of apartheid by members of that body.

Many people interpreted the proposed visit to South Africa as simply one more opportunity for young Oregon wrestlers "to see the world." The opposition of the AAU was getting to be predictable, and, as in the past, it was interpreted by some as outside interference and restraint on the "freedom of the individual." Certainly it was interpreted that way by Dale Thomas who had been put on five-year probation by that sports body in 1973 for his participation in exchanges with South Africa which were in direct violation of international wrestling statutes enforced by the AAU. Thomas's response was expressed in these words: "I'm on a five-year suspension from the AAU, and working on a lifetime suspension. It's the greatest honor I've ever had." Roy Gault, sports editor of the Corvallis Gazette-Times who had once accompanied Dale Thomas's Oregon Cultural Exchange to South Africa as team correspondent, joined Thomas's criticism

<sup>\*</sup>Paper presented to the 4th Annual Conference of the Willamette Valley Racial Minorities Consortium, University of Oregon, 13 November 1981.

of the AAU in 1976 when he wrote in support of Thomas's program that "the AAU is trying to rob Oregon youngsters of the most educational program athletics have to offer. . . . Fortunately, Oregonians have so far spat in the AAU's eye." When the secretary in the Department of Physical Education at OSU heard of the opposition to this summer's visit, she commented, "He does it every year, and every year he gets a little static, and every year he goes anyway."

But the opposition included a new element this year which had not been heard from before. The African Students' Association (ASA) at Oregon State University, which represents over one hundred students from that continent, spoke out in opposition to the proposed visit. In a three-page letter to President MacVicar, which was made available to the press, the ASA President, Winnie Tay, listed four reasons for opposing it. I quote from his letter:

- 1) Oregon State University is being cast in a unique role as a result of these repeated violations of the United Nations boycott of South Africa. We doubt there are any other institutions of higher education in this country with such strong and visible sporting ties with South Africa. We are ashamed that such a shadow is being cast over Oregon State University. We can only say that it borders on a national collegiate sports scandal.
  - 2) The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid published its first "register of Sports Contacts with South Africa" on May 15th. The blacklist of athletes, coaches, and institutions will be updated periodically. If the visit to South Africa by the OSU wrestling team takes place then, we believe, we must be prepared to be the first university in this country to appear on that blacklist. It is likely that the students will appear on it too. Must they and this institution suffer such an ignominious fate because of Dale Thomas's ties with apartheid South Africa?
  - 3) It is our opinion that another consequence of the visit will be strong action taken within the PAC-10 universities against OSU this coming year. The visit will certainly receive broad publicity within those institutions and we would not be surprised to see boycotts of OSU teams.
  - 4) If the visit takes place we are inclined to

think that it will have a very negative impact on the future recruitment of athletes to this institution. What intelligent prospective athlete--especially those of African ancestry --would want to attend an institution where the athletic program has such strong ties with racist South Africa and is so oblivious to the sports boycott observed by so many international sports federations, national sporting bodies, and prominent individuals such as John McEnroe?

The African Students' Association also wrote letters to each of the university wrestlers planning to go to South Africa because the ASA believed they were unaware that the trip would jeopardize their sporting careers. Along with the letter, literature was included to inform them about the system of apartheid in South Africa and the reasons for the international sports boycott of that country. The wrestlers were invited to contact the African Students' Association with their questions or requests for further information.

The Oregon press picked up the story and featured it with the following headlines: "OSU African Students Blast Wrestling Tour"; 10 "For OSU Wrestlers, African Trip May Be Costly"; 11 "OSU Wrestlers May Lose Eligibility If They Go On Tour. "12 The New York Times, 20 July 1981, carried the story with the caption, "South African Trip May Jeopardize US Team."

Much to the surprise of those who assumed that this trip would take place as others had without any major programs, Oregon State University did not support it. The university had investigated NCAA rules in response to the AAU and ASA letters and it found that, indeed, the proposed trip would be in violation of existing statutes. <sup>13</sup> Had the students gone on the trip, they would have returned to be ineligible for competition and financial support. The university would not support the trip by seeking an exemption from the ruling. <sup>14</sup> The Oregonian informed its readers that "Coach Won't Take OSU Wrestlers to South Africa," while the Guardian ran the story with the eye-catching caption, "South Africa Taken to the Mat." <sup>15</sup>

Yet Thomas would persist, and by changing the composition of the team to include ex-wrestlers, he would be able to take advantage of South Africa's offer to pay full expenses for fifteen of them to travel and compete. Readers of the Oregon press were kept informed of the change in plans. "Thomas Still Plans South African Trip" was the caption for the story of 31 July in the Corvallis Gazette-Times. Thomas said that he was determined to take a team of wrestlers so they could compete and "learn the truth" about South Africa. The president of the South African Amateur Wrestling Federation, Johan Du Plessis, just happened to

be Thomas's houseguest at that time and he painted the condition of South African blacks in glowing terms when interviewed by the Corvallis Gazette-Times:

Blacks in the Republic of South Africa are better off economically and politically than in other African nations, and (we want) people to visit South Africa to see for themselves. . . . It is an opportunity for students to see for themselves what the black man has in South Africa, then they can come back and tell about the real situation. 17

Jan Botha, a student at OSU and the only black South African in Corvallis, took exception to Du Plessis's statements and sought an interview with the *Gazette-Times* to counter the misrepresentations. When interviewd, Botha said, "I strongly believe that a lot of statements he made are blatant lies." Botha denied that Africans in South Africa were better off than Africans outside South Africa: "Blacks in other African nations are independent, and blacks in South Africa are denied the democratic right that is taken for granted in other countries—the right to vote." Be contined to make the following points in the interview:

Jan Botha says Dale Thomas should stay at home. He says the Oregon State University wrestling coach's willingness to take teams to the Republic of South Africa is undermining efforts to bring racial equality to that country. . . . "Dale Thomas and his friends are trying to push the idea that people should go there and see the truth for themselves. From all I've seen, those wrestlers are going to be ushered around to places the South African officials want them to see. Certainly, if all they do is go to barbeques and Krueger National Park, they'll come away loving the country."20

The caption given by the Gazette-Times to the interview, "Don't Ignore the Boycott," conveys Botha's strong support of the international boycott of South African sports. "Cultural exchanges like Thomas's trip undermine the boycott," said Botha who concluded with the observation: "The isolation isn't just to change discrimination in sports. It's to change the whole government structure."<sup>21</sup>

I do not have the time to cover the many fine letters written to the press in opposition to Thomas's visit to South Africa, nor those written in support of his violation of the sports boycott of the apartheid system, but I should note that there were more of the former than of the latter. One outcome

of the continued exchange of viewpoints was that the issue became focused on one fundamental point: should sports persons ignore or honor the international sports boycott of South Africa? The sports section of the *Oregonian* printed pro and con letters on the issue under the highly misleading caption "Boycott, or Study Apartheid," which is certainly a false dichotomy to suggest that one can only study apartheid by ignoring the boycott. But that has not prevented those who ignore the boycott from using the argument.

The reconstituted group of wrestlers left with Dale Thomas for South Africa on 5 September. Roy Gault of the Gazette-Times gave this report of their departure:

Oregon State University wrestling coach, Dale Thomas, left Portland today en route to the Republic of South Africa with a ten-man wrestling team. The wrestlers are making the trip despite vows by the International Amateur Wrestling Federation that they will be banned from all future competition. <sup>22</sup>

Thomas gave Gault these departing words about their motives for going to South Africa:

They can all think for themselves and they all realize they'll be barred from international competition and from AAU competition in the United States. They believe in what they're doing, and I think that's why they're doing it. I feel what we're doing is right.<sup>23</sup>

The Gazette-Times came out editorially in support of the trip to South Africa by making this general argument: "When people get together, whether politicians or athletes, there is a better opportunity for understanding."<sup>24</sup>

The foregoing summary of the events of July through September is brief and much pertinent material had to be omitted. But I believe we now have enough of an outline of the main points to enable us to isolate the key issues which must be examined to arrive at a deeper understanding of the meaning of these continuing "cultural" wrestling exchanges between Oregon and South Africa. There are three issues which I would like to identify and clarify for the remainder of my presentation. They are:

- 1) The system of apartheid
- 2) The international sports boycott
- 3) The meaning of the boycott for Oregon

The System of Apartheid

The system of apartheid forms the basis of the South African state. It is neither a policy aberration nor an incidental part of the state apparatus: it is the foundation on which the structure has been erected. It is a system to create and perpetuate a cheap labor force necessary for an extremely profitable economy like that of South Africa. Black South Africans were dispossessed of their land and went to work for the white minority which reaped the profits. The black majority became impoverished and the white minority became enriched.

The polarization of South African society along these lines was formalized and perpetuated by racial legislation enacted by the white minority. It was a rather haphazard, but allencompassing, process before World War II, but in 1948 a concerted effort was made by the white minority to systematize the legislation to eliminate all loopholes as African resistance mounted against white minority oppression. Today the African majority--which constitutes over 80% of the total population in South Africa -- still does not enjoy any basic democratic rights under white minority rule: they cannot vote; they cannot own property; they do not have freedom of speech; they do not have freedom of assembly; they cannot marry a person of their choice; married persons are denied the right to live together; they cannot live in residential areas of their choice; they are denied South African citizenship. The list could be extended indefinitely, but the examples I have given are already a scathing indictment of the tyranny of the system. I suggest that those of you who would like to increase your understanding of apartheid begin by reading the recent publication, South Africa: Time Running Out, which is the Report of the Study Commission on US Policy Toward Southern Africa. 25

Apartheid in sports is enforced in South Africa through a variety of laws and regulations, as well as intimidation. In response to growing support for the international boycott of South African sports, the administration has initiated a series of purported changes in South African sports policy. These changes have only been of a token kind made to appeal to conservative and moderate sports enthusiasts abroad and required to maintain the basic structure of apartheid intact at home. In this regard it is worthwhile to note the evaluation made by the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid of the changes:

The Special Committee (Against Apartheid) as well as the non-racial sports federations in South Africa, and the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, have analyzed these so-called changes and pointed out that they are fraudulent manoeuvres by a regime that is irrevocably committed to racist domination. <sup>27</sup>

Assuming that changes in apartheid sport can be made more easily than elsewhere in society, one might expect a faster pace of change in that field. But the dilemma of the South African state is clear. Apartheid has evolved historically as a total system. Equality cannot be granted in one area without it being demanded in another. Since apartheid in the work force is absolutely essential to the high rate of profit sought out by multinational corporations and domestic capital, the state hesitates to act. It is highly unlikely that fundamental changes can be made in apartheid sports without bringing the whole system into question. The changes observed by the Oregon wrestlers during their whirlwind visit to South Africa in September are of a superficial nature and have not altered the basic structure of apartheid.<sup>28</sup>

The International Sports Boycott

The second issue which has not been fully explored in the debate over Oregon's sporting ties with South Afirca is that of the scope of the international boycott of South African sports. The policy of boycotting or isolating South African sports gained momentum in the 1960s for three reasons. First, sports to the white minority in South Africa are something of a second religion. Therefore, it was assumed, to isolate the white minority would induce some changes in apartheid sports. Second, the policy of "bridge-building" or collaboration with the sports administration of apartheid South Africa has proved to be bankrupt: it was the policy for all international sporting relations with South Africa for more than six decades during which time the system of apartheid was strengthened rather than altered. 29 Third, the independence of the African nations from colonial rule in the 1960s heightened the external demand for change in South Africa, while the newly independent African countries were unwilling to collaborate with a system not unlike the colonialism they had recently experienced.

These newly independent African nations emerged in the 1960s as one of four forces that made the initial push for an international sports boycott of South Africa. They joined with a second force, the African majority within South Africa, which was in the forefront of the struggle. Black, coloured, and Asian sports persons within South Africa began to form non-racial organizations within the country and call on the international sporting community to isolate apartheid sports. Many of those sports persons who advocated non-racial sports have been forced into exile where they now work to support the international boycott.30

The third force to advocate the isolation of apartheid sports has been black American athletes. Dr. Harry Edwards, a world class athlete who now teaches sociology at the University of

of California, Berkeley, and other black athletes were instrumental in the expulsion of South Africa from the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

The fourth force to join in the early support of the boycott movement were progressive sports persons, organizations, and individuals outside Africa and the black American community who were opposed to racial sports. The American Committee of Africa was a leading force in this group.

Through their combined activity in the initial phase of the struggle a new stage was reached by the late 1960s when political and sporting bodies at the international level formally adopted boycott resolutions or statutes. I would like to single out four of those organizations and explain the positions of each of them. They are the United Nations; the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa; the International Olympic Committee; and the International Amateur Wrestling Federation (FILA).

It was apparently in 1966 that the first sports boycott resolution was adopted by the United Nations when it declared that "all states should refrain from cultural and sports relationships with South Africa as long as apartheid and white supremacy prevailed in that country." A more comprehensive resolution, the "International Declaration Against Apartheid in Sports," was adopted by that body in 1977. In the document the General Assembly reaffirms its support for the Olympic principle that there be no racial discrimination in sporting activities and South Africa is condemned for violating that principle. Two of the remaining articles have particular significance for the sporting ties between Oregon and South Africa. They are Articles 2 and 5 which resolve that:

States shall take all appropriate action to bring about the total cessation of sporting contacts with any country practising apartheid . . . . (and) States shall take appropriate action against their sporting teams and organisations whose members collectively or individually participate in sports activities in any country practising apartheid or with teams from a country practising apartheid. . . . 32

In 1980 the General Assembly, by a vote of 131-0, again reaffirmed "the importance of a complete cessation of all sports exchanges with South Africa in the campaign for the elimination of apartheid."33 To encourage action on the resolution, the Special Committee Against Apartheid was requested:

. . . to continue its activities to promote the implementation of the resolutions of the United

Nations on apartheid in sports, and to encourage appropriate action against those who promote or participate in sports exchanges with South Africa. 34

Six months after the adoption of that resolution the Special Committee Against Apartheid had taken the first step toward its implementation by compiling a "blacklist" of sports exchanges with South Africa and a list of promoters active in collaboration with apartheid sport. The document was published by the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid as the Register of Sports Contacts with South Africa. 35 Neither the Oregon Cultural Exchange Committee nor Dale Thomas appear on the blacklist because it includes only those exchanges that took place between 1 September 1980 and 31 March 1981.

The African Students' Association made the register available to Dale Thomas and the student wrestlers so they would be aware of its existence and the fact that it would be updated and republished from time to time. We can presume that Dale Thomas and those wrestlers who accompanied him to South Africa in September will appear on the updated second blacklist.

What are the consequences of being "blacklisted by the United Nations"? The Special Committee Against Apartheid, in publishing the register, expressed its hope "that the register will facilitate appropriate action by governments, organizations and individuals in the campaign for the boycott of apartheid sports." The Supreme Council for Sport in Africa had already laid the groundwork to make the register effective at the time of its publication last May:

At its executive meeting held in Freetown, Sierra Leone, 17-20 December 1980, the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa urged all its member countries to take action against collaborators with apartheid sport, identified by the United Nations register, and in particular, to deny them entry into their respective countries.<sup>37</sup>

The register documents the action taken by several African countries to ban from local participation those individuals and organizations which appear on the blacklist. Those persons who persist in collaborating in apartheid sports are closing the door to their future participation in sports activities in the more than fifty independent countries of Africa.

The Supreme Council for Sport in Africa--the second of our international organizations to implement the sports boycott of South Africa--was founded by the then 32-member states of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1966. One of its major roles was to lead the struggle of independent African nations

against apartheid sport:

It is the firm decision of the Supreme Council to use every means to obtain the expulsion of South African sports organizations from the Olympic Movement and from International Federations should South Africa fail to comply fully with the International Olympic Committee rules. (Further), the Supreme Council invites all its members to subject their decision to participate in the 1968 Olympic Cames to the reservation that no racialist team from South Africa take part, and to ask all national Olympic committees to support the attitude of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa. 38

It was this resolution, supported by black American athletes, that caused the International Olympic Committee to withdraw its invitation to South Africa to participate in the 1968 Olympic Games held in Mexico City. 39

In 1976 the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa pursued its policy of boycotting South Africa in a more indirect, but equally effective manner. The decision was made to boycott the Montreal Olympics because of the participation of New Zealand which continued to be a primary collaborator with apartheid sports. Thirty countries honored the boycott.<sup>40</sup>

The third international body to take action against apartheid South Africa is the International Olympic Committee (IOC). That organization is one of the most conservative of all international sporting bodies, but it must be responsive to member countries, especially when they organize into blocs to pursue their objectives. The African nations are a case in point: they took the initiative to have South Africa expelled from the Olympic Movement because its policy of apartheid was in direct violation of the non-discriminatory principle on which the Olympic Movement was founded. Success first came to the African nations when the IOC barred South Africa from participation in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. The black poet and leader of the non-racial sports movement in South Africa, Dennis Brutus, was serving an 18-month prison term on Robben Island at the time he heard of the decision. In an interview with Richard Lapchick, he recalled the response of the African prisoners to the news:

It gave us great satisfaction. The cheering in the quadrangle at Robben Island where we were breaking stones, must have deafened the guards. 41

South Africa was again barred from the 1968 Mexico City Olympics primarily through the combined efforts of the African nations and black American athletes. The move to isolate South continued for another two years until the apartheid regime was expelled from the Olympic Movement in 1970.

It was in that same year that the fourth of our international organizations, the International Amateur Wrestling Federation (FILA), made its policy decision to implement the international sports boycott of South Africa. The policy of FILA and its US representative, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), is spelled out in the following extract from a letter written on 11 February 1976 by AAU President Joseph R. Scalzo to the Oregonian to clarify AAU opposition to wrestling exchanges between the Oregon Cultural Exchange Committee and South Africa:

The International Amateur Wrestling Federation (FILA), the body that governs and controls amateur wrestling in the world, including World Championships, Olympic Games and all international competition in wrestling, has a (1970) statute that specifically excludes South Africa from FILA and hence all international competition among member nations. . . . The AAU, as the United States representative to the international body comprising some 100 countries which subscribe to these same rules, is duty bound by the statutes of FILA to enforce the FILA regulations or itself be removed. . . . Because the stakes are so high, there is no way the AAU can permit the removal of our country's wrestlers from all international competition with FILA member nations, 100 strong, by violating this statute for a small exchange with a non-member country, namely South Africa.

The statutory basis for AAU opposition to the wrestling exchanges between Oregon and South Africa are made quite clear in that document.

The Meaning of the Boycott for Oregon

I have saved the third issue for my conclusion because it follows from the others and requires action. I would like to pose it in the form of a question: taking into consideration the foregoing information about the international boycott of apartheid sports, what course of action should we take?

First, we must ask and clarify for ourselves, "Who speaks for South Africa?" Is it representatives of the apartheid system who come to Corvallis and demonstrate their total ignorance of the conditions and aspirations of the African majority in their own country? I have in mind Johan Du Plessis, President of the South African Amateur Wrestling Federation, who claims "the world doesn't understand the improvements in interracial

relations that have taken place in his country."42 Or there is his associate, Dick Van Der Merwe, coach-organizer of the South African Amateur Wrestling Federation, who proclaimed as he left Corvallis for South Africa in 1980, "We have found the people of Oregon most friendly and full of understanding for us as sportsmen in South Africa."43 But when he's back in South Africa the public relations stunt is over. He writes to the Daily Barometer that African students in the United States "are puppets of communism, but too stupid to know it. "44 One week later he writes to the Corvallis Gazette-Times about Steve Biko, the young African leader of the South African Black Consciousness Movement murdered in police custody, and calls him a "common criminal . . . who died a deserved death, because he was a terrorist leader."45 What type of "truth" will these two individuals -- the main South African organizers for the wrestling exchanges--provide for our youth? The statements they make confirm my opinion that we can expect neither understanding nor knowledge from "cultural exchanges" with such persons. These men are the problem, not the solution.

What is the solution? The resolutions, declarations, and statutes are waiting to be implemented. We can no longer remain indifferent to collaboration with apartheid. The boycott must be honored. The time has come to sever the connection.

#### NOTES

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Corvallis Gazette-Times, 16 July 1981.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Oregon State University Barometer, 21 July 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Corvallis Gazette Times, 28 July 1976.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Ibid., 25 September 1980.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Oregon State University Barometer, 21 July 1981.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Oregon Journal, 27 January 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Amateur Wrestling News, 30 September 1972, and Corvallis Gazette-Times, 28 January 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Corvallis Gazette-Times, 16 July 1981.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Oregon State University Barometer, 21 July 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Register-General, 19 July 1981.

<sup>11</sup> Oregonian, 21 July 1981.

- 12 Statesmen-Journal, 21 July 1981.
- 13 Corvallis Gazette-Times, 21 July 1981.
- 14 Oregonian, 22 July 1981.
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  - 27 Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup>See observations of those who took September 1981 trip to South Africa in the *OSU Daily Barometer*, 11 November 1981.
- Richard E. Lapchick, The Politics of Race and International Sport: The Case of South Africa, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1975, pp. 18 and 197.
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- 31 Lapchick, The Politics of Race, p. 97.
- 32 Reprinted in the Journal of Sport and Social Issues, Las Vegas, University of Nevada, vol. 2, no. 2, Fall/Winter 1978.
- 33 United Nations, Resolutions and Decisions Adopted by the General Assembly During the First Part of its Thirty-Fifth Session, New York, U.N. Dept. of Public Information, 21 January 1981, p. 51. The United States was one of 15 countries that abstained.
  - 34 Ibid., p. 52.
- 35 United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, Register of Sports Contacts with South Africa.
  - 36 Ibid., p. 9.
  - 37 Ibid.
  - 38 Lapchick, The Politics of Race, p. 80.
- Richard Espy, The Politics of the Olympic Games, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979, pp. 101-103; Lapchick, The Politics of Race, pp. 101, 114, 130; and Ramsammy, Racial Discrimination in South African Sport, p. 55.
  - Espy, The Politics of the Olympic Games, pp. 157-58.
  - 41 Lapchick, The Politics of Race, pp. 63-64.
  - 42 Corvallis Gazette-Times, 5 August 1981.
  - 43 Tbid., 25 September 1980.
  - 44 OSU Daily Barometer, 9 October 1981.
  - 45 Corvallis Gazette-Times, 17 October 1981.