

Brutus used sports to fight apartheid

Poet encouraged, led others, to use sports to end oppression in South Africa

**by
Richard E. Lapchick**

Dennis Brutus died in his sleep Saturday in Cape Town, South Africa, at age 85. Between the early 1960s and the end of apartheid in South Africa, the architects of that most racist regime rarely slept, due to the force of major activists such as Brutus.

He was a renowned poet, but I knew Dennis as a freedom fighter who used sport as his weapon. In the course of our first meeting 40 years ago, Dennis Brutus changed my life.

Before Muhammad Ali had to fight for his title in the courts, before Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists at the Mexico City Olympics, before Bill Russell wrote "Go Up for Glory," before Billie Jean King served and scored for an entire gender, Brutus saw the power sport had to change society. He might have been the first sports social activist as he led the sports boycott of South Africa after escaping into exile in 1965.

"Invictus," the new Clint Eastwood film starring Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela, is giving the world a glimpse of life in apartheid South Africa. Under apartheid from 1948 to 1990, the less than 20 percent of South Africans who were white completely controlled the more than 80 percent who were black, "colored" (of mixed racial ancestry) or Indian.

People of color could not vote, own land, live where they wanted, move freely about the country or send their children to a decent school. Education prepared children solely to serve white people or the white economy. People of color could work only in the mines, on farms, in factories or as domestic servants.

To this day, it was the only regime that the world came together to isolate in peacetime. There were oil, trade, bank loan and sports boycotts. Oil can be smuggled and trade restrictions circumvented. Some banks made loans that kept the regime afloat. But there is no black market for games, and the sports boycott became South Africa's Achilles' heel.

Ironically, "Invictus" shows the power of sport to heal. President Mandela knew how the boycott of South African sport helped lead to his release from 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island and to the collapse of apartheid, and he channeled that power to bring together post-apartheid South Africa, rallying the nation around the 1995 Rugby World Cup even though rugby was an almost-all-white sport.

Brutus was actively involved in the South African Sports Association, which was a non-racial answer to all-white sports governing bodies. "Non-whites" could not represent the

country on national or international teams. SASA was raising its voice to get South Africa banned from international sports competition when Brutus was arrested for his role in 1963.

He escaped police custody and tried to flee the country by bus, but the driver forced him off. A policeman shot him in the stomach and left him bleeding on the pavement. A "Whites Only" ambulance came to get him, but when the medics saw that Brutus was "colored," they left him bleeding. He was sentenced to 18 months on Robben Island, where he served time with Mandela.

The international publicity surrounding his case helped awaken the world of sport to apartheid, and South Africa was suspended from the Olympics in 1964 and eventually thrown out of the International Olympic Committee in 1970. By then, Brutus was in exile in London, where he helped found the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee, which led the international fight to completely isolate South Africa in sport. The only remaining major countries that would allow competition with South Africa were Britain, France, New Zealand, Australia and, finally, the United States.

Brutus came to the United States 40 years ago as a visiting poet at the University of Denver, where I was a graduate student focusing on international race relations. I met him at a Friday evening reception held for him by George Shepherd, my dissertation chairman.

My two main passions were sports and fighting racism, but before meeting Brutus, I had not seen a way to combine the two. I went home and wrote a new proposal. I now wanted to study the effects of apartheid in sport in South Africa and the international response, comparing that to the Nazis in Germany, the Berlin Olympics and that international response. I did not sleep for two days. My original dissertation proposal on the racial factor in American foreign policy took six months to write and get approved. This one took three days to write and was approved that week by my committee, which eventually included Brutus.

That dissertation was published as a book in 1975, and Brutus encouraged me to found the American Coordinating Committee for Equality in Sport and Society in 1976. ACCESS became the coalition of United States-based groups boycotting South African sports teams. He was a professor at Northwestern at the time, and together we helped stage the first American sports protest against South Africa at the U.S. Open in Forest Hills, N.Y., in 1977. It was there that Arthur Ashe announced he was supporting the boycott after advocating sports contacts with South Africa for the previous few years.

Americans knew little about apartheid, and the American movement was small. Only 75 people demonstrated at that U.S. Open, but it put apartheid on the sports pages, and people in the U.S. began to learn about events such as the June 1976 Soweto uprising, in which more than 600 black school children were gunned down by the South African police, and the September 1977 murder in police custody of Steve Biko, the leader of South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement. On the sports pages!

In March 1978, the South African Davis Cup team was scheduled to play in the U.S. In early February, I went to Nashville, Tenn., to try to get the matches there canceled. When I returned home to Virginia, I was attacked in my college office late at night by two masked men. I sustained liver and kidney damage and a concussion, and "niger" (sic) was carved in my stomach with a pair of office scissors. Brutus was the first person who was called when I was hospitalized. As always, he was ready to support me and anyone who would fight the apartheid regime.

But his focus was sharp and pointed: The demonstrations against the South African team had to be mounted. This time, more than 2,500 people demonstrated outside the matches versus only 500 spectators inside the stadium. Brutus, who spoke with the fire of a fighter but with the eloquence of the poet he was, portrayed the evils of apartheid for the crowd. Few could have done it better.

We worked side by side for more than two decades until the end of apartheid. Along with writer Bob Lipsyte, Dean Richard Astro and myself, Brutus was part of the team that founded Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society in 1984. Together, we won the Jean Mayer Global Citizenship Award from Tufts University in 2000. It was the last time I saw him, as he lived his last years in his beloved South Africa. Knowing he was gravely ill, I reached out to him a few weeks ago to remind him of what he meant to me.

I was invited by Mandela to his inauguration in May 1994. After the inauguration, instead of attending the diplomatic parties in Pretoria, he flew by helicopter to Johannesburg to watch a soccer match between South Africa and Zambia. In his box at the game, I asked him, "Mr. President, why did you come here and not go to the parties being held in your honor?" His response was clear: "I wanted my people to know that I became president sooner because of the sacrifices made by our athletes during the years of the boycott."

I am sure that day the president already was thinking of what could be done with the 1995 Rugby World Cup. He knew the power of sport to affect social change. Few have used it better than Dennis Brutus.

My life was forever changed by knowing him.

December 31, 2009

Used by permission of Richard E. Lapchick and ESPN.com where this article was originally published.