

# RACE & ETHNICITY

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## *Umdlalo Wabantu: A History of Soccer in Pre-Apartheid South Africa*

This paper investigates the development and spread of organized soccer in black South African communities between 1910 and 1956, from the formation of the Union of South Africa to the apartheid regime's takeover of sport. The specific focus is on the major urban areas of Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. In South Africa, soccer has played a crucial role in creating the social and cultural world of black workers since the turn of the century. In the materially impoverished environment of pre-apartheid South Africa the game served as a conduit for popular leisure, cultural adaptation and political resistance, its popularity extending its influence beyond the boundaries of the playing fields, and linking people to the industrial economy and wider social processes of South Africa.

Participation in soccer brought together black workers from different social, economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. People who played soccer created a new social arena of interaction, conflict-resolution, and enjoyment in which they exercised greater autonomy from their overseers and employers. The creation of black teams—often outside white control—was an important release from the routine of work, a “feel good” therapy in a harsh world, as well as a source of status achievement and real, albeit limited, political empowerment. Soccer gatherings provided a forum for political discussions, and soccer grounds became the only area where thousands of black men and women could convene without fear of prosecution or arrest. Organized crime groups founded soccer teams to legitimize their activities. The development of a distinctive style of play and the incorporation of pre-industrial rituals and beliefs point to an “Africanization” of the colonial sport of soccer and its significance as a cultural practice linking the agrarian past to the industrial period.

Through the use of both archival and oral sources I investigate three main questions: How and why did soccer help to shape workers' group consciousness and identity, and their search for a new sense of place in the expanding cities? Was the adoption of soccer by Africans an example of cultural innovation? Was soccer a unifying force for all South Africans?

Investigating these questions helps to reveal significant, hidden aspects of the history of black people's lives, and thus broadens our understanding of this period of South African history. The paper also begins to correct the oversight that has left South

African soccer out of the field of sport history. The use of archival sources and oral data incorporates the voices of ordinary people into the narrative. This approach emphasizes the central role of black people's agency in shaping the world in which they lived and played, as well as the severe material constraints that defined the social context in which those experiences took place.