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21st Century Soccer Writing

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Edited by Tom Dunmore
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You don't run into a lot of Irish folks in Africa. Lots of Canadians, Norwegians, Japanese, and Australians, but very few Irish. Maybe that helps to explain why Sport Against Racism Ireland was among the groups who, during June’s Confederations Cup in South Africa, were quick to assume that predominantly black crowds were booing the lone white player on the South African national team, Matthew Booth."

In fact, the crowd was celebrating Booth by enunciating and elongating his name: "BOOOTH." The sounds are certainly easy to confuse. But the meanings could only be confused by anyone who hasn't spent much time in Africa.

During June's Confederations Cup I was actually surprised, and I suppose pleased, by how little race came up as a major issue. As the first African World Cup approaches, it seems as though the rightful focus is more on poverty and economic justice - the challenges and expenses of creating a massive sport spectacle when there are so many other needs raises complex questions about global inequality. But issues of race bring their own complexities, often wrapped up with issues of economic inequality, and the relationship between race and soccer is one of many interesting issues I suspect will get much attention in the run-up to World Cup 2010.

AZUNGU IN MALAWI

Beyond general intellectual curiosity, my amateur interest in race and African soccer is decidedly personal. During a two year Peace Corps stint between 1996 and 1998 I spent a season as the only white player in Malawi’s 400,000 Kwacha Lifebuoy Super League. Prior to Peace Corps, I had been a decent college soccer player, and played two years in the USL (then called the “USISL”) with some moderate success. But I was always a step too slow to think realistically about anything more. So when I joined Peace Corps I was mostly ready to accept the end of my playing days. But in joining Peace Corps I ended up with something of a choice between an assignment in Tonga and an assignment in Malawi, and the fact that Tongans prefer rugby helped me make my decision. In the back of my mind I hoped I might find a way to tap Africa’s passion for soccer.

After settling into my work assignment at the Malawi Institute of Education I stumbled into a connection with the University Football Club (UFC), a mediocre team in the top Malawian league comprised of a mix of students and affiliates. When I approached the team with an interest in trying out, I made it a priority to try and moderate any expectations. Having watched some ‘Super League’ games I thought I was a good enough player to contribute, but knew I was not good enough to be a star. Unfortunately, being an “Azungu” (the ubiquitous term in Malawi referring primarily to “Europeans”) in Malawi almost inevitably meant confronting expectations, often having to do with wealth and ability, that arose from a challenging mix of colonialism, satellite TV, and global economics. Though such expectations are infinitely problematic and frustrating, on average they tend to be excessively generous to the Azungu. Far from experiencing derogatory racism, I suffered from people thinking too much of me.

Though I don’t know much about Matthew Booth, I suspect he has also had more of people thinking too much than of people thinking too little in his experiences as a white man playing soccer in Africa. With a bit of online searching you get the idea that Booth has led a pretty interesting life: raised in Cape Town, coming of age during the end of Apartheid, working with a human rights lawyer to challenge an early contract with Cape Town Spurs (according to the career history on his own website), representing South Africa everywhere from Malawi to Georgia to Trinidad and Tobago to Burkina Faso, marrying
a stunningly beautiful (black) South African model, spending the bulk of this decade in the Russian Premier League, back in South Africa for the run-up to the World Cup. I certainly suspect that the man has some good stories. But not having access to those stories, the only thing I really know is that most (though certainly not all) South African soccer fans seem to enjoy watching Matthew Booth play.

My own experience was a bit less certain. The Malawian Super League was an officially amateur affair – the type of league where all the teams are sponsored by companies (Bata Bullets were sponsored by the shoe company) or government agencies (Telecom Wanderers were sponsored by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications) that provide cushy jobs for really talented players, and some meal money for everyone else.

It was, however, the only league in the country of any significance and had a regular place of prominence in the sports news. My UPC team was a minor club and though my appearance on their roster did garner a vague article or two about an American training for the Super League season, I mostly came as a surprise to the few hundred fans attending most of our games.

Our home field, the Zomba Community Center Ground, was a dusty brick and tin job with a few concrete benches and most of the seating on a hillside. In my first few games I caused a bit of a stir – playful jibes and excited laughter met my lumbering attempts to join in the team’s rhythmic warm-up runs. After kick-off, the first minutes set the tone for the rest of the day: during one or two games I held my ground defensively and made smart decisions with the ball – the hillside would come alive with cheers. More often, however, my lack of pace would get exposed and the hill would turn on me – a rollicking four beat chant of “Azungu out! Azungu out!” was more than enough to send the coach scurrying for a halftime substitution.

The team overall had more downs than ups. My Malawian teammates were good guys, but the season was frustrating for everyone and they never quite knew what to make of me. If anything, they gave me too much respect. As the frustrations mounted, it turned into a lonely time for me. Being Azungu brought curiosity and deference, but it also brought a sense of isolation that was the hardest thing about my time in Africa.

THE NEW MARK FISH?

A year later, still trying to make sense of it all, I sat down with my Malawian teammates to get their perspectives (and to try my hand at the type of field research I was planning to pursue in graduate school). I mostly asked them about their own experiences with soccer, but I also slipped in a few questions about what had happened to me. I was reminded of some of these conversations when reading about Matthew Booth. My teammates reinforced for me that among many Malawians, “People always think that, just because he is a white player, and everywhere you see that, for example, major leagues of the world are always dominated by white people...hey, we have a savior here.”

The point is that in my experiences with soccer in Africa white players are much more likely to be the targets of undue admiration rather than undue derision. Though this may have been particularly true in Malawi (during a more recent stint in Angola I found much less deference to “Europeans” and a good reminder that Africa is not just one place),

I’ve been around enough to know race-based resentments among black Africans are much less likely to turn into personal vendettas than you might think. In my case, even when I proved something of a disappointment on the field, Malawians loved to watch me play and some even cheered me with the approving moniker “Fish!” – a reference to the South African center back Mark Fish who was his generation’s Matthew Booth. Fish was a tall and flamboyant center back who made 82 appearances for his country during a career that included professional stops with Jomo Cosmos, Orlando Pirates, Lazio, Bolton Wanderers, and Charlton Athletic.

In fact, one of my favorite moments during my playing days in Malawi came nowhere near the field – riding in a car stopped at a somewhat frightening police check point when travelling through a small Malawian town an hour from my home, a group of boys playing on the side of the road recognized me and started chanting “Fish! Fish! Fish!” The police waved me through. It may be relevant to note here that I look absolutely nothing like Mark Fish. He has the swarthy look of a Mediterranean sea captain, while I look more like a pasty Minnesota
farm boy. But we were both white guys playing soccer in Africa, and for the Malawians that was close enough. It was also cause for celebration.

Of course, my own minor version of celebrity during my season in the Malawian Super League was nothing in comparison to Mark Fish in South Africa. His story, along with that of his 1998 World Cup partner in the central defense of Bafana Bafana Lucas Radebe, was framed by at least one book as the story of the new South Africa (Madiha’s Boys: The Stories of Lucas Radebe and Mark Fish). He has also been the subject of a 2007 academic analysis by Chris Bolsmann and Andrew Parker titled Soccer, South Africa and Celebrity Status: Mark Fish, Popular Culture and the Post-Apartheid State.

Bolsmann and Parker argue that Fish generated an enthusiastic following in South Africa at least in part as a reaction against racism: black soccer fans appreciated Fish both for his talent and for his willingness to counter the racial norms of apartheid that artificially segregated blacks to soccer and whites to rugby and cricket. Ironically, due to his being a white soccer player Fish represented the possibility of a new South Africa that did not depend on racial categories.

Watching the Confederations Cup from a distance it seems to me that Matthew Booth has taken up this mantle and symbolic importance. South Africa certainly struggles with issues of race and racism, as do most countries in the world, but South Africans also take well-deserved pride in the possibility of being a true “Rainbow Nation.” The soccer field offers one of many symbolic spaces towards this possibility, allowing white players to be appreciated and celebrated because of how they contribute to an admirable ideal.

Of course, South Africans along with Africans of all nationalities also just appreciate good soccer. On a trip through Uganda and Kenya in the summer of 2008 I was endlessly amused by tributes to teams such as Manchester United and Chelsea in the most unlikely places.

The fishing boat painted with the Man Utd logo in rural western Uganda had little to do with race and much to do with the satellite television access to Premier League highlight packages. The shanty-town school chalkboard in Nairobi covered with homage to Frank Lampard and John Terry seemed mostly to be honoring the best talent money can buy.

This ultimate appreciation for the game itself is what finally proved my own downfall during my time in the Malawian Super League. The pace of the games was frenetic – there was much skill and quickness to admire. But the tactics were what you might expect of a country where most players learned the game on their own without access to much coaching. My robotic American style of play was a poor match, and being white just confused the matter. As one of my teammates reflected:

“People were just expecting too much, because the greatest players from Europe, America – that is how they were rating you, they were expecting that. They didn’t know you. When people don’t get what they are expecting, they take away.

“The mere fact that you are Azungu, I was noticing players on the other teams, when they get the ball, they want to actually dribble the Azungu so they can go back and say – Jack, I dribbled the Azungu. The feeling of most Malawians is that the Azungu is superior, so if they get to dribble an Azungu, yeah!”

Despite the confusion I persisted for months, hoping that I might adapt while my teammates and fans adjusted their expectations. But things mostly just got worse. I finally gave up on a bright November day. We were playing the Blue Eagles (sponsored by the Malawian Police) at the Lilongwe Stadium, a crumbling hulk of cement risers filled with a few hundred fans. The pitch, though among the best in the league, was poached-marked and rough.

Both teams were in the bottom half of the table, and my presence seemed to offer the only small flutter of enthusiasm among the fans and the Blue Eagles. But after a poorly timed tackle in the second half, I came up with a bloody knee that caught the eye of a Blue Eagles player. He froze briefly with a look of uncertainty. Then, with great enthusiasm, began excitedly pointing and cackling. Look everyone, the Azungu bleeds! Suddenly flesh and blood, a mere moral who can’t even make a clean tackle, I somehow knew I was done.

I stuck around UFC for the rest of the season, helping out with practices and games however I could. But in retrospect I imagine the most important thing I did that season was to offer a different type of Azungu footballer to Malawians familiar primarily
with Mark Fish and the EPL: the not very good Azungu. In the context of June's Confederations Cup, I offer this as a reminder that there are some white players that deserve to get booed. But Matthew Booth isn't one of them. Fortunately, African soccer fans are smart enough to figure that out on their own. p5

* The Sport Against Racism Ireland claim was described by Jere Longman in a June 27th 2009 New York Times article (“Scrutiny for South Africa Year Before World Cup”), and notes the “group later acknowledged its mistake.” It seems that several other reporters and observers made the same mistake.