‘More than just a game’ is an oft-used cliché referring to the socio-political impact of sports in our current world. While in Europe countries may have ceased going to war with each other, rival European soccer fans have not. While the world no longer fears the might of the British army, European security groups worry at the prospect of a different kind of ‘invasion’, that by tens of thousands of supporters of English clubs as they trek across Europe in support of their teams as they battle it out for coveted European soccer trophies. Soccer is not alone. International cricket has in the last 20 years witnessed the emergence of a new British army, the so-called ‘Barmy army’ of English cricket followers who flee the European winter in pursuit of their national team as they take on the ‘old Empire’ of India, Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The British are not alone in their fanaticism as rival Egyptian soccer fans recently demonstrated so fatally. More than just being a game, it seems that to some of those fans soccer is more a matter of life and death.

But there is a whole other side to the power of soccer. In 2010 to coincide with the soccer World Cup in South Africa, the Durban-based NGO, ACCORD (the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes), put out a special journal entitled *Playing for Peace* which presented accounts of soccer as an instrument in Africa for peacemaking, reconciliation and the forging of national identities.¹ Drawing on the experiences of Rwanda, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Algeria, it documented how the game has been used as a positive force, contributing sometimes decisively to ending the deadly
spirals of hate and killing. Not in and of itself, of course. It was rather soccer’s potential which skilful and visionary figures, politicians and players like Didier Drogba in the case of Ivory Coast, recognised and tapped into in order to effect profound changes and hasten the end to hostilities. Of course, in the wrong hands the opposite could be the result, witness the so-called ‘soccer war’ between Honduras and El Salvador following a 1969 world cup qualifying match. The war lasted only 24 hours but shamefully and tragically it cost over 2,000 lives, a war crime for which no one was held to account (Kapuscinski 1991).

To these accounts of soccer as a liberating and positive force, we can now add the inspiring story from the apartheid era in South Africa told in this book under review. Though published in 2008, it has received too little attention, but such is the fate of history in this age of the internet. It is the extraordinary tale of how thousands of political prisoners on Robben Island formed the Makana Football Association (MFA) in the mid-1960s and used soccer not only to reclaim their humanity but also to undermine apartheid.

The story premiered as a docudrama in Cape Town in November 2007, coinciding with the draw for the World Cup’s qualifying rounds. The film of the same name as the book drew on eleven years of meticulous research by the American historian, Chuck Knorr. Assisted by the movie’s scriptwriter, Marvin Close, Knorr’s work is in this reviewer’s opinion, the most important new and wholly original work of apartheid-era history to emerge from the post-apartheid academy. It is both heart-warming and inspiring in telling a story which, apart from the prisoners themselves and their warders, nobody knew – or even imagined. Who could have thought that the game of soccer could have thrived in that grim place – described by the authors as ‘horror incarnate’ (2008:259) – in that grimmest of apartheid’s decades, the 1960s?

The Island of the 1960s was, as the authors tell, presided over by largely arrogant white supremacist officials to whom the impulse to hurt and humiliate blacks was ingrained. Nonetheless, week after week from 1964, the ‘politicos’ demanded to be allowed to play soccer. A request routinely denied until suddenly in 1967 the authorities relented. It seems that they had gotten tired of the same tedious demand and thought that once agreed, the prisoners would be unable ‘to get their acts together’; and the desire to play the game would dissipate or collapse in a welter of recriminations. They clearly had no idea of the talents of those with whom they were dealing – future presidents and senior ministers of a ‘new’ South Africa, as well as a future constitutional court judge in the form of the PAC’s Dikgang Moseneke.
Mosekene was the first chair of the MFA and as a teenager of only 15 years of age at the time of his incarceration in 1963, the youngest of the Island’s political inmates. His right-hand assistant was another young man, the ANC’s Indres Naidoo, later an MP in the post-1994 Parliament. Recognising his brilliance, it was Naidoo who proposed Mosekene for the chair position. Sadly this early example of inter-party cooperation between two ideological rivals did not rub off on another inmate and an active soccer player in the MFA league, Jacob Zuma, who has twice refused to elevate Mosekene to the position of Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court, a post for which he is widely seen as the best qualified of the current bench.

The MFA spawned a league of many different teams, some formed along party and or ideological lines and others which recruited players irrespective of their affiliations or political leanings. Run strictly according to soccer’s international governing body’s (FIFA) rules, the MFA presided over a network of working groups, including referees’ and disciplinary committees. While doing hard labour in the quarries, the prisoners may have been powerless automatons, but in their cells while debating matters relating to soccer and the MVA, they reclaimed an element of control over their lives. There they debated for hours, planned upcoming fixtures, deciding on disciplinary matters while all the time keeping meticulous records. That was the task of a group of prisoners dubbed ‘the archivists’. And what a job they did.

In 1993, 27 years after the formation of the MFA, the then Director of the University of the Western Cape’s historical archive collection, the Mayibuye Centre, Dr Andre Odendaal, directed a new visiting researcher, Chuck Knorr, to a collection of 70 boxes labelled simply ‘Robben Island: sports’. The rest is history, or rather, this wonderful volume. For Chuck, an avid sports historian, it was a totally unexpected bonus. ‘At that time I was totally unaware that there had been any sports on Robben Island. If anyone had mentioned the two words together, I would have said that is an oxymoron’ (2008:259).

Three points can be made on this text and on the impact of the MFA on South African political life and the 1990s transition in particular. One, and I have already alluded to this above, is the fact that the MFA was able to transcend the great political divide which afflicted the South African liberation movement post-1960. With the PAC reduced to a political smidgen today, it may be hard to remember the bitterness of the schism which emerged in 1959 with the breakaway of the so-called ‘Africanists’ from the ANC. It
was deep to the point of paralysis when it came to issues of a united front in exile. Yet, on the Island, the ANC and PAC talked and worked together; some even played soccer in the same team. It would not be fanciful to suggest that soccer contributed much to defusing the tensions between the two parties, laying a basis for a future where they could cooperate and compromise.

The second relates to the extraordinary chemistry which developed over time between the prisoners and their warder captors. The extraordinary friendship between Nelson Mandela and his gaoler, James Gregory, has been documented (Gregory 1995). Another of Mandela’s warders, Christo Brand, took a job in the Robben Island Museum after 1994. Even more extraordinary was how the warders began to identify with teams in the Island’s leagues, identifying too with key team members. They watched games avidly and they cheered and shared the triumphs of their favoured teams. In the process, they became part of the soccer scene and the players became in their eyes mere mortals, sportsmen more than ‘terrorists’. The game demystified ‘the other’ on both sides of the apartheid divide. It was a blow, albeit a small one, to a National Party authority on the Island which clung to notions of the ‘herrenvolk’.

Finally, mention needs to be made of the humanising power of the Island’s soccer, its therapeutic effect. Time and time again the prisoners interviewed in this study mentioned that it was the soccer that kept them going, kept them sane, gave them a sense of self worth. Sentences became less one of years to be served than soccer seasons to be relished. Little wonder then that in 2007 FIFA awarded the Makana Football Association associate membership status in recognition of its role in keeping alive the hope that one day South Africa would change and that the Robben Islanders would one day become the rulers of South Africa. As this major contribution to South Africa’s recent history so clearly shows, soccer played no small role in ensuring that that hope, once so distant, in May 1994 became a reality.

Notes
1. An earlier version of this review appeared in that publication, Sellstrom (ed) 2010:50-52.
2. According to the authors, the name Makana was chosen because ‘it combined the history of the island with pride in their own heritage’ (2008:72). The prisoners knew it would mean nothing to the warders but Makana’s story of resistance to colonial rule in the eighteenth century, his banishment to Robben
John Daniel

Island, and his death by drowning while trying to escape inspired them. His legend, they felt, was ‘a fitting one for their new soccer association’ (2008:72).

3. Zuma captained Rangers, one of the Island’s top teams. A defender, Zuma is described in the text as as ‘uncompromising on the soccer pitch as he was in the political arena’ (2008:97).

References
