

AURORA CRICKET CLUB: SHIFTING THE GEOGRAPHY OF APARTHEID

by Christopher Merrett

FIFTY years ago, on 13 October 1973, two cricket teams met in the local Pietermaritzburg league in Alexandra Park. One of them, Aurora, comprised players from different ethnic backgrounds.¹ Among the spectators were at least ten police officers, some of them photographing cars; plus their Pietermaritzburg commander, Colonel J. Pieterse. The government had gone to the trouble of issuing Proclamation R228, which it imagined would prohibit the match.² The apartheid regime was at its most confident.

Aurora claimed innocently that they were simply interested in cricket, but there was of course a political purpose. The object was a threefold challenge: the law, whose control of the use of public open space was contestable; National Party apartheid policy (apartheids-beleid); and long-accepted colonial custom regarding segregation, always rigid in Natal. It was claimed by most whites, erroneously, that these factors ruled out mixed sport. Many of those involved with Aurora were lawyers with a contrary view. One of them, John Didcott, famously advised a strategy to avoid trouble: bowl brilliantly, bat badly – and [don't] stay for tea.

They opted to challenge local white cricket administrators who, by and large, proved amenable, having long sheltered behind various excuses; including the idea that conservatism was apolitical. The municipality showed no inclination to intervene arguing that sports teams themselves shouldered the responsibility to obey the law. But Minister of Sport Piet Koornhof attacked Aurora players as terrorists and



Proclamation R228, 1973

agitators, although they were acting strictly within the law. He was boxed into a complicated corner, trying to limit mixed sport while keeping international links alive; and above all reassuring National Party verkramptes that apartheid policy was sacrosanct. But the law, not government policy was sovereign.

His problem with the law was that the Group Areas Act (GAA, 1950 and subsequently amended) was ill-equipped to deal with recreational use of space. The main issue for mixed sport lay with the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) whose provisions could be avoided. Koornhof's proclamation in terms of the GAA referred to use of space over 'a substantial period of time'; but was shoddy law, void for vagueness with many unintended consequences (nannies in white parks or black caddies, for instance). The Broed-

erbond argued that South African sport was being subverted by foreigners.³ There was no evidence of this except that the generation that founded Aurora were probably influenced by the European and American student movement of the 1960s. On 3 October three Aurora players, all lawyers, were summoned to Pretoria to meet Koornhof, but they had no mandate so nothing transpired.

Late in the day in Aurora's first league match against the local university, Warrant Officer Boucher from the Group Areas Department asked the Aurora captain, Gopaul Manicum, if he had a permit. The answer was negative, so Boucher started taking names of players of both sides, the young scorer and his sister, and a dozen spectators.⁴ The police brief was 'onopsigtelik observasie' (unobtrusive observation) and in their opinion they 'exercised tact' (taktvol opgetree).⁵ They attempted to seize the scorebook at close of play, but Aurora refused to relinquish it without a warrant.⁶

It was one of apartheid's more farcical events. No prosecution ensued, nor was there any real chance of the farce ending in Aurora's banning, which would have been under the Suppression of Communism Act (1950).⁷ So, the team played on in the white league. What they had achieved was to break South Africa's social geography that prevented ethnic mixing for recreational purposes. Economic mixing had a long expedient history, but once social taboos were broken even apartheid law was no solution as Koornhof had found. This was especially important as the government was trying to establish ethnic, self-governing urban areas to mirror the bantustans of rural South Africa. In Pietermaritzburg defined Indian and coloured cities

would be overseen by local advisory committees. Aurora's move signaled that Pietermaritzburg was no longer a white city; nor would other groups consent to its racial fragmentation.

Aurora had correctly assessed the limitations of the law and its loopholes, and the fragility of custom; and seized the moment with South Africa looking for international approval amid a growing boycott movement. The early 1970s were a significant time for political change often characterised by the Durban moment: strikes that led to independent, non-racial trade unions flavoured by Steve Biko's black consciousness and Rick Turner's ideas about participative democracy.⁸ But the actions of Aurora also signal a Pietermaritzburg moment framed by municipal approval of limited desegregation, especially the Natal Society (public) Library.⁹

In 1978 Aurora took an even more significant step by exiting white cricket, which showed no real commitment to change except a return to international competition despite a short episode of so-called normal cricket. This showed that multiracial sport could not be grafted onto a racist society. Aurora joined the non-racial Maritzburg District Cricket Union (MDCU). This was affiliated to the South African Council on Sport (SACOS), coincidentally founded in 1973 to oppose discrimination in sport, but now after the Soweto Uprising of 1976 openly anti-apartheid. This move cost Aurora a few members unhappy about the shift from white space to poor, and often non-existent, facilities in unfamiliar areas of the city. But it positioned the club unequivocally as apartheid began to unravel. Its members made multiple contributions to non-racial sport including advanc-

ing the boycott of mercenary tours in the 1980s.¹⁰

Apartheid's supporters were correct: mixed sport was the thin end of a very thick wedge that was to emerge in 1990. Perhaps Aurora's greatest achievement was to shed complacency, identify opportunities, and act decisively in pursuit of a cause – first multiracial, then non-racial sport. On a far grander scale this was the essence of the Durban strikes and then the schoolchildren's uprising in Soweto; making the 1970s a decade of profound change in South Africa that is often overshadowed by the more dramatic events of the 1980s.

NOTES

- 1 The history of Aurora Cricket Club is well documented: Mike Hickson, 'The Aurora Cricket Club and South African cricket since isolation' *Reality* 11(4) 1979, pp. 7–9; Christopher Merrett, 'Aurora: the challenge of non-racial cricket to the apartheid state of the mid-1970s' *International Journal of the History of Sport* 18(4) 2001, pp. 95–122; Christopher Merrett, 'Aurora Cricket Club' in *Pietermaritzburg, 1838–1988: A New Portrait of an African City* edited by John Laband and Rob Haswell (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, 1988), p. 248; Christopher Merrett, 'Bowl brilliantly, bat badly – and don't stay for tea' in *Sport and Liberation in South Africa: Reflections and Suggestions* edited by Cornelius Thomas (Alice: National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre, University of Fort Hare, 2006):, pp. 49–65.
- 2 Proclamation R228 was headed 'Declaration that the provisions of the Group Areas Act 1966 relating to the occupation of land or premises shall apply also to persons present in or upon any land or premises'. The proclamation did not specifically mention sport. Some legal opinion reckoned that the loophole identified by Aurora might have been further widened.
- 3 Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, *The Super Afrikaners* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1978), p. 247. The years following 1968 were a 'hallucinogenic kaleidoscope of political, cultural, social and environmental radicalism' characterised by the slogan 'Be realistic, demand the impossible!' (Timothy Garton Ash, *Homelands: A Personal History of Europe* (London: Bodley Head, 2023), p. 103).
- 4 At this point Aurora were 41 for 6, replying a University of Natal score of 209 for 8. The twelve-year-old scorer was John Rayner.
- 5 C.A. Buys, 'Polisie optrede: Aurora krikiet wedstryd 13.10.1973' (SAP ref. 25/1/2). State Archives, Pretoria, Department of Sport & Recreation MS 6/5/9 v 2.
- 6 Unhappily, the scorebook has not survived.
- 7 This Act deemed many opponents of the government 'communist' even though they had not the slightest connection with the Communist Party of South Africa, nor communism. However, it is difficult to see how even the National Party could have officially labelled a cricket club communist.
- 8 Richard Turner, *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980); Billy Keniston, *Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013); Ian M. McQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements under Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018).
- 9 Tony Hooper and Christopher Merrett, 'When professional ethics and politics collide: libraries in a time of apartheid, part one' *Innovation* 62, pp. 16–32; Tony Hooper, 'The Natal Society Library from 1974 to 1980: reflections of a chief librarian, part 1' *Natalia* 50 (2020), pp. 32–43.
- 10 There were seven of these, including that of the Arosa Sri Lanka team in 1982 that was a particular target for the MDCU. See Brian Crowley, *Cricket's Exiles: The Saga of South African Cricket* (Cape Town: Nelson, 1983), p. 140; *Survey of Race Relations* 1982, p. 592 and 1983, p. 644; Christopher Merrett, 'Cricketing mercenaries' [letter to the editor] *Natal Witness*, 29 October 1982.