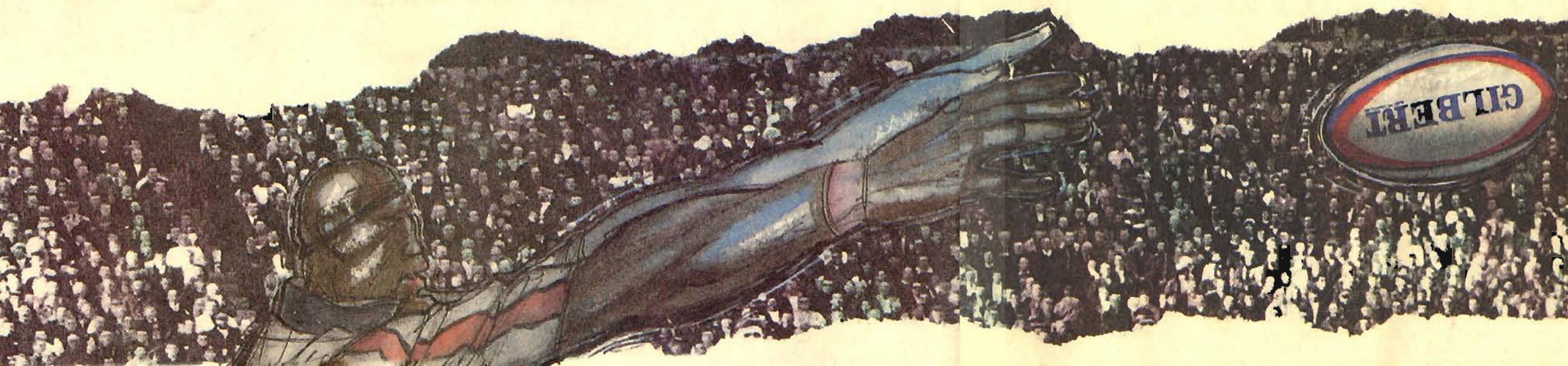


Weekend FT



South Africa's return to Earth

Michael Holman and Mark Suzman on apartheid and the power of rugby

In the shadow of Table Mountain, in the Cape that cradled apartheid, one of the biggest sporting events in the world is about to start. It will include an image as potent and poignant as sport has provided since Jesse Owens won four gold medals at Hitler's Berlin Olympics in 1936.

Just as, almost 60 years ago, the black American sprinter shattered the myth of Aryan invincibility, and conveyed a message that transcended sport, so the scene is set for a similarly momentous occasion at Cape Town's Newlands stadium on Thursday.

In the presence of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's president, and in the green and gold colours of the Springbok team, Francois Pienaar, a descendant of the Afrikaners who journeyed into the African hinterland, will lead his team mates on to the turf of Newlands Stadium.

These children of apartheid, born in the dour 1970s, at school during the revolution that was the 1980s, and for whom the world opened up in the 1990s, will take part in an event which would have been unthinkable a few years ago: they will join in the singing of the hymn of southern Africa's liberation movement, *Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika* (God bless Africa).

Then, accompanied by Mandela, the man their fathers imprisoned, the moving words of South Africa's original anthem, *Die Stem*, will carry from Newlands stadium across the land, to the frontier towns of the northern Transvaal, the *dorps* of the Orange Free State and into the hearts of the

white tribe of Africa.

In an atmosphere charged with as much *huy!* as a crowd in full voice at Cardiff Arms Park, and with all the defiance and challenge of the New Zealand *haka*, the Springboks will take to the field in the opening game against Australia, marking the beginning of the four-week-long competition for the mantle of rugby union world champions.

Sixteen national sides, from

War was diplomacy for apartheid South Africa, as it tried to force its neighbours to submit

countries as diverse in their cultures as Western Samoa and Japan and Argentina and the Ivory Coast, take part in a contest which has grown rapidly since its inception eight years ago.

It may well be for the last time in this form, for media tycoon Rupert Murdoch's plans for the game could well transform it, sweeping away the difference between amateur and professional players.

But before sponsors tally their exposure and publicity, and before the world discovers just how much "amateurs" earn, and before 35,000 visiting fans discover whether South Africa's hotels and aeroplanes can take the strain, the world

might pause for a few moments and marvel.

Not simply at South Africa's continuing and remarkable peaceful revolution that is transforming a country, but to consider how extraordinary it is that the sport that the architects of apartheid embraced with the passion they brought to religion and politics could become a force for change.

The same passion became part of their Achilles heel. The world was to discover that cutting off Afrikaners from their rugby, and white South Africans in general from most international sporting contacts, was almost as important as economic sanctions in the battle against apartheid.

For the Afrikaner above all, being granted the opportunity to host the event signals their return to the outside world, and the formal embrace of a game they love, and which for so long excluded them.

But nowhere did this game, created by the English, a race for whom Afrikaners have mixed feelings, take hold with greater fervour and passion than in South Africa, and in particular among Afrikaners.

Their roots go back 350 years, and it all began not far from the site of the stadium where the opening match will be played. It was here in the Cape, that old South Africa was born when Jan van Riebeeck established a settlement.

"The fairest Cape in all the world" could be also called the

cradle of apartheid. It was the fertile land, glorious beaches, imposing mountains, that sheltered and nourished the first white settlers.

In time they were to become known as Boers, who developed the language that gave them the name Afrikaners. Chafing under the British, in 1836 they began the Great Trek that led to two great wars of liberation - the Boer war, and the war for democracy, which they lost. It was in 1948 that the National Party won power, which they only relinquished more than 40 years later, in the meantime imposing the cruel social engineering known as apartheid.

If the Dutch Reformed Church was seen as the National Party at prayer, the Springbok scrum was its cabinet in conclave: heaving solidarity in battle against the "kaffirs" and a hostile world.

War was diplomacy for apartheid South Africa, as it tried to hammer its neighbours into submission, and rugby was diplomacy by other means.

It was during this period that *Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika* became the anthem of black liberation, funerals and political rallies, so often the same thing during black southern Africa's struggle to overthrow white rule.

Hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, died on the

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The village of the addicts