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Farieda Khan ^a

^a E-mail:

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Anyone for Tennis? Conversations with black women involved in tennis during the apartheid era

Farieda Khan

abstract

Tennis in South Africa has a long history at both mainstream and township level, as well as a proud record of female participation dating back to the late nineteenth century. The game is widely regarded as a woman-friendly sport, as women have always participated in the sport at both a social and competitive level. Notwithstanding, women and girls involved in tennis are subject to the same challenges presented by a patriarchal society in the form of gender discrimination and gender stereotyping. Historically and currently, the participation of black women in tennis needs to be seen within a political context. Obstacles such as poor and insufficient facilities, poor or no coaching, and the institutionalised poverty and racial discrimination of the apartheid era have shaped and often constrained their involvement in the sport. The game of tennis can only recapture its previous status as an important national sport if the socio-economic constraints currently hobbling the game are addressed; while the participation of women and girls will only be increased if gender discrimination in the sport is addressed within the framework of a national development programme aimed specifically at meeting their needs.

keywords

tennis, gender discrimination, Black female tennis players

Introduction

Tennis in South Africa has a long history at both mainstream and township level, as well as a proud record of female participation dating back to the late nineteenth century. The game is widely regarded as a woman-friendly sport, as women (whether married or single, with or

without families), have always participated in the sport at both a social and competitive level.

This *Briefing*, which presents some of the experiences of Black¹ women in the tennis sector during the apartheid era, is drawn from a broader study (still in progress) which attempts to detail the history of the participation of blacks in tennis in

the Western Cape from the post-1910 segregation era to the dawn of democracy. While the primary focus of the broader study is to recapture some of this 'forgotten' history in the vein of other sporting histories detailing the involvement of blacks (Booley, 1998; Odendaal, 2003), this *Briefing* focuses on the specific experiences of Black women in the tennis sector during the apartheid era,² while placing these experiences within their pre-and post-apartheid political and historical context.

The participation of black women in tennis – the early years

Several of the current sports widely practised and followed in South Africa today, such as rugby and cricket, may be traced back to their mid-to-late nineteenth century origins (Odendaal, 2003). While this also applies to tennis (Summerton, 1978: Astronomical Society of Southern Africa, 2006), what sets the game apart from a male-dominated sport such as football, is that, at a time when Victorian notions of passive femininity held sway, middle- and upper-class women enthusiastically became involved in playing social and competitive tennis from the earliest days of the sport in South Africa. That the participation of women in tennis was fairly remarkable during this era must be seen in the context of the fact that, globally, their participation in sport was commonly frowned upon, perceived as dangerous and as a potential obstacle to their ability to bear children³ (Guttmann, 1991; Hartmann-Tews and Pfister, 2003; Lake, 2008). Given the prevailing stereotype of the female as a passive being, it is likely that the acceptance of women in tennis was due to the fact that the game was perceived (like croquet), as an appropriate form of sport for women – ie not aggressive, overly strenuous or requiring physical contact – and thus not incompatible with the notion of being ladylike.

In all probability, membership of the early tennis clubs was exclusively White, given the

formal and informal colour bar in operation at the time.⁴ Excluded from membership of the nascent tennis clubs, the exposure of blacks to the game of tennis would have occurred as part of the missionary school education (which included sport) then available to the elite⁵ (Archer and Bouillon, 1982). They would then have formed separate clubs in urban areas where this was possible, as happened in Port Elizabeth (Odendaal, 2003: 54), King Williamstown in the 1880s (Booth, 1998: 41; Odendaal, 1988: 199), Bloemfontein in 1893 and three in Kimberley in the 1890s, (Odendaal, 2003: 59, 61).

Opportunities for African women in sport were circumscribed by notions of femininity and what constituted an 'acceptable' sport for women. As noted by Cobley (1994:213),

the daughters of the African elite were pressed into a more passive domestic mould of femininity which largely precluded extensive participation in sport.

However, notwithstanding these social constraints, African girls attending mission schools (such as Lovedale in the Eastern Cape) appear to have been involved in physical education to some extent (Odendaal, 2003). Indeed, the fact that the members of the Port Elizabeth Ladies' Croquet Club (founded in 1884) were also keen tennis players (Odendaal, 2003), is evidence that educated African women and girls did indeed participate in sport in general and tennis in particular. Further evidence is provided by the fact that in 1894, women were members of the three African tennis clubs then in existence in Kimberley and also played competitive tennis (Odendaal, 2003).

Badenhorst (2003:116-117) has noted that recreation pursuits for African women during this period was "never organised to the same extent or with the same intensity as men's leisure". Notwithstanding, by the 1930s, middle-class African women had begun to play a range

of sport (Alegi, 2002) and many of them utilised the facilities of the Bantu Social Club (BSC)⁶ to play tennis (Odendaal, 2003). Many Johannesburg tennis teams, such as the Rosebuds and United Services included women, while there were also all-woman teams such as the Bloemfontein Ladies and the Johannesburg Ladies (Djata, 2008). While many women undoubtedly enjoyed the game, with some taking it fairly seriously, for others playing tennis was just a status symbol, an indicator that they were part of the leisured classes. These were the women who featured in the social pages of the newspaper, *Bantu World*, having tennis parties in urban centres such as Bloemfontein and East London (Cobley, 1994) and formed part of those derisively known as the “ooscuse-me” in reference to their perceived aloof and conceited manners (Wilson and Mafeje, 1963:26-27).

Among Cape Town’s coloured communities,

While mainstream tennis blossomed, Blacks remained on its periphery, confined to a tiny number of courts and prevented from competition with top seeds

the development of tennis followed a similar pattern, with tennis being played on municipal courts by the business and professional elite during the 1930s (Edgar, 1992). Interest in the game developed rapidly and a number of clubs were established which women eagerly joined (F Khan, 27 September 2008, *Saturday Weekend Argus*, “Reading between the Tramlines”). One such club was Wisteria, which was established in Salt River in 1934 by a group of Muslims (including women) many of whom were teachers. The participation of Muslim women was unusual for the period, though not for the class they belonged to. Founder member Galiema Brown, a 21 year-old teacher at the time, noted that,

People made remarks of course, because it was unusual for Muslim girls to play tennis

[but] my parents never objected. When people criticised, my mother just said that girls also needed fresh air and exercise. It was the same thing she used to say when I was a child and was allowed to play in the road in front of our house (Brown interview, 2004).

Tennis in the apartheid era

Much of this period was something of a golden era for mainstream tennis, as the game reached its peak of development in terms of a mushrooming of interest in the sport and an increase in clubs and facilities (Goldman, c1978; Archer and Bouillon, 1982). At the beginning of this era tennis, together with swimming, were the sports enjoyed by most White participants – yes, ahead of rugby! (Archer and Bouillon, 1982: 36-37), while by the 1980s, South African tourism authorities were able to promote the country as a desirable sporting destination with numerous club, hotel and municipal tennis facilities of the highest standard (South African Tourist Corporation, c1981).

The Government used earlier traditions of racial segregation and apartheid legislation (such as the Group Areas Act and Separate Amenities Act) to ensure that a system of separate, unequal facilities for Black communities⁷ was entrenched and consolidated (Merrett, 1996). There was a gradual, albeit inadequate increase in municipal tennis facilities in African⁸ and Coloured areas⁹ and, in spite of the inferior nature of these facilities, interest in playing the sport grew. Not all townships benefited from the increase, with some, like Langa and Gugulethu in Cape Town having being so badly neglected that the two tennis clubs serving those communities had been forced to suspend their membership of the Western Province Tennis Union in the mid-1980s (Tramlines, c1985b).

Thus while mainstream tennis blossomed, Blacks remained on its periphery, confined to a tiny number of courts and prevented from competition with top seeds at national and international level.

This situation changed only very gradually from the 1970s onwards, as the Government began to make small concessions in its implementation of apartheid sport in an attempt to regain access to the international sporting sectors from which South Africa had been banned (Booth, 2003). These reformist measures however, were rejected as cynical and opportunistic by the South African Council on Sport (SACOS) which represented non-racial sport, and were fiercely resisted by this organisation during the late 1970s and 80s (Booth, 1997).

The participation of black women in tennis in the apartheid era

The participation of African women in sport during this era was minimal (Hargreaves, 2000) and where such participation took place, it was largely limited to middle-class women, as can be seen through the experiences of several women who played tennis in Cape Town's African townships during the 1980s. Sindiswa Mavata who lived in Langa, played tennis seriously from about the age of 20, but had started playing tennis while at primary school already, since she had been a very active, sporty child (Mavata interview, 2010). Mavata recalls that during the 1980s, there were a number of other young women who also played tennis seriously, participating in matches, as well as older women club members. Nikki Ngcukana began playing tennis at the Langa Community Centre as a child of 11 during the mid-1970s and continued to play at high school in Maitland, where she attended a 'mixed' school (Ngcukana interview, 2010). While she was a member of the Langa Tennis Club as a youngster, her membership was very informal, and she did not become involved at tournament level, although she remembers playing matches against Coloured clubs on the Cape Flats, as well as in Worcester and Paarl. Luyanda Ndukana, who lived in Gugulethu, started playing tennis as a child of about 11 or 12 in the early 1980s. Ndukana recalls

that there were several women in the Gugulethu Tennis Club who played the game seriously and that, as a youngster, she often watched them play (Ndukana interview, 2010).

None of these women experienced any objection to their involvement in tennis from their families, who, in fact, were all very supportive and encouraging, providing money for transport to matches against township schools and clubs in Coloured areas, as well as buying equipment and tennis kit. Ndukana adds:

My family was very supportive and interested – they encouraged us. No-one in the community found it strange that girls played sport. My uncle played tennis very well and he coached us (Ndukana interview, 2010).

Ndukana was also supported by her high school Business Economics teacher, Nomsa Sihamba, who encouraged the girls to play tennis on the school court and to play against neighbouring schools, Fezeka and I D Mkhize. Today two of the interviewees no longer play tennis: Ndukana reports that she moved to the Transkei and then lost touch with the sport, while Mavata stated that she gave up tennis due to objections from her husband:

I stopped playing tennis when I got married in 1996. My husband became very jealous because I had to wear short dresses. Each time I had to go to practice or play a match, I had to ask him for permission. We argued, so I stopped playing. I wish I could play tennis again (Mavata interview, 2010).

Ncukana, however, after giving up tennis for softball as a young woman, returned to the sport about ten years ago, when she started playing tennis socially, together with her husband.

The participation of Coloured women followed the earlier pattern set during the earlier years

with middle-class women, mainly professionals such as teachers, joining tennis clubs. One such teacher was Latiefa Hendrickse (née Behardien) who joined Wisteria Tennis Club in 1948 at the age of 22. As a single Muslim woman, she was still under her father's authority, but he had no objection to her involvement with tennis as long as she observed the tenets of her religion and played in modest attire (at the time, an over-the-knee divided skirt).¹⁰ Hendrickse says of that time,

I loved playing tennis – it was exercise, it was recreation and it was a way to meet people ... people outside my circle of relatives and friends (Hendricks interview, 2010).

Hendricks was able to practice as much as she liked after school, as the court was within easy walking distance and she developed into a good player, participating in tournaments, as well as in the administration of the club (at one stage she was its secretary). She continued to play tennis for many years after her marriage.

Ragima (Ray) Abrahams (née Jardine), another Wisteria player, was first exposed to the sport while at primary school during the late 1940s and early 1950s. She and her sister, Rugaya (Gay) Hermans, joined the club in the mid-1950s and subsequently developed into strong players. However, they faced opposition from their parents, especially their father, who did not approve of the short tennis attire they wore. In order to avoid arguments, Hermans remembers that they used to leave home dressed in their usual clothes and only changed into their tennis gear later (Hermans interview, 2010). Abrahams stated of her early tennis career,

I was very keen, I played at every opportunity. I played during the week after work and at weekends. Sometimes my parents would scold me because on Sundays, I wouldn't complete the housework, I would just sneak out to play (Abrahams interview, 2010).

Lynn Clarke, who joined Progressive Tennis Club in Elsie's River as a child of 11 in 1963, remembers tennis as a "family affair", which she greatly enjoyed as a tennis player, later serving in numerous capacities (as coach, selector, team manager, match referee and tournament organiser) at both provincial and national level (Clarke interview, 2008). Avril Jansen joined Athlone Tennis Club as a child of six in 1968 and by the age of 12 had already progressed to senior level. Subsequently she played in the top league and was good enough to represent Western Province at inter-provincial level. She remembers the 1970s and early 1980s as a time when tennis attracted the enthusiasm of the whole community. During matches there would be line of cars outside the courts, where there was a "euphoric atmosphere" and "the excitement was just magical" (Jansen interview, 2009). Jansen loved playing tennis, the social as well as the competitive aspects, and her career only came to an end due to a disability.

The experiences recounted by the women interviewed for this study represent just a fraction of the experiences of black women active in the tennis sector during the apartheid era. There are many stories still to be told, such as those of players active during the 1960s, including provincial champions T Tshabala, Pam Himson and Elizabeth Mogaai (District Six Museum Resource Centre, no date), as well as Charmaine Carolissen, a top ranked player and a South African tennis champion during the 1980s.

Tennis during the apartheid era was experienced as a family friendly sport in which the needs of female players with children were accommodated as many clubs catered for junior sport. Other characteristics common to apartheid era tennis was the sociability of the sport; the willingness of members and clubs to help out by providing free catering for functions; and assistance, through fundraising, in order to subsidise or fully pay for transport and accommodation for competitions (Hargreaves, 2000; Clarke, 2008; Jansen, 2009).

Tennis Today

It may arguably be said that the state of tennis with regard to the standard of competition and level of public interest has declined considerably since the heyday of mainstream tennis during the apartheid era. While many private club and municipal facilities with top-class facilities in former White areas are still in operation, the standard of tennis generally has declined.¹¹ Further, since South Africa seldom holds international competitions which would attract top-ranked players, this means that serious competitors have to train and compete abroad – as South Africa's current top-ranked female player, Chanelle Scheepers, had to do while still a teenager (S Lerman, 08 June 2010, *TimesLive*, "Scheepers says US move helped her improve"). It is in this context that journalist Phathisani Moyo has characterised South Africa's chances of producing a local player capable of beating top international competition as being a "distant dream" (P Moyo, 16-22 January 2009, *Mail & Guardian*, "Ball not in SA's court").

With regard to the state of 'township tennis', many municipal tennis courts (such as those in Cape Town) have either been demolished or stand derelict and neglected (F Khan, 27 September 2008, *Saturday Weekend Argus*, "Reading between the Tramlines"; Guwa interview, 2010), no doubt victims of the inadequate government funding of the sporting sector (Desai, 2010). The trend towards putting the limited resources available to the sporting sector into elite and high performance sport in post-apartheid South Africa (Desai, 2010) has been followed in tennis with the establishment of the South African Tennis Performance Centre in Pretoria. However, this approach, which does not address the needs of ordinary communities at school and club level, will not contribute to the resurgence and re-establishment of tennis as a major sport in South Africa. The financial and infrastructural inadequacies in the tennis sector have contributed to a general decline in the levels of interest and participation in the sport

among black communities. Furthermore, tennis is no longer the aspirational, middle-class sport it was in the past, and in fact today some even question whether it is a sport for Black people at all! (M Dibetle, 01-07 May 2009, *Mail & Guardian* "Soweto serves tennis dream").

The participation of women in tennis

It is generally accepted that sport in South Africa is a male-dominated activity, evidenced by the fact that, despite the high profile enjoyed by a few individual sportswomen such as Natalie du Toit (swimming) and Caster Semenya (athletics), the national spotlight seldom falls on the achievements of ordinary sportswomen.¹² Ironically, gender equity is an integral part of the official rhetoric of Government (SA Government Information, 2006a; 2006b) which has been given expression in various policies, laws

Sport in the democratic era has continued to marginalise the needs of women and girls

and the establishment of forums aimed at promoting the participation of women in sport (SA Sports Commission, c2005). In practice, however, it has been the racial integration of top male-dominated sport such as rugby and cricket which has been the priority (Pelak, 2009; Jones, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000), with money and other resources being channelled into traditional male sport while the issue of gender inequality remains on the periphery. Thus, despite the lip service paid to gender equity, sport in the democratic era has continued to marginalise the needs of women and girls.

While tennis is widely regarded as a woman-friendly sport, it is nevertheless not exempt from the obstacles facing women in sport in South Africa. Hence female tennis players also have to deal with the usual barriers facing women in sport, such as the lack of a safe environment, the fear of violence, financial constraints, lack of safe and conveniently

located public transport, lack of quality coaching and the potential for sexual harassment. Then there are the socio-cultural norms, traditional customs and patriarchal notions which contribute to gender stereotyping and act as constraints, barring women and girls from certain types of sport perceived to be 'inappropriate' and pressuring them to prioritise domestic duties over sport and recreation (Chappell, 2005; Pelak, 2005; SA Sports Commission, c2005). In common with sportswomen in general, female tennis players also have to deal with gender discrimination, sometimes taking the form of lower levels of media attention – even the no. 1 seed, Scheepers, recently expressed the hope that her matches would finally receive media exposure (T Williams, 03 May 2010, *Business Day*, "Beaten Scheepers takes heart at Garros"). Women's tennis not only struggles to get sponsorship from the corporate sector (Naidoo, 2007) but appears to suffer from neglect by the SA Tennis Association, as international competition – the lifeblood of any sport – has not been organised, ostensibly as a consequence of the difficulty of sourcing sponsorship for a women's tour event (P Moyo, 16-22 January 2009, *Mail & Guardian*, "Ball not in SA's court").

The participation of Black women in tennis should thus be seen within the context of the socio-economic and cultural constraints operating against women in the sporting sector. The financial and infrastructural inadequacies, and the general decline in the levels of interest and participation in the sport, have combined to bring about a similar decline in the interest and participation levels among Black women.¹³

Conclusion

Tennis is somewhat hampered in its efforts to regain its earlier position as an important national sport – after all, it has none of the hallmarks of a popular mass sport, nor is it a classic team sport. Notwithstanding, it has a firm core of support and a long history at both mainstream and township level,

as well as a proud record of female participation dating back to the very first days of the sport in South Africa. Yes, there are numerous obstacles in the form of inequity in the sport, however, genuine transformation which would ensure that communities have easy access to well-maintained tennis facilities and a good standard of coaching at school, local and provincial level is possible, given the political will and financial commitment.¹⁴ Building upon this foundation, the implementation of a well-resourced national development strategy for tennis specifically targeted at the needs of women and girls, would enable them to not only regain the ground previously lost in this sector, but also make it possible to develop South Africa's very own Serena Williams in the future.

Footnotes

- 1 The term 'Black' includes the segregation and apartheid-era racial categories of Africans, Coloureds and Indians.
- 2 A number of interviews have been conducted, both for the broader historical study of tennis in the Western Cape, as well as specifically for this *Briefing*. Interviews were held with everyone who responded to letters from the author, which were published in mainstream and free community newspapers. Other interviewees were identified through personal contacts.
- 3 However, medical opinion was by no means united in this issue during the late nineteenth century, as demonstrated by some French medical experts, who argued in favour of "limited physical activity and some sports" as a means of preparing girls for their reproductive role (Buoun and Luciani, 2009: 575).
- 4 The Boer republics and Natal gave legal expression to beliefs based on white supremacy and racial discrimination, as well as early forms of structured segregation (Beinart, 2001). While it is true that racial segregation was not, as yet institutionalised at the Cape and there was a certain amount of social fluidity among lower income communities in places such as Cape Town (Bickford-Smith, 1995), this needs to be seen in the context of the racism and racial segregation that did exist in the late colonial era (Bickford-Smith, 1995).
- 5 Lovedale, which was established in 1841, offered sport, including tennis, as an integral part of its educational activities (Shepherd, 1940).
- 6 During the 1930s sports centres such as the Bantu Sports Club (BSC) in Johannesburg and the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg and Durban played a major role in

the promotion of organised sport, including tennis among the African middle class (Badenhorst and Rogerson, 1986; Vahed, 1998).

- 7 As was also evidenced by the vast disparities in the funding of school sport for white and black schoolchildren (Hargreaves, 2000; Archer and Bouillon, 1982).
- 8 For example, by the mid-1980s, there were 50 courts in Soweto, but as Stan Gumede, the then Vice President of the Tennis Association of South Africa pointed out, these were built in an effort to prove to the international community that social conditions for blacks were improving in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprising (Tramlines, 1985a).
- 9 Coloured communities were served by more municipal facilities and, moreover, had well established tennis clubs with large memberships in a number of areas across the Cape Flats, such as Athlone and Elsies River (Clarke interview, 2008; Jansen interview, 2008).
- 10 This concern about a suitable mode of dress for Muslim females was common for the period, as another young Muslim woman noted that during the 1940s, her father did not approve of her wearing a short skirt [for sport]. This meant she could not play sport after school. (Nauright, 1997).
- 11 Both Ashley Katzin, CEO of tennis sponsors, Forward Zone and Ian Smith, CEO of the South African Tennis Association, have commented on the unfavourable state of South African tennis and the low international rankings of many of its top players (Naidoo, 2007).
- 12 The international NGO, The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), asserts that this in fact holds true for the southern African region as a whole (*Pambazuka News*, 2009).
- 13 For example only one of the female members of the Langa Tennis Club is good enough to play in tournaments (Guwa interview, 2010).
- 14 The establishment of tennis academies dedicated to the development of the sport at community level, such as the Arthur Ashe Centre in Jabavu, Soweto, would greatly contribute to the growth of tennis in South Africa. The Complex has had a somewhat chequered history since its establishment in 1976 (Erasmus, 2008), but now, with its eight world class courts and well-established coaching system, appears to be making a sound contribution to the development of the sport in Soweto (M Dibetle, 01-07 May 2009, *Mail & Guardian*, "Soweto serves tennis dream").

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FARIEDA KHAN is an independent social and environmental researcher, with an interest in gender issues. Her specialist research area is South African conservation history. E-mail: fariedakhan@gmail.com

