

When It's Not Just a Game

A new book demonstrates how a sporting event can take on a greater meaning

In an episode of the 1970s TV show "Happy Days," Ralph Malph wrecks Fonzie's motorcycle. Fonzie is smitten with grief. Howard Cunningham tries to console him and suggests that he shouldn't be taking it so hard; after all, "it's just a motorcycle." Fonzie then gives a long litany of what he and his motorcycle have been through together and concludes by saying that it is his motorcycle that made him "the Fonz." He then delivers the memorable line: "Just a motorcycle, Mr. C? And I suppose your mother was just a mother."

Unfortunately, Fonzie's words have been of little use to me over the years when I have placed heightened importance on a sporting event only to have a sports infidel suggest to me that it is "just a game." The fact is, sometimes the sports world does offer up an event that is so much more than "just a game." But it is awfully hard to convince someone of that fact if they have not experienced it themselves. Usually, they tend to be as unmoved as Howard Cunningham was about Fonzie's motorcycle.

I am happy to report, however, that my search for Exhibit A has finally come to an end. For years, I have looked for something tangible that I could hand to someone and say "here it is," "read this," or "look at this," and they would then understand what a sporting event can mean. To be sure, there have been books and even movies depicting sporting events that transcended just the victory or loss on the day, such as "Seabiscuit," "Cinderella Man" and "Miracle."

But nowhere has a sporting event been set up and revealed to be of much greater consequence any better than in John Carlin's book "Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation." The game is the 1995 Rugby World Cup final in Johannesburg, South Africa, between

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the host country and New Zealand. South Africa won in overtime.

Carlin's portrayal of what it did to a nation still trying to come to terms with the wounds of apartheid, and Nelson Mandela's role in several decades of events before the match and in the events surrounding the Rugby World Cup itself, gives me all

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the fodder I need to preach to the sports unconverted.

Rugby in South Africa was historically a sport dominated by the minority white population, and in the days of apartheid the black population would actively root for any national team playing against South Africa. In chronicling how the entire nation, black and white, English and Afrikaaner, Zulu and Xhosa, etc., came to support and revel in South Africa's 1995 World Cup victory, Carlin not only reveals the power of sport but also gives keen insight into how Nelson Mandela got to be Nelson Mandela.

Mandela had no background in rugby, but while he was in prison he made it a point to learn as much as he could about the sport. He also learned to speak the Afrikaans language so that he was ultimately able to talk to his captors and adversaries in their native tongue about their favorite sport. "You don't address their brains, you address their hearts," he said. And Mandela understood the power of sport to appeal to hearts and to connect people emotionally and socially in ways that politics never can.

Political discussions by their very nature are divisive, particularly in a

place like South Africa where the law intentionally created division. Mandela, with the vision of a prophet and with monumental charisma, used sport to engage his foes, to transcend politics and to unite the country.

One of many remarkable aspects about Mandela is that he prepared himself for a day that might never have come. It was entirely conceivable that he would end his days speaking about rugby in Afrikaans to his jailers, a fact that makes the discipline with

which he held to his vision even more astounding. But through a series of political, diplomatic, social and (yes) violent events, all of which Carlin chronicles in "Playing the Enemy," Mandela was the

president of a new South Africa in 1995 when his country hosted the Rugby World Cup, after the dismantling of apartheid ended South Africa's international sports isolation.

Mandela reached out in particular to the captain of the national team, Francois Pienaar—an Afrikaner who historically would have been on the opposite side of the political spectrum from Mandela—as part of his very public campaign for the country to rally around the team. The scene of Mandela presenting Pienaar with the World Cup trophy remains a stunning visual for anyone familiar with South Africa's history.

Carlin's book is being made into a movie, *The Human Factor*, with Clint Eastwood directing, Morgan Freeman playing Nelson Mandela and Matt Damon playing Francois Pienaar. No word yet on who will play Pienaar's young son, Jean, whose godfather is Mandela himself. Is there any better proof that it wasn't "just a game"? ■

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