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The Remarkable Story of Courage in the Face of Oppression

By  
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“Mandela used to watch football matches from his cell window.”

“The Makana Football Association was named after...one of the first political prisoners sent to Robben Island.”

“...political prisoners defied...apartheid rules, but adhered strictly to FIFA’s rules...”

*“The game of football kept us alive.”*

“He was the striker for the Manong Football Club- one of the leading teams in the Makana Football Association...”

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*“He bids me call you forth,*

*Bold sons of Káhabee,*

*To sweep the White men from the Earth,*

*And drive them to the sea:*

*The sea which heaved them up at first...”*

—**Thomas Pringle**

Makana’s Gathering

## **MAQANA NXELE**

Makana was a prophet of the Xhosa people of South Africa. His revolutionary teachings and an imposing stature (he was 6 feet 6 inches tall) combined to make him a charismatic leader. Nicknamed *Nxele* (The left-handed), he promised his people that he would turn the bullets of the White Colonists into water. The White Colonists, like the Xhosa, were expanding in search of new farmland and pasture.

The agrarian Xhosa were moving westwards because of overpopulation and land shortages. These pressures were later aggravated by the influx of refugees from the *Mfecane*, Chaka the Zulu’s wars of conquest. In a similar vein, the arrival of more British settlers, the great increase in white birth rate, and wasteful land usage led to land hunger, which caused the White Colonists to move eastwards.

In 1819, Makana led an attack on the British fort of Grahamstown. Earlier, in 1811 the British had attacked the Xhosa and forced 20,000 people from their homes. A British Colonel, John Graham, had then found a town on the newly acquired land in 1812. And so, in April of 1819, Makana led an army of 10,000 against a colonial army of 450.

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Against superior fire power, the superior numbers of Nxele's army was not enough to turn the battle in favour of the Xhosa, lead did not turn into water. Makana was captured and condemned to life imprisonment on Robben Island, thus he became one of the first black political prisoners banished to Robben Island. On August 9, 1820, Nxele stole a boat, and with some 30 other prisoners, escaped from the island, but he drowned when the boat capsized.

## **SEAL ISLAND**

Robben Island means Seal Island in Dutch. European sailors used to stop on the island, which had been discovered by Bartolomeu Diaz in 1488, to hunt seals for fresh meat. It was an important refueling site on the trade route between Europe and Asia in the 16th century, as fresh meat was important to sailors in combating diseases such as scurvy and dysentery.

In 1591, the Khoikhois, a nomadic tribe that claimed the southernmost tip of Africa as their hunting ground, attacked the Europeans living on the island. The Europeans had been cheating the Khoikhois in commercial transactions, but the gun power of the Europeans secured them the victory. In order to punish the Khoikhoi survivors, the Europeans left them on the island, without food or water, making them the first of many prisoners on the island.

Between the 17th and the 19th centuries, both the Dutch and the British who followed them used the island as a colonial settlement for immigrants and a prison for indigenous

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Africans who revolted against unfair trade practices or repressive governance. A prime example of the latter use to which the island was put is the incarceration of Makana.

However, by the middle of the 19th century, the island had become a dumping ground for the colonial society's undesirables. It became populated by the mentally ill, lepers, prostitutes with sexually transmitted diseases, alcoholics and even people who were just too old or too sick to work. They lived under the same harsh conditions as the prisoners, receiving no treatment for their illnesses and being subject to chaining, beatings and violence.

Between the First and Second World Wars, the government of South Africa developed an interest in the island as a naval base. The sick were sent to the mainland, most of the buildings were razed to prevent any epidemics, the water system was improved, and new buildings constructed. Defences were constructed to protect the country from Germany. It also returned to its initial role as a refuelling site, this time, for ships travelling around the Cape when President Nasser of Egypt seized control of the Suez Canal.

In 1914 J.M. Hertzog had founded the Nationalist Party to further the cause of Afrikaners (South Africans of Dutch descent) and create a society in which British and Afrikaners would be separate but equal. A fervent promoter of Afrikaner rights, Hertzog secured the equality of Dutch and English as official languages when the Union of South Africa was established in 1910. When he became prime minister in 1924, he replaced Dutch with Afrikaans as the country's second language and prepared the way for the later system of *Apartheid* by promoting racial segregation.

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In 1948 the Nationalist Party returned to power with the United Party as the official opposition. The Nationalist Party pushed through a legislative agenda of *Apartheid*, a policy of white supremacy. The Nationalist Party legalized white economic exploitation and the political subjugation of non-white South Africans. These policies were not only passed into law, but were enforced with a harsh and intrusive policing, separate and unequal education, job discrimination, and residential segregation. Fundamental human rights were violated blatantly. An anti-Communist law was passed, which equated Communism with any struggle for socio-political or economic change. The anti-Communist law was used as an excuse to arrest many of the government's opponents. In 1959 Robben Island was converted into a maximum security prison.

## **MADIBA AND MBEKI**

After 50 years of non-violent resistance to White minority rule, enforced by violent repression, the African National Congress (a multiracial civil rights society that was dedicated to promoting the interest of black South Africans) morphed into a militant organization in 1961 with the formation of its armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. Earlier, in 1959 a faction of the African National Congress, led by Robert Sobukwe and Potlako Leballo had gone on to form the Pan Africanist Congress.

The Pan Africanist Congress questioned the effectiveness of the nonviolent methods and multi-racial base of the African National Congress. Mandela—leader of the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* had travelled to Algeria for guerilla training—explained that the African National Congress turned to violence as a last resort, when it dawned on them that the many years

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of non-violent protest against *Apartheid* had not and could not produce any changes. On the 5th August, 1962, based on a **CIA** tip off as to his whereabouts and disguise, the South African police finally caught Mandela, after he had lived on the run for 17 months. On the 25th of October he was sentenced to five years in prison.

Govan Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki's father, graduated from the University of Fort Hare in 1937 (the same school from which Mandela was expelled three years later for participating in a student protest) with a B.A. in Politics and Psychology. He taught for a while, but was dismissed from his job for political activity. He then managed a store, but when the store was destroyed in a tornado he returned to teaching. He was again fired from his teaching job for political activity.

An accomplished writer, he then became the editor of *New Age*, a left-wing paper that under his guidance published the conditions, aspirations, and demands of black South Africans. The government banned *New Age* in November 1962, and in defiance, the editorial board decided to publish under a new title. This led the government to ban all the editors and writers. Mbeki was openly a communist, a leader in both the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party.

While under house arrest in 1963, Mbeki went underground to join *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. He was arrested in July when the police raided the secret headquarters of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* in Rivonia. Mandela, the head of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, was brought from prison to stand trial alongside Mbeki for treason (both of them are Xhosa), they were charged with

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conspiring to overthrow the government, and were sentenced to life imprisonment. They were both imprisoned on Robben Island.

## SEAL ISLAND, AGAIN!

Robben Island must have greeted Mandela with its characteristic wind-swept coldness and stark bleakness. The heavy doors that clanged shut behind him must have caused him to shiver to his soul. From deep within the recesses of this tomb, a harsh voice,

“Shut your @%#! mouth *kaffir*, you @%#! *bliksem*, do you think this is an hospital?”

and the whimpering that accompanied it.

A guard said to Mbeki,

“@%#! Communist,”

and turning to his partner,

“*ou kerel*, look at this one, another @%#! Communist!”

His voice was full of loathing. The only permitted sounds in this place would be the slamming shut of heavy doors, footfalls and the clanking of heavy keys.

60 men were held in a cell that was built to hold 20. At 5:30 am, without fail, the inmates were frog jumped, naked, across the yard, while their cells were searched. Then they were given a cold bowl of mealie (pap) which they had to eat while squatting. Anyone whose butt touched the ground was beaten severely. Deaths from beatings were even higher than deaths from starvation and disease. After breakfast, it was hard labour:

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breaking of stones for the next nine hours. Mandela was in the isolation block, cut off from contact with everyone. The psychological pressures are unimaginable, holding on to sanity was near impossible.

In the evenings, the guards tortured anyone who displeased them. They liked to hang prisoners upside down, by their legs, and beat them in to a state of coma. Or they may set their hideous dogs on their quarry, after having stripped him completely naked. The mindless cruelty, the monotony of the enervating rock breaking, the hunger, the deprivation, the cold, the fact that most of the inmates did not deserve to be in the prison in the first place, coupled with the fact that there would be no one to right the wrongs done to them—all these were enough to convince a man of the pointlessness of continued existence.

*I'm in chains; you're in chains too...Mr Jailer.*

Johnson Mlambo, a leader of the Pan Africanist Congress was buried up to his neck in sand, in the sun, for hours and then, a warder came and pissed on his head.

Suicides were common, even amongst the warders

## **MATYENI (Stones)**

The prisoners tried to counter the effects of their dehumanizing existence. They held on to anything that reminded them that they were humans, especially the small things that one usually takes for granted in the course of everyday life. They hid pictures of loved ones; even though, to be caught with such contraband meant a severe beating. They

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formed friendships along party lines and communicated using codes. They spoke to members of their ethnic groups in their mother tongue, told each other stories. They made footballs out of pieces of paper and cardboard, and old cleaning rags—all tied together using strings. They played with all their might, and with all their spirit in the football matches that were played in the corridors and in their cells. Winning a game was the only worthwhile achievement a person could aspire to in this hellhole. And so the games took on a greater significance. But not just for the prisoners, the South African government thought it saw a way to benefit from the role of football in the lives of the prisoners.

In 1958 the Confederation for African Football (CAF) expelled South Africa. The *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) followed with a suspension in 1961. However, in 1963 South Africa was reinstated after Sir Stanley Rous, the new FIFA president, president of the English FA, and a promoter of South African interests, argued that FIFA should not take political issues into cognizance when making decisions on football. He also expressed the fear that with expulsion, South African football might be dealt a blow it would never recover from. Against his wishes, in 1964, at the annual FIFA conference in Tokyo, the suspension was re-imposed, and in 1976, after the Soweto Uprising, the expulsion was announced.

In 1966, the prisoners presented a united front in requesting that they be allowed to form a football league called *Matyeni*. The government, for diplomatic and economic reasons, was trying to convince Britain and the United States of America that South Africa was a liberal, egalitarian society that even allowed its prisoners play football. And so the prison authorities acceded to the prisoners' request.

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## **The Empire Strikes Back...**

By 1967, the prison authorities had realized the vital function of *Matyeni* in the lives of the prisoners. The weekend matches had become the focal point of the lives of both players and spectators. Prison life was like an arduous marathon race, the only way to keep going was to set the goal to reach a landmark a short distance away, and to then choose another landmark after the initial one had been passed. Prisoners focused all their hopes on the weekends, “I’ll eat this bad food, I’ll bear this unjust punishment. I’ll do anything, so long as I can make it to the weekend and watch my favourite team play.”

The prison authorities then began to meddle in the running of *Matyeni*: matches were arbitrarily called off on the flimsiest of excuses, dashing the weeklong hope of players and spectators; key players were kept locked in their cells on trumped up charges; spectators were not released from their cells until the dying minutes; warders interrupted games, whimsically repositioned the ball and players on the field. The frustration got to the prisoners and *Matyeni* began to lose steam, it had become a rod of punishment in the hand of prison authorities.

The prisoners had discovered that one way to force the authorities to improve the quality of prison food was to go on well timed hunger strikes. That meant going without for a while, but the improvement in nutrition more than made up for the self deprivation. Transferring the same principles to *Matyeni*, the players, in concert, began to refuse to leave their cells on weekends. Would be spectators told their guards, “No football today.”

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## THE MAKING OF MAKANA FA

Dennis Brutus, a foremost South African poet, was released from Robben Island after being arrested in 1963; he had been shot while trying to avoid being arrested. At his trial, he was sentenced to 18 months for protesting against *Apartheid* in general, and racism in sports in particular. His testimony about the reality of life on Robben Island, after his release, before the United Nations' Special Committee on Apartheid generated a lot of negative publicity for the South African government.

From another direction, the International Red Cross also began to exert increasing pressures on the South African government to improve the conditions on the Robben Island prison. To this end, the government introduced a more lenient administration on the Island in 1967. One of the requests of the Red Cross was the establishment of a prison library. The prison library that the authorities provided consisted of just a few shelves of paperback novels, bibles and miraculously, a FIFA Rule Book.

The shrewd prisoners, sensing the change in the direction of the wind, timed the submission of their proposal for a new Football Association perfectly. The new association was to be named after Maqana Nxele, the prophet and political prisoner whose story paralleled theirs and inspired them. The significance of the Xhosa name of the football association was lost on the Afrikaner authorities.

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## **The Association**

Dikgang Moskene, now a constitutional court judge, had always displayed exceptional abilities when it came to normative matters. He was chosen to head the Makana Football Association. Together with other football buffs, drawn from both the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress, the association produced a constitution after many months of heated discussions. First the constitution stipulated that all players and officials should adhere to FIFA rules and standards.

The constitution placed enormous emphasis on the need to popularize football on the Island by organizing lectures, colloquiums, and exhibition matches in which the better footballers explained the rudiments of the game. Personal tutorials were also set up; former inmate Sedick Isaacs, referring to another inmate, was quoted as saying, “I taught Tony Suze mathematics and he taught me how to kick a ball.”

The nine clubs that made up the association were to field three teams, one in each of divisions A, B and C. The Makana FA would also organize novelty matches that would engage all inmates such as veteran games and matches between cell blocks. A Player of the Year award was established to promote excellence on the field of play.

The association set up due process for lodging complaints, and for the organizing of its programmes and competitions. The duration for matches was shortened to 30 minutes to allow for 6 games (across three divisions) to be played within the time permitted by the prison authorities.

All correspondence had to be formal. Anyone mentioned in a letter or in the minutes of committee meetings was referred to as “Mr,” surnames were used, and the standard

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ending was “Yours in sports.” This was in marked contrast to the system on Robben Island in which prisoners were degraded by referring to them either by their numbers or epithets.

## **The Committees**

The Makana FA also set up various committees: the Discipline and Pitch Maintenance Committee, the First Aid Committee, the Fixtures Committee, the Referees Union, and the Protests and Misconduct Committee. The functions of the first three committees can easily be deduced from their names. Similarly, the Referees Union oversaw the appointment of referees and their conduct. The Union, with its own constitution, officials, and standards of conduct, organized classes in the cells and made pamphlets and publications available for potential candidates. Applicants for the post of referee had to pass a written examination based on FIFA guidelines, and a practical test to determine whether they actually knew how to officiate on the pitch.

Nevertheless, by far the most important of all the committees was the Protests and Misconduct Committee. It had wide ranging functions that dealt with: the unauthorized use or possession of Makana FA property, players who were sent off the field during matches, insults to the officials of the association, threats of violence or actual violence to or by the footballers, the transfer of players between clubs. All its statutory powers were detailed in the constitution.

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## The Clubs

Club Name	Club Colours	Total Number of Players fielded in the Three Divisions of the Makana FA (First Season: December 1969—June 1970)
Manong	Maroon and Gold	59
Gunners	Black and White	nA
Hotspurs	Green and White	nA
Black Eagles	Navy Blue and Sky Blue	nA
Ditshitshidi	Maroon and White	nA
Rangers	Royal Blue and Gold	40
Dynamo	Maroon and Black	nA
Bucks	Black and Gold	38
Mphatlalatsane	Green and Gold	nA

Manong had the most players. But it was not just a matter of numerical superiority; the club also had most of the best footballers. This was greatly due to their non-partisan recruiting policy. At the end of the first season of the A division (which was the top-flight division), the Gunners were a distant second from Manong, and they were in turn followed closely, in the third position, by the Bucks. Manong's leadership was not consistent across divisions; they were close to the bottom of the table in the B division.

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The Gunners, on the other hand, were second in Division A and first in Division B (records for Division C have been lost). Overall, The Gunners were the best club.

The Makana FA had preempted the lure of player poaching amongst the clubs. The association put in place a law that required a player who wanted a transfer to another club to apply for and receive a clearance certificate from his club's secretary. In order to serve as a check against clubs holding players against their will, the association did not permit a club to hold back from replying to an application for a clearance certificate for more than a fortnight. And if the club declined the player's request, then the player could appeal to the Protests and Misconduct Committee.

## **The Players**

There was no inmate who was indifferent to Tony Suze, you either hated his guts or loved him, there was no middle ground. He was young, brash, but warm and generous towards his comrades. On the pitch, he was the terror of goal keepers. A seasoned attacker, he held in his arsenal a ferocious shot that hurt when stopped. He was a striker with Manong. He had been a fan of Wolverhampton Wolves while a free man. A member of the Pan Africanist Congress, he was sent to Robben Island at the age of 21 and served 15 years. Today, he is a director of a commercial business development company in Pretoria.

The chubby easy going Lizo Sitoto could easily pass for someone's teddy bear. But under the baby fat was sterner stuff. Initially a rugby player as a free man, he was converted in

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to the top choice goal keeper for Manong. He is an African National Congress member and was sent to Robben Island at the age of 20 to serve a ten year term. Today he is a director of the Khanyisa pre-school project in the Eastern Cape.

At 17, Mark Shinnars was one of the youngest inmates sent to the Island. Already wise to the ways of the world, he was the Island's young-old man. A natural story teller, he was also an intelligent and strong footballer who played for the Gunners. Also, he officiated in the matches of the lower divisions frequently. He served two ten year terms on Robben Island. He represented the Pan African Congress in the negotiations that led to the drawing up of South Africa's first democratic constitution.

In December 2007, the Movie *More Than Just A Game*, based on the eponymous book by American sports historian Chuck Korr, was released in South Africa. Produced by a foremost South African movie producer Anant Sigh and Lord Ted Rowlands, a member of the English House of Lords, the movie tells the story of the Makana FA, through the stories of Tony Suze, Lizo Sitoto and Mark Shinnars. Starring Presley Chweneyagae of the Oscar winning *Tsotsi*, and based on Ted Eaton's screen adaptation and directed by Junaid Ahmed, the movie will be aired by the BBC as part of the run up to South Africa 2010.

## **Training Camps**

A 'border-crossing' involved prisoners swapping places in the line as they were being taken back to the cell blocks after working in the quarry. This was the only way all the players from a particular team could manoeuvre themselves to be sleeping in the same

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block, in order to train together in preparation for a match. The evening roll call was usually nothing more than a head count, and so the warders hardly noticed that the men had switched cells, as long as there was the correct amount of prisoners in each cell. In the build up to a match, the teams set up camps for training, discussing tactics, and talking about the strengths and weaknesses of their opponents. ‘Border-crossings’ enabled players to respond to call-ups and report to camp.

## **The Pitch**

Old fishing nets used to wash up the shores of Robben Island, and the prisoners obtained permission to collect them and sew them together to make goal post nets. The actual goal posts were also made by the prisoners, from iron poles. The pitch was graded, and drains were built by the prisoners to prevent the pitch from becoming unusable after one of the heavy rains that usually pounded the island. And during the dry season, the prisoners used to water the pitch from a forgotten water tap, close to the pitch, that they had found.

But like the process of obtaining proper kits for the teams, which took 15 years of incessantly lobbying the prison authorities, these developments were a trial of the prisoners patience. In the face of rejections that were calculated to frustrate their efforts, the prisoners persevered to finally create football games that were comparable to the professional games that went on in the outside world. Their fortitude was recognized two years ago, when the Makana Football Association was awarded Associate Member status of the world football governing body.

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## **The Spectators**

The Makana FA came to develop a great following in the prison. More than half of the inmate population were active supporters and spectators. Over a quarter of the prisoner population were involved as players, referees, club officials and officials of the association. Prisoners never seemed to tire of analyzing the games, predicting scores or hurling invectives at the supporters of rival teams. The excellent footballers also developed a following, particularly amongst the cooks who reserved treats for them, and warders who cut them some slack.

Many colourful characters gained reputations as die-hard fans of the various clubs. Edgar Gamboye was known to roar out in his loud voice, “kill them, slit their throats, this game is not for sissies,” egging his adopted teams on. He supported teams that drew their players exclusively from amongst the members of the African National Congress. ‘Blue’ was the foremost fan of Ditshitshidi. He was fond of telling the fans of other teams that were drawn up against Ditshitshidi that, his team would kill theirs on the day of the match. As the Ditshitshidi players filed out, he would call to them, “Win for your friend, Blue.” He went as far as to play for Ditshitshidi in the C division. He had heart, but his footballing abilities never rose above the level of play in the lowest division.

The morale of the inmates was boosted immensely. The number of suicides amongst the inmates fell to zero! The warders continued to lose some of their colleagues to suicides, especially amongst the ranks of the younger, unmarried warders. When the authorities of Robben Island Prison found out that Mandela could watch Makana FA matches from his

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cell—in the Isolation block (Block B) —they built a wall to cut him off. Even though the games were played only a few metres away from Mandela and Mbeki, they had to rely on other inmates to provide them with information on the fixtures, scores, and news of events in the Makana FA.

## **UHURU!**

### **Milestones in South African History**

**1862**—First ever documented football match on African soil played in Cape Town, South Africa.

**November 5, 1987**—Mbeki released from Robben Island after 24 years of incarceration.

**February 11, 1990**—Mandela released from Victor Verster prison farm after 27 years of incarceration.

**May 1991**—The last political prisoners leave Robben Island, and in 1994, the Prison was closed down.

**3 July 1992**—South Africa reinstated as member of FIFA, CAF membership automatically followed.

**November 13, 1993**—Agreement reached by all South Africans to create a non-racial, and democratic South Africa based on the principle of: one person, one vote.

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**January 13, 1996**—The kick-off of the African Cup of Nations which South Africa hosted and won.

**December 1999**—Robben Island declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations

**July 18, 2007**—Makana Football Association conferred with honorary membership of FIFA by Joseph Sepp Blatter, the FIFA President

**June 14, 2009**—First ever Confederations Cup on African soil kicks-off in South Africa.

The First ever World Cup on African soil will also take place in South Africa from June 11, 2010—July 11, 2010.

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## **MORE ON THE MAKANA FA**

[http://www.metro.co.uk/news/newsfocus/article.html?On\\_the\\_football\\_pitch\\_we\\_were\\_free&in\\_article\\_id=359884&in\\_page\\_id=65](http://www.metro.co.uk/news/newsfocus/article.html?On_the_football_pitch_we_were_free&in_article_id=359884&in_page_id=65)

## **The Book: MORE THAN JUST A GAME**

### **A Review**

[http://www.harpercollins.com.au/books/9780007284115/More\\_than\\_Just\\_a\\_Game\\_Football\\_Versus\\_Apartheid/index.aspx](http://www.harpercollins.com.au/books/9780007284115/More_than_Just_a_Game_Football_Versus_Apartheid/index.aspx)

### An Excerpt

<http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/worldfootball/general/92/71/04/e-mtjag4pp067-096.pdf>

## **The Movie: MORE THAN JUST A GAME**

[http://www.morethanjustagame.co.za/pr\\_3.html](http://www.morethanjustagame.co.za/pr_3.html)

<http://yeahbodotnet.blogspot.com/2009/05/anant-singh-continues-his-film-triumphs.html>