

Sports and ethnicism: Instruments of labour control at the Messina Copper Mines, 1920-1960

FELIX MALUNGA

Recreational and competitive sports at the Messina mines

Musemwa describes sport as a form of escapism from the otherwise monotonous tenor of township life.¹ Stedman-Jones sees sport as fundamentally about play, fun and amusement.² Molapo maintains that sports reflects the way in which a society is structured.³ J. Phiri, a former grade 2 clerk at the Messina shaft, maintained that whilst it is true that recreation and competitive sports at the Messina mines of the Messina (Tvl.) Development Co. Ltd. (MTD) was intended to be an important instrument of labour control of workers especially over weekends, it was also structured in such a manner that ethnic stratification would not be diluted but rather would be intensified to the point of sharpening ethnic jealousies and maintaining a low conflict profile among the African mineworkers.⁴ According to A. Musekwa, a former underground mineworker, recreational and competitive sports at the Messina mines provided the African mineworkers who were subjected to miserable social and economic conditions with an outlet for creative entertainment. Those who excelled in popular sports such as skittles, athletics and soccer uplifted their self-esteem and earned the respect and admiration of their fellow compound dwellers.⁵

The question we need to address ourselves to is whether the above mentioned definitions of sports correctly define sports at the Messina mines as a means of

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- W.F. Malunga (fmalunga@univen.ac.za), is a senior lecturer in History at the University of Venda. One of his forthcoming publications for the publication *Contemporary History* will deal with the Anglo Boer War and specifically address the issue of Sekhukhune II going on the offensive in the Eastern Transvaal in the period 1899-1902. He is currently busy with research for a doctoral thesis on African Mine Labour at the Messina Copper Mines: The struggle for Economic and Social Survival, 1905-1960.
 - 1. M. MUSEMWA, "Aspects of the Social and Political History of Langa Township, Cape Town, 1927-1948," (MA, University of Cape Town, 1993), p. 127.
 - 2. G. STEDMAN-JONES, *Sports Politics and the Working Class*, (Maybe = *Languages of Class Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984), p.1.
 - 3. R.R. MOLAPO, *Sports, Festivals and Popular Politics; Aspects of the Social and Popular Culture in Langa Township*, (MA, University of Cape Town, 1994), p. 36.
 - 4. Interview with J. Phiri, Nancefield Location, 15.6.1996.
 - 5. Interview with A. Musekwa, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996.

defusing the socio-economic frustrations of the mineworkers. Between 1905 and 1920 recreational and competitive sports of British origin was confined to the White mining community at Messina. By 1920 fully equipped club houses and the necessary playing fields for hockey, tennis, bowling, golf, cricket, soccer and rugby were established for the White community.⁶ Some of these sporting activities such as golf, tennis and bowling were class-specific and as such participants mostly came from the ranks of managerial structures of the mining company. Other sports like hockey, cricket, soccer and rugby were class-neutral and therefore open to the rank and file of White mineworkers .

It was only in 1922 that the Messina mine management institutionalised British recreational and competitive sports activities such as soccer, athletics, tennis, skittles and netball among the African mineworkers. However, no attempt was made to introduce sports such as golf, hockey, bowling and rugby among the workers. One probably reason could be that mine management wished to avoid introducing sports activities which could be financially costly to the company.

Skittles

One of the most popular recreational and competitive sport at the Messina mines was skittles. This game originated in Britain and was introduced to the African working class at Messina by the mine management. The rules of the game were modified to suit the conditions at the mines. In the 1940's each of the four mine compounds had skittle courts. Each court had a cement floor and measured 6,5 meters long and 3,5 meters wide. The mine compounds of Harper, Campbell and Artonvilla each had two skittle courts whilst the Messina compound had three courts.⁷ The skittle game was both class- and culture-neutral but tended to be ethnic-specific at the level of team formation. The game was played mostly by as few as two players or as many as ten players divided into two teams. The skittle pins, each made of hardwood, measured 7,6 cm. in diameter at each end, 15,2 cm. in diameter at the middle, stood at 30,5 cm. and weighted 3,2 kg. Twelve skittle pins were placed 2 cm. apart in a straight line at both ends of the court. The queen skittle pin was then placed in front (about 2 cm.) of the row of twelve skittle pins.⁸

The players at each end stood behind a line which was about a meter from the skittle pins. Each player had a turn called a chalk of three throws, that is, he would bowl a ball along the court with the purpose of knocking down as many skittle pins as possible. However, first to be knocked off was to be the skittle queen pin. Once this was achieved, other skittle pins could be knocked down in any order. If members of say team A managed to knock down all the thirteen skittle pins of team B, during the first leg, then they would be declared the winners of that leg. However, if they

6. ARB 345 145/20, Report on recreational activities of White mineworkers at the Messina mines, 23.7.1920.

7. NTS 9995 391/ 408 D, Report on the recreational facilities at the Messina mines, 23.4.1942.

8. Interview with T.G.Lebepe, Nancefield Location 12.6.1996.

failed to knock down all the skittles, team B would then take its turn to knock off the skittles of team A. The skittle match consisted of five legs and the first team to win the five legs would be the winner.⁹

Skittles was played by men only. At each mine compound, teams were formed on the basis of ethnic affiliation. They competed on a league basis for the floating trophy and prize money. Inter mine compound competitions were held annually on a round robin basis. Only the best skittle players were selected from the various teams to form the mine compound invitation side. This game was usually played on a Sunday morning and attracted large crowds because it was quick, exciting and of short duration. The Mozambicans dominated this game and as a result ethnic jealousy was inevitable.¹⁰ Thus, to the credit of the mine management, the skittle game promoted ethnic separateness as a strategy of maintaining labour and social control over wage labour. Nonetheless to the skittle team members and their rank and file ardent supporters, the game represented an important source of fun, amusement and a temporary escape from the boring and tormenting established mine culture.

Tennis

Another sport which was introduced to the African mineworkers was tennis. It was only in 1951 that management decided to build a tennis club house and two enclosed cement surfaced tennis courts at the Messina mine compound. Among the Messina African mineworkers tennis was class-specific but ethnic- and culture-neutral. A limited but influential group of mineworkers from the ranks of clerks, policeman and hospital orderlies who formed the middle class of the mine compound, developed an interest in playing tennis for recreational purposes.

The concept class is here defined both culturally and economically. African mineworkers who were among the top wage earners, unmarried and who had immersed themselves into the White culture found it easier to embrace participation in the sports of tennis than those who were in the lower wage brackets. They also introduced their girlfriends to tennis.¹¹ Thus a very limited number of petty bourgeoisie women became involved in tennis. However the majority of the compound women remained rooted in their roles of domestic duties or as street hawkers.

Despite the limited number of tennis players, the mine authorities offered them special privileges. For instance, they were supplied with tennis rackets and balls discarded by the all White tennis club. All they had to do was to buy themselves white shorts, a white shirt and white tennis shoes. Under the patronage of the chief compound manager, they formed the Messina Bantu Tennis Club. Players competed for trophies supplied by management for the singles, doubles and mixed matches.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Interview with A. Manthata, Nancefield Location, 15.6.1997.

11. *Ibid.*

However, due to lack of training, the standard of tennis remained low.¹² This petty bourgeoisie was also hand picked by the chief compound manager as a core of welfare officers assigned with the task of organising sports teams and clubs thereby further enhancing their social status within the compound community. The hidden agenda was apparently to develop these workers' attachment to and identification with their employer. By this strategy which bordered on paternalism, the mine management hoped to increase the petty bourgeoisie's job satisfaction and thereby counteract any possibility of labour unrest and the upward pressure on wages that would threaten the industry's financial profitability.

Nonetheless the hand picked quasi welfare officers remained petty bourgeoisie whose aspirations for an enhanced social life were frustrated, ironically not only by capital's labour control strategies such as job and wage discrimination, but also by a myriad of institutionalised government racial laws which restricted their stay within the underdeveloped mine compounds or Nancefield Location, prohibited racial mixed sports amenities and subjected them to influx control measures. To the majority of compound dwellers, tennis remained an unpopular game and those who participated in it were ridiculed as a lost group who were mimicking the White mineworkers.¹³ This meant that tennis was not only a source of fun and entertainment to the few elite mineworkers, but was also used by capital to create a minority social class strata which brought about social cleavages within the compound community.

Athletics meetings

Another form of defusing social and economic frustrations at the compounds was athletics meetings. Records show that it was only after 1946 that mine management and the hand picked welfare officers began to organise athletics meetings at their respective mine compounds.¹⁴ One probable reason for this delay was that in practice athletics involves too much organisation and the mine management were unwilling to invest time and energy in activities which were perceived as not profiting the company. Initially athletics meetings were held only during festive seasons when the workforce would not be working. The objective was apparently to reduce the possibility of conflict situations among the workers which could in turn affect productivity when the mineworkers returned to work. Experience with the above arrangement appears to have influenced mine management in the 1950's to extend athletics meetings even to normal weekends thereby keeping mineworkers from the "evils of prostitution and beer drinking" in order to protect Monday morning productivity for the industry.¹⁵

12. Interview with J.Phiri, Nancefield Location, 15.6.1996.

13. Interview with M. Semono, Nancefield Location, 14.6.1997.

14. NTS 9908 391/408 C, Housing and Recreation at the Messina mines, 21.4.1946.

15. NTS 9909 234/564, Report on recreational activities at the Messina mines, 12.7.1952.

Athletics was an ethnic- and class-neutral sports activity at the Messina mines. Middle and long distance events, track and field events, high and long jump, all attracted large crowds. Ethnic jealousies were almost dormant if not non-existent since the emphasis was on the performance of an individual.

Mine records show that among the Messina mineworkers, good athletes were drawn from the ranks of the Venda, Rhodesians and Nyasa migrant workers. These athletes were products not so much of the educational system through formal training but rather of physical fitness which they acquired as a result of the heavy physical work they performed underground. Other probable contributing factors included the geographical environmental aspects such as the high terrain of the Zoutpansberg and Sibasa districts which was a major advantage to middle and long distance runners, the Venda indigenous practice of circumcision of boys during which periods the initiates are taught among others, the art of hunting which requires speed.

Long and middle distance runners like Denga Gededza, Thomas “China ” Seleka and Solomon Chaima became role models to the youth at Messina. A good example of a youth who was influenced by these athletes was Aden Milanzi. During his primary education at Musina school, he collected a number of trophies and medals as a track and field athlete. At Mokomene High School he represented his school successfully at inter-school athletics meetings.¹⁶ Upon completing his matric studies, he was recruited by the Bracken Gold mine in the Eastern Transvaal to be a member of their track and field club. Whilst attached to the gold mine, Milanzi was offered a track and field scholarship to attend tertiary education in the United States of America. In the latter country, he was awarded the Presidential scholarship which enabled him to complete his BA degree in Political Science at the University of Utah.¹⁷

Although the mine management used athletics as a strategy of labour control, it nonetheless provided the compound dwellers with the opportunity to experience true amusement, self esteem and to display their skills and talents without being subjected to negative divisive labour control measures of ethnicism and social class strata.

Soccer

Of all sports activities at the Messina mines, soccer was the mainstay of popular recreation and entertainment. Mazrui maintains that in Britain soccer is not class-neutral as it is mainly a working class game. In the United States of America soccer is an acquired taste and therefore semi-elitistic. In Africa, however, soccer is culture-neutral because it is classless, a game for almost the whole population.¹⁸ At the

16. Interview with M.A.Ravhudzulo, Senior Lecturer at the University of Venda, 5.5.1998; S.T.Ramokgopa, former teacher at Mokomene High School, Seshego, 1996.

17. Curriculum Vitae, Eden Milanzi, 2.3.1997.

18. A, MAZRUI, *The Africans, A Triple Heritage*, (Little Brown, Boston, 1986), pp.120-121.

Messina mines soccer brought together Africans of all classes into contact with one another. It was in the 1930's that mine management introduced soccer to its workers.¹⁹

From the industry's financial standpoint, supporting soccer among the African workers was less expensive. All that the company needed to do was to provide a patch of ground, a set of goal posts and footballs. No club house with facilities such as change rooms and showers were provided as was the case with the White community. On the insistence of the mine management, soccer teams were formed on the basis of ethnicism and regional affiliation. Whereas such ethnic and regional divisions seemed to consolidate worker unity of a specific ethnic group, in reality it served the interests of the mine management since it contributed to undermining the unity of workers on common labour related issues.

The mine authorities established a thriving semi-professional soccer league called the MTD League to which all Messina soccer clubs were affiliated. At stake was the chief compound manager's floating trophy, prize money and medals for the winning first and runner-up teams. From the Messina compound five football clubs took part in the MTD League: Limbi Football Club (L.B.) with team members who were migrant workers from the Limbi district of Nyasaland. Brilliant soccer players from the L.B. club included Sylvester Chisanga, Alex 'Zoo' Zulu and Gaps Dzhombire. Blantyre Football Club (B.T.) with team members such as Osman and German Kapalamula and Josiash "Englishman" Tembo represented the Blantyre district of Nyasaland. Nyasaland Football Club (Mukango Island) was for migrant workers coming from the Northern territories of Nyasaland. Stars in this club included Nyakanyaka "Trouble-maker" Mulauzi and Gatson Ndiwandini. Northern Rhodesia Football Club (N.R.) for migrant workers from Northern Rhodesia and Mokopi Football Club for the Mozambican migrant workers also participated in the league.²⁰ Thus football club formations reflected patterns of ethnic and labour migration thereby enabling some of the foreign migrant workers to retain some cultural ties with their country of origin.

On the other hand, Union Africans resident at Nancefield Location formed two clubs: Pull Together Football Club and Home Defenders Football Club. The names of the two clubs reflected the desire by Union workers to prevent domination of the sports of soccer by foreign migrant workers. S. A. Mudua states: "The Union workers at Messina had to pull together and defend together against the *amagoduka* who were perceived as foreigners or intruders at Messina."²¹ Moscow Singo, Eric "Zero" Seakamela and John "Pro" Mocheke are reported to have been the outstanding players at Pull Together. The geographic separation of the two groups

19. NTS 9908 391/408 C, Application for surface rights: Native Recreation Grounds, Messina (Tvl.) Development Co. Ltd., 5.4.1939.

20. Interview with M.A.Ravhuzhulo, University of Venda, 5.5.1998.

21. Interview with S.A. Mudua, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996.

in addition to the ethnic and regional formation features intensified the conflict and tension among the soccer clubs.

However, the scenario was different at Harper, Campbell and Artonvilla. Because of weaker club teams, the three compounds competed in the MTD League through their invitation sides. The formation of invitation sides eliminated ethnic and regional loyalties among the compound dwellers of the above mentioned three compounds. League matches were always held on a Sunday afternoon from February to November each year. These matches were often patronised by the compound managers, their families and invited guests. A special stand was built for occupation only by mine management and their guests.²² In this manner racial segregation was enforced even at the field of play.

During a soccer game between top teams, the crowds would burst into songs composed spontaneously to meet the mood. What the spectators seemed most interested in during such occasions, was the spirit of the event rather than the musical performance. Keen rivalries between top teams found expression in the formation of supporters' clubs, whose primary aim appeared to generate excitement for the soccer games. Among some team supporters, one would also find drummers and saxophone players, who doubled up as singers along the sidelines of the soccer pitch thereby providing the additional excitement to the games.

Ethnic and regional rivalries among the spectators often spilled over to the soccer field in the form of violence. It was common for supporters of a losing side to invade the pitch and in the process assault the referee and even team members of the winning side. Such soccer violence occurred more frequently whenever "Union clubs played against foreign clubs". To counteract this hooliganism in soccer, mine management arranged for the deployment of compound police at strategic points of the pitch. People arrested for disrupting games were held at the compound goal for overnight and the following day had criminal charges laid against them with the South African Police (SAP).²³

From the mid 1960's the MTD Invitation XI side played against teams such as Naughty Boys and Stone Breakers from Pietersburg. This marked the beginning of friendly games against well known Transvaal football teams such as Witbank Aces and Orlando Pirates Football Clubs. This exposed some of the brilliant soccer players to a wider audience. Thus Pele Singo was recruited and played for Naughty Boys and later was transferred to Orlando Pirates. Issac Chirwa played for Kaiser Chiefs and much later for Jomo Cosmos.²⁴

The popularity of soccer among the compound dwellers attracted huge crowds every weekend throughout the whole year. As a result, to mine management soccer

22. Interview with A. Manthata, Nancefield Location, 15.6.1997.

23. NTS 9908 391/408 C, Report on inspection of the Messina (Tvl) Development Company, 15.8.1954.

24. Interview with J. Phiri, Nancefield Location, 12.6.1996.

became a powerful instrument of maintaining labour control and social harmony on its property. On the other hand, soccer provided the players with the opportunity to develop their skills and offer spectators exciting entertainment.

***Musango* (African fist fighting)**

African mineworkers also resorted to *musango* (African fist fighting) as a way of defusing their economic and social frustrations. An old disused soccer pitch situated between Nancefield Location and the married quarters of the Messina compound was used as the arena for *musango*. This non-prize fighting sport was ethnic-neutral in that almost all the ethnic groups at the Messina mines participated in the sport. However, it was class-specific because only the less educated underground and surface mineworkers who were in the lower wage bracket actively took part as spectators or fist fighters. *Musango* was also gender-specific as it was an all male sports and woman were not even allowed to approach the fighting arena.²⁵

Musango was more popular among the Venda, Shangaan, Ndebele, Karanga and some Sotho speaking men from Nancefield Location. At any given time five to 10, say Venda bare fist fighters, would enter the arena and start demonstrating their boxing skills by shadow boxing. This would then be followed by a number of, say 5 to 8 Shangaan or Sotho fist fighters, also entering the arena. Matches would be secured by the fighters in the arena challenging each other. Once this process was over, the first set of fighters would start exchanging blows. There was no referee. However, acknowledged champions from various camps acted as supervisors of the matches.

Fist fighters were free to use their heads, knees, legs to kick and knock down their opponents. However, no weapons were allowed to be carried or used at the arena. *Musango* demanded a high level of fitness and other merits including strength, speed, stamina, mobility and a high degree of skill. These fights were brutal and very hard on contestants and sometimes went on for more than one hour.²⁶

It was apparently for this reason that the mine management condemned *musango* since Monday productivity was always negatively impacted by injured mineworkers not reporting for work. Again mine management condemned *musango* believing that its brutality and violence would instill a spirit of defiance among the mineworkers towards management's labour control measures.

Musango champions were held in high esteem by the mineworkers irrespective of their ethnic group. Some of the most popular champions from north of the Limpopo River included Poison, Scorpion, Black Mamba, Yster, Tiger, Man-o-Man, Ruber-ruber, and Hammer Man. These names were descriptive of the agility, swiftness, prowess or punching power the champions possessed as their trade mark in the arena. Amongst the most popular *musango* fist fighters from within the Union of South Africa were Taxi, Mahlaba, Pull Chain, Stop Line and Maphike. Champions

25. Interview with M.A. Ravhuzhulo, University of Venda, 5.5.1998.

26. Interview with M. Semono, Nancefield Location 15.6.1997.

received favours from the compound police and kitchen staff who were generous in ration allocation. They also received gifts in the form of cigarettes and beer from their supporters. Forthcoming fighting matches between the reigning champions often became the focal theme of discussion among the mineworkers in their dormitories, at the mine kitchen, underground and even at some sports venues.²⁷

Gender discrimination in recreation and sports

In providing and organising sports both recreational and competitive, the Messina mine management prioritised male participants in their sports structures. Like their counterparts elsewhere in South Africa, women at the Messina mines faced several obstacles like social prejudice, sexism, religious discrimination and gender domination. The compound culture which perceived women as being responsible for child care, housework and household management (patriarchal system) made their chances of participation in sports less probable. The patriarchal system is here defined as a set of social relations which allowed for domination of compound women by compound men.

The only sport which was open to the compound female was netball and even then only school girls played the game. Their mothers could only be spectators. To make matters even more unfavourable for the compound women, the netball programmes were scheduled according to the time and space requirements of their male counterparts who acted as match referees.²⁸ Thus effectively compound women were relegated to the status of being spectators in male structured compound sports. Unlike their husbands, for them there was no outlet by way of recreation from the boring and monotonous tasks entrusted upon them to perform duties of a domestic nature in supporting their husbands.

Nationally the position of women in sports has been gradually changing for the better. In June 1992 an organisation called the South African Women for the Advancement of Sports and Recreation was formed. One of the main objectives of this organisation is to “fight for equal opportunities and representation of women at all levels of sports”.²⁹ Hopefully this organisation will encourage, develop and improve women’s participation in sports and recreational activities even at a local level.

Government segregation sports policies at the Messina mines

The politics of segregation as enforced by the South African government did not only affect the economic, social and political daily lives of Africans and Whites. Sports was also affected and this was more apparent in the area of sports facilities provided for the two groups. Whereas the Messina mining company provided its White employees with the best sports facilities it could afford, only basic sports

27. Interview with Phineas Mudau, Nancefield Location, 15.6.1996.

28. Interview with B.Milanzi, Nancefield Location, 15.6.1997.

29. C. ROBERTS, *Against the Grain: Women and Sport in South Africa*, (Cape Town Township Publishing Vlaeberg, 1992), p.5.

grounds with no club houses were made available to African mineworkers. This was made possible by the enforced residential and social separation of the two communities already in place. When the National Party came to power, they institutionalised segregation laws and practices which had been in place before 1948 through the *Group Areas and Population Act* of 1950, the *Reservation of Separate Amenities Act* of 1953 and the *Native Resettlement Act* of 1954.

The segregation sports policies of the government of the day which were eagerly enforced by the mine management hindered the possible development of sports among the African compound dwellers. Potential and talent became wasted as resources and development were focused only on Whites. This was exacerbated by the fact that the few compound sports facilities which were available were poorly equipped. There was also no coaching and technical personnel to help develop mineworkers sportsmen and women.

In March 1962 Jan de Klerk, Minister of the Interior, stated that “The mixing of races in sports in teams taking part in sports meetings in the Republic and abroad must be prevented The government cannot allow teams from the Republic to be composed of Whites and non-Whites. Conversely, foreign teams which are so composed cannot be permitted to enter the Republic.”³⁰ Racial discrimination in sports was condemned by foreign governments and sporting bodies. The failure of the government to eliminate racial segregation in sports eventually led to the expulsion of South Africa from the Olympic Games held in Tokyo in 1964.

Although international sporting links were resumed with South Africa following the restructuring of the sporting organisations to allow mixed participation in the early 1990's, segregation still exist between Africans and Whites at Messina on a day-to-day level. Some sports like golf, tennis, bowling, cricket and rugby still remain the exclusive preserve of the White community because there are no facilities for these sports for Africans in their own neighbourhood. The same scenario is also prevalent at a national level. Years of segregation at a local and national level produced different sporting preferences not only among the employees of the Messina company, but also amongst the Africans and Whites elsewhere in South Africa. At the Messina mines soccer became the most popular sporting culture. On the other hand, for the White mining community, rugby was the most favoured sport.

Conclusion

The analysis of the various sports activities at the Messina mines clearly indicate that the different definitions of sports given at the beginning of this paper were all relevant to the sporting activities of the African mineworkers. Sports served not only as the company's instrument of labour and social control, but also served the participants as a means of self expression, it brought conflict and divisions, it introduced new social class formations among the compound dwellers, and it provided the people with fun and amusement. Thus sports at the Messina mines was

30. *Die Burger*, 31 March 1962.

not a one way traffic of manipulation of the working class into conformity, but rather it also ignited their ability to resist control and provide sport with the stamp of their own culture.

Opsomming

Sport en etnisiteit: instrumente van arbeidsbeheer by die Messina kopermyne, 1920-60

In die studie word gepoog om vas te stel watter tipe sport vir die swart werkers deur die bestuur van die Messina myne in die Noordelike Provinsie destyds ingevoer is. Dit was 'n poging om aan die gemeenskappe van die Messina-, Harper-, Campbell- en Artonvilla-kampong ontspanningsgeleenthede te bied. Die fokus val op die wyse waarop die werkers in hul beoefening van sport, tekens van konflik vertoon het. Die verdeeldheid was ter wille van hul etniese en regionale affiliasies – veral op die terrein van mededingende sportsoorte. Ten spyte van die dinamiek van etnisiteit wat onder die kopermyners aanwesig was, het sport die gemeenskap in die kampong van 'n ontspanningsgeleentheid voorsien. Dit dien ook as 'n manier waarop die deelnemers hulself kon uitdruk. Vir die mynboumaatskappy was sport 'n belangrike instrument van sosiale kontrole en arbeidsbeheer.