

SPORTSMAN BOSS

W. MILLER

THERE can be little quarrel with the frequent assertion that White South Africa's pre-occupation with sport is a neurotic manifestation, that it signifies a flight from reality, a collective burying of the head, as it were, in the turf of the playing field.

But since this particular neurosis is not peculiar to South Africans—it has afflicted many peoples at many different times—it remains to enquire why South Africans in particular are called sport mad. It does suggest that the South African variety of the disease is an unusually virulent one.

The measure of the disease can be taken not merely by our pre-occupation with sport, but also by its corollary—our incredibly stubborn refusal to talk about or interest ourselves in much else. The eighteen months just passed have been unusually disturbed ones. The United Nations organization has been faced with crisis after crisis—an invasion of Egypt, uprisings in Hungary, the continued disturbances in Algeria. Here in South Africa, the Coloured Franchise case, the Treason Trial, the Bus Boycott and a continued turmoil of "colour" legislation have all helped to keep the social and political pot boiling. But very little echo of all this upheaval can be heard in the talk of the ordinary man. In common with thousands of others I have ridden to work day by day in crowded buses. Together with about 250 colleagues I have lunched daily in the staff restaurant of a large financial house. I have mingled with crowds in the street and in public places, but only rarely have all these topics of daily news been broached. I have watched with bemused curiosity reader after reader skimming briskly across headlines en route to the sports page of the morning paper, feeling sure that this banner, that streamer must surely hold the attention, even momentarily. But no; the sports page alone compels.

Two incidents stick in my mind as characteristic.

The liftman said to me one day:

"This Bus Boycott, now—bad show, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes," I agreed emphatically, "terrible business."

"Aye, all this politics—best left alone, I'd say."

We had arrived at my floor, the buzzer rang imperatively, and I couldn't keep him waiting. It would be nice to think that there was a missed opportunity for a good talk on the

topics of the day. But it is far more likely that the liftman's word was his last, and that his view was an affirmation, a brisk, brief definition of the neurosis itself.

The second incident—it occurred a year ago—is even more provoking.

A colleague of mine, a very intelligent man of wide interests, said to me one day:

"I have just read 'Cry, the Beloved Country.' Of all the sentimental twaddle. The bloody Kaffirs have never been so well off in their lives."

I made haste to disagree. I said I thought that in many respects the picture it drew was a faithful one and that we, the Whites, had a lot to answer for. "It is always, I suppose, theoretically possible to be a little worse off than one is—until one reaches the grave."

He took off his spectacles, gently massaged the bridge of his nose, and replaced them. Then he turned round in his chair, picked up his pen and continued his work, ignoring my presence. He no longer greets me.

These are the two recollections which, over the months, have engrossed my thoughts. My colleague's reaction in the second case is, it seems to me, full of significance. Has his outrage made a case for those who praise sport as a healthy and grace-saving diversion? If there were not the safety valve of sport, would we be continually at each other's throats, so that life would become intolerable and social intercourse all but cease? There is a limit to contending—one must live with people.

On the morrow of South Africa's victory in the fourth cricket test match against England, thousands upon thousands of people were smiling back at the pleasant face of bowler Hugh Tayfield. To him, as to all men of prominence, cling certain legends. I am in no way able to pierce through this enshrouding aura to discover the man, and so he remains as much a stranger to me as someone whose name and photo has never appeared in the press. Yet there are things I do know about Hugh Tayfield. I know, for example, that one morning he was undisputed king of South Africa—White South Africa. I know other things about him and about ten other men who made up his team—and indeed about 70,000 others, men and women, who, during those few days last year, watched these 11 men 'salvage the honour of South Africa'.

I know that these people—all of them, players and spectators

alike—are products of a certain environment, conditioned by precedent, committed, philosophically, politically and culturally, to a certain set of values which they do and must affirm in the ordinary day to day business of living. These values they take with them wherever they go, for attitudes are not things which one can leave off on Sundays and pull on over one's head like a jersey on Mondays. They are like one's skin, a part of one's permanent clothing. Hugh Tayfield, his team-mates, the spectators cheering him, were all affirming certain things—a love of cricket as a game, an interest in the question of cricket supremacy, a liking, perhaps, for sun and fresh air, a love of crowds, gaiety, spectacle.

But this is not all. Cricket—or any other game—endorses in its shibboleths, its laws, written and unwritten, the attitudes of player and spectator alike. South African cricket is not quite the same as English cricket or Australian cricket or Indian or West Indian cricket. The Wanderer's Oval reflects, like a willow in a pool, its ideological setting. For in so diverse a community as ours all the players are White. This is a matter of such long-established custom that it passes almost unnoticed, and people like myself who draw attention to so obvious a fact are accused of "bringing politics into sport." It is not pondered or questioned or analysed. It simply is. Players and spectators alike are probably quite unaware that herein is a moral and social curiosity so staggering that a foreigner, unconditioned to our society, must, like the old man looking at the giraffe, doubt his own senses. Indeed to the average South African sportsman—there may be exceptions—White exclusiveness, far from appearing strange, is a source of deep satisfaction, precisely because it is exclusive. It is—think of it—the one and only sphere of communal activity into which the non-European does not intrude whether as servant or henchman, enemy or rival, or in any other capacity, except occasionally as spectator. It is a small, confined area of absolute apartheid, a narrow, pale microcosm of the White Utopia in which the White man will see none about him but his own. Those sportsmen of Bloemfontein who seek to exclude the African even as spectator may be bigoted and unrealistic, but within narrow limits they are being intensely logical. Even as spectator the African has never really been a part of White sport. The spectator is not a passive agent—he has his part to play. His is the duty of partisanship, the duty to root for the home team, to identify himself with the hero of the day.

And, of course, we all know that the African insists upon bringing politics into sport by backing the other side; he cannot and never does play the part, and his formal, physical exclusion would merely follow upon a spiritual one.

This exclusiveness the White man craves because within its confines he is secure, unchallenged, free of the torments and doubts which beset him in the presence of the Black, who can no longer strike or boycott, incur hatred or claim sympathy, simply because he is no longer there. It is not even as a servant that the White man wants him. For when the master leans too heavily on the servant, who is really the boss?

Indeed, who? The White man is not at all sure that the "Jim fish" who pads about his kitchen on bare feet during the workday-week may not pad so effectively around the running track when work is over as to outstrip him. Is that grinning Black man who brings him his tea at 11 o'clock perhaps another Jake Tuli? A most unnerving prospect—that one might suffer defeat in the sphere in which, above all, the White man regards himself as supreme. What would happen if a team of fleet-footed Africans from Fort Hare were to meet a team of Stellenbosch students on the rugby field? It is a fascinating, if altogether fanciful, speculation, although in the wider world of sport the American Negro, who is, after all, first cousin to the African, may already have answered the question. One notices that the Secretary of the Western Province Cycling Union is disinclined to put the matter to a more decisive test. Surely the sports-field, above all, is no place to monkey about with the doctrine of White supremacy, which, like the doctrine of the last trump, is entirely a matter of faith.

Within the confines of sport there is, too, an area of complete and rigid orthodoxy—an absolute hegemony of prejudice. To return to my colleague—it was not politics that confounded him, it was unorthodoxy, the shock of non-conformity, a non-conformity which put me immediately beyond the pale. I am one with whom he cannot honourably contend. (So, no doubt, a Nationalist member of the House of Assembly voting for the expulsion of a Native Representative might deny that he is being undemocratic, on the grounds that a man who would plead for the African franchise is no more to be treated as a responsible M.P. than one who might plead for Nudism as the national religion.)

There is more truth than he knew in Dr. Craven's hysterical

assertion that Rugby Union alone makes White South Africa a united nation. The good doctor, I am sure, talks in terms of rugby whilst his subconscious mind dwells upon more momentous things.

Thus, when the average sportsman talks of leaving politics out of sport, he means the wrong kind of politics—he means treason against the most sacred dominion of absolute apartheid. For in South Africa sport is politics in the highest degree, and the White man's pre-occupation with sport is a very special kind of flight from reality—a flight from reality by means of a retreat *into* politics, the most sacred fastness of race ideology where all the White man's dreams come true. Of this I am certain—that if ever the colour bar in sport is broken down, the White man will turn away from it in search of some new religion.

