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American Coordinating Committee for Equality in Sport and Society (ACCESS)

Imagine playing in a tennis match, down advantage to forty. The whole world is watching to see if the correct moves are made in order to secure the victory. One wrong move and all the hard work in establishing goals throughout the season would abruptly disappear. The lack of being focused could result in the opponent gaining the next point and winning the match, ending any hope of victory. This was exactly the situation the anti-apartheid movement found themselves in. One ignorant mistake would result in the apartheid government, present in South Africa during the latter half of the twenty century, continuing to oppress Africans for many more years to come. The sector of the anti-apartheid movement known as the international sports boycott needed the United States to help isolate South African sports. Numerous groups would emerge to help this cause but one group in particular from the Northeast stood out. This anti-apartheid coalition was known as the American Coordinating Committee for Equality in Sport and Society (ACCESS).

ACCESS was founded in 1976 by human rights activist Richard Lapchick. Pushed by another human activist, Dennis Brutus, to create this group, Lapchick knew that he had a long road ahead to help out the majority that had been oppressed in South Africa since the 1948 election when the National Party (NP) was elected. In the late 1970s, ACCESS founders knew that they had to establish a mission and goals to help the international sports boycott of South Africa. At the first meeting in New York City, ACCESS established three major goals, with a mission to isolate Africa by boycotting all United States competition with South African sports. The goals were to organize successful educational campaigns, reach out to government officials

and sports federations, and conduct non-violent, direct protest actions. Could ACCESS accomplish their goals and provide enough assistance needed to advance the international boycott of South African sports? It was not an easy task but ACCESS did accomplish the goals they had set back in May of 1977. The coalition advanced the sports boycott by educating both ordinary Americans and American officials about South Africa's enduring apartheid in sports, through media campaigns and direct protest actions.

ACCESS' Early Beginnings

Right from the very beginning, ACCESS wanted to educate both the American people and sports federations in the United States about the horrors taking place in South Africa. For example, ACCESS hoped “to influence United States sports federations that allow(ed) affiliated teams to compete with South Africa to end their competition on the theory that change will come about only when South Africa is totally isolated in the world of sport” (Lapchick, 1977, 5). To complete this isolation of South African sports, ACCESS created an early goal to ban ties with all South African sports teams competing against United States teams by the time the 1980 Olympics rolled around.

Like other international sports boycott groups, ACCESS felt that isolation of South African sports would help force the apartheid government to give in. This would allow all black South Africans to gain equal rights and a more democratic government for the future. In the first couple of meetings ACCESS had planned exactly how they were going to combat this movement. For example, in a meeting in August 1977, “it was decided that official relations with the police, press and presentations to the USTA would be handled by Rich Lapchick, Dennis Brutus and Ray Gould” (Minutes of Meetings, Aug. 1977, 1). This was important to set because

the leaders of ACCESS did not just want anybody talking to these officials due to the fact that many Americans were still not fully educated on the issues of the sports boycott movement. Having the leaders of ACCESS deal with this was more beneficial to the overall mission that ACCESS was trying to accomplish at this time. In fact, the coalition of many organizations within ACCESS would not have been possible without two men who devoted countless hours to making sure this movement was successful.

ACCESS' Founders Richard Lapchick and Dennis Brutus

Richard Lapchick, a white American man who dealt with racial slurs at an early age in life, would soon become a well-known human rights activist. While he was a young boy, Lapchick had seen a lot of racial bias because his father was heavily involved in human rights activism as well. For Lapchick being involved in the anti-apartheid movement was more than just helping another race, the cause for equal human rights throughout the world was more significant than anything. This was especially the case when it came to helping all races be equal in the realm of sports.

Some of Lapchick's human rights success with the group ACCESS began with the opposition to the Davis Cup in 1977. "On the day he spoke there, the financial backers of the event pulled out, generating widespread publicity" (Araton, 2011). Lapchick knew he had to be proactive in the opposition to South African sports or nothing would be done in stopping the corrupt government system. Today, Lapchick is world known for his human rights activism and helping sports become more diverse. Throughout his lifetime he has worked with the UN, professional sports organization in the United States, and constantly reminding people of the

numbers behind diversity in sports. For Lapchick, “The words, he decided, were merely meant to get people’s attention. Numbers told the story” (Araton, 2011).

Another important figure of ACCESS was the black South African Dennis Brutus. Just like Lapchick, Brutus devoted himself to the long cause of ending apartheid rule and generating a better system for human rights not only in South Africa but around the world. In Lapchick’s article, “Brutus used sports to fight apartheid,” right from the beginning he details about how Brutus was a major activist in this struggle: “Between the early 1960s and the end of apartheid in South Africa, the architects of that most racist regime rarely slept, due to the force of major activists such as Brutus” (Lapchick, 2009). Brutus, a well-known poet, was actually a freedom fighter at heart. This man wanted to spread the word and his knowledge internationally about apartheid to hopefully stop its devastating regime. Brutus, as Lapchick had put it, knew that the sports boycott would be South Africa’s Achilles heel (Lapchick, 2009). While other boycotts like oil, trading, and the economics could be brushed underneath the table, there was no room for sports to be hidden. Sports was front and center on a global scale and became a devastating blow to the apartheid government, thanks to organizations like ACCESS and leaders like Dennis Brutus.

Brutus was the driving force for the creation of the group ACCESS in the United States. Lapchick recalled Brutus encouraging him to create the coalition group (ACCESS) and together they both “helped stage the first American sports protest against South Africa at the U.S. Open in Forest Hills, N.Y., in 1977” (Lapchick, 2009). This would just be the start of the many contributions Brutus made to the international sports boycott in the United States. Other contributions along the way would include educating Americans on apartheid issues, teaming up

with other ACCESS leaders in organizational rallies, and taking lead roles by speaking about the hidden truths of the minority rule in South Africa.

Apartheid Sports Policies

Apartheid's absurd sports inequalities did not become really evident until the 1970s. Before 1970, the apartheid government was known to not have any black South Africans playing on their international teams. This policy continued and outraged many nations, especially when it came to the Olympic games. In fact, South Africa was "first banned in 1964, readmitted in 1968 only to be excluded a few months later, and, finally, dismissed from the Olympic Movement altogether in 1970" (Lapchick, 1977, 2). The primary reason for the exclusion of South Africa was the nation kept deliberately leaving out black South Africans from participating in their international teams even if these individuals had enough skill to be on the team. These continuous actions by the apartheid government ignited the sports boycott globally.

Knowing that sports was a big component of life in South Africa, sports administrators became very defensive when asked about sport policies. One defense that was used by sports administrators was that "South African sportsmen are not responsible for and cannot change government policy and, players are chosen strictly on merit; that is, there are only a few qualified nonwhites available to represent South Africa" (Lapchick, 1979, 162). This defense used by South African sports administrators was inaccurate. In reality, there were many non-whites that could have represented South Africa, but increasingly they were in exile, like cricket player Basil D'Oliveira. Other athletes in the sports of rugby, boxing, and tennis were quite capable of making the South African teams as well, but the government restraints kept them from doing so. The other issue evident at the time was that many foreign non-whites were not allowed to

compete in sporting events held in South Africa. For example, African-American tennis player Arthur Ashe and Maori rugby players from New Zealand were “among those ‘undesirable’ athletes kept out of South Africa until the early 1970s” (Lapchick, 1979, 156).

The 1970s was when the apartheid government experienced the most heat globally in the realm of sports. Many more nations began seeing through the fake front the country was putting on and were concerned for the well-being of the majority population. By 1971, “multi-racial sport was still banned on the club, provincial and national levels” in South Africa (Lapchick, 1977, 3). This did not sit well with international affairs, as many nations urged the apartheid government to start sending integrated teams to international competition or South Africa would continue to be banned from competition. South Africa began to make some changes to their international teams but in most cases the country ignored global requests and continued to enforce these policies within the country itself. As Dennis Brutus had stated, “it's a new name for the old game,” completely dismissing the changes that South Africa was making to their international teams (Lapchick, 2009). Internal apartheid sports would stay the same and many international organizations recognized this, keeping South African teams excluded from their events. “If they wanted to resume competition, the cost would clearly be the elimination of apartheid from sport” (Lapchick, 1979, 165).

ACCESS' Educational Campaigns for the American Public and Sports Federations

A major component of the group ACCESS was their promotional material and advertisements to gain new followers in their ever-growing movement to boycott South African sports at an international scale. One promotional piece that really stands out that ACCESS created was a leaflet just before major international tennis tournaments were held in the United

States during the late 1970s. On the front of the leaflet, in bold letters, read “Score a point for freedom. Ban South Africa” (“End All Sports Ties With South Africa,” 1977, 1). The leaflet featured a cartoon image of a tennis racket with several severed African heads on it. By using this brutal image, the coalition hoped that other Americans would be struck by the horrors of apartheid and choose to participate in the isolation movement of apartheid sport. Educating people in the United States was a major struggle ACCESS leaders faced, but promotional material like this piece only helped the cause. These advertisements not only helped educate ordinary people but also allowed for large sports federations to think twice about what teams they were going to compete against.

One sports organization ACCESS had trouble in convincing not to compete against South African sports was the U.S. Tennis Association (USTA). For awhile, this organization did not realize that they were supporting an awful cause by still competing with the teams that South Africa was bringing over. The USTA chose to ignore the controversy over apartheid sport in order to keep international competition with the country going. ACCESS was not pleased with this and spoke out against the sports organization by generating another leaflet in the summer of 1977. In this leaflet, it detailed why other nations are taking precautions against apartheid sport but then it let readers know that the USTA refused to break ties with South African competition. Later in the leaflet it also stated, “Inviting the South Africans is an insult to everyone concerned with human rights and social justice” (“Tennis, Anyone?” 1977). This information provided by ACCESS helped grab the attention of ordinary Americans, in which members participated in non-violent protests later that summer and eventually at Forest Hills in September. These actions forced the USTA to reconsider their stance on this issue.

Pressured by the coalition, the UTSA asked South Africa to withdraw from the competition that was set to take place in March of 1978. In a letter from Lapchick to W.E. Hester (president of the USTA), Lapchick stated, “The reason I am writing is to congratulate the USTA, under your leadership, for the decision to ask South Africa to withdraw from the Davis Cup and the Federation Cup. We believe this is a dramatic and positive step in the right direction” (“Dear Mr. Hester,” 1977). This statement shows that ACCESS was beginning to make an impact on educating the American people. However, in the same breath Lapchick warns Hester of the possibility that South Africa will not accept the UTSA’s withdrawal request. Two months later, ACCESS found out that the matches were re-scheduled for the following year, which forced the coalition to alert its members to be ready for action that following spring. In this alert, Lapchick asked members to reach out to others in the Nashville area, asking how much money each organization will be able to contribute to this effort (Lapchick, Dec. 1977). In response to this request, thousands of members protested the Davis Cup at Vanderbilt University in the spring, pushing for the South African team to be banned from competition. A year later, South Africa would be excluded from the 1979 Davis Cup and were not allowed to compete in the competition until 1992 after apartheid ended.

Other material ACCESS published was less of educational material on apartheid but more of member recruitment. In the early 1980s, ACCESS published a brochure that was titled, “Don’t Play Ball with Apartheid Sport!” This brochure pressured people to consider joining the sports boycott movement and become members of ACCESS. In the brochure it gave readers horrifying statistics: such as, “Inside South Africa the truth is clear: there is no mixed sport at the club level where 99% of all Africans compete” (“Don’t Play Ball with Apartheid Sport!” 1980-81, 2). Towards the end of the brochure, it contained a cutout for people to mail back in stating

that they would help support the goals of this movement. Options included for people to write their name, address, and affiliation declaring whether or not they would provide money or volunteer to help with the work ACCESS needed to accomplish (“Don’t Play Ball with Apartheid Sport!” 1980-81, 7).

ACCESS' Outreach to Government Officials

ACCESS members felt that it was necessary to grab the attention of many influential leaders throughout the United States from its early formation. One influential figure that ACCESS targeted right away in the summer of 1977 was President Carter. In their letter to the president, ACCESS wanted Carter to support their goal of ending all United States contact with all South African teams. One point Lapchick brings up in this letter to President Carter is that they appreciate his commitment to human rights and supporting the majority of South Africa (“Dear President Carter,” 1977). Sports was a major component of helping United States citizens understand the horrors of apartheid because it was something that Americans could relate to. Further in the letter, Lapchick warns the President that the United States was one of the last major nations to support the opposition of apartheid sports, stating that prime ministers of other nations at a conference accepted an agreement to oppose connections with these sports teams (“Dear President Carter,” 1977). ACCESS wanted the President to support this agreement and continue to support their efforts moving forward. This was just one of the many steps that ACCESS made to grab national attention in the United States.

Lasting Effects of ACCESS' Activism

A decade after the boycott of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the apartheid government had been pushed out. The long struggle could not have ended without the help of ACCESS and other global activists. The group's persistence and efforts in boycotting South African sports competing with the United States throughout the late 1970s into the 1980s helped isolate South Africa on a global scale. Activists like Lapchick and Brutus began the push and the goals of ACCESS members finished the rest. ACCESS had been dedicated for several years to eliminating South African competition with the United States, especially in the sport of tennis. However, this organization would not have excelled without the backing of political figures like President Carter and its members that spent countless hours protesting tournaments that were going to allow these sports teams to compete within the United States. Ultimately, ACCESS helped the anti-apartheid movement flip the script of the difficult tennis match being played out, from being advantage to forty in the apartheid government's favor to celebrating a victory in the early 1990s when the final point was scored in the majority population's favor, ending the long struggle for liberation.

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