

Address at The Presidential Sports Awards Ceremony

Midrand, 23 March 2001

Master of Ceremonies,
Minister Ngconde Balfour,
Sports men and women,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am pleased to be here today as we celebrate the outstanding performances of our sportsmen and women at national and international levels.

If we look back into our past, we are reminded that sports in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, emerged out of warfare, and the games that people played and in some places still play today were based on the warrior tradition. Sports like wrestling, horse riding, spear-throwing later developed also into forms of entertainment in times of peace. It was not the aim and marksmanship that produced a winner among the spear-throwers, but the strength, velocity and distance of the throw. Sports in general emphasised the skills and the prowess of the athletes, qualities we still hold in high esteem today.

On this occasion of celebration, as we salute sporting heroes and heroines of our new country and of these new times, we do so conscious of the fact that we now have in our midst the sporting warriors of sustained peace times, those who have excelled and blossomed as our new democracy has grown.

Thus every conscious effort of our sports men and women to excel in the various sporting codes, and in helping others to grow, contributes in countless ways to the building of our nation and the nurturing of a caring and people-centred society. It is in this context of transformation and of the attainments of our freedom that we must understand the role of sports in the development of our nation.

The democratic order we have established and the deepening of this democracy is also dependent on more and more of our people becoming involved in sports. That principle of a sound body and mind is what we require of each and everyone of us if we are to build a nation which is hard at work in a united action for change.

The kind of co-operation required of sports people, the team effort which we often talk about in matters unrelated to sport, is what our youth must learn on the sports fields today, for these are also the qualities which we need to build a truly great country and they who are tomorrow's leaders must start learning these skills now.

The competitiveness we must inject into our economy, as in sports, derives from the co-operation and togetherness of a healthy nation.

It is in this context of nation-building, national development and the inculcation of national pride and identity, that we honour and celebrate the outstanding performances of our athletes and pay tribute not only to those who have excelled in the international arena, but also those who, because the past system deprived them from developing their potential to the full, were never recognised for their performances which were accomplished against tremendous odds.

Tonight we must focus on these positive role models and their most valuable contributions in helping us to understand who we are as South Africans and what we still strive and imagine ourselves to be, irrespective of colour, gender, of region, of town, irrespective of the disabilities of those among us.

The excellent performance of our Paralympic Team in Sydney last year has demonstrated beyond any doubt that those who have been most marginalised through their disabilities can show us through their actions how great we really are meant to be. More than anyone else, they have demonstrated their determination to overcome all obstacles in their path and have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. We salute them!

We are also immensely proud and heartened by the performance of individuals. I am thinking here of Penny Heyns who in the period 1999 to 2000 managed to break eight world records.

I believe we have performed well in cricket, in rugby, in boxing, in tennis. Our half-marathon team has won the World Championships for two years in succession.

Our successes can be attributed also to our sports administrators, our coaches, our trainers, our supporters, our families and of course, our athletes themselves. We thank you for your determination to succeed for us as South Africans and to demonstrate what we can do as a country.

The resources that Government make available to sport and recreation are also intended to involve our youth in meaningful activities that must contribute to the rebuilding of our communities. The attainment of a better life for all can only be realised if we have sports being accessible to all the people of this country. The role of our National Federations must be to make this goal possible. I am pleased that in this regard, Minister Balfour has seen to it that there has been signing of performance agreements with several of these federations.

I am also aware of the existence of the Ministerial Task Team that is investigating high performance sport in our country and also look forward to hearing their proposals. For the 2000 to 2001 financial year, the government has sought to make a substantial allocation from the Poverty Relief, Infrastructure Creation and Job summit resource pool for developing sport and recreation facilities in disadvantaged areas. I would like to believe that the greater access that these facilities will provide for deprived communities will contribute to deeper interest in sports and to elevating levels of sports performance in our country. We must also not forget that resources will also come to sports and recreation from the proceeds of the National lottery.

Partnership between the sports sector and the private sector has produced good results and of mutual benefit to both stakeholders. I think that private sector partnership will be further deepened and enhanced if consideration is given to a more equitable spread of resources in different sporting codes and activities, so that sports for women, for people with disabilities and in rural areas are encouraged and allowed to flourish.

As we thank our sports people for their service tonight, we thank our athletes for their sacrifices in representing this country and for competing in international competitions against those who may have had more privileges and better training than we do here.

As we pay tribute to these athletes who are at the present peak of their careers for aspiring to even greater heights, we also recognise the heroes and heroines of the past and the coaches, the administrators, the officials and the volunteers, without which sports would not succeed in this country.

You are all, each and everyone of you, the spear-throwers of our present times, those who follow the paths first set in ancient times and who now contribute their strengths and skills and sportspersonship to creating this new road of united national action for change. My most sincere congratulations to all these outstanding South Africans.

Thank you.