

Speech at a Sponsors Of Sports Dinner

13 April 1999

I am honoured to be in the company of such committed sponsors and sports enthusiasts this evening as we show our appreciation of your generous contributions to the sporting successes of our nation.

The legacies of apartheid and the social divisions it generated has meant and still means that the ongoing transformation of our country's sports is not an easy one. Divisions along the lines of race, class and gender entrenched under the apartheid system will take time to be ironed out.

At the same time, the integration of our country's sports movement into continental and global sports competitions has given us an opportunity as South Africans to begin to forge a national identity. It is also thanks to the sponsors of sport that we have achieved international successes that give us pride in being citizens of this country.

But a recent study suggests that thus far our successes have been limited. John Nauright argues that:

The RWC [Rugby World Cup], cricket victories, a winning national soccer team and Olympic successes have all been important to many South Africans and have generated some momentary feelings of national identification. However, the overall conception of what South Africa is, or should be, is still being negotiated through lived experience and discursively through the media and other forms of public discourse.... Sport is but one area where the South African nation can exist; however the divisions that exist within sport and within wider South African society mean that it will take a long time before a truly 'national' identity is forged that takes account of race, class and gender differences. *From Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa, David Philip, Cape Town 1997*

I put it to you that what brings us together here this evening, what unifies sports practitioner and sponsor alike, is the idea that we can be one confident nation symbolized by our sporting prowess.

Gone are the days when the relationship between sports practitioner and sponsor – from the government or private sector – could be viewed as one of mere subsidy and patronage. Neither the relationship between servant and master, nor spectator and player, can suffice in describing this relationship.

It is no longer adequate to see the sports person as armed with a begging bowl or with a cap in hand, seeking funds from a wealthy funder. We must move beyond this welfarist mentality.

Similarly, let me be bold enough to say that it is also no longer the time to equate the funding of sports as mere shirtfront sponsorship or having company logos on pitches and playing fields. Sponsorship must go beyond the promotion of brand awareness and putting a brand name in front of potential customers so as to maximise potential income.

It would also be true to say that it is not for the sports practitioner to emulate business, as it is also not for the corporate sector to begin treating their companies like sports.

We must move beyond seeing our roles as limited and self-serving – a divisive vision which was perpetuated by apartheid – to a more holistic understanding of what the game is really about. I am pleased to hear that there are moves afoot in the Ministry of Sport and Recreation to establish a stakeholders' forum consisting of government, sport and business. This forum will go a long way into bridging the gap between sports person and sponsor. This forum that will come up with strategic parameters is part of an overall comprehensive plan for sports in this country. Among other concerns, it will address ways in which existing resources can be utilised efficiently.

The notion of such a forum is important because the relationship between sports practitioner cum enthusiast and sponsor is not one of power-play, but that of a necessary partnership between citizens.

It is based on a mutual understanding and common desire of those who collectively wish to build bridges between people who were divided.

It concerns the role of sport as celebrating our athletic humanness and bring out the best we have to offer; it is about seeing sports as a crucial element in the healing of our nation.

A wise poet once said that “politics is the art of the possible, creativity is the art of the impossible.” I say to you that sports can succeed, where politics may fail, at nurturing a national culture and consciousness of a people.

A national victory gives us confidence, instils a belief in self-worth and builds pride. Failure also teaches us – like the lessons from a fable or a folktale – that we must try harder next time. It intensifies our will to succeed and to endure. For sport is the stuff legends are made of.

Even the language of sport has so permeated the language of politics and the expressions of everyday life, that it sometimes seems as if we can no longer comprehend our reality without knowing what it is like to shift the goalposts or level the playing fields or instill fair play or start a whole new ball game.

Globally – for our country is no exception – sports has helped to define moral and political community and become vehicles for human identity. Sports can and must be a means by which we create new social identities.

Even Hegel himself believed that “Sports presents the higher seriousness; for in it Nature is wrought into Spirit ... in this exercise of the physical powers, man [sic] shows his Freedom, viz. That he has transformed his body to an organ of Spirit.”

Rousseau declared that sport could “keep a certain vigour alive in the people” and the great historian, Hobsbaum, in his superb work, Nations and Nationalism, observes that an entire country, a nation, “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven people.”

Nations have been enshrined in sports, through the use of flags and anthems in ceremonies, and the use of national colours in sports attire.

For us in present-day South Africa, sport undoubtedly has the capacity to unite our fragmented society, to nurture our new patriotism.

We must continue to focus on infrastructure building programmes in underdevelopment areas. Sports disciplines that have been sidelined and given Cinderella status must be brought in from the cold and receive sponsorship.

We must open up opportunities for everyone in this land to be able to participate in sport and reach his or her fullest potential. For this is a crucial step towards the nation building that is necessary for our moving forward as a people.

Long term commitments from all stakeholders are needed to achieve our goals in making our country a truly great sporting nation of which the entire continent can be proud. Our hosting of the 7th All Africa Games in September of this year is a step in the right direction, since it will encourage a spirit of friendship, a sense of belonging among the youths of our continent. Yet it also develop healthy competitiveness, for sports is often undervalued in its role as a medium for diplomacy. Here too corporate sponsorship is crucial to our success as hosts and participants in the All Africa Games.

As sponsors, you understand that the sports have major social, political and economic significance in contemporary society. I acknowledge your past contributions in sponsorships and thank you in anticipation of your future commitments. Please continue to sponsor the development of sports in our country.

Long ago the same Romans who told us *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*, (Out of Africa always comes something new), also said *mens sana in corpore sano*, that is, that a person is one who is sound because of his or her physical soundness and well-being. I ask you tonight to remember their words of wisdom and to make our nation a healthy one, both in body and in mind, with your ongoing generous contributions.