

Soccer amongst the cane fields

Driving through KwaZulu-Natal, the old sportscar's V8 leisurely churns over green rolling hills and through winding mountain passes. Temporarily abandoning a busy corporate schedule, the long slow drive along quiet country roads gives me plenty of time to discover what the 'soccer of the people' is really about, uncluttered by the messages of media and advertising.

Moderated by warm ocean currents, days down in Durban are temperate even in winter and nights at worst demand a sweater. Moist breezes nourish sub-tropical vegetation and assure bountiful harvests of the crop that this coastal province is famous for; sugar.



Sugar cane fields and distant hills in the warm winter sun near Eshowe.

For a visitor from the cold dry Highveld, this area is outwardly a paradise. Yet there are signs that residents face daily issues such as AIDS and poverty on a large scale. Kilometres of gently waving sugar cane and pleasant smiles offer no evidence of the region's turbulent past and occasionally tense present. Clues lie however in names steeped in history, signposts to now centuries old

battle sites dotted all along the rural roads.

Leaving Durban early Saturday morning after attending a conference, I follow the North Coast road. Seaside towns with names like Umhlanga and Ballito are familiar to generations of holidaymakers from the 'Reef'. Turning inland before Richards Bay, I am soon caught behind trucks carrying mountains of sugar cane to the mills.

Passing tiny unpainted homes with thin dogs and bursting washing lines, there are many unkempt makeshift soccer fields serving young warriors. In these poor communities children are often at work helping their family put bread on the table. Despite this the Department of Education does recognise the importance of sport, and so it is possible to find schoolchildren at play during weekday afternoons and over the weekend.



Fencing poles and even straight trees are nailed together for goalposts, as this pitch in Shakaskraal shows. Fields are seldom regulation size and often covered with far less vegetation than this one.

I was out to encounter some of the many faces of soccer, and found three matches being played along the three hundred kilometre route from Durban to Vryheid. Each stop taught me something different.

Over the Tugela River and past Mandini, an hour and a half out of Durban on my trip there is a shop on the right hand side, a diesel pump and a field with rickety whitewashed poles making up the goals. The scattered settlement is called aMatikulu and there is a river nearby.

Some boys are knocking a ball around. It is mid-morning, the sun is warm and I have no appointments to attend. The low-slung car complains as it is gingerly guided along the dirt path towards a young man sitting on a log. He is watching boys play ball whilst some men play cards on the grass nearby.

The boy's name is Lindo and without delay he emphasises he is a player as well as a spectator. He is a grade eleven pupil at the local secondary school and had been staying in the Bluff in Durban until recently. Born in Richards Bay, he moved to aMatikulu to stay with his mother. Unsurprisingly, he expresses a longing for a bit more action than the village can offer. Soccer is a cherished diversion from daily chores that

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The landscape garden at the entrance to Stanger says "Siya Jabula 2010".



A group of young boys playing soccer on a Saturday morning in aMatikulu.

Soccer in aMatikulu

include fetching water from the river. Lindo's English is better than that of the others sitting around, perhaps because of the city experience, so he is able to paint me a vivid picture of home and soccer in this community.



Lindo, wearing a hat, and four friends in the sun. The group grew and the soccer was abandoned when they saw I was taking pictures.

Despite the lack of electricity and technology at home, Lindo is well informed about global soccer and the World Cup. His school has a computer and is now teaching tourism. He feels that there is a chance that his community can prosper in 2010, although he is not sure exactly how. Soccer itself is less of a mystery. Whilst the game is not sponsored in the area and is mostly informal, some league activity does exist. Money for kit and transport usually comes from gambling, but there are clubs or teams owned by individuals who pay some expenses. Needless to say, the money does not go far.

On parting Lindo thanks me for my interest in their soccer and wishes me well in my endeavours. He also asks me to send some photographs and perhaps return during the week when I can speak to the teachers.

aMatikulu is a place where dreams are born.

Three-and-a-half hours out of Durban, the monster that I am driving, now nicknamed 'Thirsty', insists on refreshments. Coasting into a timber and sugar town called Melmoth, I spot a group of people on a school field. On turning in, a far bigger crowd can be seen half a kilometre away. Secondary schools are having a match, and it appears most of the town is there to watch.

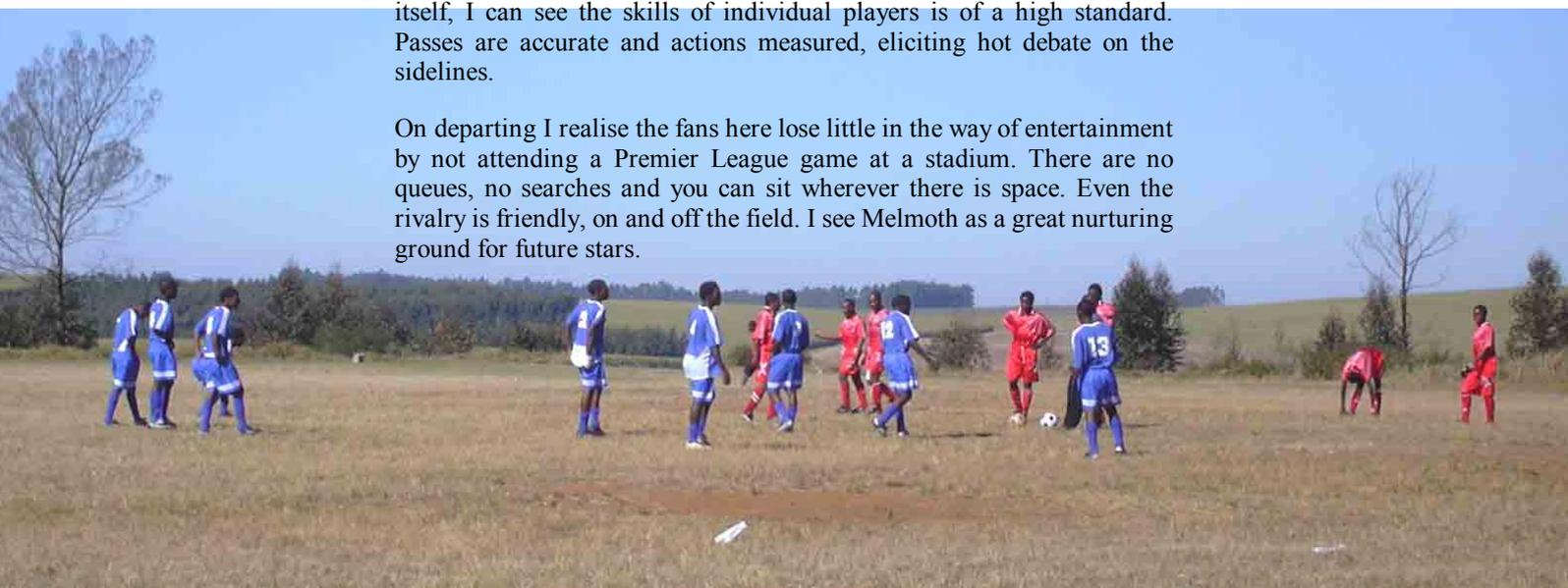


Convenience stands for refreshments alongside the pitch are well patronised and offer fresh healthy fare.

Evidently an outsider, I am regarded with curiosity and a degree of welcome to proceedings. Teams are on and around the field, and the fans range from children to adults. There is a lively volleyball game being played behind us. The cooler-box convenience stands and an open-air telephone 'booth' on the grass somehow do not appear out of place amidst the amazing vistas and clean air.

This game is far more organised than in aMatikulu. Melmoth's players are warming up, immaculately turned out in their blue and red uniforms. Well-disciplined teamwork, respect for the referee and enthusiasm from the fans are immediately apparent. Whilst not an expert on the game itself, I can see the skills of individual players is of a high standard. Passes are accurate and actions measured, eliciting hot debate on the sidelines.

On departing I realise the fans here lose little in the way of entertainment by not attending a Premier League game at a stadium. There are no queues, no searches and you can sit wherever there is space. Even the rivalry is friendly, on and off the field. I see Melmoth as a great nurturing ground for future stars.



Finding a match

For a city-slicker like me, finding a soccer match in rural KwaZulu-Natal requires observation and intuition. Newspapers don't publish dates, or even cover the local games, and there are no stadiums. The first clue to look for is a flat piece of land, then groups of people standing around, preferably in brightly coloured shorts and shirts.



Fans taking their places next to the field in Melmoth.

Teams square up for the kickoff in Melmoth.

Soccer at Konfoor Secondary School

North of Melmoth the countryside becomes dryer and more rugged. Grass is beige and trees thorny. Between Babanango and Vryheid there are vast valleys separating steep mountains. Rich in history, here is where the Prince Imperial died and battles such as Ulundi took place. Nature reserves and isolated communities are spread thinly across the landscape, and it is possible to drive fifty kilometres without seeing another person. Cane has given way to cattle, game and subsistence stands of maize.



The pitch has little chance of growing green when water is scarce. People cluster around a water pump at Konfoor Secondary School when the midday temperature rises.

Over the Wit Umfolozi, just past Gluckstadt, I pass people sitting on a barricade next to the highway. Looking down, a soccer match is in preparation. I park in the grass near a dusty but perfectly laid out field. Enquiring stares follow as I start to take pictures of the people and players stretching. A young player soon approaches me and asks if I would mind coming with him. I am not sure of the protocol here, and my African etiquette is sadly lacking. I am introduced to Elias who draws up a chair for me and offers Coca Cola or something a bit stronger, a beer perhaps?

Elias politely asks my business, then introduces me to the principal of the school, Mr Shabalala. I am invited to stay to watch the game, and even to return in a month when a big tournament is taking place. The school seems to want pictures and especially video footage.



The goalie readies himself for a strike. Zealous defence prevents a goal from being scored.

There are about a hundred people watching the soccer, with maybe another thirty watching girls play netball. The soccer field looks to be regulation size, with lines scraped in the earth and filled with cement dust. Fans are seated on the ground, on rocks or chairs. Again, they are not just schoolchildren, with at least half

being adult men.

I am invited to look at the school facilities whilst the principal has his hands full being coach. Classrooms are well kept but sparse. Nevertheless, dedicated staff make the most of what they have.



Hard running football in this heat requires stamina and fitness. Players are careful about dehydration when the humidity is so low.

Here players look very professional. After players warm up next to the field in a platoon-like formation, the referee with his tie and long sleeve shirt selects the ball and the game is underway. There is no doubt teams are here to win. Players are not reluctant to engage with opponents, the only deference paid to hard stony earth is that they do not slide into tackles as they may do on a grassy pitch in Europe.

My lasting impressions of Konfoor will be of African hospitality, that it is where skilled individuals are hardened and honed, and that it is where values are taught. Determined people live here.



Principal Shabalala is also the coach. During the game he demonstrates every bit of passion from the sidelines that his Premier League counterpart would.



Elias watching soccer with his son Shange, Shange's daughter is on the roof of the bakkie. Shange teaches geography and Elias' wife teaches English and Business Economics at Konfoor Secondary School. Elias himself works for the municipality.



Dedicated staff use Konfoor Secondary School's limited facilities to the maximum.

Soccer in rural KwaZulu-Natal is simple, unadorned and yet an important part of community life. It provides entertainment, motivation and hope for all involved. Pride in South Africa hosting the World Cup 2010 is immense, and everyone I spoke to hoped for benefits that were as much social as commercial. With such hospitable and ardent fans, tourists to South Africa and to the region should include visits to small rural communities such as these in their agenda. Whether in a Matikulu, Melmoth or along the Wit Umfolozi, they will experience the real 'soccer of the people'.