

RACE

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Katanga versus Johannesburg: A History of the “First Sub-Saharan African Football Championship,” 1949-50

While vacationing on the shores of Lake Victoria in 1949, J.G. Young, Senior Welfare Officer of the Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department, and Commandant van Hoorebeke, a Belgian colonial official at the head of the Katanga provincial football (soccer) association (UFASL), discovered they shared a passion for soccer. They decided to organize a sporting visit by a South African soccer team to Elisabethville (Lubumbashi), capital of Katanga province in southern Congo. Van Hoorebeke and Young billed the match the “first Sub-Saharan African championship.” The contest took place at the Elisabethville Stadium in front of more than 30,000 spectators on July 23, 1950; the Katanga select side crushed the Johannesburg visitors by a score of 8-0.

This paper examines the history of the southern African tour by the Johannesburg Bantu Football Association (JBFA) team from its very colonial inception in 1949 to the settling of the trip’s financial accounts late in 1950. How does the Katanga-JBFA championship match help us in understanding the history of southern African soccer during the colonial era? The central argument of this essay is that close scrutiny of the primary sources reveals that African soccer in the colonial context cannot be easily categorized as either an affirmation or subversion of cultural imperialist objectives. While it is certainly true that colonial officials and European missionaries viewed the 1950 soccer championship as a tool for social control of colonized people, it is necessary to examine the perspectives and experiences of the African men. By doing so, we learn about the tour as an opportunity for South Africans to experience the African landscapes, peoples, languages and leisure practices encountered beyond the borders of South Africa.

In the end, the results on the soccer fields of Congo, Northern and Southern Rhodesia proved as important and instructive to the Johannesburg footballers as the traveling experiences. The JBFA tour led to a decade of soccer tours to and from Johannesburg, but the organic development of South African soccer was brutally stunted by the apartheid state’s political, bureaucratic and military thrust to entrench racial discrimination and economic exploitation of the disenfranchised black majority. The first sub-Saharan African championship provides a historical window through which to observe African soccer at the beginning of apartheid, and on the eve of the formation of the Confederation of African Football in 1957. It reveals, among other things, the agency of

Africans within the limits and constraints of colonial political economy and sheds light on the pre-institutional history of inter-African competitions.

This paper is based on rich primary evidence excavated in South African archives during a year of dissertation research by the author funded by a Fulbright Fellowship. The evidence came from newspapers, journals and magazines of the black press, annual reports of the Johannesburg Bantu Football Association, and official government documents of the Union of South Africa and Belgian Congo colony.