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The Need to Organize Football

'I taught Tony Suze mathematics and he taught me how to kick a ball.'
Sedick Isaacs, Prisoner 883/64

It was a Saturday morning early in February 1968. Tony Suze, Freddie Simon, and the rest of the footballers in the cell block were limbering up, stretching, and getting in some last-minute training before taking to the pitch for the game they'd been looking forward to all week.

However, as the training session went on, the men's anticipation took on a different form and they began to exchange troubled looks. Though the men were banned from wearing watches, the rigid routine of their average day meant that they had developed an internal sense of time that was astonishingly accurate. The footballers were released from their cells at 10 a.m. for the first game of the day, but it was now becoming clear that it was past that time. One inmate stepped up to the bars of his cell and called out to the guard, asking when they were going to be allowed out to play. The guard answered dismissively, 'No football today.' The men were incensed but, having become skilled at negotiating with the warders, tried to stay calm and gently persuaded the officer to explain why. Casually, he informed them that a couple of warders were off sick. There weren't enough staff to guard the footballers while they played.

This wasn't the first time it had happened. The regime had realized from the outset how much football meant to the prisoners and that it could be used as a weapon against them; the men, too, had been aware from the very beginning of their campaign to be allowed to play football that victory could prove to be a double-edged sword. There had always been the danger that the authorities would exploit the opportunity it had granted the prisoners, withdrawing the right at will and thus transforming it into a punishment, and it was the prisoners' bad luck that they gained permission to play just at the time major changes were about to occur on the island.

In early 1967 a new administration had taken over the running of the prison. It was a tough regime, out to get revenge on the prisoners for revealing so much to the International Red Cross about living conditions on Robben Island. The authorities and the guards were also enraged by ex-prisoners who had served shorter two- and three-year sentences then left the island and gone out of their way to publicize the human-rights violations that regularly occurred there.

One former prisoner who had been released was the black poet Dennis Brutus. He had served an eighteen-month sentence for crimes against the state. On his release he gave testimony to the UN Special Committee on Apartheid about the reality of life on Robben Island. It garnered a lot of attention around the world and drew widespread condemnation of apartheid. The South African regime was attracting more and more negative publicity. This was brought home to the warders on the island when their own Commissioner of

Prisons attended an international conference in Stockholm. The purpose of the summit was to discuss standard minimum regulations for prisoners around the world. On arrival, he was met by angry demonstrations and then humiliatingly quizzed by journalists who seemed to know more about conditions on Robben Island than he did.

Football was one way in which the authorities could both take their revenge on the inmates for this negative exposure and reassert their control. It would, however, be hard for them to justify a wholesale withdrawal of the right to play to the Red Cross so, instead, they set out to disrupt and destabilize the prisoners' weekly programme of matches.

Week after week, the footballers would have their hopes of playing dashed by 'staff shortages'. When matches did take place, severe limits were placed on the number of spectators allowed to attend. Warders would deliberately wander out on to the pitch and interrupt play, sometimes pretending to take part in the games, mischievously taking pot shots at goal. If a prisoner had annoyed or crossed one of the guards during the week, the warder would make sure that his cell block wasn't allowed to play that Saturday. Known 'troublemakers' had imaginary charges laid against them, too – the penalty: no football.

Guards opened cells late on purpose, allowing the prisoners only to have a few precious minutes out on the football pitch and, instead of allowing the prisoners to send out their club teams, the prison officials disrupted the league programme of matches by picking their own random teams of players from among the men in the cells. Everything the prisoners had organized, the authorities were now trying to sabotage. The prisoners' response was bravely defiant and totally mystified the guards.

One Saturday morning in April 1968 the warders opened up the cell blocks and informed the prisoners that it was time to play football. The men moved not a muscle. One of the inmates calmly told the guards: ‘No football today.’

The footballers had held a series of meetings in the cell blocks and the quarry and had decided that, if the prison regime was going to use their right to play football as a stick to beat them with, then the prisoners would try to turn the tables and cease playing the game until the administration stopped sabotaging their efforts and allowed them to have control over their sport.

Up until June no matches were played in the prison, apart from some friendlies on 31 May, Republic Day. The following year, July 1968 to June 1969, just a handful took place. Some prisoners may have regarded the action as counter-productive, in that they were denying themselves the very game they so loved to play, but nothing could have been further from the truth. The men had every intention of resuming organized football, but it had to be on their terms.

There was no question that the action did hurt the men – the footballers missed playing and the fans had lost an important, morale-boosting focus to their otherwise tedious weekends, but they regarded the self-imposed privation in the same way that they viewed the increasing number of hunger strikes on the island. The prison diet was dreadful and the only way to improve it was to go without and thereby put pressure on the authorities. Though, from the prison authorities’ point of view, the men were there to be broken and demoralized, prisoners dying of hunger were not a good advertisement for the South African regime in the outside world or to the International Red Cross.

One astonishing incident on the island made the prisoners realize just how far-reaching the effects of their protests could be. After one hunger strike to protest against the perennially poor quantity and quality of their food, the men, weak and miserable, were unexpectedly buoyed up by some astonishing news: following the prisoners' example, the junior warders had begun to boycott the guards' cafeteria, demanding better food.

Apartheid revered hierarchy, even among whites. Senior and married guards were routinely given the best of everything in the island's staff canteen. The younger warders were offered a far inferior menu, and they were tired of it. Their protest won the day. The inmates had taught the young warders a lesson in solidarity.

The prisoners, too, saw a slow improvement in their diet throughout the late Sixties, thanks to their actions, highlighted by selective hunger strikes. They had also proved to themselves, in their battle to get permission to play football in the first place, that if they stood together and presented a united front, the authorities were more likely to come to a compromise; so they stood their ground, hoping that their refusal to play football would again put pressure on the authorities – and attract the attention of the delegates of the next International Red Cross visits to the island.

With the appointment of another new and less draconian senior prison team in June 1969, the prisoners saw their chance to act. Living on Robben Island, they'd long ago learned to stay attuned to the rising of an opportunity, however faint its murmur.

The South African government had responded in its customary cat-and-mouse way to pressure from abroad about conditions on Robben Island and put in place what appeared to the outside world to be a more liberal prison regime. It was a purely pragmatic move. If international concerns could be appeased by the odd concession here, the odd compromise there, then it didn't hurt to make a minor volte-face.

Ever more politically astute, the prisoners judged the situation correctly. This was the moment they had been waiting for: a chance to fight for the right to relaunch serious football and gain more control over their day-to-day lives. The incoming prison authorities regarded support of organized football on the island as an acceptable 'minor' concession to make, to help hoodwink the wider world into believing that Robben Island was not the 'Devil's Island' it was made out to be in the foreign press.

Having re-won the right to play, a committee of prisoners charged with organizing the teams and matches voted unanimously to change the name of the league from Matyeni to the Makana Football Association. The word *matyeni* (stones) reminded the players too much of hard labour in the quarry. The committee chose something that combined the history of the island with pride in their own heritage. 'Makana' would have meant little to the white guards on Robben Island, but the prisoners knew that it was the name of the Xhosa warrior-prophet who had been banished there by the British military in 1819 for fighting against colonialist powers. He died the following year when the boat carrying him and thirty men attempting to escape the island capsized. To the men on the island, his inspiration was legend, his name a fitting one for their new football association.

To begin playing proper league matches in earnest, the new MFA first had to organize itself, to elect officials to run the association. It was no surprise that the talented young Dikgang Moseneke was once again chosen to head up the reformed association or that the ever influential Indress Naidoo would remain his right-hand man.

Together with the likes of Tony Suze and other prominent football personalities, they sat down to write, rewrite, and redraft a formal constitution for the MFA. It took months of debate and sometimes heated discussion to hammer it out, and members of both the ANC and PAC were prominently involved. It was finally unveiled in June 1969.

The constitution filled many pages and articulated the new FA's most heartfelt aims. Key among these was that the MFA and all its players and officials should adhere to FIFA rules and standards. FIFA was football's ruling world body, and its rules and regulations applied to international member countries – not to a bunch of prisoners playing football on a godforsaken island off the coast of South Africa – but their will to adhere to its standards was a measure of just how seriously the footballers on Robben Island took their task of developing the sport on the island.

It was purely by chance that the prisoners managed to get hold of the FIFA rules. Thanks to pressure from the inmates and the International Red Cross, a small library had been established in the prison. It consisted of just a few shelves of randomly chosen, dog-eared books. Among the mainly pulp fiction and copies of the Bible was a slim volume containing FIFA's rules and standards.

One of the first tasks of another committee of prisoners was to expand the library by gaining the right to have books donated from university libraries and to borrow books from other libraries on the mainland.

Some of the MFA's objectives as listed in the constitution had an almost evangelical zeal. The MFA constitution spelled out the need to 'spread the word' and popularize soccer on Robben Island by arranging talks, lectures, and exhibition matches in which the better players would explain the rudiments of the game. It also pledged to put on special events that would serve the interests of both players and spectators, such as veteran games and matches between cell blocks. To encourage excellence and fair play out on the pitch, each season, it planned to select a Football Player ('Soccerite') of the Year.

The constitution contained a long list of rules and regulations, including how complaints should be made, the procedure for choosing representative sides and the way in which the league would organize its programme and knock-out competitions. There were sections dealing with the players' club registration and – one rule that attracted a lot of attention among the prisoners – the transfer of players from one club to another.

In the outside world, players had legally binding contracts which made them employees of their clubs. Player movement was completely controlled by the clubs. Players had little control over transfers and the substantial amounts of money that could be involved. On Robben Island, the players could decide for themselves if they wanted to move on to another club. In that sense, the players enjoyed more freedom than most professional footballers. The founders of the MFA were experienced enough to know there had to be some restrictions, lest there be no stability in the clubs. One restriction stipulated that the player had to request a clearance certificate from the secretary of his club before a transfer could be permitted. The founders of the MFA anticipated that clubs would try to poach players from one another, and this was a way of preventing it.

At the same time, however, it didn't really make sense for freedom fighters to deny one another the basic liberty of playing for whichever club they wished. The MFA resolved this problem by stating that no club could refuse a certificate of transfer for more than fourteen days 'without valid reason' and, if it did, the player had a right to appeal to the MFA's Protest and Misconduct Committee (PMC), which, after proper investigation of the circumstances, had the power to adjudicate between the club and the player. It was the only committee whose functions – ranging from dealing with players who were sent off the field by referees, through the unauthorized use or possession of association property, to threats of violence, actual violence, or insults to the officials of the association by players – were detailed in the constitution. The PMC also had the responsibility to act 'as tribunal with final judgement' in appeals by members against the actions of their clubs.

These rules represented something quite remarkable on Robben Island. The men, themselves imprisoned by a judicial system that granted them few, if any, rights, were ensuring that there was a full range of appeal available to football players. The prisoners were making sure that they created a system within which the sport would operate that was fair, equitable, and based upon the twin ideals of justice and democracy – in other words, one that was the absolute reverse of apartheid.

There were other committees too – for discipline and pitch maintenance, for first aid and fixture lists – but it is no coincidence that the committee that had the broadest mandate in the constitution was the PMC. It had a unique place in the life of the island, held far more frequent and much longer meetings than any other committee of the association – and generated more paper in its reports and minutes than all the rest of the committees combined.

Writing paper of any kind, pencils, pens, and ink were precious commodities. The prisoners needed stationery for their lessons, their letters, and to conduct the business of various organizations. They found ways to economize on paper by using sheets of different sizes and by making their handwriting as small as it could be and still remain legible. They turned paper products such as the brown bags that held cement into writing paper. The fact that the men were more than happy to donate so much of their precious paper to the PMC proved just how important getting organized football up and running was to them.

Of course, the prisoners being united in their aim did not automatically mean that there would not be disputes and disagreements. The draconian regime on Robben Island had not transformed the men into docile and unquestioning yes men. If one important purpose of establishing the right to play football and formulating a league structure was to reintroduce an aspect of self-determination and independence of thought into the men's lives on the island, it was only natural that they would encounter the same kinds of disputes and difficulties with football there as they would have outside. It was with this in mind that the MFA created another organization crucial to football – the Referees Union.

All over the world, in casual matches, footballers act as their own referees, but this was never an option for the Robben Island footballers. The philosophy of the MFA was absolute in this regard. It established the Referees Union (RU) on the back of the simple statement: 'No referee, no organized football.' It was yet another indication of how seriously the men took the organization of the sport. While the mottos chosen by the clubs themselves were colourful in their imagery and playfully boastful – Manong FC's, was 'The vulture is hungry'; the Rangers','Score is silver, art is gold' – the motto of the Referees Union was both noble and realistic: 'Service before self.'

The Referees Union had its own constitution, its own officials, and its own standards of conduct. Applicants who wanted to become referees had to pass a written examination based on FIFA guidelines and a practical examination to demonstrate that they knew how to officiate on the pitch. The RU organized lectures and classes in the cells and made books and publications available for potential candidates.

The world over, referees and match officials are chosen to oversee matches with no connection to their own hometowns but, of course, this wasn't possible in the closed community of Robben Island. The night after a match, a referee could find himself sleeping next to a player he had sent off; the following day he could be breaking rocks with a supporter whose club had lost on a disputed penalty or taking classes with a captain whose team had been the victim of a strange offside call. The pressure on referees was therefore enormous.

One of the good things about football was that it diverted the men from the frustrations of life in the prison by exciting their passion and inspiring loyalty among players and supporters. However, this also meant that complaints made against the referees could be all the more vociferous. For all the prisoners' rhetoric about how character building and unifying football was, the sport could provoke passionate emotions that divided supporters and players, and it was the referee who had to arbitrate – and to bear the brunt of the men's ire if a decision went against them.

The MFA recognized the problems and attempted to forestall potential difficulties by establishing a firm policy that no unofficial approaches could be made to the referee by anyone wishing to complain, in the cell block or any other area of the prison. A complaint had to be formally lodged with the relevant committee.

Marcus Solomon wasn't put off by any of these difficulties. He became one of the first men to step forward to train as a referee. For him, it was simple: you couldn't have football without a referee; someone had to do it; and he was more than happy to help out. Later, he would train and evaluate other referees and serve on disciplinary panels handling many of the trickiest cases that came before the PDC.

The MFA needed strong-minded men like Marcus. It was a matter of pride to the prisoners to show the authorities they were capable of self-regulation, that they could remain in control of themselves and others even when passions ran high, that they were able to deal with problems and broker solutions in their own community. The role of the referee was therefore vitally important.

Another area in which the men wanted to prove that they could run things properly was in the written side of the association's administration. If they were going to take the trouble of writing letters and using up their valuable supply of paper, there was no way they were going to be slipshod or even casual about it. All the correspondence between the MFA, the clubs, and their members had to be done by the book, written in an extremely formal style, almost according to a template. Anyone mentioned in a letter or in the minutes of committee meetings was referred to as ‘Mr’ and given their surname. Known and addressed only as numbers by the staff – or, more commonly, called by abusive racial or otherwise demeaning epithets – the use of surnames was the men’s way of reasserting their dignity and individuality. The standard ending was ‘Yours in sports’, to signify that, whatever the differences of opinion expressed, the men remained united solidly behind the enterprise as a whole. Perhaps the most unusual characteristic of the correspondence was the universal usage of interior addresses, both of the sender and the recipient. If Tony Suze received a letter from the officials of the MFA, it would be formally addressed to Mr Anthony Suze, Cell C1, Cell Block Four, Robben Island.

Why did the men not make their arguments and settle their disputes face to face instead of committing everything to paper? After all, they lived together, worked together, even showered together and, particularly in the quarry, to relieve the tedium of the backbreaking work, they seized the opportunity to talk about anything and everything. The answer was not hard to find. Once something was written down, it was there for ever. The writer could not disown it; the recipient could not dismiss it. The men also were wedded to doing things ‘properly’. If any of them had been the secretary of a club in Pretoria, he would not have thought to go to the home of the Secretary of the FA to discuss a football-related matter. If there was a right way to do it back home, that was the way it would be done on the island.

Nine clubs – Gunners, Ditshitshidi, Rangers, Hotspurs, Dynamo, Bucks, and Black Eagles having been joined intially by Manong FC and later Mphatlalatsane – were now lining up for the launch of the

MFA's first real season, each fielding a team in all three divisions: A, B, and C.

The football initiative was hugely popular. An incredible number of inmates had signed up and registered to play. Rangers boasted a playing squad of forty across their three teams, Bucks of thirty-eight, but, for both quantity and quality, right from the very beginning it was Manong FC was top of the league. Thanks partly to their non-partisan selection policy, they had an astonishing fifty-nine registered players.

Each of the nine clubs appointed their own committees to run affairs, trained men in first aid, appointed coaches, and selected players. Soon, nearly half the political prisoners on Robben Island were directly or indirectly involved in football.

Once they had their players and the clubs' administration was up and running, the football fraternity on Robben Island had more practical issues to deal with. First of all, if they were going to play proper league football, they wanted to look the part. Obtaining proper football kit for all of the players was a priority. On their initial approach to the prison authorities, they had offered a pragmatic justification – they did not want to damage their everyday clothes – but the real reason went a lot deeper: running on to a pitch in proper kit would give the men back something that they had lost – a taste of how their lives had been before they were transported to the island.

The colours their teams should play in became a matter of animated debate. Some wanted to adopt the strips of the clubs they had supported back on the mainland, others the colours of foreign favourites such as Manchester United, Real Madrid, and Wolverhampton Wanderers. In the end, the Gunners decided that their strip would be black and white, Ditshitshidi that theirs would be maroon and white. Rangers went for royal blue and gold, Hotspurs, green and white. The other teams had chosen their colours, too: Dynamo, maroon and black; Manong, maroon and gold; Mphatlalatsane, green and gold; Bucks, black and gold; and Black Eagles, navy and sky blue.

It was one thing deciding upon what colours to wear, though, and another getting hold of the kit in the first place. The International Red Cross gave some money towards it and so, too, although hard pressed financially, did members of the men's families back on the mainland. Reading between the lines of the heavily censored letters they received, and listening to the news from recently released Robben Island prisoners, they had come to understand just how important football was to the men.

Now that they had some funding, the players took things one step further, drawing detailed sketches of the design they wanted, indicating which colour should go where. Of course, the problem of how to actually source the kit then presented itself. It wasn't as if the men could just wander into the nearest sports outfitters. Through the Red Cross, they negotiated with the chief warder to place orders through sports shops in Cape Town. Each club placed its own individual order and then – waited and waited. All too often the prisoners were ripped off by the shops on the mainland, paying in advance and receiving sub-standard kit in return. The order would be short, the colours or sizes wrong, and the footballers weren't really in a position to register a complaint.

The MFA decided to try another approach: they went to the chief warder again. Not only did he agree to discuss the problem with them, in itself an indication of the new regime's more liberal approach, he also came up with a possible solution, suggesting that the MFA should in future co-ordinate all the clubs' different orders so that retailers were dealing with one, relatively lucrative client. It was a rare instance of inmates and staff positively co-operating.

There were other practical problems to address before they could start playing league football. The pitch was nothing but a patch of rough ground adjacent to the cell blocks. If it was going to provide a decent playing surface, something would have to be done. The prisoners entered into negotiations with the prison authorities to borrow a heavy roller, and used it to improve the camber and condition of the pitch. And not only that. The prisoners toiled long and hard to install a cement water tunnel and drain to prevent the ground becoming a mudbath in the heavy rain that frequently whipped across the island. The prisoners had also found a way to get the pitch into peak condition in dry weather: they had discovered a concealed water tap in the ground, just next to the pitch. Without the warders realizing, the men were regularly watering the football field.

Tony Suze made new iron supports for the goals, and his fellow prisoners Nlwana, Mbatha, and Chirwa replaced the nets. Their hard work saved the MFA at least thirty precious rands (at today's value, slightly less than £2), money which could now be used to pay for other equipment. The pitch had come a long way in two short months. Even the guards couldn't help but be impressed. An area that had been nothing but scrubland had been transformed into a lush, green playing field.

With everything ready, the men really were close to launching the league, and the prison cells crackled with expectation. Training was intense and, in order to get the necessary hours in, the prisoners in the A teams engaged in a potentially risky practice called 'camping'. Players in each team were scattered across all of the main cell blocks and, once the cells had been locked down for the night, it was clearly impossible for them to get together to train, so they would swap places as they lined up to be taken back to the cell blocks after working in the quarry. In this way, all the players from a particular team would manoeuvre themselves to be sleeping in the same block for a couple of nights before the match. This subterfuge soon became known on the island as 'border crossings' – a term that suggested hope, escape, and freedom, a journey to a better place.

When players were required for a 'camp' the cell-block cleaners would sometimes leave a note and then swap the prisoners' bedding between cells. The prisoners could pass messages between study groups and correspondence classes, and they managed to set up a communications network in the quarry, too. Individual work parties often toiled hundreds of yards apart, so the men had to devise a means of passing messages, orders, and instructions between themselves. The men made use of the warders' discarded matchboxes and cigarette packets as mobile letterboxes for 'dead drops'. The prisoners were constantly on the look-out for them and became adept at retrieving, filling, and dropping them discreetly. Those who transported the rocks in the hated wheelbarrows could also relay messages and spread news.

During the camping sessions, the men would train, discuss tactics, and talk about the strengths and weaknesses of their upcoming opponents in great detail. Was such and such a player perhaps carrying a bit of an injury? Was a specific player one- or two-footed, strong or poor in the tackle, positionally naïve or tactically gifted?

As the guards patrolled the cell-block corridors ordering the prisoners to sleep, the men would crowd close together and whisper. Like professional teams everywhere, the players and their coaching staff would put together a game plan – and then a plan B, and C. Should they play with wingers, a more defensive formation, or a packed midfield? Field two strikers – or three?

These camping sessions were obviously against prison regulations. Inmates were assigned to a cell and even the mat on which they were to sleep within that cell. To be found in the wrong block at lock-down meant immediate punishment. However, because of the prison regime's policy of rotating guards around the jail so they would not get too close to individual prisoners, the warders seldom noticed that the men had switched cells. The evening roll call was nothing more than a head count and, if there was the correct amount of prisoners in each cell, the warder considered his job done.

In December 1969 the first season of the MFA kicked off. Problems soon surfaced out on the pitch. Though the players had been training hard and getting fit in the cells, they were all short on match practice. This was most apparent in the impact areas of the game, tackling in particular. Mis-timed tackles and lunges carried the risk of injury, and the clubs' coaches began to put in extra work with the players to improve their timing. With five days' hard labour in the quarry a week, the last thing a player needed was to be injured. Any knock picked up through playing football was viewed as a self-inflicted wound by the prison regime, and no excuse not to work.

By mid season, Manong was getting into its stride and already five points ahead of its nearest rivals, the Gunners. At ten o'clock on a bright, sunny Saturday morning, 4 April 1970, the players strode out in their distinctive maroon and gold strip to take on Hotspurs' green and whites. Mark Shinners was one of the linesmen and a true football fan. He was more than happy to be officiating at an A-division match that day.

The players were up against the clock. Allotted a morning and an afternoon session for football, the MFA had to pack in six games across the three divisions every Saturday. As a result, and because of its remit to offer sport to as many as possible, the games were restricted to just thirty minutes – fifteen minutes each half, with an immediate turn-around at half-time.

Hotspurs entered the game at the bottom of the division and, along with the Dynamos, were already four or five points adrift of the seven other teams. This was always going to be a tough match for Hotspurs, and they were pinned back in their own penalty area for much of the first half. Manong peppered their goal with shots and headers, and then, after ten minutes, Tony Suze broke the deadlock with a ferocious volley from just outside the penalty box. There wasn't a goalkeeper in A division who enjoyed playing against Tony. He had the reputation of possessing the strongest and fastest shot on the island and, when it hit, it hurt. Just before the whistle went for half-time, Manong scored a second through striker Nkatlo.

The second half became a procession as Hotspurs tired and became more and more demoralized. Manong scored a further three goals – a second for Nkatlo and one each for Tshabalala and Tabane. Despite the inequality of the teams, the match was played in good spirit and there were few fouls but, for Hotspurs, it was yet another indication that, along with the Dynamos, they were a long way behind the other sides in Division A in terms of quality players. It was a problem both sides would need to address at the end of the season.

In Division B, the players were still working hard to improve standards. At 2 o'clock on 18 April Mark Shinners found himself refereeing a second-tier game between Ditshitshidi and Rangers, both mid-table clubs. He had to blow the whistle for numerous offsides, and chances on goal were minimal in both halves. As soon as the ball came anywhere near either penalty area, defenders lofted it straight into touch rather than looking up and casting around for different passing options. Neither strike force displayed much co-ordination and each played too far apart to threaten the defences. The only genuine chance for a goal came in the second half, when Ditshitshidi was awarded a penalty. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was missed. The game ended in a 0–0 draw.

Down in C Division, the players made little attempt to apply tactics to their games. They were just happy to be out on the pitch having a good run-around with the sun on their backs.

Now that matches had started in earnest, the grim, grey confines of Robben Island were abuzz with talk about football. The only other subject that inspired quite so much conversation and debate was politics. Initially, only a small number of fellow prisoners were allowed to leave their cells and stand on the touchlines to watch the games, but they returned to the cell blocks with passionate, blow-by-blow reports of the action, as in depth as those of any football journalist. The MFA soon realized that, in order to involve as many men as possible in their project, it needed to persuade the prison regime to allow more men out to spectate. This became the focus of the next campaign.

For the first half of the season the response from the guards was that there weren't enough staff to police larger crowds, but then, one Saturday morning, one of the senior warders surprised everyone. When some of the more junior guards trotted out their usual response as to why more spectators were not allowed to watch the games, he replied confidently that the prisoners were more than capable and disciplined enough to martial their own games. It spoke volumes about how the authorities were coming to view football on Robben Island – and about at least one senior official's changing attitude towards the prisoners. He had recognized their self-discipline and organization, and his attitude began to trickle down, with some of the warders beginning to trust the prisoners to arbitrate among themselves. Gradually, more men were allowed out to be spectators.

The A matches were supported by hundreds of inmates pretty much every week. The spectators proved themselves to be as fanatical as any crowd, and some real characters began to emerge in the pavilion – the 'pavvy'. One of them was Edgar Gamboye, who stood head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd in terms of height, and could make himself heard above them all too. He always supported sides that were either totally or predominantly made up of fellow ANC members and would yell, in his booming, voluminous voice, things like, 'Slit their throats! Kill them! This is not a game for cissies!'

And Gamboye was not the only one to carve out a place for himself in the stands. One prisoner, nicknamed Blue, sent his beloved Ditshitshidi team out on to the pitch with the plea to 'win for your friend, Blue', and loved to give supporters of rival clubs the pre-match warning: 'Tomorrow you die.' He was hardly a star footballer himself, but Blue loved to play the game, too. He never rose above playing in the C division, but that wasn't important. No veteran of the MFA would ever forget him or how much he contributed to the atmosphere in the pavilion.

Mark Shinners, a skilled and mentally tough footballer, was the first to admit that the impassioned support of the fans had a real effect on the players out on the pitch, but not always a positive one. He complained to fellow players about the 'cheerleaders', who would sing chants to rile the opposing team and its fans, saying how much they wound him up. Shinners was sometimes so distracted by shouts from fans or cheerleaders that he made mistakes on the field.

The teams soon had keen supporters in the isolation cells, too. Although they were denied the opportunity to watch the football, information was regularly fed back to them about who had won which match, who had scored, and how the games had played out, so the men in B Section, including ANC leaders such as Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, could still follow the news. They took great pleasure in being included in what was going on and came to share the awareness of how important their breakthrough in being allowed to play and set up their own league was to the men. Some of them became huge fans of individual clubs.

Football mania continued its spread throughout the prison. Common-law inmates now supported specific teams, and those who worked in the kitchens, the library, the boiler room, and the hospital would do special favours for the players. Tony Suze was awoken one day at 4 a.m. by one of the cooks singing loudly about Manong FC and chanting, 'The vultures are hungry,' while preparing breakfast. The cook also passed drums of hot water through a window into Tony's cell block, something that Tony and his fellow political prisoners were not allowed to have.

Support for the teams throughout the prison was fervent. The first part of the week was consumed by minute dissection of the previous Saturday's match and, on Thursdays and Fridays, the men would be caught up in discussing the coming weekend's fixtures – just as they would if they were back living in the normality of the outside world. Anticipation reached such a pitch at some points that the tension seemed almost physical. Sometimes, the week before a big match, fans and players couldn't bring themselves to talk to their best friends if they were on the opposing side. There was just too much at stake.

Of course, the men still had obstacles to overcome in running the league, challenges that just wouldn't arise for football associations anywhere other than on Robben Island. Chief among these were the constant requests the executive committee of the MFA had to make to the clubs and individuals to contribute writing paper – a commonplace commodity but one upon which the whole football enterprise depended.

During the season, the executive committee put in its order for the following year, requesting that it be sent as soon as possible. It consisted of three hundred sheets of foolscap newsprint paper, one foolscap hardcover notebook, one blue Bic pen, and one sheaf of foolscap carbon paper. The amounts may seem paltry, but the MFA had to conduct lengthy negotiations with the prison authorities before finally being granted even this limited supply of stationery. In the meantime the MFA continued to depend on whip-rounds and appeals to individual prisoners for paper in order to keep the administrative side of the football association running.

The men's thirst for practical footballing knowledge became insatiable. The MFA wrote officially to the prison's chief librarian Silva Pillay, requesting 'as many copies as possible of instruction, guide, and rule books'. Shortly afterwards he submitted a list to the committee of eighteen titles which might be of assistance to the Referees Union, clubs, and individuals, among them books by prominent figures in British football such as Jimmy Greaves, Malcolm Allison, Bobby Charlton, Tommy Docherty, Jimmy Hill, Denis Law, and Sir Alf Ramsey.

These joined the small collection of books already in the prison library; supplementing two already prized volumes: the FIFA handbook, which laid out precisely the rules of the game, and *Soccer Refereeing* by Denis Howell.

Up until 1970 the most borrowed book in the prison library was Karl Marx's *Capital*, whose acquisition was approved by a (presumably not particularly bright or well-read) censor who thought a book about capitalism might 'teach the communists on the island the error of their ways'. The second most popular was Howell's classic text for football referees, which had a massive influence on the island's players and officials. It set down in unambiguous black and white exactly how to apply the rules of football out on the pitch.

Though most of the prisoners did not know it at the time, Denis Howell was a strong and vocal opponent of apartheid in sport. In addition to being a football referee, Howell was also Labour MP for Birmingham Small Heath. In the mid-Seventies, he became the UK's first Minister of Sport. A tireless crusader for 'sport for all' and fairness in sporting issues worldwide, he would have been happy to know that his *Soccer Refereeing* was so important to the men on Robben Island.

Back on the pitch, standards were fast improving. Thanks to continuing pressure on the part of both the prisoners and the International Red Cross, the food given to the prisoners began to get better too. Increasingly, meat, fish, and fat were added to their meals, not in huge amounts, but enough to raise their calorific intake and give the men more energy.

In addition, the men had become adept at poaching food. Down in the quarry, they would search for birds' nests and eat the eggs. One day, Tony Suze managed to catch a guinea fowl. It was smuggled back to the prison kitchen and handed over to Freddie Simon, who as well as being a strong and skilled footballer also worked in the kitchens. Freddie surreptitiously cooked it and added it to the following day's rations. The prisoners learned always to be on the look-out for anything that might be edible. Some became adept at trapping their constant companions on the island, making roast sea gull into a coveted delicacy.

Freddie Simon was to become one of the most popular players on the island. A common-law prisoner who over time was persuaded by other prisoners to support the ANC, he soon became a very active member of the party. He had a great sense of humour and was inclined to see the lighter side of life. He was always looking for fun and, as a football player, loved the limelight. His first links to the political prisoners were through football. Freddie was transferred into the cells with the political prisoners, but he continued to work in the kitchens, a job for common-law prisoners only.

He made an important contribution by helping to solve one of the political prisoners' biggest problems – how to smuggle supplies out of the kitchens in order to have something to barter for food and other luxuries. Simon used this opportunity to smuggle fat and sugar out to the political prisoners, to add taste and calories to their meagre diets. No wonder he was a popular man.

The improved diet, more sophisticated training methods, and growing self-confidence among the footballers led, in the course of the first season of league football on Robben Island, to vaulting new standards of play out on the pitch.

Though Manong was running away with the first season championship in A division, competition between the teams immediately below them, such as Gunners, Bucks, Rangers, and Ditshitshidi, was becoming ever more fierce. Games were hotly contested. At one match in May between Rangers and Ditshitshidi, Pro Malepe officiated as referee, and Tony Suze and Harry Gwala acted as linesmen. The match tested all three officials' mettle. The two defences had become expert at moving out in a line to leave the opposition strikers offside, and numerous attacks broke down at either end because of this tactical awareness. The final score, after an extremely tight encounter, was 2–1. In fact, most league games were decided by the odd goal – except that is, when Manong played.

The club won the first official championship by a mile. The consequences of its policy of political integration could not be ignored. Tony Suze, who had been the author of the constitutional clause that broadened the political base of Manong, was the first to admit that this had contributed hugely to their being the first team to romp home with the championship.

One of Manong's players was ANC member Lizo Sitoto. Big and strong, before being sent to Robben Island, Lizo had played rugby but, when PAC member Tony saw how he handled and kicked the ball, he shrewdly recruited him as a goalkeeper for Manong's A team. Many other players followed suit, signing up for clubs regardless of their direct political affiliation.

There were prominent figures in all aspects of football on the island. One such was Harry Gwala, who made being a referee almost into a calling. Harry was in his mid-forties when he was sentenced in 1964 to eight years. He was a teacher and trade-union organizer and a member of both the ANC and the Communist party, and renowned among the prisoners for his skill and ferocity as a debater. Despite the passion with which he held his own political opinions, men turned to him for advice and knowledge whatever their political convictions.

He was always immaculately turned out; some players reckoned he secretly had an electric iron in his cell. Everyone respected him but, at the same time, he could provoke fury among players and fans alike with the hardline approach to right and wrong he brought on to the pitch. 'Uncle' Harry Gwala was famous in the community for his insistence on the most rigid interpretation of the rules and the authority of the referee to interpret them on the spot.

His knowledge of the history of the game across the world was almost encyclopaedic, and he delighted in sharing it with comrades. He talked enthusiastically about the standard of football in the USSR, about great footballers in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere, not just in the West. The men had only ever discussed football in Britain, with the possible exception of Real Madrid, and one or two Italian clubs.

He lectured the men on what he called the greatest team (Hungary, 1954) never to win the World Cup or the Hungarian player Ferenc Puskás, reminding them that there was a whole big wide world of football out there. People just like them, no matter what their nationality, background, colour, race, or creed, played the world over, and Harry Gwala made the men feel a part of this global community.

On 1 June 1970 Manong FC was crowned inaugural champion of the Makana Football Association's A division, closing the season seven points clear of their nearest rivals, the Gunners.

A DIVISION	P	W	L	D	F	A	Points
Manong	14	12	1	1	28	1	25
Gunners	14	7	3	4	14	9	18
Bucks	14	7	4	3	14	12	17
Rangers	14	5	4	5	10	13	15
Ditshitshidi	14	4	6	4	14	12	12
Mphatlalatsane	14	2	4	8	10	17	12
Dynamos	14	2	9	3	6	17	7
Hotspurs	14	2	10	2	7	22	6

Beaten just once during the season – 1–0 by the runners-up – Manong had scored twice as many goals as any other team, and the three top goal-scorers in the A division all belonged to the club. Nkatlo clocked up ten goals, Tshabalala scored nine, and Tabane seven.

The season had been altogether tighter in B division, with just four points separating the top clubs. The Gunners' second string ended up champions, with Manong's B team a disappointing third from bottom.

B DIVISION	P	W	L	D	F	A	Points
Gunners	14	7	2	5	13	5	19
Mphatlalatsane	14	4	1	9	12	8	17
Rangers	14	6	3	5	10	7	17
Ditshitshidi	14	4	3	7	10	7	15
Bucks	14	4	5	5	13	15	13
Manong	14	3	4	7	9	10	13
Hotspurs	14	3	6	5	6	11	11
Dynamos	14	1	8	5	5	15	7

Sadly, there is no longer any record of the final table of results for C division.

MFA officials awarded Manong a handmade wooden shield to mark its success as A-division winners. The players were euphoric – but not for long. When the ceremony had finished, guards stepped in and, offering an immediate reminder of what life on the island was all about, they confiscated the trophy. The prisoners had won a few new freedoms and, five years previously, the reality of their having negotiated and won so many concessions from the prison regime would have been unthinkable – as would the notion of any sense of co-operation between inmates and guards. Things had come a long way, but the prison bosses were still keen to remind them just who was in control on Robben Island.