

AFRICA

Dennis Brutus Dies at 85; Fought Apartheid With Sports

By DOUGLAS MARTIN JAN. 2, 2010

When Dennis Brutus heard the news, he was breaking stones on Robben Island, the notorious prison colony where Nelson Mandela, the freedom fighter and future South African president, occupied the cell next to his.

The news was that the International Olympic Committee had suspended South Africa from the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo.

That signified a victory for Mr. Brutus, who led the fight to use sports as a weapon against the racist policies of South Africa. Ultimately, South Africa was barred from almost all international athletic competitions, including the Olympics, from 1964 to 1991.

Mr. Brutus paid a high price for his sports activism. Besides imprisonment, he was exiled and shot in the back. A poet, teacher and journalist, he was barred from earning a living except by menial labor.

He died in Cape Town on Dec. 26 at the age of 85. His son Anthony told the South African Press Association, a news agency, that he had had prostate cancer.

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In 1995, after apartheid — the official system of racial discrimination — had crumbled, it was a sporting moment that symbolized the birth of a new democracy in South Africa.

It happened during the rugby World Cup tournament, from which the country had been barred, when it was being held in Johannesburg. Mr. Mandela, then the president, appeared at the stadium wearing the green-and-gold jersey of the country's team, which until recently had been all white, as a symbol of national unity. (The moment is re-enacted in the film "Invictus," with Morgan Freeman playing Mr. Mandela.)

"Mr. Brutus has a distinction that makes him a hated symbol to the white rulers of South Africa, and a heroic one to the critics of their regime," Anthony Lewis wrote in The New York Times in 1983. "He has actually succeeded in bringing about some change in one aspect of apartheid."

Dennis Vincent Brutus was born on Nov. 28, 1924, in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), to South African parents who moved back home to Port Elizabeth when he was 4. Of African, French and Italian ancestry, Mr. Brutus was classified under South Africa's racial code as "colored."

He graduated from the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, taught in nonwhite schools, did social work and joined the underground campaign against apartheid.

A mediocre athlete himself as a youth, Mr. Brutus turned to sports politics after seeing black athletes turned down for South Africa's international teams in favor of inferior whites. He took up the issue not as a tactic to attack the apartheid system, he said, but because of the personal harm the policy was doing to athletes.

In 1959, Mr. Brutus helped form the South African Sports Association as founding secretary. It began by lobbying all-white sports organizations to change voluntarily, but made no progress.

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which he was president, persuaded Olympic committees from other countries to vote to suspend South Africa from the 1964 and 1968 Olympics.

In 1970, the group gathered enough votes from national committees, particularly those in Africa and Asia, to expel South Africa from the Olympic movement.

For Mr. Brutus, it would be a painful road to Barcelona, where a South African team, an integrated one, returned to the Olympics in 1992.

A paper prepared by apartheid opponents for the United Nations in 1971 said, "Dennis Brutus, one of the most persistent campaigners against racialism in sport, became a special target of the South African regime."

In 1960, he was barred from meeting with more than two people outside his family. When he met with a Swiss journalist and others three years later, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

But he jumped bail and fled to Mozambique, where the Portuguese secret police arrested him and returned him to South Africa. There, while trying to escape, he was shot in the back at point-blank range.

After only partly recovering from the wound, Mr. Brutus was sent to Robben Island, where he was imprisoned for 16 months, five in solitary confinement. On his release he was ordered not to leave his home for five years. But after a year, he made a deal to emigrate to Britain on the condition he not return to South Africa.

Four years later, Mr. Brutus moved to the United States, where he taught at Northwestern University and the University of Pittsburgh. He continued to work on South African sports issues, speaking out against General Motors' involvement in South Africa in 1970 and returning to Britain in 1971 to protest the Lawn Tennis Association's decision to allow South African tennis players to compete at Wimbledon.

In a highly publicized case, United States immigration authorities tried to

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literature professor, suggested that Mr. Brutus was being persecuted by the Reagan administration for his race and leftist politics. The administration denied a political motive, saying it was simply following standing policies.

Mr. Brutus won political asylum in the United States after a judge ruled he would be in danger if returned to South Africa.

Mr. Brutus is survived by his wife, the former May Jagers; two sisters; eight children; nine grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

The author of 14 books, Mr. Brutus was an outspoken critic of South Africa's embrace of capitalism and remained deeply skeptical about racial attitudes long after apartheid had dissolved. In 2007, when the South African Sport Hall of Fame sought to induct him, he refused the tribute, saying some of its members were "unapologetic racists."

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