

**Ace(ing) Apartheid Tennis**  
*A Tale of Dedication, Resilience and big hearted Spirit*

## **Preamble**

Despite the debilitating effects of apartheid on sport and social life for black (African, Coloured and Indian) South Africans, tennis as with many other sporting codes, brought about social cohesion, commitment to the sport and an indomitable spirit that saw the rise of many ace tennis players.

This narrative is based primarily on a missive from former tennis administrator, Mr E. Osman, and provides a brief, yet succinct account of tennis, as one of the sports of choice in the Black communities in KwaZulu-Natal. Due to a lack of documentation, much of the information is anecdotal and historical details cannot be verified.

## **Tennis Development in the early 'apartheid' years**

Apartheid was the legislated system of laws that enforced separate and unequal social, economic and political development for the majority of South Africa's 'non-white' populations, from the early 1940' to its repeal in the 1990's. On the sporting front, Africans, Indians and Coloureds not only played their sports separately from the White community but also from each other.

The early history of tennis amongst the Black communities in KZN and the country has therefore to be documented in 3 separate sections. Not much in the way of documentation is available and few of the players and officials of that early era survive to supply or confirm information. While the early history has of necessity to be recorded separately - common threads runs through it, that of deprivation, inequality, lack of facilities, lack of funds and a battle to keep the game alive in the face of overwhelming odds. That success was achieved in some measure is remarkable and a shining testimony to the resilience, dedication, spirit of selfless service and love for the game of tennis from both players and administrators of that era.

## **BLACK AFRICAN COMMUNITY**

The information here is very sketchy, but it is known that there was a tennis body in the 1940's and 1950's, the Durban and District Lawn Tennis Association (D&DLTA). Four courts in Somtseu Road, where the present courthouse complex stands, formed the main centre of activity. Probably few clubs existed and competitive tennis by way of inter-club league and an annual open championship were the main activities. It is also known that McCord's Hospital in Overport had a floodlit court which provided a much needed venue for the nursing, other staff and their circles of associates.

In Pietermaritzburg there were some activity and basic facilities at Edenvale. Distance and shortage of facilities made it unviable for any organized or regular tennis activity in the rest of KZN. Lawyer R.A.V (Reggie) Ncgobo and Japhtha "Super" Mahanjane, a talented all round sportsman (tennis, soccer, boxing, cricket) and dedicated official were the key administrators of that era. Some of the players who dominated the scene were: Super Mahanjane, Mildred Mahanjane, Chico Khumalo, Thandi Tshabalala, Jwara Sam and Tembisa Mispah Luvuno. Later in the 1950's and 1960's some basic facilities were created in KwaMashu, Umlazi and the SJ Smith Hostels in Mobeni. These resulted in more clubs and more inter-clubs and tournament activities. By then the Somtseu Road complex was lost to other developments and tennis became even less accessible to the African players in the Durban area. Sponsorship, especially from the S.A. Sugar Association, enabled the D&DLTA to host a popular open tournament, The Sugar Open, which was held at Easter time and attracted entries from throughout the country.

## **COLOURED COMMUNITY**

The Coloured community was equally hamstrung by a lack of facilities and resources and there appeared to be very few clubs and little organized competitive activity in the Durban area. There was a complex in the Umgeni and Argyle roads area near the old aerodrome with a few courts. What is also known is that the Coloured tennis fraternity of Natal had affiliation with the S.A Tennis Board (SATB), the National Governing body for 'coloured' tennis. Durban, in the early sixties hosted a national open championship of the SATB at the Stamford Hill tennis complex. David Samaai, by far the best player of the colour produced in South Africa and the dominant figure in 'coloured' tennis for over 2 decades, won the singles title easily for the umpteenth time with a comfortable victory over Basil Smith of the then Southern Rhodesia.

'Coloured' tennis became more structured with the establishment of the Tills Crescent Sports complex in Brickfield Road in the mid 1950's. For competition purposes however, Coloured players found it more compelling to join clubs in the predominantly Indian Association. Clubs from Tills Crescent also played in inter-club and open championships of the Southern Natal Lawn Tennis Union (S.N.L.T.U) (predominantly Indian). In the late 1980's and 1990's these clubs and players then began to align themselves more with the Natal Tennis Association (NTA) for competition purposes.

There was an active tennis community in the Eshowe area in Zululand. Important figures in the coloured tennis administration of that era were, Ken Mannering, Vic Lawlor, Reggie Richards, Lew Azor, Myron Fynn, Harry Ally and

Dougie Isaacs. Players from the Coloured community who were prominent at the time were: Mike Richards, Anne Richards, Harvey Bowler, Sylvia Salsone, Trevor Ally, Jean Marais, Deon Dirksen, Charmaine Pugin and Sheila Ogle.

## **THE INDIAN COMMUNITY**

A little more information in the form of documentation and oral history is available on the story of tennis in the Indian Community.

## **THE BEGINNING**

The first attempts at creating a structured tennis body were initiated in 1926 by Harry Jithoo, R Regnath, P.B Singh, S.L Singh and M.K Naidoo. This resulted in the formation of the Natal Indian Lawn Tennis Association (N.I.L.T.A) with a handful of clubs like Moonlighters, Sydenham, Avoca and later clubs like Spes Bona, Kismet, and Premier. Most of these played their tennis on private courts. Public facilities were non-existent.

An attempt was made to form a national association for Indians. This meant Natal and Transvaal only. There were very few Indians in the Cape and they were well assimilated in the Coloured and Malay communities. Indians were barred from the Orange Free State by Law! With stalwarts like Himdad Khan, Willie Ernest, M.M Gardee and others, the South African Indian Lawn Tennis Association (S.A.I.L.T.A) was formed. Natal and Transvaal hosted alternatively every two years an interprovincial and open championship during the Christmas/New Year vacation. So once in four years Durban and Johannesburg hosted a national tennis event which generated great excitement, fierce rivalry, but great reciprocal hospitality and enjoyment.

## **1940 – 1960**

By the late forties the 2 courts at Sastri College, Curries Fountain and the 2 courts at the Durban Indian Girls High School became hubs of tennis activities. The inter-club league matches were still played at individual private courts and enjoyed a special intimate social character (mixed with intense rivalry and some ugly spats), with the home team laying on an elaborate meal for the visiting team. With clubs formed in Pietermaritzburg, Umzinto, Tongaat, Stanger and Port Shepstone, the day's outing to play league matches and enjoy the hospitality of the home team was eagerly anticipated.

From 1940 - 1960, S.S Maharaj was undoubtedly the 'King of Tennis' in the Indian community. Dedicated, self-taught and with a range of flawless strokes, he completely dominated the scene for two decades. During this time he won the Natal singles champion 1 time and was national champion 4 times in addition to winning a string of doubles titles with players like S. Jaynath, Laljee Deonarian and Dawie Roopnarain.

## **1960 – 1970**

While the game was still being largely administered and played in racial compartments, it is important to record a few significant first moves to bring all tennis players together. In 1960, the Natal Indian Lawn Tennis association removed the word "Indian" from its name and constitution. Membership was now open to all. The prime movers for this were stalwarts, MN Pather (who later became one of the leaders of the non-racial sports struggle), B.S Moodley who served the game in various capacities for over 3 decades and Ebrahim Osman, who was beginning his 50-year career in tennis administration. The secretarial report of the year commented on the historic significance of this and stated that this was a good start although the first year saw only one 'non-Indian' member - Dr Zondi of Umzinto.

The Estcourt tennis club organized an annual open doubles tournament which attracted entries from all over Natal. Michaelhouse School also hosted an annual doubles tournament at its beautiful scenic country setting at Balgowan. This attracted players from all races including the White community and was a great 'ice breaker'. The Central Tennis Club, whose court was in Umgeni Road where the Game City Complex stands today, pioneered non-racial tennis in Natal with its Open Annual tournament which drew entrants of all races and was in fact bigger than the annual championship of the racially segregated associations. It had to use the Somtseu Road Complex and individual courts all over Durban and play the tournament over 3 to 4 weekends. But it brought together players and administrators of the different races and prepared the ground for unity which was not far off. However white players still remained apart and Westridge Park with over 30 courts and excellent facilities was forbidden territory for tennis players of colour.

Public facilities for tennis players of colour were still not a priority for civic and other authorities. Hence the late fifties and early sixties saw this situation deteriorate rapidly. This was due to the Group Areas Act and other developments which resulted in the loss of several courts, none of which was replaced. Courts in Sydenham (Moonlighters), Clairwood (Premier), Umgeni Road (Central), Riverside (Kismet), Castle Court in Mayville (which belonged to the Bodasingh family and had a rich tennis history), Curries Fountain (to make way for schools) were some of the courts which were lost. In spite of this players and administrators soldiered on and kept the game alive.

## **TOP PLAYERS: 1960 -1970**

This decade belonged to the trio: Prabhoo Roopnarian, Ginger Mahomedy and Rabi Ramlakan. All three won Natal titles during this period. Roopnarian and Mahomedy went on to become National Champions. Not far behind them were players like Tribhu Naran, Joe Luckraj, Mewa Roopnarain, Bandy Mandan, Ebrahim Haffejee, Vivian Persadh and Bill Asmal. All these players provided memorable tennis both in club matches and tournaments. They all represented Natal in interprovincial tournaments of S.A.I.L.T.A and SALTU during this decade. However there was a paucity of good women players. The only three players prominent at this time were: Sheila Hiramuin, Sadambal Ramouthar and Sushila Naicker. Only in the 1980's when more junior tournaments were organized did a pool of promising female players emerge.

The next two decades were dictated by events in the non-racial sports struggle. In April 1962 a very significant event took place when the 3 national racial associations decided to disband and form the SOUTHERN AFRICA LAWN TENNIS UNION (SALTU). All associations in S.A for some reason continued to use the word "LAWN" in their titles though nearly all the tennis courts were either grit or clay, with hard courts becoming more common, and hardly a grass court to be seen. The unity effort unfortunately was not 100% successful. By now the anti-apartheid sports struggle and the counter strategy of those who wanted to maintain the status quo were both gaining momentum locally and internationally. The Black National Body which was supposed to have dissolved still had links with bodies like the S.A Tennis Trust which was seen by some in the non-racial sports struggle as a vehicle for channelling funds to the disadvantaged tennis community with a view to getting them to accept the status quo in line with government sports policy. This created tension in SALTU and the Black component of SALTU, especially at administrative level, seemed to be drifting back to their old structure. The grassroots Black players on the other hand, continued to participate in all tournaments and at the same time continued to accept funds and other assistance from the S.A Tennis Trust and other sponsors which SALTU saw as pro government.

## **THE JASMAT DHIRAJ SQUAD**

An event that made history and recorded as part of the story of "Indian" tennis took place in 1971. On the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1971 the first ever tennis squad of colour left South Africa to play at tournaments in Europe. This squad under the banner of the national SALTU was named the "Jasmat Dhiraj Squad" and consisted of: Jasmat Dhiraj, Hira Dhiraj, Cavin Bergman (all Transvaal), Oscar Woodman, Alwyn Soloman, Chamaine Williams (Cape) and Hoosen Bobat (Natal), the most promising junior in SALTU. The Dhiraj brothers were both national champions and among the best players of colour produced in the country. The squad played in various tournaments in Europe and the UK with understandably, modest success. The most significant part of this story is that Hoosen Bobat's entry to Junior Wimbledon was accepted on the basis of his undoubted talent and potential; but it was not to be. The 'white' SALTU through its chairman, Alf Chalmers and connivance of the secretary of the ITF Basil Reay, objected to the entry because it was not "official" and Hoosen Bobat's name was removed from the Draw for Junior Wimbledon. No doubt the SA Government of the day had a hand in this (as in the Basil Oliviera episode the previous year) - to create yet another sporting victim of apartheid.

The period 1965 - 1979 was a period of growth with increase in clubs, players and competition, in spite of the lack of facilities and attempts to prevent use of facilities like those at Natal University, UDW and Tills Crescent. This was a reaction to the increased isolation by the international community of South African sport and the campaigns spearheaded by SANROC and activist like Denis Brutus and Sam Ramsamy overseas.

## **1980-1995**

In 1979 a new attempt to unify the 3 black associations came to fruition when at the national championship in Benoni the Tennis Association of South Africa (TASA) was formed and in Natal, the formation of the Southern Natal Tennis Union. The key administrators from the Black Association in this merger were Adv. K.K Mthiyane, Prof Paulus Zulu, Don Kali, Super Mahanjane and Adv. C.S Ntloko. From SNLTU Ebrahim Osman, MN Pather, BS Moodley and Vivian Persadh were the leading administrators. Ebrahim Osman was elected the first president of SNTU and has held the same position since then. This association brought with it a valuable sponsor in the S.A Sugar Association which not only continued to sponsor the premier championship of the SNTU but also made a substantial contribution to the creation of the Union's headquarters the Jeevan Kara Tennis Centre in 1984. The Centre itself is a microcosm of the anti-apartheid sports struggle. It came into being after a 15 year battle against inequality and discriminatory policies of the Durban City Council and a further 5 year battle to prevent the council from evicting the SNTU from the centre for "non-payment of the loan" granted to build the centre; this at a time when the council (still in the apartheid era) was dishing out millions in grants to other sport bodies (mainly Whites).

The Union won its battle to keep the centre and was supported by anti -apartheid activist like IN Singh, I.C Meer, R.D Naidoo, Ashwin Trikamjee and even organizations like DIMES (Durban Indian Municipal Employee Society). The centre came to symbolize the anti-apartheid sports struggle and was dubbed the "Mecca of non-racial Tennis". It became a vibrant venue for national tournaments, club, competition, junior and schools tennis, coaching and development programmes from 1984 - 1995. Club activity was also at its peak at this time.

The Coca Cola Winter Open (which started in 1965 with a sponsorship of R1500) also developed into a National Tournament dominated for many years by the Western Cape and Transvaal players like David Samaai, Conrad Johnson, Alwyn Soloman, Hermie Abrahams, Amie Poole, the Dhiraj brothers, Charmaine Williams, Brenda Peterson and Winston Peterson. The Sugar Open was the premier tournament and attracted as many as 300 participants from all over the country over the Easter Weekend. In its last few years the sponsorship of this event was taken over by SANLAM.

This period, 1984 – 1995, also saw the emergence of a string of junior players who showed great potential in local, provincial and Coke master's national tournaments in the age groups 12 – 18years. It is important that names of these talented juniors, some of whom went on to win titles at senior level and compete beyond our borders, be recorded for posterity. A few outstanding examples of these are Ismail Asmal, Hoosen Bobat who was part of a SAL TU squad which played in overseas tournament in 1971, Richard Mahlangu, Natal senior champion in 1984, who became coach in Austria and Alicia Pillay who played at junior Wimbledon and other junior tournaments abroad, represented the country at junior level in tournaments in Africa, made it into the Fed Cup Squad and in university tennis in the USA.

The Mahomedy brothers, Hassen and Hussein, who both were national junior champions, rose from junior ranks to emulate their father M.S "Ginger" Mahomedy to become national Single Champions. A father and two sons - all national Single Tennis Champions – probably a world record eligible for the Guinness Book of records! It must be recorded as a waste of talent that many players missed out on opportunities solely because of the colour of their skins, and in that sense they must be counted as victims of apartheid. We should therefore put their names on permanent record.

Top juniors of the Apartheid Era:

#### **BOYS**

Hoosen Bobat  
Ismail Asmal  
Girish Raniga  
Luncedo Ntloko  
Ntozonke Ntloka  
Robbie Naidoo  
Sanele Zondi  
Mohamed Haffejee  
Hoosen Khan  
Ashraf Khan  
Navin Singh  
Gopaul Maduray  
Razin Tewary  
Ugen Pillay  
Owen Balwanth  
Nasim Bismillah  
Santosh Christopher

#### **GIRLS**

Alicia Pillay  
Lulu Makhoba  
Pam Hira  
Brenda Henry  
Amina Haffejee  
Razia Ayob  
P Tholsi  
Suriakumari Govender  
Roshan Hira (triple national champion)  
Thiru Govender  
Clinton Sayers  
Vindo Hansraj  
Nalin Balwanth  
Deshan Naidoo  
Thaveshni naicker  
Cindy Mbatha (triple national champion)  
Gene Bowler  
Zama Makhanya  
Tasneen Asmal  
Themba Zulu  
Rita Nathan

During 1970 - 1988, South African Tennis and sport were being increasingly isolated. India refused to play S.A in a Davis Cup Final and SA was subsequently barred from participation in this and other international team competitions.

In the early 1970's an ITF delegation came to SA to bring the different structures together. Another delegation tried in 1977, but the positions of the white SALTU and non-racial SALTU were too far apart in principle. Further, government policy and law created huge obstacles to any meaningful process of unity. These efforts came to nothing. In the late 1980's after the release of Nelson Mandela, the country moved into negotiations mode. This created a new, more hopeful climate for another attempt at unity. Another ITF delegation under Chairman Brian Tobin visited SA. This was followed by negotiations between SALTU, TASA, and a new structure representing mainly the Black Tennis Community called the Tennis Federation of SA (TFSA). A joint delegation also attended an ITF meeting in Germany to further the process.

Out of this was born the unified National Body in about 1990 called Tennis South Africa (TSA). However with TSA strongly aligned to SACOS and its "No Normal Sport in an Abnormal Society" stance and the White SALTU component playing its cards with caution the cracks and tension in TSA soon surfaced. Before long in 1991, TASA pulled out of the Unity process because they claimed it was being "too rushed" - before some concrete and visible transformation had been achieved.

The background to this national and international dynamic is important if we are to understand how and why the tennis scene in Natal changed during the period leading up to unity in 1995. In 1992 the Southern Natal Tennis Union took a decisive step when it broke ranks with TASA. The reasoning was that the whole country was on the path of negotiation,

and sport and tennis should join in. The release of Nelson Mandela changed the situation completely. The SACOS strategy of 'all or nothing', boycott and isolation, justified and effective as it was up to that point, now needed to be modified.

In Natal the Black Tennis Forum was formed with the TFSA component headed by Desmond Makhanya. Dialogue with the NTA and informal contact at player level was encouraged. As an icebreaker an open junior tournament was held at the Jeevan Kara Tennis Centre. After this began earnest negotiations on unity in terms of the guidelines set down by TSA for unity at provincial level. A key element in these guidelines was the 50-50 principle in the composition of an interim management committee to administer tennis for a period of 2 1/2 years during which period the ground would be prepared for the establishment of a single unified democratic body to govern tennis. Some frank and 'bruising' discussions followed. Some of these were chaired by a TSA appointed facilitator Mr Harry Naidu. Finally on 25 November 1993 at a meeting chaired by TSA Exco member Colin Clarke, the historic agreement on unification of Tennis in Natal was signed by Ebrahim Osman - chairperson of the TFSA Natal Forum and Chris Anderson - President of NTA. Incidentally Colin Clark had been the National Secretary of both TASA and SACOS. He had broken ranks with these bodies to take the negotiation path and had been invited together with Ebrahim Osman to serve on the TSA Executive.

A management committee consisting of an equal number from the TFSA Forum and NTA was formed with Chris Anderson and Ebrahim Osman to serve alternatively as chairman / vice Chairman for a two-year period. The management committee and its subcommittees held several meetings over the next 2 1/2 years. Finally after almost 5 years and many hiccups along the way the historic day arrived when on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1995, Tennis Natal came into being as the single controlling body for tennis in the province with Ebrahim Osman as the first President for the first 6 months and Chris Anderson as President for the next six months.

The inaugural Presidential Address set out the underlying ethos of unity. The name was changed to KZN Tennis Association to align with the province. This is a convenient point at which to conclude the history of tennis in the non-white community of KZN, but before closing this chapter it is necessary to record for posterity the names of the Tennis administrators (very few of whom are still with us) who years served the game with a singular passion and dedication. There was not a single paid official in all these years. And many probably bore part of the financial burden of administration from their pockets. In the face of all kinds of obstacles and frustration created by the apartheid system and without basic facilities and resources they succeeded not only in keeping the game of tennis alive but saw it flourish among the disadvantaged. The tennis community of our new democracy and the future needs to have this sense of history to understand where we come from.

#### **BLACK TENNIS ADMINISTRATORS DOWN THE YEARS**

S.L Singh (served in many capacities in Natal and national Indian Tennis).

R. Regnath - Vice President SNTU, founder member Natal Indian Society.

P.B Singh - Served in various capacities in Natal and National Indian Tennis.

J.S Jugnath - Served in various capacities in Natal and National Indian Tennis.

A.E Shaikh - Served in various capacities in Natal and National Indian Tennis.

E.H Ismail - Vice President SNTU.

B.K Rarndass- Secretary and Chairman NIL TA.

R.A. V NcGobo - Head of African Tennis.

S.S Singh (Sect. & Exco Member - SNTU).

M.N Pather - served in various capacities in Natal & National Indian Tennis - Gen Sect of SAL TU, TASA and SACOS.

M.K Naidoo - Served in various capacities in Indian Tennis and SAL TU, TASA, and SNTU.

Ebrahim Osman- Sect. NILTA, Chairman SNTU - 1963 -2007, Councillor SAL TU & TASA 1962 - 1992 ,board member - TSA,

SATA - 1993 - 2002, First President KZN Tennis 1995, HLVP -KZN Tennis 1996.

Ahmed Yusuf Mulla- treasurer SNTU & SAL TU / TASA for over 25 years.

B.S Moodley - Sect., Vice President and Exco member - SNTU, Vice President KZN Tennis 1997 served for a 40 year period.

Hoosen Bobat - Exco Member and Chief Coach - SNTU - selector KZN Tennis.

M.L Ba1wanth - secretary, vice president, Exco member - SNTU for over 20 years.

Vivian Persadh - Exco member and Vice president SNTU for over 30 years.

R Budhoo - Sect and Exco member SNTU.

R Ramlakan - Sect. & Exco member SNTU.

Parbhoo Roopnarian - Sect. & Exco member – SNTU.

Baker Khan - treasurer, coach and Exco member SNTU.

Roy Naidu - Exco member – SNTU.

Gora Peerbhay \_ . record clerk & Exco member.

Siva Chritopher - Exco Member SNTU.

Vishnu Tewary - Exco Member SNTU.

T.H Naran - Exco member SNTU.

Krish Pillay - treasurer and exco member SNTU.

R.R Pillay - Sect & Exco member SNTU.

Dave Seeripat - exco member SNTU.

Robbie Naidoo- ex eo SNTU.

AM Bobat - exco & convenor of selectors.

G.R (Pal) Bowler - Rec. Clerk and ex eo member.  
Andrew Geduld - Exco member SNTU.  
Reggie Richards - Exco member SNTU.  
Lew Azor - Exco Member SNTU.  
Sy1via Sa1sone - Exco member SNTU.  
K Manwaring - Vice president & Exco member SNTU.  
Myron Fynn - exco member SNTU.  
Narry Ally - exco member SNTU.  
Adv.C.S Ntloko - vice president & Exco member SNTU.  
M.J .Super Mahanjane - vice president & Exco member SNTU.  
Prof Sam Zondi - Exco member SNTU.  
Prof Paulus Zulu - vice president & Exco member SNTU.  
Moses Ndimande - Secretary & exco member SNTU.  
Hassen Mahomed - Exco member SNTU.  
D.C Govender - Exco member SNTU.  
Jack Hira - Exco member.  
Adv. K.K Mthiyane - vice president & ex eo member SNTU - 1979 - 2006, Judge of Supreme Court Appeal.  
Ms Phumla Xyotoeni - Exco member & Selector SNTU.  
Ms Zethu Mkhize - Exco member SNTU.  
Teddy Buthelezi - Exco member 7 Coach SNTU.  
Don Kali - Exco member SNTU.  
Ben Mosala - Exco member SNTU.  
Sipho Ncgobo - Exco member SNTU.  
Charles Zulu - Exco member SNTU.  
M.S Slax Mhlongo - Exco member & Rec Clerk SNTU.  
Pat Khuzwayo - Exco member SNTU.  
Domisane Ncgobo - Exco member SNTU.

#### **PATRONS DOWN THE YEARS**

S.S Maharaj  
A.R Naidoo  
M.S Mohamedy  
M.M Desia  
Prof CLS Nyembezi  
H Bodasingh  
Mac.P. Mota  
A.C Khumalo  
Harry Ally  
A.M Moolla  
'M.K Naidoo  
J.N Singh  
C.S Ntloko  
J. Mashones