

The Power of Sports to Overcome Racial and Ethnic Differences

More than a billion people watched the final game of the soccer World Cup which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa this past Sunday. While the people of Spain may have the most to celebrate with their team's victory, we can all celebrate the power of sports to bring people from different cultures and backgrounds together in peaceful and friendly competition.

It is particularly gratifying to me that South Africa was the host for this World Cup. I was born in South Africa and lived there until my family emigrated to the United States when I was twelve years old. Hosting the World Cup is another triumph for South Africa in its transformation into a peaceful multiracial, multicultural nation.

When I was a child growing up in South Africa, apartheid laws defined a person's race, restricted non-white people in terms of where they could live and work, and established separate and unequal systems of education. Only white people were considered full citizens and had the right to vote. Even in sporting events there was almost no mixing of different races.

In the 1980s the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and around the world led to sanctions against the South African government. South Africa was also barred from participating in international sporting events, like the World Cup and the Olympic Games.

Seeing South Africa not only competing in this World Cup but hosting the event -- the first time any African nation has hosted the World Cup since it began in 1930 -- is truly a testament to the strength of the South African people and the power of peaceful democratic change.

Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison for opposing the apartheid regime before being elected President in South Africa's first fully representative democratic election, keenly understood the power of sports to unite people and overcome racial and ethnic differences.

As portrayed in the 2009 film *Invictus*, Mandela championed the South African rugby team, known as the Springboks, in the 1995 Rugby World Cup which was played in South Africa. The Springboks had been a hated symbol of apartheid for most black South Africans. But, with Mandela's encouragement, the entire country united behind their national team which won an improbable victory in the final over New Zealand. Mandela personally presented the trophy to the team captain, Francois Pienaar, while wearing a Springbok shirt. This was widely viewed as a major step in the reconciliation of black and white South Africans.

In the last 20 years since the end of apartheid, South Africa has emerged as a rich multicultural nation. It is fitting that as the World Cup host country it welcomed teams and fans from around

the world of different races, ethnicities and cultures who all came together to enjoy a great sporting event.

Let us congratulate Spain on being World Cup champions. And, let us salute the people of South Africa for being great hosts and for showing the world how to move beyond our differences and appreciate our diversity.

I welcome your feedback on sports, South Africa, or any other issues. Please visit our website at www.RepJasonLewis.com. You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us.

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