Racism deserves to get the red card

By RICH MICHENDO

Sport is supposed to be the epitome of the level playing field, where people are judged by their performance on the field or court, not by the colour of their skin. My favourite sport, football, has the capacity to bring people together. I am paired by the fact that when it comes to the poisonous hate of racism, the game has also been there, done that.

It is hard to think of a single month in a single year in the past generation in which there has been no racism in sport. As we bade farewell to 2011, England and Chelsea captain John Terry was alleged to have racially abused Queens Park Rangers defender Anton Ferdinand. Terry was said to have used the words "**** you and your **** with Ferdinand...The Terry incident came soon after the spat between Liverpool forward Luis Suarez and Manchester United defender Patrice Evra....While we have advanced from the days when banana skins were tossed at black players, the fact that a professional in terms of his skin colour is an affront to these enlightened times....

No matter how far we have come in the fight for equal rights, racism is still a major issue every day, everywhere, as well. All of us are guilty of it, one way or the other. We all judge people based on appearance without even thinking about it. Of course, we would like to think that all of us are guilty of it, one way or the other. We all judge people based on appearance without even thinking about it. Of course, we would like to think that we have moved beyond issues of race, ethnicity and skin colour—that those issues are problems of the past. The truth is that despite the progress we have made breaking down barriers, we are still steeped in the flip of the finger from those who claim they no longer find them to be an issue. We are guilty of it, as well. As we bade farewell to 2011, we move ahead, not necessarily being better at recognising and ridding it from our society.

Why do we act in these horrific ways, and what do these terriible events have to do with the everyday racism that does not make the headlines?

Eli Siegel, an American educator who founded the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism, has an answer. He explains that racism begins with the hope for contempt—the “false importance or glory” a person gets by making less of another person in the poisonous hate of racism, the game has also been there, done that.

In his book James and the Children, a consideration of The Turn of the Screw by Henry James, Siegel writes: “According to Aesthetic Realism, the greatest sin that a person can have is the desire for contempt. Because as soon as you have contempt, as soon as you don’t want to see another person as having the fullness that you love, you can rob that person, hurt that person, kill that person.” Contempt, Aesthetic Realism explains, is the cause of every injustice—from ethnic ridicule and slurs to the deadly forms of racism, bombs and war.

One of the clearest places where contempt can be seen is on the pitch, where two rival teams can construe itself as an international danger. It also carries personal friction, as demonstrated by Suarez’s and Terry’s moments of “false importance or glory.” A person who is “white” (Suarez) looks at a person whose skin is darker (Evra) and feels: “I am better than you.” Because the two white players wanted to think well of themselves, an easy way of seeming to think well of themselves was to consider the other as inferior.

In my life, respect for people begins with asking, and honestly trying to answer, the necessary question which Siegel first presented: “What does a person deserve by being a person?”

I believe that in 1775, the people of Machias were so worried about jobs and money….By April 1775 people are judged by their performance on the field or court, not by the colour of their skin. My favourite sport, football, has the capacity to bring people together. I am paired by the fact that when it comes to the poisonous hate of racism, the game has also been there, done that.

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Why does an historical event that took place on June 12, 1775—the onset of America’s Revolutionary War—have such meaning for people today? As a photographer who loves the natural beauty of coastal Maine, and the history of our great country, that is the question I was thinking about as I traveled from New York City to Machias last summer to participate in Margaretta Days. I loved being at this event, which commemorates the 240th anniversary of the first naval battle of the American Revolution. Its meaning came alive as I thought about what Eli Siegel, the great American philosopher and founder of the education Aesthetic Realism, said: “The aim of history is to make past feeling felt more, or, simply, the past felt more.” I believe this is why people are so stirred seeing our relation to the past, to men and women who lived at a critical time in our nation’s history.

Largely unknown today, this mighty occurrence was called the “Lexington of the Sea” by the eminent writer James Fenimore Cooper. Though few of the thousands of men and women of Washington County seized the British ship the Margaretta, anchored in Machiasport. It was a known fact that the British were planning to use the Margaretta as a training vessel, and in order to build forts to be used against Washington’s army. Through threatened, Mainers put their lives on the line to protect the meaning of the Revolution, and refused to provide the British with one leg of Maine’s valuable resource. Their brave decision stands for what we, as individuals and a nation today, so much hope for. In the period of the Night of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known, Ellen Reiss wrote: “What the American Revolution was concerned with is how the living Americans are not turned over now—as people across this nation are so worried about jobs and money....By April 1775 there came to be a fury in many persons in America that while they lived on the American earth, planted it, built on it—the wealth....was being robbed from them by an English king. There was fury that George III saw the American land and the people who lived on it as a means to enrich England.” There was fury that George III saw the American land and the people who lived on it as a means to enrich England.

I believe this describes the underlying cause of the fierce resistance to British tyranny. It was our desire to be free as Americans—women and men who felt there was something big and beautiful to be protected and fought for. This feeling was represented with depth and style in the Margaretta Days celebration! While today America is not going to the British monarchy, there is tremendous hardship and distress in the lives of most Americans because our vast wealth is used to bail out corporations and enrich executives and shareholders, as the average American gets poorer, including in Washington County. No person should ever be forced to worry about not having a good-paying job or not being able to afford the basic necessities. If America’s economy was based on ethics, and which will enable every man, woman and child to have good lives.

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I believe that in 1775, the people of Machias felt intensely: “This land is ours—and we’ll protect it with our very lives.” We can use what took place in 1775 to be a cleaner and surer about what we hope for and deserve—an economy that is based on ethics, and which will enable every man, woman and child to have good lives.

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