

From Racism deserves to get the red card

BY RICH MKHONDO

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 pained 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 “****ing black ****” in an exchange 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 footballer could insult a fellow 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 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 filth of racism—and those who think it’s already gone need to be especially active in recognising and ridding it from society....

Why do people act in these horrific ways, and what do these terrible 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 the reality of other people.

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 have, 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 it 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?”

No one begins life as a racist, but all of us can yield to the temptation of wanting to feel superior to other people, especially when we feel unsure of ourselves.

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