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Chasing shadows

BY

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A docuseries about the Springbok rugby team invites us to examine the enduring legacy of Rainbowism in South Africa.

In *Chasing the Sun 2*, the five-part documentary series on the South African rugby team's 2023 Rugby World Cup campaign in France, an eerie desperation belies the Springboks' attempt to win a historic fourth Webb Ellis trophy. "[We] have to win the World Cup," says head coach Jacques Nienaber during an interview in episode one. It's a sentiment echoed by other coaching staff, players, and pundits who appear in the series.

Produced by the South African-based sports broadcaster SuperSport, the expensive docu-series teases the idea of a Springbok defeat with a sense of foreboding. While the first *Chasing the Sun* series, released in October 2020, charted the Springboks' efforts to restore honor to the badge at the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan, *Chasing the Sun 2* examines the struggle of maintaining that prestige as defending champions striving to deliver hope to a country in dire straits.

The series functions as a case study on the legacy of patriotic myth-making in South African rugby. *Chasing the Sun 2* is underpinned by the post-apartheid mythology of the "Rainbow Nation," personified by this multiracial 33-man squad, looking past their differences to achieve greatness. Coined by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Rainbow Nation was a celebration of South Africa's racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in an effort to combat the divisive legacy of apartheid after 1994. For then-president Nelson Mandela, Rainbowism was meant to cultivate an inclusive—if not idealistic—national identity based on the African National Congress's (ANC) tradition of non-racialism, and Tutu's theology of racial reconciliation. Although South Africa had to contend with an inert economy and the threat of civil war, Rainbowism became synonymous with what was regarded as the fruits of democracy – namely, the introduction of

civil liberties, dissolution of censorship, the emergence of a small black middle class, and the country's reintegration into the international community after decades of isolation.

Despite the significance of these gains, Rainbowism was lambasted for promoting a disingenuous tale of post-racial harmony. These criticisms were reinvigorated by the university students of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, who saw the decolonization at historically white universities as a symptom of the concessions made during negotiations for democracy. The *Chasing the Sun* series makes no mention of these tensions. Instead, it leans into the mythology of Rainbowism, showcasing footage of South Africans from different race, class, and ethnic groups cheering on the Springboks in their green and gold national jerseys. On the surface, it seems like a throwback to those imperfect, yet hopeful years of early democracy. But as the series unfolds, it becomes evident that this isn't a renaissance proper. It is more of a retreat into bleak familiarity, a regression into the solutions of the past to escape the realities of the present. Much like the US, Europe, and parts of Latin America, the rise in austerity has seen the return of reactionary politics where racism, ethnic chauvinism, xenophobia, and mobster vigilantism have found an audience among South Africans disillusioned by the current state of affairs. Consequently, the displays of Rainbowism in the World Cup were more like nationalist cosplay, a performance of multiracial unity that ended once the lights went down. *Chasing the Sun 2* is less about South Africans reviving the mythology of the Rainbow Nation than pursuing what feels like a specter of it.

But if melting pot exceptionalism has proven to be an unreliable way of encouraging unity in South Africa, why do we continue to indulge in it? If South Africans have dismissed Rainbowism as a fairytale, why do we continue to believe its fictions? *Chasing the Sun 2* doesn't offer answers to these questions, but it does reveal how quickly we retreat into magical thinking during moments of political vulnerability. Under the leadership of Rassie Erasmus, the cunning director of rugby who still behaves like the head coach, the Springboks are the poster children for Rainbowism. For this squad, winning the World Cup is a matter of life or death. Erasmus lives up to his reputation as one of the most controversial figures in world sport. He is blunt, funny, and oftentimes villainous, lending the series moments of intensity, humor, and introspection. Like mind-game specialist José Mourinho, whose media antics eventually overshadowed his talents as a football coach, Erasmus isn't shy of using unorthodox methods to bring out the best out in his players.

The first episode begins by time-traveling to the Springboks' semi-final battle against England, where they're trailing by six points. Despite beating the English in the final of 2019 World Cup, the Springboks have battled to adjust their game to the wet weather. In the locker room during half-time, an enraged Erasmus lays into the team for their lackluster performance. "You promised that you'll play like the last fucking game as a group together. But you lied. You're fucking liars," he screams. Throughout the series, it's clear that Erasmus is a man on edge. "Fuck

man, I'm nervous," he admits in one interview. In addition to the expectation on their shoulders, South Africa has been drawn into a pool of unenviable group-stage opponents: Romania, Tonga, Scotland, and most frighteningly, Ireland. Erasmus also appears to be reeling from a 10-month ban from the sport following his contentious video where he slammed referee Nic Berry for his decisions during the 2021 British and Irish Lions series.

Nevertheless, Erasmus still entrusts the Springboks with the responsibility of bringing the cup home to South Africans. "To hold the cup is nice, but I want to see the people at Joburg Airport [OR Tambo International Airport] waiting and being happy." Erasmus and Nienaber view the diversity of their squad and their familiarity with hardship as invaluable qualities that distinguish them from other teams in the tournament. They show a genuine sensitivity toward the struggles of players who've been on the receiving end of racial and income inequality in their lives. In his memoir, *Rassie: Stories of Life and Rugby*, written by veteran journalist David O'Sullivan, Erasmus characterizes the implementation of and pushback against the racial quota system as "embarrassing." Through initiatives like the Elite Player Development (EDP) program, which was established in 2013 to identify rugby talents from the most impoverished parts of the country, Erasmus and Nienaber transformed the perception of diversity as ANC propaganda, to important criteria for choosing a squad with depth, character, and resilience.

In *Chasing the Sun 2*, we're often reminded how inclusive South African rugby has become. Players conduct their interviews in their home languages. Stock footage of the country's milieu is split evenly between the urban and rural. And while the talking heads are mostly men (with the exceptions of veteran TV presenter Motshidisi Mohono, and Springbok physio Rene Naylor), they come from a broad cross-section of society. The series goes to great lengths to familiarize us with the communities from which the players hail, and the people who witnessed their respective journeys. In one sequence, we're taken to Bethlehem, a city in the Free-State province, where we meet the proud parents of hooker Bongi Mbonambi, who plays a central role in the World Cup squad and documentary series as a whole. In another sequence, we pass by Humansdorp, a town in the Eastern Cape province, where we meet the family and friends of fly-half Manie Libbok, who are emotional at seeing him live out his dream on a global stage. We also stop by a butchery in Paarl, located in the Western Cape province, where winger Kurt-Lee Arendse reconnects with former co-workers, who speak highly of his work ethic and determination to play rugby professionally.

These dispatches are moving forays into the lives of poor and working-class South Africans in places that rarely get spotlighted by the mainstream press. However, they also reveal the toll of what writer Benjamin Fogel describes as the "politics of de-development." According to Fogel, de-development "refers to the process when countries, rather than experiencing economic growth, improving living standards, better infrastructure and the emergence of a more cohesive society, regress and become poorer, less educated and more insecure." Eventually, it ends in

“war of all against all competing for dwindling opportunities and resources that in more advanced stages becomes the war between armed actors, the cartel, the mafia, and paramilitary groups.” The footage from Bethlehem, Humansdorp, and Paarl exposes how economic stagnation, coupled with poor and corrupt governance, has impoverished places whose infrastructure, resources, and access to basic services were already scant to begin with. And while the stories of Mbonambi, Libbok, and Arendse make for moving television, their individual success isn’t going to prevent them from being victims of this “Hobbesian world,” as Fogel puts it.

It isn’t just the problems of the country that the Springboks have to shoulder. *Chasing the Sun 2* reveals a squad wrestling with their reputation as one of the most reviled teams in World Rugby. As far as sports documentaries go, the series offers significant access to the Springbok locker room, where the style of play has been dismissed as being “anti-rugby.” When the Springboks thumped the All Blacks 35–7 in a game ahead of the World Cup, they received scrutiny over their use of a 7:1 bench split, a tactic that allows the national team to exploit the strength of their infamous scrum. Before their first game against Scotland, Erasmus brings up this critique in a strategy session. It clearly touches a nerve. Throughout the series, the Springboks carry themselves like underdogs; it’s hard to think of a more downtrodden group of defending champions in the history of test rugby. This defensiveness is somewhat justifiable. The Springboks are often characterized as the brutes of rugby, despite their range, consistency, precision, and tactical brilliance.

Nonetheless, this sense of persecution does feel distinctly South African. Like novelist Ivan Vladislavić writes in his book *The Near North*, we’re a nation that loves to “to feel embattled, and when the going gets tough, we draw together.” In the same way that the Argentina football team reinforced their national mythology of suffering during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, South Africa thrives on the belief that we’re being constantly underestimated—evident in even affirmative phrases like “*hulle weet nie wat ons weet nie*” (they don’t know what we know), which gestures at the sense of being a perennial underdog. Erasmus is more than happy to take advantage of this cultural insecurity. These psychological tricks are part of how he makes each game “personal” to his players, as he likes to say. And the manipulation seems to work. During the game against Scotland, we hear players Faf de Klerk, Steven Kitschoff, Pieter-Steph du Toit, and Duane Vermuelen relish decimating players with impactful tackles. Mbonambi takes the cake by describing his satisfaction at the number of injured Scots lying on the field. “I remember just smiling to myself and saying yeah, they’re definitely tasting us now.”

But this sense of accomplishment is short-lived. In episode two, the Springboks are beaten by Ireland in a group-stage match. The loss prompts Erasmus to erupt in anger and take his reverse psychology up a notch. “All these beautiful songs you sing [in] English, Xhosa, Afrikaans. You sing all of them, but you’re false,” he screams. Soon, he directs his frustrations at Siya Kolisi, the

first black South African to captain the national rugby team. “I promise you Siya Kolisi is not the biggest thing in South Africa. South Africa is the biggest thing in South Africa,” he says to an incensed Kolisi. “You pretend you’d die for your country, but you will not die for your country,” Erasmus says to the rest of the group. The audience feels for the hopelessly likable Kolisi, who’s served as the face of diversity and transformation in rugby since November 2019. Kolisi is visibly disappointed in himself, questioning whether he has lost sight of the bigger picture due to an ego problem. Based on his efforts to recover from an ACL injury four months before the start of the competition, we know this isn’t the case.

It’s a moment where the audience questions whether the World Cup should mean that much to South Africa. Though Kolisi treats the incident as a form of character-building, it does prompt some doubt as to what a seven-week tournament can accomplish for South Africans. Though Mandela was labeled as a sellout when he sported a Springbok jersey to congratulate captain Francois Pienaar at the 1995 Rugby World Cup, his actions were part of a diplomatic olive branch to an Afrikaans community that still regarded him as a terrorist.

Beyond reciting the problems facing South Africa, *Chasing the Sun 2* doesn’t spend enough time investigating why South Africa continues to ascribe the responsibilities of nation-building to sport teams. There are other parts of the series that fall short of the compelling narratives told through the Springboks. The narration can be needlessly theatrical and the pacing can often feel stagnant, a product of the bloated format for documentary series during the streaming era. The soundtrack is a painfully conventional mix of choral and orchestral sounds, missing an opportunity to spotlight amapiano—undoubtedly South Africa’s biggest cultural export at present.

The series overcomes these glitches in episodes three and four, where the Springboks secure one-point wins over France and England in the quarter and semi-final matches respectively. In the French game, Cheslin Kolbe’s gravity-defying charge down on Thomas Ramos, Eben Etzebeth’s hard-won try, and Handré Pollard’s ice-cold 100% kick conversion have touches of thespian flair. Much of the drama for the England game is established in the preceding scenes with no-nonsense scrum coach Daan Human, his bucket hat, and the “Bomb Squad.” As the proudest benchwarmers in all of sport, the Bomb Squad are forwards who come off the bench to supply the team with intensity and power at crucial points in the game. Typically quiet, these players are their most animated when recounting the mechanics behind a successful scrum, which they execute brilliantly against the English. When soft-spoken prop Ox Nché gives a blow-by-blow account of how he dismantled the English scrum, you feel his delight as he unpacks the technicalities of his craft which he jokingly refers to as the “dark arts.”

The final episode opens with the allegation of racism leveled against Mbonambi, who is accused of calling England’s Tom Curry a “white cunt.” The incident is picked up by the English press,

who seem to think the incident will be the undoing of a country with a racially fractured past. Conversely, the incident becomes a joke on South African social media. Some of Mbonambi's most vocal supporters are Afrikaner TikTokers, who explain that the hooker probably used the Afrikaans term "*wit kant*" (white side). It's an unexpected show of solidarity that would've been unfathomable even to the most ardent Rainbowist. As a result of this heightened start, the rest of the last episode falls flat despite the dream final against the All Blacks. The century-long rivalry doesn't quite translate into dynamic storytelling—possibly because South Africa actually respects New Zealand. When the Springboks are crowned back-to-back World Cup champions, winning again by one point, there's a sense of relief and joy that is enhanced by the social media clips of South Africans grooving in the streets, crying in their homes, or chasing down the Springboks bus as they did a victory lap across different cities in the country. The audience even gets to see Erasmus in tears at OR Tambo International Airport, as he'd envisioned.

The recent elections have illustrated how easily South African nationalism can be manipulated to suit the agendas of political opportunists. For the next five years, the country will be ruled by a Government of National Unity (GNU) made up of the ANC, the Democratic Alliance (DA), and other smaller parties. Having officially returned to his position as head coach following the departure of Nienaber to Ireland, Erasmus will have to guide a national team in a Sport, Arts, and Culture ministry led by Gayton McKenzie, the Patriotic Alliance (PA) leader known for his hostility towards African immigrants, and his support of Zionist Israel. What will become of the Springboks' diversity under the leadership of a politician who ran an election campaign on the slogan "*Abahambe*" (they must go), and suggested that black people get jobs ahead of Colored people? Will the country still support a team made up of players whose roots are similar to the retired Tendai "Beast" Mtawarira, or will their origins be subject to litigation as our national identity becomes more exclusionary and chauvinistic?

Chasing the Sun 2 may overstate what the 2023 Rugby World Cup can do for the country. However, it's clear that support for the Springboks is far from manufactured. The national team has managed to win over South Africans who didn't see themselves in the squad. Consequently, South Africa has and hasn't come a long way since the 1995 World Cup exchange between Mandela and Pienaar. For better or for worse, we're a nation that continues to revive the ghost of Rainbowism whenever we're faced with the kind of political strife that has been foundational to our national lore.

About the Author

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