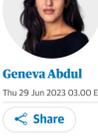


Wimbledon

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# How Wimbledon and apartheid South Africa blocked a teen's tennis dream

Hoosen Bobat was thrilled to receive an invite to Junior Wimbledon in 1971 - what happened next still hurts, 52 years on



Geneva Abdul  
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Hoosen Bobat hailed from a segregated Durban suburb and travelled 50km to practice on private courts as a youngster. Photograph: Hoosen Bobat

When a telegram arrived from the All England Lawn Tennis Club inviting Hoosen Bobat to play in the 1971 Wimbledon junior tournament, he read it more than a dozen times to be certain it was addressed to him.

The accomplishment was surreal for the then 18-year-old, hailing from a segregated Durban suburb where life was a "struggle all the time" under South Africa's brutal apartheid regime.

"There was no level playing field," recalls Bobat on a recent trip to London. Then, black players were denied facilities and couldn't play their white counterparts. Matches at all-white tennis centres were watched from caged sections, he recalls, and once a week he would travel 50km to practise on private courts.

All the years of sacrifice weren't in vain, he thought when the news arrived, and with it came the opportunity to become the first black tennis player from South Africa to play at Junior Wimbledon.

"All we proud to do was play tennis," he says. "To make our people back home proud that black people, no matter the lack of facilities, lack of sponsorship, can still play on the greatest stage in the world."

In the 1970s, against the backdrop of the anti-apartheid movement and increasing pressure from the international sports community, the country maintained its racist policies. In 1970 South Africa was excluded from the Davis Cup and the International Olympic Committee banned the country's representatives, alongside other sports boycotts at the time.



Athletes were told by the white government not to mix politics and sport, Bobat recalls: "But we used to say, hang on, from the moment you are born as a black in South Africa, you are spending the rest of your life trying to erase politics from sport."

While non-white players were restricted playing at home, some overseas athletes boycotted playing in the apartheid state amid calls for change in sporting policy. Others such as Indigenous Australian player Evonne Goolagong-Cawley competed in 1971 under the designation of an "honorary white" status - or what Bobat refers to as "window dressing".



Evonne Goolagong on her way to victory in the 1971 Wimbledon women's singles final - she was designated as 'honorary white' when playing in South Africa. Photograph: Express/Getty Images

In 1967, at the height of apartheid, Bobat's family was forcibly moved from their home of 50 years under the South African government's Group Areas Act which created racially segregated areas. The family was given three months to relocate 20km out of town.

"That left a big mark on me at that time, seeing them speaking to my grandmother and my mother in that way - really being nasty," Bobat recalls. "And I'm thinking to myself: 'But this is our house, we built it' - but it didn't matter."

At 18, Bobat was part of a six-person team sent on a European tour organised by the non-racial Southern Africa Lawn Tennis Union (SALTU), separate from the country's white tennis union.

He applied for leave from his university, but was later denied by the school's senate, forcing him to reapply upon his return.

He had applied for entry to Junior Wimbledon, satisfying all the criteria at the time. As a top-ranked junior, he held national under-19 titles and was a member of a recognised International Lawn Tennis Federation (ILTF) club.

One week before the tournament, however, a telegram from the ILTF arrived requesting an urgent meeting in London. Bobat was surprised to see the head of the white SALTU union as he entered the office, and wondered: "What is he doing here all the way from South Africa?"

It was then, Bobat recalls, that the ILTF general secretary told him the union leader objected to his entry. He said Bobat did not belong to an affiliated club, nor was he the official No 1 player in the country. A player from the white union was, he was told.

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Just like that, game, set and match, my dream was over  
Hoosen Bobat

"And just like that, game, set and match, my dream was over," says Bobat, shaking his head.

Bobat returned to Durban with his passion for tennis killed. Remotivated by his parents, he continued to play while completing school, before a back injury forced him to retire his racket from competitive play.

He stayed involved in the sport, working for the non-racial tennis body, coaching many children to provincial and national levels before later joining his family's brokerage.

But 52 years on, and with Bobat now 71, he is left with more questions than answers. How did the process around his removal from Junior Wimbledon happen? Did one man alone make the decision? And how did the All England Lawn Tennis Club accept it?

The retraction from the junior tournament came nearly a year after non-racial union officials were approached to join the white union in exchange for "honorary status", Bobat recalls. "Our tennis president and secretary, after 10 minutes, showed them the door."

"Even now, nothing much has changed. There are less black - which we define as Indian, coloured and black - tennis players now than then."

It was cathartic, however, to speak about the incident decades later with his friend, Saleem Badat, an author and professor at the University of the Free State. What began as a conversation between them during the pandemic now forms much of Badat's recently published book: Tennis, Apartheid and Social Justice: The First Non-Racial International Tennis Tour, 1971.

"I take very seriously the idea that the past is not dead," Badat says. "The past is not even past. People are living with this trauma today in South Africa, of things that happened 50 years ago. These injustices are having their toll, even today, people are still waiting for apologies."

Badat has requested a public apology from the AELTC and the ITF (the ILTF having dropped "lawn" from its name in the late-1970s), which was echoed by Labour MPs and veteran anti-apartheid campaigners Peter Hain and Jeremy Corbyn this week.

The trauma that this caused, and continues to cause, Mr Bobat is regrettable and shameful  
Peter Hain

Lord Hain said: "The collusion of international sports federations in permitting South Africa to participate in sport internationally and effectively denying black sportspeople opportunities is well-documented. That the AELTC complied with the directive of the ILTF and the trauma that this caused, and continues to cause, Mr Bobat is regrettable and shameful. I very much hope that the AELTC will unreservedly apologise to Mr Bobat and the South African non-racial sports fraternity."

The AELTC has thanked Badat for bringing the matter to their attention and has offered to speak with Bobat directly. "We are currently reviewing the information available to us regarding how entries to the Junior Championships were administered in 1971," a spokesperson said.

An ITF spokesperson said: "This is a very important matter, and the ITF is looking for information about the potential injustice this may have caused, both within tennis records dating back to 1971, as well as from Prof Badat who has also brought it to our attention."

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