

DREAMING THE **IM**POSSIBLE

THE BATTLE TO CREATE A
NON-RACIAL SPORTS WORLD



MIHIR BOSE

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Mihir Bose is a British-Indian journalist and author who was the first Sports Editor of the BBC. In nearly 50 years in journalism he has worked for the *Sunday Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and written on sport, business and social and historical issues for the *Financial Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Independent*, *Sunday People*, *Evening Standard*, *Irish Times* and *History Today* and broadcast for Sky, ITV, Channel Four News and was the first cricket correspondent of LBC Radio. He is the author of 37 books. His *History of Indian Cricket* won the 1990 Cricket Society Silver Jubilee Literary Award. *His Sporting Colours* was runner-up in the 1994 William Hill Sports Book of the Year.

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To Debi, Somen, Edwin, Hamish, Arthur, Antonia and
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This book has come about because of Peter Burns of Arena Sport. Incidents of racism in sport were on the increase and we had been discussing the question of race, sport and society. I had suggested that perhaps I should reissue my book, *The Sporting Alien*, published 25 years ago, which had looked at these matters. While Peter and his team liked the book, he suggested that I should look at the whole subject again. At that stage nobody outside China knew of Wuhan and the perils held by its lab and its wet market, and George Floyd was still alive. Within months, the world had changed like never before and Floyd's death and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement completely transformed the debate about race and sport. So my first thanks are to Peter.

Neville Moir, my editor at Birlinn, has guided the book with a deft touch and Ian Greensill, not put off by editing a previous book of mine on India, willingly took this one on and has done an admirable job.

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Over the years, I have interviewed many people in sport. In the course of writing this book, I have gone back to many of them and interviewed many others. The number of people I have spoken to covers a vast field. To all of them, I owe my thanks for sparing me their time and providing valuable insights into sport, race and society. The entire list is too long to mention everyone. I would like to thank in particular: Michael Holding, Mo Farah, Pat Cash, Raman Subba Row, Moen Ali, Chris Powell, Luther Blissett, Garth Crooks, Brian Stein, Colwyn Rowe, Trevor Westley, Dwight Marshall and David Gower, Rimla Akhtar.

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Jeremy Butterfield was his usual unflappable self.

Covid has meant that I have not been able to have any face-to-face interviews but have relied on the use of the phone, Zoom, Teams and Skype. The need to use technology, which I did not even know existed before Covid, has meant that I have had to rely even more on Rose Chisholm, whose help and patience was invaluable, all the more so as my ideas on technology were formed in the typewriter age.

As ever my wife Caroline was the rock who made sure I kept to the course despite the fact that it often meant she herself was diverted from her busy work as well as writing her own book which I am convinced will be a bestseller. My daughter Indira has provided wonderful insights into how her generation sees the question of race.

Of course none of these people are responsible for the errors and omissions that remain. They are my responsibility and I can only hope there are none.

London
January 2022

FOREWORD

by Roy Hodgson, former England manager

Mihir Bose has used his vast experience, his contacts with top people in the world of sport and his considerable skill as a journalist and author to produce a topical book which sheds much-needed light on the intolerable abuse and the many injustices which our black and Asian sportsmen and women have had to endure for so long.

The varied and interesting stories the book contains highlight the many myths and prejudices that have confronted talented black and Asian sportsmen throughout the years and which, in many instances, still do today.

A theme that occurs in so many stories, especially those relating to the particularly brutal period of the 1970s and '80s, concerns the advice players of that era received in order to help them deal with racial abuse. Basically, it amounted to being told to 'get on with it' and 'rise above it'. On no account should it ever be allowed to affect their game or be taken into any account whatsoever!

Incredible and simplistic solutions offered for an ugly and unacceptable state of affairs and the governing bodies of that era and those that have followed to the present day cannot escape criticism that not enough was done to change it.

The emergence of anti-racist organisations, such as 'Kick It Out' and 'Black Lives Matter', combined with such initiatives as 'taking the knee' by Premier League footballers, have helped to raise awareness which is long overdue but may help to provide a better platform and environment for black and Asian sportsmen and women of the future.

In the final chapters of this fascinating book, Mihir looks deeper into the lack of opportunities at management and boardroom level for the BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) community. He questions why there are still so few Asian players breaking through to the professional ranks, especially in the world of football. Mihir also discusses with the leading administrators of British sport questions about white privilege and institutional racism which are now so much a part of our public discourse as a result of the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some of their responses are enlightening.

I congratulate Mihir for undertaking the monumental task of researching the historical abuse and prejudice that has blighted British sport for so long and for allowing us to 'dream the impossible' and to believe that this will not be so for ever.

INTRODUCTION

The Coon, the Baseball Bat and Enoch Powell

Forty years ago a train used to run on Saturday nights from Nottingham to London. It left Nottingham at 19.03 and arrived at St Pancras just after 21.30. It was an unremarkable train. The first-class coaches, which were usually at the front, consisted of cubicles set off down a corridor. This was marked first class from the second class (the term standard class had not yet come into use) in a much more class-conscious manner compared to present-day trains where all compartments blend into one long corridor and what distinguishes first from second is more the quality of the furnishings and the fact that the seats in first class are more spacious. When I first encountered the train the cubicles had some of the feel of the trains in *Brief Encounter*, exuding an air of seclusion and intimacy. Over the years, and particularly on winter nights, they also conveyed some of the danger and fear of an alleyway. If they had first held out hope of adventure, they later threatened menace.

But their full significance did not become clear to me until I took a fateful trip - returning from covering a football match for the *Sunday Times* - when they made a horrifyingly indelible impression on me.

The first time racism had revealed its football face to me was on 21 March 1981. I was on my way to Norwich to cover their game against Arsenal. The match was unremarkable but I had persuaded John Lovesey, sports editor of the *Sunday Times*, that this would be suitable for an experiment in reporting. I had read in *Time Out* how most journalists and directors watched football from a seat in line with the centre circle rather than behind the goal as the terrace supporters did. This, said the writer, gave them a middle-class bias as opposed to the supposedly more genuine working-class view provided from behind the goalposts. I wrote for *Time Out* but I knew it could occasionally come out with pretentious rubbish, particularly when those who did not write on sport ventured into this area. But it did strike me that depending where you watched a football match, you might have a different perspective, not in a class sense but as a way of looking at the game.

So, I suggested to Lovesey that we send not one but five reporters to a match. Get one to stand with the hard-core terrace supporters, another with the manager in the dugout, a third with the chairman and the fourth with the season ticket holder in the main stand. These four journalists would report the match through the eyes of their chosen subjects. In addition there would be the normal match reporter sitting in the press box to provide the usual match report. With a page devoted to this one match, the reader would get a feel of how different people, all of them supporters of the same team, saw the game and the whole exercise would indicate that a football match had many dimensions. It would also address the charge made against us journalists that our reporting never

corresponded to the match as seen by the supporters and was more often a figment of our preconceived ideas.

Lovesey was attracted to the idea but I felt devalued the concept somewhat by allowing the match reporter 900 words or so while the four of us had no more than 250 words each, instead of the equal space I had envisaged. Nevertheless, it was a major feat to make this the main feature and persuade a national newspaper to send five reporters, including Brian Glanville, the paper's legendary football correspondent, and Rob Hughes, the number two football reporter, for this fairly ordinary league match against Arsenal.

So, fairly full of myself, I travelled down to Norwich on the train with Glanville, Hughes, Chris Lightbown and Denis Lehane. I had been assigned to sit in the directors' box with the Norwich chairman, Sir Arthur South; Lehane was with a season ticket holder; Lightbown, who was seen as the voice from the terraces, with a young terrace supporter; and Hughes with Ken Brown, the Norwich manager. Glanville was to do the match report.

Norwich was a town I always liked visiting and the train journey, which I made often, was a delight. The walk to Carrow Road took us past the canal and I chatted happily to Lehane and Lightbown as we moved along with hundreds of supporters. By this time a large crowd had gathered outside the ground and they seemed to be in good spirits. There was just one moment that jarred. As I made my way to the entrance marked 'Directors', I heard a cry: 'Get your copy of the *Bulldog*, get your colour supplement.' I turned to see a man with close-cropped hair, wearing a bomber jacket on the arm of which was the NF insignia, selling copies of a paper marked *Bulldog*. Lehane and Lightbown heard the cries as well and they seemed

somewhat embarrassed. To me it was by now part of the environment round a football ground. I was, after living in this country since the sixties, well aware of racism and had learned to accept such things.

I soon forgot about the incident as I tried to portray the match through Sir Arthur South's eyes. All of us had been provided with excellent crib sheets on our subjects by Rob Hughes who had already been to Norwich and done a fair bit of preliminary work. He had picked out both the season ticket holder and the terrace supporter – Bert Horrex, a 65-year-old who sat in Block C, seat eight, and had been going to Carrow Road since 1937, and Mark House, a 13-year-old who used his pocket money to watch Norwich. Hughes, who had interviewed all of them, had carefully noted down Sir Arthur's confession that he did not know anything about football but he knew men. He never interfered with the manager and did not know the team until he arrived at the ground. If Steve Walford, whom Norwich had recently bought, committed an error, then the first time it happened he would not say anything. But if he repeated the mistake he would ask Brown if he knew he had this tendency. Was that why Walford was available rather cheaply, his price knocked down from the original asking price of £400,000? This, in those pre-Premier League days, was big money.

Sir Arthur lived up to his advance billing and Hughes's notes made it easy for me to write Norwich versus Arsenal as seen by the knight. More interesting in some ways was the insight the whole experience provided in a world I hardly knew existed. Until that moment I had not realised how class-ridden football clubs could be. I had watched football as a supporter or from the press box. At Norwich, for the first time, I was admitted to the directors' box, the holy of holies in football. It was a world removed from the

pen where away supporters were herded. Here there was no frisking, no injunction to wait until the home supporters had left. I was now the chairman's guest and immediately made aware of the almost mystical significance football clubs assign to the word 'chairman'. From the moment the steward met me, saying, 'The chairman is expecting you', never once did I hear Sir Arthur South referred to by his name. Many people spoke to him during the course of the afternoon but it was always yes, chairman, no, chairman, chairman this and chairman that. And the style and opulence of the hospitality available to directors and their guests surprised me. As a football supporter I was aware that football grounds provided more than soggy meat pies and wretched instant coffee. The standards of press box hospitality varied from the sumptuous spread at Arsenal – provided, so the joke went, to compensate for their football – to Nottingham Forest, where a half-time cup of tea was a treat second only to getting an interview with Brian Clough. By the time I came on the scene, Clough had stopped attending post-match conferences. But that afternoon at Norwich I was introduced to the comfort the real bosses of football enjoyed before, during and after a game.

I had not been invited to the pre-match meal that the Norwich board, the visiting Arsenal directors and their guests had partaken of, but I was ushered into the boardroom for a pre-match drink and at half-time there was a magnificent spread supplemented by as much free drink as anyone could manage. In the years since then, and particularly with the formation of the Premier League, the hospitality provided by clubs for the reporters has increased and in some clubs it is truly lavish. But it was at Norwich I was first introduced to it and to a certain kind of

well-heeled woman in expensive furs, tasteful but costly jewellery and with what looked like a permanent suntan. Many years later I learned that the tan was very often acquired after hours under a sunbed rather than actual exposure to the sun, but nevertheless the women there were very far removed from the sort of occasional woman of pallid complexion I had seen on the terraces or in the stands.

My mind was full of these wonders of the boardroom when after the match, and having filed my copy, I met up with Lehané and Lightbown to walk, or rather run, back to the station. There was a train at five past five and we were all very keen to get it. We got to the station just as the train was about to pull out. Normally I would have walked the length of the platform to find a first-class compartment but there was no time for that and, following Lightbown's lead, I jumped in the first available compartment with Lehané just after me. As we did so the train left. It was now, as I walked down the aisles towards first class, that I realised the great peril I had put not only myself but all three of us in.

We had got in at the back of the train packed with Arsenal supporters returning to London. As I walked through them they looked at me with faces like thunder. Suddenly, as I went past one large, fat supporter, he looked at me and cried out, 'Coon, coon, hit the coon over the head with a baseball bat.' As he said so he got up and started following me. It was my extreme good fortune that by the time he did I had gained some distance on him and a couple of people had interposed themselves, quite unwittingly, between me and him. But this only seemed to add to his sense of urgency to hit the coon.



Scott Lloyd, chief executive of Lawn Tennis Association, with Andy Murray, agrees with Pat Cash that tennis is a white middle-class sport and that for a white person it is difficult to understand what it is to experience discrimination on a daily basis. *James Jordan Photography*



Young kids taking to tennis as part of the LTA's Inclusion Strategy launched by Lloyd in May 2021 to help tennis reach out beyond its traditional white Middle England heartland. *James Jordan Photography*



Emma Raducanu, whose victory in the US Open in 2021 made her the first qualifier to win a Grand Slam singles title in the open era, is proud of her Chinese heritage.

James Jordan Photography



Chris Hughton, unique among black ex-players, has an array of impressive managerial portfolios including three Premiership clubs. He feels racism will always be there but is encouraged that more black coaches are coming through. *Graham Jepson Photography*