

THE UNITED STATE

Sport has triumphed as our greatest unifier.

By Clinton van der Berg

SIX WEEKS BEFORE THE START OF the Fifa 2010 World Cup, there was a discernible swing among the public. The bickering suddenly stopped. Agitated callers to radio phone-ins quietened down. Pessimism was put on hold.

Almost overnight, the Rainbow Nation re-emerged. Cars flew SA flags, side mirrors were bedecked in SA colours and Football Friday took off. Corporates arranged Diski Dance days, staff members were encouraged to decorate their desks and schools created innovative World Cup days.

Football fever took hold, brought on by a sense of civic pride at the splendid new stadiums, at the gleaming new hotels and at the sense that South Africa would indeed pull off the most spectacular football party.

Given the country's damaged past, it's no surprise that sport is seen as a refuge. Stripped of our badges, colours and ranks, sport unifies us, not least in seeking a collective goal, be it Bafana Bafana's success or the staging of a successful World Cup.

This sense of unity was amplified less than a month before the tournament when the Bulls rugby team played a Super 14 semi-final at Orlando Stadium in the heart of Soweto.

Of all the things a Bulls fan could have expected this season, trekking into Soweto for a major match was not one of them. Bulls fans have never been the most open-minded, but there they were, piling into Soweto with their bull horns, painted faces and nose rings.

And black South Africans opened their arms (and houses and shebeens) to these supporters in a rare show of sporting unity.

Stories emerged of nervous visitors getting lost and being shown the way, and of happy supporters making their way to taverns and being invited into private homes.

For many, this was their first experience of township life. 'We'll be back,' was the refrain, as many were for the Super 14 final a week later.

'It was,' said Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 'one of those special South African moments that proves we are better off for having one another and that despite the challenges we face, our society is on the right track.'

He added, with typical candour, that not too long ago Pretorians 'would have choked on their moustaches at the thought of kicking for posts in Soweto ... and the arrival of these giant Bulls from the north would have sent many Sowelans ducking for cover.'

Tutu has always been a man for distilling the moment and in those few words he confirmed sport's capacity for uniting South Africans.

One of the first demonstrations of this occurred in 1995, when the Springboks won the Rugby World Cup. Captain Francois Pienaar recalls travelling in the bus from Sandton to Ellis Park and being taken aback by the black and white cordon of fans along the route. This was very different, he sensed.

Former president Nelson Mandela was greeted with chants of 'Nelson! Nelson!' as he approached the players wearing Pienaar's No 6 jersey. The predominantly white crowd was mesmerised by the grand gesture.

When the Boks triumphed, all races danced in the streets and townships erupted in joy. Given how early it was in our democracy, it was a seminal moment.

A generation later, this astonishing story of triumph and reconciliation became a hit film, *Invictus*, which sought to lay bare the extraordinary power of sport with the benevolent Mandela at its centre.

It may sound trite to talk about the transcendent nature of sport, but in South Africa the evidence is simply too compelling to dismiss.

It unites us, like nothing else. 

