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To cite this article: Tafadzwa Blessing Choto (2024) An Olympic Fairytale: The Zimbabwean Women's Field Hockey Victory at the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 41:10-11, 1150-1164, DOI: [10.1080/09523367.2024.2412080](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2024.2412080)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2024.2412080>



Published online: 22 Oct 2024.



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An Olympic Fairytale: The Zimbabwean Women's Field Hockey Victory at the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT

In July 1980, an all-white Zimbabwean women's hockey team made history by unexpectedly winning gold at the Olympic Games in Moscow. The 1980 games had been overshadowed by cold war political tensions which manifested in the boycott by several western countries in protest over the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. This politicization of the Olympics set the stage for Zimbabwe's participation and the eventual politicization of the women's field hockey victory. This victory was unexpected partially because the Zimbabwean women's field hockey team had very little time to prepare for the tournament. The ramifications of the victory extended beyond the playing field as it became intertwined with racial and gender discourses that dominated the post-independence political narrative. Therefore, the events connected with this 1980 Olympic victory by the Zimbabwean women's hockey team demonstrate how the victory transformed women's field hockey from being a relatively obscure white minority sport, into a critical social space where political rhetoric was enunciated. This effectively increased the standing of the sport in the eyes of the ruling ZANU PF regime as demonstrated by investment in hockey infrastructure as well as attempts to continue its association with the 1980 Olympic victory.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 September 2023
Accepted 23 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Field Hockey; Zimbabwe; post-colonial; Olympic Games; women's sport

The newly independent country of Zimbabwe won its first Olympic gold medal at the 1980 Moscow games, following the unexpected victory of an all-white women's field hockey team. The racial composition of the team reflected the colonial Rhodesian tradition of fielding all white teams in sports that were considered as being exclusively for whites. This practice had its roots in the 1890s, when sport in colonial Rhodesia was introduced by the white settlers, who organized it through clubs which served as symbols of white social and political domination.¹ South Africa played a significant role in the development of sport in colonial Rhodesia due to its geographical proximity and increased opportunities for better quality competition as demonstrated by a number of Rhodesian sports bodies which began as South African affiliates. Though Rhodesian sport was not legally segregated as was the case in apartheid

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South Africa, the overshadowing influence of South Africa resulted in Rhodesian sport being racially discriminatory in less overt ways.²

Literature on sport in colonial Rhodesia mostly emphasizes how sport was an imperialist tool that served different racially defined purposes. For the geographically scattered white settlers, sports like cricket and rugby were important in fostering white social acculturation and forging a Rhodesian white identity, whilst for the native blacks, sports like football were introduced as a mechanism for social control.³ Although not much has been written specifically on hockey in colonial Rhodesia, presumably because of its low popularity and limited media coverage, it was – like cricket and rugby – an exclusively white sport mostly due to its embryonic connection with apartheid South Africa.⁴ The Rhodesian men's hockey team received considerable media coverage for a period after it qualified and participated in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, where they were part of a predominantly white contingent involving athletes from seven sports disciplines.⁵ Women's field hockey was equally racially segregated as was the men's game, but unlike the men did not receive considerable media attention until the Olympic victory in 1980. Before then it was a virtually unknown game played only by a small group of privileged white women like those from elite white only schools such as Evelyn High school in Bulawayo.⁶ By 1950 women in Rhodesia were playing field hockey as part of the exclusively white South Africa and Rhodesian women's hockey association which assembled teams that participated in invitational tournaments like the international women's hockey tournaments which included other countries including England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the United States.⁷

The Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in November 1965 by the white Rhodesian government in the face of increasing British pressure towards African independence had a considerable impact on sport. The British government's response to the UDI was to move towards denying the Rhodesian regime much-needed international legitimacy. Their response included sponsoring trade sanctions, an arms embargo, and restrictions on the transfer of currency.⁸ From 1967 onwards the efforts of the British government to de-legitimize the Rhodesian regime were extended to sport, including preventing international tours by the Rhodesian hockey team and dissuading British cricket and football teams from touring Rhodesia.⁹ The result was a coordinated international ban on Rhodesia resulting in their being unable to participate in the 1968 and 1976 Olympic Games in Mexico City and Montreal respectively.¹⁰ Rhodesia was not only banned from participating in the Olympic Games but its national sports associations like the Rhodesian Olympic Committee (ROC) and the Rhodesian Football Association were suspended by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) respectively due to racist segregationist practices. This meant that for over a decade Rhodesian sport was mostly internationally isolated.

The IOC granted Moscow the right to host the 1980 summer Olympic Games at its seventy-fifth meeting in 1974. The Moscow games were the first major global sporting event the Soviet Union had hosted and were regarded by the Soviet leadership as having immense political and economic benefits.¹¹ The Moscow games were held at the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This resulted in the United States and other Western nations adopting firm retaliatory measures to register their displeasure, and central to that was the disruption of the 1980 summer games.¹² Led by the

United States, the mooted western response was to advocate for a boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. The western boycott followed a similar boycott by African and Arab countries of the 1976 Montreal Olympics in protest over the participation of New Zealand which had sporting ties to apartheid South Africa.¹³ These events occurred in the broader context of the Cold War, where sport and the Olympics became increasingly politicized assuming a central role in the global propaganda battle for supremacy between the east and west.¹⁴ Literature on the Cold War era Olympic boycotts emphasizes how these were rooted in the understanding by rival political blocs on the political importance of the Olympics as platform for expressing their political and moral superiority.¹⁵

The western led boycott badly affected the preparation of the games as a total of 67 countries boycotted, leaving the Soviet Union and the IOC to scramble for replacements in order to salvage the games.¹⁶ Newly independent African countries like Zimbabwe were a natural target because they had historical ties with the Soviet Union which had supported a number of African liberation movements including the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and its military wing the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA), one of the two Zimbabwean nationalist movements.¹⁷ The transformation to majority rule in 1980 following a bitter protracted civil war ended the country's international isolation and opened up opportunities for the newly independent nation to participate in international events like the Olympic Games.¹⁸ The participation of Zimbabwe in the 1980 Moscow games was therefore politically significant for the post-independence regime as it signified the legitimization and acceptance of the country into the international order. This to an extent set the stage for the politicization of the women's field hockey team victory and its transformation from being a relatively obscure sport to being at the very heart of post-independence political discourse.

The Bumpy Road to Moscow

Zimbabwe's participation at the Moscow Olympic Games was fraught by uncertainties emanating from the previous Rhodesian suspension by the IOC. This resulted in delayed invitations that adversely affected the preparation of athletes and teams for the games. Zimbabwe was one of the last countries to be invited for the 1980 Moscow games by the IOC due the uncertainties surrounding its legal status. Eventually the IOC gave Zimbabwe provisional recognition which would subsequently be upgraded to full membership, and with that an invitation to participate at the Moscow games.¹⁹ From the perspective of the Zimbabwean government, the Moscow 1980 Olympic Games provided the perfect opportunity for the newly born Zimbabwean nation to strengthen fragile diplomatic relations and market themselves to the outside world.²⁰

Upon receiving the invitation just 35 days before the opening ceremony, the Zimbabwe Olympic Committee had to hastily assemble an Olympic team to represent it. Explaining on their rationale in accepting the Olympic invitation John Madzima, the head of the Zimbabwean Olympic delegation, said:

The main thing is for us to participate. Our National Olympic Committee had little time to prepare an Olympic team, nevertheless we have done our best. We represent our young independent state, and we are eager to gain as much experience as we can. The first page in the history of the Zimbabwean Olympic movement will be written here in the Soviet Union.²¹

The invitation for Zimbabwe to participate at the Moscow games also included invitations to both the men's and women's field hockey teams. The inclusion of the women's field hockey team invitation followed the decision of the International Olympic Committee in March 1980 to recognize women's field hockey as an Olympic sport. The initial women's field hockey Olympic tournament was badly affected by the western led boycott as five of the scheduled six teams including the United States of America had indicated their non-participation.²² By the time the IOC executive board met in May 1980, only the host nation the Soviet Union was definitely entered for the Olympic tournament. The IOC set the deadline on June 24, 1980 – less than a month before the tournament was to begin – for team registration. Eventually a total of six teams registered: the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, India, Zimbabwe, and Austria.²³ Zimbabwe was the last country to be invited for the field hockey tournament also due to the uncertainties surrounding its membership status with the International Hockey Federation. The decision to invite Zimbabwe for the Olympic hockey tournament only happened after the IOC had received confirmation from the International Hockey Federation regarding the membership status of the Zimbabwe Hockey Association in June 1980.²⁴ Although the invitation for Zimbabwe to participate in the Olympic tournament was for both the men's and women's teams, the government and the hockey association decided to send only the women's team due to resource constraints and lack of adequate time to prepare.

The delayed invitation of the Zimbabwean women's field hockey team to the Olympic tournament negatively impacted their preparation for the tournament. The situation was compounded by the challenges the sport was facing following its administrative separation from South Africa. When the Olympic invitation finally came in June 1980, the women's field hockey team was nowhere near ready to play, given that they only had six weeks to practice and had never before trained on artificial turf.²⁵ At this point women's hockey was facing a crisis following the 1978 decision by the South African Women's Hockey Association to administratively separate from Rhodesia due to pressure from the South African government to separate themselves from politically embattled Rhodesia.²⁶ From its inception women's hockey in Rhodesia was always part of South Africa, with Rhodesian players competing for the South African women's hockey team. The impact of this separation, according to the then president of the Rhodesian Women's Hockey Association (RWHA) Judith Dreyer, was 'devastating and disturbing'.²⁷ This was primarily because at this point Rhodesia did not have the administrative and financial capacity to run its own independent women's hockey league. With independence in 1980, the now administratively independent Rhodesian Women's Hockey Association was, like other white sports, renamed to the Zimbabwe Women's Hockey Association whilst retaining the same white Rhodesian leadership led by Judith Dreyer as president.²⁸ This continuity of Rhodesian white sports infrastructure in post-independence Zimbabwe may be understood as reflective of the broader nationalist regime's Lancaster House inspired reconciliation policy that aimed to retain white capital through allowing whites to retain control over exclusively white enclaves like white sports. Thus, an all-white team was assembled, composed of players who at one point had played in the South African tournaments. The team consisted of coach Anthea Stewart, captain Ann Grant, Sarah English, Susan Hagget, Patricia Buckle, Brenda

Philipps, Christine Prinsloo, Sonia Robertson, Helen Volk, Linda Watson, Liz Chase, Sandra Chick, Gillian Cowley and Patricia Davis.²⁹ The team itself was mostly comprised of amateur players like Ann Grant, a bookkeeper, and Christine Prinsloo, an insurance underwriter. The only exception was player-coach Anthea Stewart, an experienced player who had won representative honours with South Africa.³⁰

The inadequate preparation for the Olympic tournament and the unpleasant traveling experience to Moscow demonstrates the dire circumstances in which Zimbabwean women's field hockey was at that point and how unexpected their victory was. In preparation for the tournament the team played two hastily organized preparatory matches with local men's teams and then flew to Moscow ten days before the beginning of the games. The actual journey to Moscow was itself a difficult one. Instead of a scheduled airliner, the players travelled on a World War II Dakota freight aircraft that was used to transport meat from the Manyame Air Force Base in the capital Harare via the Zambian capital Lusaka where they connected to Moscow.³¹ The difficult circumstances surrounding the trip were mainly because both the Zimbabwean government and the women's hockey association had no financial resources towards the trip which had to be exclusively funded by the Soviet government, which at this point was overwhelmed financially. Part of the Zimbabwean hockey delegation included ZWHS president Liz Dreyer and Audrey Palmer the team chaperone as well as members of the football team that had been invited to the Olympic Games.³² Reflecting on this unconventional traveling experience the captain Amy Grant later recounted that 'Our luggage was plonked in front of us with a big rope and we set on benches on either side facing each other... our aspirations were just to go and show the world what we could do.'³³ She also said: 'We had never seen an artificial pitch and didn't have the right shoes to play on it because we had only played on sunbaked grass pitches in Zimbabwe, and the team had to rush out and buy appropriate shoes when they arrived in Moscow.'³⁴ Even with these uncomfortable circumstances, the Zimbabwean team was in cheerful spirits and at the opening ceremony, Zimbabwe paraded in bright blue uniforms behind a flag which had only been recognized in April when independence was formally confirmed, and it was probably the first time it had been seen by a wider audience.³⁵

The 1980 Olympic field hockey tournament itself was played on a round robin basis at the newly reconstructed Young Pioneer's stadium and the minor arena at Dynamo stadium in Moscow. The first match was against Poland, which Zimbabwe surprisingly won 4-0. Describing the experience one of the players Patricia Davies later explained that even though the Zimbabwean team was not used to playing on artificial turf, their possession-oriented style of play gave them an advantage over their opponents. The second match against Czechoslovakia ended in a 2-2 draw, followed by a famous 2-0 win over the much favoured hosts the Soviet Union. The next game was a 1-1 draw against India which, according to Stewart, was the most difficult match of the tournament. A 4-1 win over Austria in the final match resulted in the team topping the table and winning gold.³⁶

The Olympic boycott by the established women's field hockey playing western nations opened up a rare opportunity to the newly independent Zimbabwe to participate and unexpectedly win gold. This Olympic victory by the Zimbabwean women's

field hockey team was unexpected considering the difficult circumstances surrounding their invitation and travel to Moscow as well as crisis which had enveloped the sport following its separation from South Africa. Nevertheless, this victory is also attributable in part to the post-independence regime's racial policy that allowed whites to keep control of white sports like hockey which provided the much-needed administrative continuity. This aspect enabled the women's hockey association to assemble a team of white players with some experience of playing in South Africa in a short space of time.

After Olympic Victory

The racial optics surrounding the victory by an all-white team representing a newly independent country ruled by a Black majority government were very much apparent. In the euphoria of victory, the all-white women's hockey team demonstrated their awareness of the racial and political tensions surrounding their victory and ironically began shouting the ruling ZANU PF's political rallying cry *Pamberi ne Jongwe* (forward with the cockerel).³⁷ This cry was derived from a Shona protest song, sung by the nationalist ZANLA guerillas to denounce the then white Rhodesian regime during the Rhodesian bush war.³⁸ The cockerel was the election symbol of ZANU PF which itself was associated with African masculinity and political dominance. This action by the white hockey team can be understood as an attempt to use their victory as a platform to communicate their alignment to the ZANU PF nationalist discourse. This appreciation also extended to the small section of predominantly white fans who, following the scoring of the fourth goal in the last game against Austria which secured Zimbabwe's Olympic victory, started singing *Zulu warrior*, an old folk song also associated with African nationalism.³⁹ Earlier that year in April the Hockey Association of Zimbabwe had publicly rebuked 'a section of white fans' who had continually shouted 'Rhodesia' during a men's national field hockey team match against Zambia.⁴⁰ In aligning themselves with Mugabe's ruling party and African nationalism, the players and the white hockey fans in Moscow demonstrated behaviour that was consistent with that of other white public personalities. Uncertain of their future under the new ZANU regime, they desperately wanted to disassociate themselves with Rhodesian identity and align themselves with Zimbabwe and ZANU PF.⁴¹ The events that occurred in the aftermath of the unexpected victory by the Zimbabwean women's field hockey team thus demonstrates the intersection of sport and identity politics.

The reaction by politicians from the ruling ZANU PF party to this victory also demonstrates their interpretation of the Olympic victory as having immense political significance – a perspective that can be traced back to the broader Cold War era politicization of the Olympics where governments were heavily involved with the Olympics. Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's reaction to the Olympic victory was central to the state media's narrative on the Olympic victory. The two state owned dailies, the *Herald* and the *Chronicle*, both ran the story of the Olympic victory on their August 1, 1980 front pages, which are usually reserved for political news. The *Herald* headline read 'History Made Cables Mugabe' and the report that followed emphasized how Mugabe was the first to offer his congratulations to the women's team. The paper quoted his congratulatory telegram message in its entirety:

All Zimbabweans join me in sending you heartfelt congratulations on your magnificent achievement in winning our first gold at the Olympic games. In this decade for women, it is especially pleasing that you have led the way, you have made sporting history today we are proud of you daughters of Zimbabwe, this sensational news will spread to millions all over the world and is a sensational triumph for our country in our first year of independence and in our first entry to the Olympic games as Zimbabwe.⁴²

The *Chronicle* also quoted Mugabe's telegram message in full on its front page. On August 3, the two state weeklies the *Sunday Mail* and the *Sunday News* both contained a special souvenir supplement commemorating the women's hockey team victory which again quoted Mugabe's telegram in its entirety.⁴³ Mugabe's message situated the victory in two discourses that characterized the nationalist ZANU PF regime's post-independent political ideology. First was the postwar reconciliation policy announced soon after the 1980 general elections. The reconciliation policy itself had its origins in the Lancaster House agreement which clearly safeguarded white privilege. The Lancaster House agreement was a political settlement facilitated by Margaret Thatcher's British government that achieved the constitutional settlement of the Rhodesian independence problem and which paved the way for the first multi-racial elections in 1980.⁴⁴

By referring to the all-white hockey team as 'daughters of Zimbabwe', Mugabe was not only altering his pre-independence anti-white rhetoric but deliberately defining 'Zimbabwe' as being multi-racial. This narrative, apart from its Lancaster House roots, aligned with the economic interests of the ZANU PF government at that time who did not want to scare away the white population, who at this point controlled the economy.⁴⁵ The reconciliation policy was thus a key element of Mugabe's attempts at nation building in the aftermath of a brutal and racially polarizing war.⁴⁶ For Mugabe then the participation and victory by an all-white female hockey team was tied to his vision of the new nation at that point and provided an important platform to re-articulate his racial reconciliation rhetoric. This is however not to be superficially read as demonstrating Mugabe and the ZANU PF regime's holistic commitment to racial reconciliation as it was not backed up by institutional processes or inter-racial agreements. In practice it was more of a temporary 'stay of execution' prior to the confrontation that happened two decades later following the violent fast-track land-reform programme.⁴⁷

Mugabe's message also tied the victory to the United Nations decade for women, which was a period characterized by an international commitment to gender equality. In referring to the decade for women Mugabe was communicating to both the local and international audience that the victory of the women's hockey team was evidence of his government's commitment to international gender equality frameworks. Like race, gender was a thorny social issue in the aftermath of Zimbabwe's independence, following a war in which the nationalist pro-independence parties tapped into Marxist feminist rhetoric to mobilize women's support for the war. This strategy opened up many freedoms to women, but for political reasons the ZANU PF government was unprepared to completely overhaul the traditional patriarchal systems.⁴⁸ This expression of commitment to gender equality by Mugabe should therefore not be read superficially as a reflection of his government's total commitment to gender equality but as more of a conveniently choreographed narrative

seeking to position the ZANU PF government in a positive light with international organizations like the UN which championed gender equality. In reality the Mugabe government's approach to gender equality has been described by scholars as ambivalent and driven more by self-interest.⁴⁹ An analysis of Mugabe's speech extensively quoted by state media in the aftermath of the Olympic victory by the women's Olympic team thus demonstrates his awareness of the significance of this victory, which he politicized into a platform to communicate his political agenda to a broader audience. This phenomenon broadly defined Mugabe's reign as evidenced in his politicization of significant events like funerals to promote his preferred values and political ideology.⁵⁰

Beyond Mugabe's reaction to the victory, state media reports also contained descriptions of the reaction by other ZANU PF politicians which aligned with that of Mugabe. The August 1 *Herald* story also contained a description of the reaction in parliament upon receiving the news of Zimbabwe's Olympic victory:

Zimbabwean legislators paused for a moment last night to record their congratulations for the women's hockey team ...the ZANU PF chief whip Mr Frederick Shava said we should thank independence for such victories as they would not have been realised because of the Rhodesian regime's UDI.⁵¹

Shava's message demonstrates how the ruling ZANU regime claimed credit for facilitating the victory at the same time charging the previous regime with negatively undermining sport. This narrative demonstrates how ZANU politicians understood the potential of sport as a means to gain political capital through associating themselves with sport victories and disassociating its competitors from it.

When they returned to Salisbury from Moscow, the team was met in a special ceremony at the airport normally reserved for visiting heads of state. The government dignitaries greeting the team included Prime Minister Mugabe and the Minister of Sport, Teurai Ropa Nhongo later known as Joice Mujuru. Nhongo was the only woman in the first post-independence Zimbabwean cabinet, and she had previously been a guerrilla commander, with her husband being the Zimbabwean army commander. This background made her the most powerful and influential female politician in post-independence Zimbabwe, and she later became the first and only female vice president Zimbabwe has had. The *Herald* report on this event contains an extract of Nhongo's speech, in which she emphasized the implications of the victory on gender discourses. Nhongo said:

I am proud to be associated with your sporting endeavours and would like to take this opportunity to thank the women's hockey team who have shown that the women of this country have taken the initiative over our men folk during this period which we know as the decade of women.⁵²

Like Mugabe in his earlier message, Nhongo aligned the victory of the women's hockey team to the United Nation's decade for women. In addition, Nhongo underscored that the victory of the team testified that women were taking an initiative over men. Nhongo's speech in particular positioned the victory as evidence of the agency and capabilities of women over men, thus pushing back against colonial ideologies of domesticity that emphasized the submission of women and their confinement to

domestic spaces. Nhongo thus framed the women's hockey team's victory within the broader gender struggles in post-independence Zimbabwe that saw the enactment of significant pieces of legislation like the Legal Age of Majority Act and the Sex Disqualification Removal Act gave women equal access to social services and education, as well as full judicial authority which did not exist during the colonial period.

From the airport the team were invited to the Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's house where he again described the Olympic victory a fillip for the spirit of his multi-racial and gender equal nation. The gender equality narrative and its association with Olympic victory is also evident in newspaper articles, for instance an editorial in the *Herald* which praised the women's hockey team for 'showcasing the ability of the girl child', in addition the editorial used words like 'gallant' and 'heroine' to describe the winning team, words normally used to describe ZANU PF politicians.⁵³ The use of nationalist discourse to describe the female hockey players demonstrates how the victory was situated within the broader narrative of the liberation struggle, whereby ZANU and ZAPU nationalist guerillas waged a war against the militarily superior Rhodesian state which ultimately resulted in independence.⁵⁴ The *Sunday Mail* described the victory as 'an irresistible fairytale that showcased the bravery of Zimbabwean women', whilst the *Chronicle* hailed 'the courage and determination of the women's hockey team despite all the obstacles they faced'.⁵⁵ These celebrations of female heroism trace their roots to the discursive feminist Marxism used during the liberation war to mobilize women's support for the war by emphasizing their abilities.

The next question that dominated the coverage of the Olympic victory was how to preserve the memory of the victorious women's field hockey team. One Salisbury City Council member made a proposal to rename some streets in Salisbury (as the capital Harare was then known) after the names of the women from the victorious team. The *Herald* reported on the council's September debates on this proposal. One councillor said:

In as much as its important to honour the girls for their magnificent victory, the proposal of naming streets after them is carried away, for instance if it is decided to name the streets after women, what will happen to the street names when the women decide to get married? do we intend to change the street names each time they are married?⁵⁶

The councillor's speech reflected a gendered opinion that questioned the suitability of roads to be named after women, whose identities are fluid depending on their marital status. This narrative demonstrates the enduring influence of colonial ideologies of feminine domesticity in the post-colonial gender discourses. The council and the government, through the Ministry of Local Government, eventually decided against this proposal and opted instead to give the team a trophy with a plaque bearing their names being erected by the city council in their honour. The *Herald* story about this decision was headlined 'Medallists models of modesty', which was how the then Minister of Local Government and ZANU PF politburo member described the women's hockey team members.⁵⁷ He referred to them as models of feminine modesty because they had gratefully accepted the government position not to honour them through street naming. This proposal to name streets after the women's hockey team players had been discussed in a context when the ZANU regime was engaged in a process of doing away with colonial vestiture, including renaming streets in

major urban areas in Zimbabwe to honour fellow male black African anti-colonial icons like Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, and Mugabe himself. The rejection of the proposal to rename some streets in honour of the women reflected the limitations imposed by both gender and race upon the kind of honour to be given to these women.

The Olympic victory also increased the standing of Zimbabwean women's field hockey as Zimbabwe was invited for an elite tournament in the United States that featured stronger western hockey teams whose countries had boycotted the Moscow games. This invitation also gained the attention of the government, with the national director of sports and recreation in the Ministry of Sport writing a letter to the Zimbabwe Women's Hockey Association (ZWHA) president Judith Dreyer. The letter demanded that the issue of the racial composition of teams be addressed after the ZWHA had, similarly for the Moscow Olympics, assembled an all-white team. The *Herald* published an extract of the letter:

I refer to your proposed women's hockey team tour of the USA in September 1981, I am directed by the honourable comrade minister of youth, sports and recreation that tours of this nature must be made by teams reflecting the racial composition of our society in Zimbabwe. To this end it is a prerequisite for permission to be granted to travel outside of Zimbabwe for now.⁵⁸

The letter demonstrates how the ZANU PF government slowly moved out of its shell and became inclined towards discourses of deracialization. The ZANU PF regime felt threatened by the continued dominance of whites in sports like hockey and actively mandated the inclusion of non-whites in the hockey team. This can also be read as part of the deliberate attempt by the ZANU PF regime to indigenize public spaces like sport and the civil service. In response to this letter the ZWHA emphasized that their selection was not racially exclusive but was based on merit. Similar to women's hockey, other white dominated sports in Zimbabwe such as cricket and tennis experienced similar racial tensions which eventually came to a head in the 1990s when affirmative action groups lobbied for black administrators to run these sports.⁵⁹ Eventually the ZWHA and the government reached an agreement, with the government reluctantly allowing the all-white team to go ahead with the tour. The Zimbabwean team did not perform as expected, losing all of their matches against more illustrious opponents like West Germany who had not competed at the Moscow Olympic Games. Zimbabwe's fortunes were again derailed in 1983 when the International Olympic Committee denied Zimbabwe's request to be allowed to defend their Olympic gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles games on the basis of the country not being a full member of the International Hockey Federation.⁶⁰

The women's hockey victory at the Moscow Olympic Games was thus an unexpected watershed moment in Zimbabwe's sporting history. Its significance was amplified by the fact that it occurred at a time just after political transition from white minority rule to black majority rule and was thus intertwined with the prevailing political discourses of reconciliation and nation-building. The new ZANU PF government sought to prevent the mass exodus of the white minority by tolerating their control and dominance of social enclaves like field hockey. The unexpected success at the 1980 Olympics brought women's hockey considerable positive media publicity and political recognition which was not afforded to any other women's sports at this

time. The Olympic victory of the women's field hockey team catapulted women's field hockey in Zimbabwe from relative obscurity to the very heart of post-independent Zimbabwean gendered and racial political discourse. However, they were limited to this enhanced positionality of women's field hockey as the nationalist regime was not prepared to grant them the same honours bestowed to prominent black male nationalist politicians who had major roads named after them, demonstrating the limitations imposed by gender and race as well as priority given to political success over sporting success.

The Enduring Legacy of the 1980 Olympic Victory

Over the years the women's field hockey team's Olympic victory has continued to be celebrated mostly through state media publications. The dominant narrative has been to construct the victory as one of the achievements of the post-independence ZANU PF regime. The importance of the 1980 Olympic victory was amplified by the lack of Olympic success after 1980. Zimbabwe had to wait for another 24 years before winning another Olympic medal, when another white sportswoman, Kirsty Coventry, won gold at the 2004 Athens games. Although Coventry's victory occurred in a period of strained race relations in Zimbabwe in the aftermath of the fast-track land reform programme, when Mugabe made a number of anti-white remarks, Mugabe in his celebratory message described Coventry as 'a golden girl' and 'a daughter of Zimbabwe'.⁶¹ This description echoed his message following the 1980 field hockey Olympic victory and was an attempt by Mugabe to coopt these Olympic victories by white female sportspersons into his broader nationalistic agenda. The lack of significant international sporting success in post-independent Zimbabwe has contributed to the somewhat legendary status that has been bestowed to the Olympic winning women's field hockey team.

State newspapers continue to commemorate this famous victory with the team being celebrated as national heroes in numerous articles published in the 40 years since the team's victory. These articles have pushed a narrative associating the Olympic victory with independence and the ruling ZANU PF regime. For instance, an April 2022 article in the *Chronicle* was headlined 'Independence opened sports industry'. This article emphasized how the ZANU PF regime and independence opened up the sports industry and facilitated the subsequent sporting success that followed, citing the 1980 Olympic victory by the women's hockey team as an example. In April 2015 the *Sunday Mail* published an article titled '#1980SOFarSoGood: So, Zimbabwe, so gold! ... golden girl relives 1980 Moscow Olympics'.⁶² Part of the article included an interview with Sarah English, one of the members of the 1980 team. The article was part of a series of articles celebrating 35 years of independence and the ZANU PF government's achievements. The commemoration of independence and reference to 1980 has over the years been one of the strategies used by the ZANU PF regime to assert their political legitimacy and state media has played a crucial role in championing that idea. This strategy has been mostly visible following the emergence of strong political opposition parties like the Movement for Democratic Change and the Citizens Coalition for Change which have effectively threatened ZANU PF's political hegemony. The success of the women's hockey team has been saliently projected as

one of the achievements of the ZANU PF regime and a reason to continue supporting them. The 1980 victory also helped increase the standing of hockey as a sport from being a relatively obscure white minority sport to one which the government prioritized through funding the construction of two large multi-million dollar astro turf hockey stadiums. The Magamba Hockey Stadium in Harare and the Khumalo Hockey Stadium in Bulawayo were, at the time of their completion in 1995 regarded as the best in Africa.⁶³ The naming of these hockey stadiums also demonstrated an attempt to entrench the nationalist discourse within hockey. The Magamba Heroes' Stadium was named after the heroes of Zimbabwe's nationalist armed struggle, which resulted in the Lancaster house agreement that ushered in political independence. The Khumalo Stadium derived its name from the ruling Ndebele royal house, 'the Khumalos', from whom pre-colonial kings like Mzilikazi and Lobhengula hailed and who have been associated with anti-colonial struggles in official patriotic histories.⁶⁴ The naming of the stadiums can be understood as an attempt to engrave the ruling ZANU PF's nationalist narrative and preserve the memory on liberation discourses, both critical in sustaining the ruling ZANU PF's political legitimacy in the face of growing political opposition.

The Olympic victory of an all-white female field hockey team came at a critical period of political transition when Zimbabwe had just attained its political independence. This unexpected victory radically transformed women's field hockey in Zimbabwe from being a relatively obscure white sport which had been overshadowed by South Africa to one that attracted significant media coverage. This successful international sports team and the media coverage of the team at the time and since then reveal the intersection of sports and politics. Victory on the sporting field by national sports teams in contexts like Zimbabwe generates significant political currency and media publicity. The political authorities have sought to appropriate this political currency and publicity through associating themselves with these victories.

Notes

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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