

Man with a mission to help turn the sporting dreams of township children into reality

THE HOPELESS go deeper into the township, hire an AK47 assault rifle for £10, and contribute to the explosion of violent crime in Johannesburg. The hopeful come to listen to Conrad Hunte.

"Learn to dream" was his message to the boys clustered around him yesterday, on a hot, airless afternoon in the Elkah district of Soweto. "Look beyond your circumstances" he advised them.

There, in a dusty field ringed with strands of razor wire, boys in a collection of laceless shoes and hand-me-down T-shirts, were beginning to lay the foundations of a better South Africa.

Most of their fathers are unemployed, they lag far behind their white counterparts in academic terms, but their significance, in recognising the value of sport is beyond dispute.

It is a towering irony that the white community would not have had the exquisite agony of debating over the omission of Clive Rice and Jimmy Cook from South Africa's World Cup squad were it not for those boys with names like Peace Justice and Harmony.

Had the ill-conceived Gating tour succeeded in irretrievably politicising cricket in the townships, as it so nearly did two years ago, the sport in South Africa would have remained the world's pariah for a little longer.

The boys of Soweto and Alexandra, an equally-unkept and overcrowded black settlement on the northern fringe of Johannesburg, would have been the unseen victims of a nation's unprincipled rush for acceptance.

Peace and Justice Nkutha are twin brothers. Among the first products of the township's scheme, they have come under the tutelage of Hunte, who played 44 tests for the West Indies between 1957 and 1966.

A trim, but grandfatherly figure, with a habit of absent-mindedly sucking his glasses, Hunte has a visible affinity with his pupils. His Barbadian childhood taught him what it is to have nothing, how to fashion a ball from tightly-bound cloth and a bat from a lump of wood.

"I came from a very underprivileged background," he told the children. "I know what it feels like. I had no pitch, no ground, a home-made bat and ball."

The boys, whose eyes burned with respect, were too eager to impress. Like boys from Bridgetown to Brisbane they wanted to bowl too fast, to launch their under-developed frames at the batsman in a flawed flurry of arms and legs.

In such circumstances the women umpires, local teachers sheltering from the sun beneath the most bewildering selection of umbrellas this side of Euston's lost luggage office, required little more than rudimentary knowledge of the no-ball law.

Hunte ordered the boys to cut their approach run by half. One obeyed to the letter, pitched on perfect length, and bowled the batsman off the frayed, green carpet which covered the concrete pitch.

"What's your name?" the star asked. "Floyd," came the reply, his face too small for his smile. He thrust his shoulders back, strutted to his mark, and wedged his next delivery between the

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leg-and-middle metal stumps.

It was a small victory for Hunte's patient tuition, of the type which prompted him to offer his services to his friend Ali Bacher, managing director of South Africa's United Cricket Board.

Hunte has spent three of the past four months working with Bacher's township scheme. He lived, initially, in the townships to forge a closer spiritual bond with his pupils.

"I always thought cricket here had done enough to be allowed back," he explained. "But when the political situation changed I knew I had to offer to help."

"We are not just creating cricketers here. We are

concerned with the human and social development of the youngsters."

Hunte helped, yesterday, in the selection of the 18 representative school sides from Soweto, who are about to enter a multi-racial league. Jon Jon Howard, a teacher at King Edward's, the public school which produced Bacher, looked on.

Howard took his team to Elkah recently, to offer an insight into the background of some of the township boys, like Daniel Khumalo, 13, a fearsomely-fast, left-arm bowler offered a bursary through the cricketing scheme.

For white youngsters who live behind high metal gates on tree-lined suburban estates patrolled by armed security guards, it was like a day-trip to Pluto.

"I'll never forget the panic I felt when I saw one of my boys wandering away, across the ditch and down the road into the township, with his new black friend," Howard recalled.

"It turned out they were both thirsty. There was nothing to drink at the ground so the black boy offered to take him home for water. There, in a small way, was the future."

"Black offering white what little he has to offer. Sport cutting across differences. I tell you, it gave me a really warm feeling when I realised what had gone on."

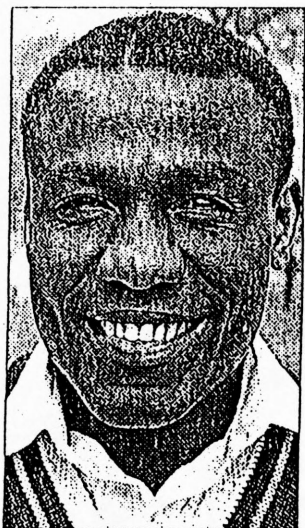
Papi Monate, chairman of the Soweto schools cricket association is, by necessity, a more pragmatic character. Only his fierce opposition to the Gating tour, and his political contacts, saved the scheme in the township.

"The Gating tour nearly killed us," he admitted. "It took a year, and a lot of careful talking, for things to be put back into place. Everything had to be reorganised."

Cricket remains a minority interest in the black community but Hunte draws parallels with the rise of West Indian cricket.

He reasoned: "Cricket in the West Indies was originally the province of the privileged white. When the blacks, led by Learie Constantine in the 1930s, began to realise it was a way out, the game took off. We had the three W's, Sobers and Kanhai. West Indians, have been secret heroes here for years and out of the ghetto will come greatness. He might be only 11 but there's a superstar here."

One could not help but look at the youngsters Hunte addressed, and wonder. "See the glass as half full, not half empty," he was saying. "Remember, think positive. I can — not I can't."



Conrad Hunte... in his Test heyday

Michael Calvin visits the cricket clinics held in Soweto by a former West Indies Test batsman

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