

# Can 2010 heal South Africa's racial divide?

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

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As the debate over racism rages throughout the nation and political parties seem fond of using this card as a sledgehammer to divide constituencies, it is worthwhile casting back our gaze to a previous host country that was equally divided along the racial fault-lines and emerged united from hosting the FIFA World Cup.

## Turning sports into politics

Prior to the 1998 FIFA World Cup, the host nation France was riddled by xenophobia and labelled “the most racially troubled country in Europe”. Even the French team, which was composed of many players from immigrant backgrounds, was subject to verbal attacks from right-wing politicians, most notably National Front politician Jean-Marie Le Pen who protested that the *Black, Blanc, Beur* (Black, White, North African) team that won the World Cup did not look sufficiently French.

## The unifying power of football

It has been said that football possesses a mystical power to unify diverse peoples, and the case of France in 1998 was no different. In a story as unlikely as it is uplifting, France won the World Cup on its home turf and the team's captain, Zinedine “Zizou” Zidane became a national hero. Zidane, an ethnic Algerian, became a household name and a role model for hundreds of thousands of French youngsters.

After the championship match, the streets of Paris resonated with cries of “*Black, Blanc, Beur*” (White, Black, North Africans), a poignant representation of the relationship between France and her immigrants. France's widely publicized diverse roster won the tournament and the players became irreproachable in the eyes of French public, regardless of their country of origin. [According to the head of the Parisian office of Time magazine](#), “The soccer team [did] more to promote racial tolerance in France, and pride and a sense of belonging amongst its immigrant population, than anything the government could have ever done.”

## “How could a game transform society?”

[Commented TIME Magazine](#): “What a turn-around from the earlier French coolness that caused Chirac to give the nation a pep talk about all the world's eyes being on them as hosts. The success of the French team eventually put paid to any ambivalence. Well before Sunday's playoff impromptu parties were being celebrated in streets all over the country.”

Opposition leader [Philippe Seguin mused](#): “When you see all these French, seemingly so different but in fact so similar, sharing the same enthusiasm, you wonder whether there isn't a cement, a principle, a solution to all our problems.”

It was a sentiment echoed by [Olivier Poivre d'Arvor](#), director of the Institut Francais: “While victory was won on the Stade de France pitch, what was at stake in this magnificent game of football had to be measured elsewhere ... France had above all exorcised its own demons: the spectre of racism, the headlong rush back towards intolerance, the catastrophic image of a country hemmed in by fear, hatred and introspection.”

“Like millions of my compatriots, I was taken by surprise by the extraordinary effect on public opinion that the competition produced. I can well remember journalists passionately telling me about their topic: the impact on France of the World Cup. This was a full year before joyful hostilities were declared on the pitch. At the time the idea had seemed curious, not to say bizarre: how could a game transform society? “

## "Ashamed about the image of a racist country"

By the time of the quarter-finals, something had crystallised in the French nation. Articles in the press marvelled about the multicoloured team, young women in the street in love declaring their Zidane, Karembeu, Desailly and other 'blacks et beurs' (Black and North African players).

[Concluded d'Arvor](#): "The semi-final set the seal on it: through its football team, France wanted to be reconciled with itself. Millions of us were in the streets, expectant and happy ... Living abroad for ten years, trying to give my host cultures an open and enlightened image of my country, always hanging on to old certainties ('the country of the Rights\* of Man', 'the Enlightenment', 'French culture is made up of borrowings from abroad'), I had felt ashamed. Ashamed at every national, regional and local election. Ashamed that this image of a racist country was being popularised beyond our frontiers. The night of 12 July, for the first time in a long while, I could breathe more easily. No, it's not true, that is not the France we love. Le Pen is just a very bad dream."

## "One of the most beautiful days of my life"

The French Minister of Culture at the time, Jack Lang, [captured the moment](#) perhaps best when interviewed about the "I went rapidly to the *Champs d'Elysee* to participate in the street. And when I saw the image of Zidane on the *Arc de Triomphe*, you can't imagine how for me it was something so strong ... for the people of my generation, *Arc de Triomphe* was the symbol of patriotic ceremony, and for the first time I saw the face of a man coming through his parents from Algeria. I don't find the words to express how I was happy, enthusiast - for me, it was one of the most beautiful days of my life."

Can 2010 achieve a similar sense of belonging of all living in the hosting nation, and will South Africa experience a revival of Madiba's Rainbow Nation?

## ABOUT DR NIKOLAUS EBERL

Dr Nikolaus Eberl is the author of *BrandOvation™: How Germany won the World Cup of Nation Branding* and *The Hero's Journey: Building a Nation of World Champions*. He headed the Net Promoter Scorecard research project on SA's destination branding success story during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, co-authored the World Cup Brand Ambassador Program 'Welcome 2010' and was chairperson of the inaugural 2010 FAN World Cup. Email [nikolaus@brandovation.com](mailto:nikolaus@brandovation.com) and follow [@nikolauseberl](https://twitter.com/nikolauseberl).  
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