

Eskimos don't play professional basketball

SPORTS Minister Fikile Mbalula last week gave Kenyans a taste of his unique leadership style when he announced at a breakfast briefing that South Africa would not be like Kenya and send athletes to “drown in the pool” at the Olympic Games.

The well-documented reaction from offended Kenyans aside, Mbalula isn't even correct. Kenya has never sent swimmers to the Games and, in terms of medals, Kenya is Africa's Olympic superpower. Kenya leads the medal race with 86 to South Africa's 76, but only started winning medals in 1964. Since 1992, Kenya has won 55 medals — all in athletics — compared to South Africa's 25.

What Mbalula may have been referring to was the case of “Eric the Eel”, or Eric Moussambani, an Equatorial Guinea swimmer who became a celebrity at the Sydney 2000 Games when he flailed through his 100m freestyle heat in a time more than twice that of the eventual winner.

Notwithstanding this probable case of mistaken identity, Mbalula is disingenuous to raise this comparison in the context of transformation in South African sport, because Moussambani actually illustrates an example of successful sporting development, something Mbalula's strategies have yet to achieve.

You see, Moussambani's story did not end in Sydney. Thanks to the International Olympic Committee's policy of allowing developing sporting nations to enter athletes despite not achieving stringent qualifying criteria, he was able to swim internationally. (Sydney was the first time he swam in a 50m pool, having previously trained in a river.)

Thus inspired, he improved his performances by almost a minute, giving him a viable, if outside chance, of achieving a genuine qual-

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ification time for future events.

He is, in many respects, a success story, which perfectly illustrates the core Olympic concept of its founder, Pierre de Coubertin.

The context to Mbalula's comments was transformation, a topic that always gathers momentum ahead of elections. Political currency aside, there is no question that transformation is important for

Kenya produces runners because it understands where its strengths lie

sporting performance too.

Why compete against the world with only 20% of your population, when you could expand to 100% and, potentially, find better athletes?

However, our transformation attempts have “drowned”, in part, due to a “zero sum” approach and, in part, because of misguided attempts to transform all sports equally.

The first problem is that we have set transformation up in such a way that the selection of one means the exclusion of another. Because we have focused artificial selection policies on the elite level, it has created a zero-sum model where transformation denies opportunities every time

it “creates” them.

The case of Moussambani and others, which, perhaps, inspired Mbalula's comment, actually shows how inclusion and development need not happen with exclusion — swimmers can be invited, invested in, developed, without affecting Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte and company.

The more serious problem holding back SA's transformation effort is a lack of information to guide intelligent strategy. Confused messages of targets and quotas abound, because nobody — not federations, not government — is able to answer the important questions about this.

The questions that need answering are not what percentage of national teams are black/non-white but, rather, how many players move through the system from ages 13 to 21 and where and why in the pathway is talent lost? These questions would probably reveal that we're trying too hard to force the same standards on different sports and failing to respect that, while we are all equal, we're also different.

Elite sport, being a great filter, chooses certain qualities, and thus groups, ahead of others, rendering forced transformation futile. For example, not many Eskimos play professional basketball.

Returning to Kenya, land of great runners, what it really demonstrates is the power of culture for specific sports. Culture is created because genetic factors allow it and then it is perfected by environment. Kenya produces runners, not swimmers, precisely because it understands where its strengths lie.

Could they find great swimmers? Perhaps a few, but the cost doesn't justify the likely return. We are no closer to finding out our strengths than we were 20 years ago.



'ERIC THE EEL': Eric Moussambani of Equatorial Guinea came last in a 100m heat at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney but it didn't end there. His times improved and his story is, in many respects, a success story. Picture: BILLY STICKLAND

Drought threat to World Cup

SÃO PAULO is facing “imminent water rationing” less than six weeks before it hosts the Brazil Soccer World Cup opening ceremony and game.

Rivers serving the biggest city in South America have been running dry for months after the lowest rainfall since 1930, leaving reservoirs parched. Their water level dropped below 11% this week.

Experts have warned that, if the situation does not improve, it will affect visitors due to start arriving in the city within a month for the start of the World Cup on June 12.

The authorities have denied they are rationing water, but residents complain that supplies are being cut at certain times of the day.

Mariana Lanna Pinheiro, who is about to give birth, said her taps were dry from 10pm every night at her home in Jardim Rizzo, in the west of the city.

Paulo Costa, director of the consultancy H2C, said: “If it continues like this, it will be a big joke during the World Cup.”

“It's extremely serious ... the government hasn't done its homework about what we need to do. Rationing is imminent.”

“The country with the biggest supply of water in the world has a big problem with water rationing. And one of the biggest metropolises in the world, São Paulo, doesn't have water for visitors for one of the biggest global events.”

About 8.45 million people in São Paulo and the surrounding area are supplied by the Cantareira system of rivers and dams, which contained only 247 million cubic metres of water between October and March, compared with 347 million cubic metres in the previous worst drought.

In response, Sabesp, the state water company, said it was intensifying its water conservation campaigns while offering a 30% discount to families that reduce their consumption.

The average water flow from the Cantareira system has dropped by 23%, from 32 cubic metres a second to 25 cubic metres a second. — © The Daily Telegraph