

THE SWARAJ CLUB

From backyard soccer to FPL champs

(Mohamed “Boeti” Eshak)

From backyard and social soccer in the streets of Sophiatown to champions of the South African Soccer Federation Professional League. That is the fairy tale story of the Swaraj Football Club, one of the oldest existing soccer clubs in Lenasia.

The Swaraj Football Club was formed by a bunch of young, dedicated men in 1949 in Toby Street, Sophiatown. Sophiatown was a mixed-race suburb, west of the Johannesburg CBD. It was surrounded by the white suburb of Westdene on the east, Melville Koppies in the north, the then predominantly Coloured and Malay Albertville (north west), the white Newlands on the west and the African Western Native Township (now Westbury) in the south.

The original team was formed in 1947 by members of the extended Singh family and neighbouring friends. It was called Naughty Boys Football Club and played friendly matches, mainly against teams from Newlands and Western Native Township (Western Rangers, Sophiatown Rovers, Mighty Greens, amongst others).



To play structured football, the club changed its name to Swaraj FC and affiliated to the Witwatersrand Indian Football Association’s second division, playing their matches at the famous Natalspuit (Indian) grounds, City and Suburban (now Droste Park).

Because of the Group Areas Act, Natalspuit grounds had two separated sections – one section for Coloureds and another one for Indians. The two grounds were used for soccer and cricket. The Indian section was also used by the non-racial South African Soccer League until it was forcibly closed by the apartheid government.

Swaraj progressed along the ranks to the most senior division. In Witwatersrand Indian Football Association, the club won many of the competitions and were always amongst the finishers. Among the better-known teams in the WIFA were Moonlighters, Vredons, Greens and Stellas.

Swaraj also affiliated another team in the second division.

When the Indians of Sophiatown were removed to Lenasia in 1959, Swaraj were forced to join the Western Districts Indian Football Association. In the WDIFA they finished tops, taking all the honours and by wide margins.

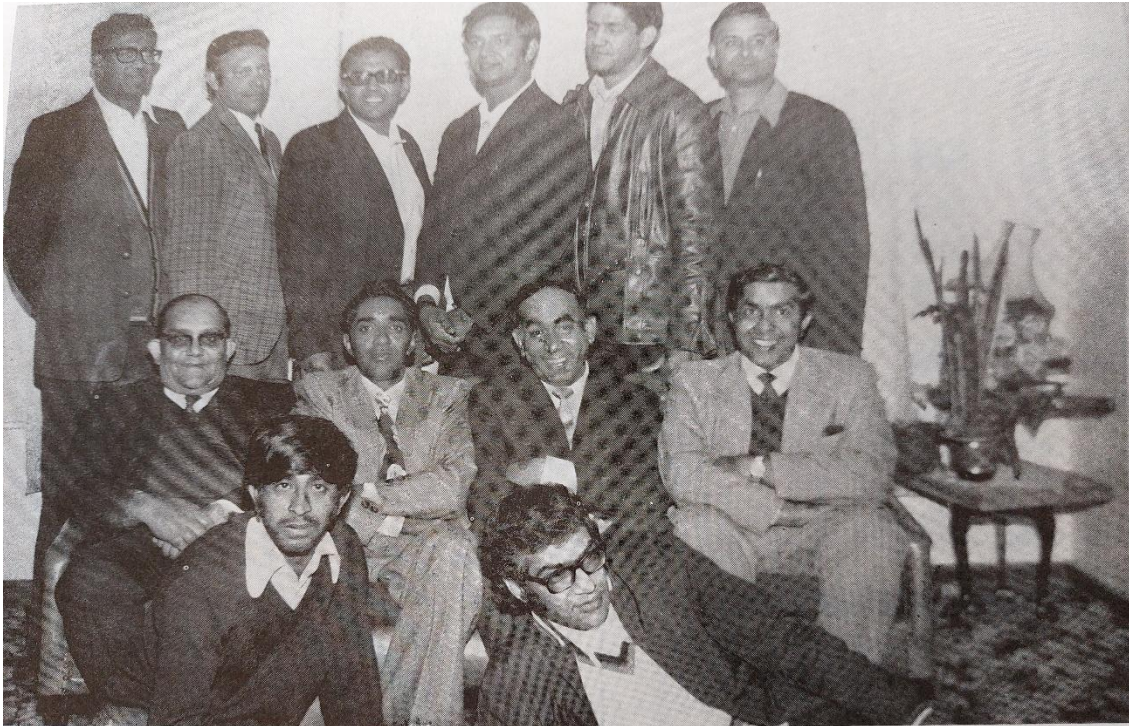


Because of the poor competition in the WDIFA, the club took the bold decision in 1962 to withdraw from the local body and began playing “freelance”.

When the club moved to playing “freelance”, they also overhauled their administration. Kokie Singh took over the chairmanship, Billa Singh was moved from secretary to manager of the first team, Boeti Eshak became secretary, Nanbhai Ram was treasurer, and the executive was strengthened with people like Soekoe Singh, ‘Eboo’ Nosarka, ‘Chommie’ Rampersadh, Sewbhai Singh, ‘Bhai’ Nosarka, Harry Lalaram, Aziz Patel, Mohamed Ravat, ‘Bubbles’ Rampersadh, Jackie Mayes and Rami Naidoo.

During their “freelance” stint, Swaraj played some of the top clubs from the African townships in Transvaal, including teams like Pimville United Brothers, Meadowlands Darkies, Witbank Black Aces, Pretoria Bantu Callies, and other clubs from Lichtenburg, Kwa-Thema, Katlehong, Tokoza, Vosloorus, Daveyton, Mohlakeng, Evaton and Sharpeville.

They also played against some of the top “Coloured” and “Indian” teams, like Burnley, Blackpool, Arsenal, Sundowns, Delfos (Pretoria), Rustenburg, Klerksdorp Delfos and others.



Standing Left to Right: S. Rampersadh, K. Songh, H. Singh, A. Patel, J. Mayes, H. Lallaram
Sitting Left to Right: Uncle, K. Lalla, E. Nosarka, Seedat.
Front Row Left to Right: R. Naidoo, B. Eshak.

It was during their “freelance” years that the Swaraj team also went non-racial as they recruited Coloured and African players to their squad, like Lucas Oranje from Noordgesig, Dan Twala and Victor Kowa.

They travelled to “away” matches in an open 5-ton truck, owned by Suresh Singh, who was contracted to deliver the Sunday Times nationally.

The Swaraj Club was the sponsors of the annual Lenasia Soccer Tournament, inaugurated 1965. It was the first Tournament in Transvaal, if not the Republic, to be staged on a Saturday and Sunday. It attracted top professional and amateur clubs from Durban, Bloemfontein and Transvaal.

Swaraj was once joint-holders and seven times beaten finalists in the Lenasia Soccer Tournament. This Tournament had many memorable occasions. The Swaraj Club was growing from strength to strength and was always invited to participate in tournaments. In 1962 they annexed the Piet Retief tournament, defeating Witbank Black Aces in the final which was played in semi-darkness.

In 1963 Swaraj contested the West Rand Soccer Tournament finals, losing to Young Dynamos by the odd goal in 3. In that tournament, Nyna Moodley was judged the “Best Player”. The 1964 Swaraj versus Grupo Desportivo de Cabral (from Mozambique) was a fitting finale to the last West Rand Soccer Tournament. It was was one of the best games watched by soccer fans, where Swaraj won by the odd goal and Virgil Padiatchi was voted the “Best Player”. Even today people reminisce about that match.

In 1967 the Swaraj won the Atlantis Dynamic Soccer Festival, in Benoni. Here too, one of their players, Links Padayachy, won the “Best Player” award. While playing “free-lance” Swaraj used the Lenasia Indian High School Grounds as their “home” ground. In August 1966 they were reported for playing non-racial soccer and were under the constant surveillance of the security police.



This ban was defied and the club continued to play non-racial soccer at the high school ground for two more years. Eventually the ground was taken away and Swaraj developed the Nirvana Grounds, adjacent to the Nirvana Circle.

But to retain that venue, the club had to belong to a “recognised” unit and in 1970 it affiliated to the predominantly “Coloured” Transvaal Professional Soccer League.

In 1973 Swaraj sought and was granted affiliation to the first division of the South African Soccer Federation Professional League, despite fierce opposition from some clubs. Some of the most stringing performances of the Swaraj Club were a 3-2 victory over the celebrated Orlando Pirates at the Lenasia Stadium in 1972, the 3-1 win against Moroka Swallows Big XV at the Nirvana Grounds in 1973 and defeats by Kaiser Chiefs and Orlando Pirates in the same year.

Ever since their “freelance” days, Swaraj set a tone of non-racialism by fielding a team comprising of players from various racial backgrounds and also playing against various racial teams. Their squad included players like Lucas Oranje from Noordgesig, Parker Essop and Victor Kowa.

A year after their FPL affiliation saw Swaraj recruit top players such as Buick Mkwati, Smiley Moosa, Dan Twala and Pro Ariel combining well with the “local boys”. The derbies against Bluebells, Dynamos and Sundowns brought about the best from their players.



In 1974 Swaraj finished fifth, in 1975 they ended in joint fourth, and in 1976 they occupied 3rd spot only to be piped by goal average for second spot. The club’s captain, Virgil Padayatchi, was voted the FPL’s 1975 “Player of the Year”.

The 1977 season started off badly but the admin staff brought in coach Alex Forbes and players Like Jimmy Joubert, Cheesa Manna, Shakes Mashaba and the club’s fortunes changed for the better. They eventually broke the domination of the Cape and Natal clubs by annexing FPL league title, with a game in hand. Their striker, Jimmy Joubert, was the league’s leading goalscorer.

While Swaraj paid some of the “outside” players they brought in, they maintained the core of local players who played their hearts out for the badge, without any remuneration.

In 1978 Swaraj found themselves in somewhat financial difficulties if they had to retain most of their players and the management decided to sell its first division status. This also led to other clubs cutting back on expenses and the downward spiral of non-racial professional football began.

Despite all eyes being on the professional side, Swaraj did not neglect local footballers. They fielded teams in all divisions of the Lenasia Football Association, from the under 6 group to the senior division. Each of the junior teams within the Swaraj fold had their own management committees.

There was no Swaraj team in the FPL between 1978 and 1982 but in 1983 Swaraj United sought and were granted membership of the only truly non-racial national soccer body. While Swaraj United was mentored by the “old” officials, this team was ably managed by the late Vina Beharie, the late Samad Bhoola, Taher Banoo, Vinod Kallicharan, Dougie Pillay and the late Shaikh Noorbhai.



Swaraj United followed in the senior team's footsteps and annexed the FPL league title in 1985, with their Derek Eastwood taking the honours as the FPL's leading goalscorer.