



SEPTEMBER 1983

The noblest role a small journal has is to air to great stories that break rules. **Terry Baron** was an established sportswriter in the mid 1980s, but in the 1980s sport was sport and you weren't paid to fool around with – aargh! – politics and philosophising and stuff. Terry's assorted awards for his (unpaid) sports-plus writing in Frontline stimulated revision. Whereupon he vanished. Went who knows where?

Raised the journalistic landscape a notch, and disappeared from it. Didn't seem right. People still ask.

Sol's Dorp

*Revere it or despise it, Sun City has taken on astonishing dimensions in South Africa's life. More than "Las Vegas in the bush", etc., it's also the living embodiment of how "we" (conveniently forgetting that BophuthaTswana isn't meant to be "ours" at all) are hitting back at the international boycott movement. **Terry Baron** is surely not alone in finding it difficult to come to terms with the conflicting social environments bunged together in Sol's fruit-machine metropolis*

You have to hand it to Sol Kerzner. Rod Stewart might not be the Rolling Stones but he is a very long way from, say, Jim Reeves. Dolly Parton is all right, all right. Frank Sinatra, Lisa Minelli, Linda Rondstadt, George Benson, Mike Weaver, Jimmy Connors, Ivan Lendl ... these are all main *manne*, and how.

Lendl is from Czechoslovakia where the system is supposed to be that you spread it around a little. For coming second to Jimmy Connors at Sun City he won 300 000 United States dollars. Those are the best kind of dollars and Ivan was nothing if not cool when we asked him what he planned to do with the money: "Put it all on zero at the roulette – 35 to one is good odds, you know."

Some communist.

Had Ivan been serious Sol would have sat at his elbow: "*Go on, do it ... bet*

the lot." In that casino a lot of people could save themselves strain on the heart by writing out a cheque and putting it in the post directly to Sol.

Sol is some capitalist: that was some deal – Communist Czechoslovakia doesn't allow its tennis players to play in South Africa. We being a bulwark and all that, don't allow them in.

Sol saw a way round that one: Lendl kept his feet clean by refusing to come off the tarmac at Jan Smuts Airport. He connected straight to the independent whatever-you-want-to-call-it of BophuthaTswana – and probably got a loose-leaf visa into the bargain.

"Where have been, comrade?"

"Sun City, gentlemen. It is a new town in the desert of BophuthaTswana. There is the usual Western decadence but nothing special to report."

The story goes that Sol took a helicopter ride over all that Groot Marico country, the dry and dusty thornveld that some farmers like to call The Trust because, *"Paul Kruger entrusted it to us especially in the koedoe season."* He was hovering above where Sun City is now when he growled in that accent which is like a cross between the Bronx and Bez Valley:

"I wannit here."

He got it there.

Then he wanted a lake. He hired an engineer to build him one and, in due course, the engineer came back to him, all chuffed and wagging his tail because the project had been finished on time.

Sol went out to take a look: it was all right as lakes go, something of a miracle in that land of thorn and scrub, but Sol wasn't satisfied.

"I wannit blue," he snapped.

Today – it's blue. I don't know how they got it that way but it brings to mind images of Tswana women, thousands of Tswana women, laughing and chattering . . . *happy* in their simple task, their hearts and minds safely won. They are all wending their way down to Sol's lake with buckets of washing blue balanced on their heads. After emptying the blue into the lake they all go back to the casino for croupier classes.

For Sol that would be no big deal, believe me.

Some of his arrangements might have gone awry in Atlantic City, the recent happenings at South African Breweries are open to all kinds of interpretations.

It will take time for the real news of those deals to filter down from the rarefied atmosphere of those boardrooms.

But, in the long run, I'd back him against the smartest business boykies you can find: sharp lawyers from New York, Greek tycoons with tankers, Army quartermasters, chicken-selling Armenians from the Persian Gulf, Kimberley Jims with a sharp eye for the klippies . . . bring 'em all and I'll give you two to one on Sol.

I am biased, I suppose. I have stayed several times at various of Sol's establishments. At the Joburg Landdrost Hotel, with the 1980 Lions, a pair of jeans got lost, the trail stopping cold at Maurice Colclough who was a large and savage lock forward. Sol doesn't know it but the Landdrost bought me a new pair. I wore them to the Weaver fight at Sun City and when I tried to go to Raffles that night the doorman wouldn't let me in.

I couldn't get mad because no-one was paying. Even Sol didn't have the heart to bill our firms in those early days when things at Sun City were a little, uh . . . primitive. The fight was held in a tent and there was a lot dust around what is now the Superbowl. There was only one block of cabanas and the day we got there it stood in nothing but the dry and desert dust.

We went for lunch and that was when they must have unrolled the instant lawn. When we finished eating there was no dust anymore, just banks of thick kikuyu grass and men in blue overalls standing around watering it.

That changed the scenery so much, some of us got lost looking for our rooms.

It got so that we got lost quite often. The cabanas were still under construction and we lived without water in our rooms. We drank water very little but sometimes we had to race each other across the lawn to the toilets near the section where the Space Invaders used to be. After a skinful of beer at Don Manuel's midnight Press conferences the races became quite tense and a lot of us switched to whiskey to ease the pressure a little.

Sharing rooms were people who liked to go to bed straight after dinner with people who preferred to come in singing at four o'clock in the morning or so. It was the kind of situation where sensible people brought sleeping bags.

Today, sporting types have it soft at Sun City: there is water in the showers, a radio where you can listen to Radio Bop . . . *The Station With A Mind Of Its Own*. They mix English up with Tswana on that station: they play good music – and they are invaluable for those who feel the need to keep themselves up on the doing of President Lucas Mangope.

There are television sets with four channels. The fourth is an in-house number which features Richard Haines doing his rounds of the casino. It's a long way from Amadeus but Richard plays the role well in his natty blue blazer: *"You want to give your money to Sol on the fruit machines, the blackjack tables, roulette, craps or punto banco . . . here's South Africa's top actor to show you how to do it."*

There are bars all around the Superbowl now . . . toilets, steakhouses, rock 'n roll time machines, bingo halls, hamburger joints, punk dancers, soft-pom movies. Cleaners, waiters, ushers, bingo callers and their pretty assistants, short order cooks, lighting technicians, sound technicians, stage managers, projectionists.

It's a whole lot better life than washing blue in the river but it's still a frontier town. There are hopefuls sitting in the bars of Amsterdam right now . . . waitresses who want to be croupiers, croupiers who want a larger slice of the action. *"Let me tell you about this place, man. It's in Africa and it's wild."*

It is not only the Tswana who come to seek their fortunes there.

Darkest Africa sits strangely with the other ambiances which can ambush you late at night. After watching naked ladies simulate a Roman orgy it gets difficult not to ask room service for a bowl of grapes, carefully peeled.

In among all those mirrors at Raffles – Berlin must have been like this in those days before Hitler finally went over the top.

"War? What threat of war ... ?"

"Waiter! Another magnum of Mumms."

"More toast for the caviar."

But too many buses come in from Zeerust to allow for such sophistication. They pour in, in their Sunday best. They all want to be 007 but there is only one woman in the casino who could get a part in a James Bond movie. She has lean brown arms and she twists big chips nervously while looking over her shoulder as though she was waiting for Al Capone or a Soweto tycoon by the name of Lucky. She is a woman all right but she gets swamped by the chorus behind her, every cliché that there is in Johannesburg come true.

So ... hello

Howzit!

So tell me ...

... you *STILL* in the beauty business?

Ag, shame.

Never mind.

Kugels should get the kind of attention Sol pays to Anneline. While we were flying to watch Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall, with a pilot who was sweating the way frontier pilots sometimes do when there is a lot of luggage – Sol was building a ski-run. They used some kind of plastic and there was a steep, green, scar running down the side of the nearest available mountain.

It was a dumb idea, on the hard red earth of Mother Africa, but there was a nice touch of flamboyance about it.

“Here,” Sol might have said to Anneline, “you look great in ski-paints, doll. Have a ski-run.”

Eat your heart out, every kugel in Killarney.

Anneline is from Witbank. When Sol met her she was only Miss South Africa but now she’s a regular in the society pages:

Anneline Kriel-Kerzner.

Jo’burg is a mining town. It needs an aristocracy.

You still have to go to Switzerland, Austria, or New Zealand if you want to ski. Mother Africa prevailed after a short summer season at Sun City and they ripped the green stripe off the mountain: leaving behind bare earth that looks like a cross between a stripmine and that site for the world’s greatest foofy slide.

The ski-run turned out to be a misjudgement but you couldn’t blame Sol for the way he flopped with the the “*Chairman and the Champions*”. Frank Sinatra was signed and he *wanted* to come: more than anything else, he wanted to be a boxing commentator.

It was an idea which came to Sol over dinner in New York with Bob Arum.

“A marriage between boxing and showbiz,” enthused Uncle Bob when they announced it in Johannesburg. “With this one, we’ll win all the awards.”

He spoke solidly for half an hour, a command performance that would have awed Dale Carnegie. When he’d finished he shook his head as if surprised at his own stamina.

“Well, you’ve just seen a boxing promoter come out of the closet,” he said, laughing and punching Sol in the ribs the way people do when dreams are

coming true and it's good times all the way.

Then Boom Boom Mancini went and broke his collarbone and that sent up in smoke a deal which was said to number around six million dollars.

Sol just shrugged, *Well, that's showbiz*, I suppose. He haggled a little with Marvin Hagler but Marvellous Marve wanted too much money for a middleweight. Sol went fishing for tennis players, a million US dollars the bait for a weekend's work.

It hooked Jimmy Connors all right, for reasons which were not altogether money. Connors had been having trouble with his wife, Patti, a former Playmate and beautiful enough to make trouble inevitable. When it became known that he was bringing her to Sun City, the mob from the media descended to fill the cabanas like Parkinson's Law.

"There are *no* cabanas left," Sam Feldman was the sports publicist and, after a time, there came a rising edge to his voice: "What do you want: I should knit you one?"

Firemen flew in for the marriage story and I exchanged greetings with one from *News of the World* outside the cabanas one hard Sunday morning.

"I lost all my money," he said. "I haven't been to bed yet, and I've got gout."

Jimmy Connors didn't have that kind of weekend. He picked up 400 000 US dollars, less whatever tax gets paid in BophuthaTswana and the R1 400 he dropped in the casino.

He had a good time.

"I like it here," explained Jimbo, exchanging hot glances with Patti so the world would know something was happening between them. "It's quiet."

Quiet! Try telling that to people who have travelled with the chartered bus from Zeerust.

But then your average *ou* from Zeerust is all agog before he even gets there. On a package deal, to pull a few handles and drink a few beers – he also likes to check out the Sodom and Gomorrah going on in the Extravaganza. There are live horses on stage there, waterfalls, Roman orgies, human sacrifice, flying saucers.

Quiet as a mouse.

For Jimmy Connors, it probably was: compared with New York ... Las Vegas ... Sun City is just another quaint cottage in the country.

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

There is another difference: Jimmy Connors got paid to come to Sun City. He didn't climb out of the bus to join the flock of pigeons around the one-armed bandits.

Two watermelons and a strawberry.

A couple of lemons.

A good rule at Sun City is to have dinner early, while you've still got the money to pay for it.

It's hard to keep your mind on ornithology when you're watching Hot Gossip dancers sunning themselves around the pool but out on the lawns, around the Gary Player Golf Course, there are plenty of birds to be watched.

Birds know a thing or two about where they would like their bread buttered. There is a colony of seagulls in Welkom which has decided that the easy pickings of sandwiches on school playgrounds outweigh the difficulties of being a gull so many hundreds of miles away from the sea.

At Sun City there are lilac-breasted rollers.

Coracias caudata, according to Roberts. "Might easily be confused with the Racquet-tailed Rollers . . . but has *straight* outer tail-feathers . . ."

Lilac-breasted rollers, tame and prosperous as an Eloff Street pigeon.

Low rollers, come by bus to deliver their money personally. SoI, on the other hand, is your *jennyouine* Jo'burg high roller.

"You wanna ski-run, doII?"

"You wanna town . . .?"

Like it or not, Sun City is on all the new maps.

Me? I like it. I'm a Jo'burg boy I don't believe it's right to knock a new town.