

## *Chapter 5*

### *Race and Soccer*

It's impossible to write a book on African-Americans and soccer without candidly discussing the topic of race and soccer. It is an intensely personal subject and exposes the souls of individuals and societies.

Race is the shadowy monster sitting in the corner or lying buried deep in our minds. Even discussing race sets many people on edge because it puts them on the defensive. It can evoke feelings of fear, resentment, guilt and bitterness.

Recent racial incidents in European soccer stadiums brought shockingly graphic images of overt racism into American homes. Watching fans with Nazi flags doing Hitler salutes and hurling racist chants toward black players in soccer stadiums is terrifying because it's a painful reminder of our own history.

Officially, racism and discrimination in America are a distant memory. Black people have access to the highest levels of government and industry. The sky is the limit and skin color means nothing to anyone.

The real life scoop on racism and discrimination isn't as clear. Values and beliefs about race pass down through generations and new economic pressures resurrect old prejudices. People like to pretend racism is dead in America. We treat racism like a family member with a drinking or gambling problem. If we don't talk about it

and ignore it, we might not have to deal with it. The colored water fountains disappeared long ago but still people remain fearful or resentful of people who don't look like themselves. Pretending it doesn't exist is comforting.

The distress generated by people who fire off angry letters or call talk shows to rant demanding to know why blacks can't let it go when the subject of racism rises is real. The idea that black people still form "black" organizations to promote black opportunities disturbs many whites who label it "reverse discrimination."

The dramatic changes in public policy and attitudes in the United States since the 1964 Civil Rights Act are nothing short of remarkable. That formally ended discrimination in the United States and the ensuing racial progress makes it hard to remember the hows and whys of bigotry.

The causes of prejudice run deeper than the instincts of a lap dog that reverts to its wolf ancestry, snarling, fangs bared when threatened. The idea that people of European descent are superior to people of color is almost as old as recorded history. The relatively new concept of equality without regard to color or national origin still has a long way to go to receive universal acceptance.

It doesn't even require reading websites by individuals and groups identifying themselves as white supremacists to understand there are still significant segments of the American population that do not embrace sharing space with people of color.