

Ottawa's attempt to beat apartheid just a foolish game H-5

The Canadian government would have us believe it is going to crush South Africa's system of apartheid with a tennis racket. Don't believe it.

The fact is that Ottawa has left a gaping hole in its sports policy regarding South Africa that allows Tennis Canada and other sport bodies to sneak through and continue as they always have in international competition.

Tennis

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In a three-pronged approach apparently intended to attack apartheid through sports, the Canadian government stated this year that:

South African athletes are not welcome in Canada to compete in any sport.

The government expects Canadian athletes not to compete on South African soil. Those who do risk losing government financial assistance and being declared ineligible to represent a Canadian team at events such as the Olympic Games.

Canadian teams and individuals are expected to decline participation and withdraw from or formally protest South African participation to event organizers of competitions in a third country if South Africans are involved.

Point No. 3 is the contentious issue, and the loophole is the formal protest.

According to the government, Canadians are expected to decline invitations, withdraw from or formally protest South African participation in an event in a third country, such as Wimbledon in England.

This point affects tennis more than any other amateur sport because Canadian professionals such as Andrew Szajder and Helen Kelesi, who earn their living through tennis, are involved and can't afford to withdraw or decline from lucrative events. They must play under protest but — and this is the key point — they do play.

Tennis Canada is federally funded and must follow the policy or risk losing its yearly money from Ottawa. The association has taken the onus off individual Canadian players and faithfully notifies tournament organizers on their behalf to object officially to South African presence.

Organizers of NCAA events in the United States also will receive faxes from Canada if a Canadian on a U.S. scholarship winds up in a draw with South Africans.

Still a member

Tennis Canada, which fully supports the government's actions against South Africa and has lobbied foreign tennis associations to follow suit, defended its "formal protest" campaign in a pamphlet handed out at the national championships two weeks ago like this:

"We will discourage our players from competing with, or against, individual South African players in third countries. However, we recognize that from time to time these contacts will inevitably occur, particularly in those countries where government policy regarding the entry of South Africans is extremely liberal or non-existent. No action will be taken against Canadian players in these circumstances."

Without the formal protest option, Canadian pros would be denied the right to earn a living as they would have to withdraw from virtually every major event on the men's and women's pro tours and limit their competition schedules to the three countries that don't issue visas for South African athletes: Canada, Japan and Sweden.

Whether the Canadian protests will have an effect remains to be seen. But the International Olympic Committee may apply greater pressure to remove South Africans from tennis until Pretoria dismantles its racist regime.

Tennis is involved with the Olympics (it was a demonstration sport in Seoul last summer) and officials hope it will be voted in by the IOC as a full-status medal sport for the 1992 Games. But South Africa is still a member of the International Tennis Federation, which will likely expel the apartheid nation in a September meeting if the federation wants the IOC to approve tennis. The IOC doesn't compromise with any other member sport regarding South Africa and it won't make an exception for tennis.

In the meantime, Canadians will not see a South African in the upcoming men's Player's International in Montreal or in the women's Player's Challenge in Toronto.

But that won't stop anyone from walking into a Canadian jewelry store to buy the biggest South African diamond they can afford.

Apparently Canadians can still trade with South Africans, they just can't play tennis with them.