

In a rural South African school,
the post-apartheid nation begins.

Black and White Together At Warmbaths Primary

By Mark Gevisser

IT'S A SEARING, HUMID FEBRUARY MORNING ON THE PLAYING FIELDS of Warmbaths Primary School, in the conservative Afrikaner heartland. A wire fence separates the neatly mown fields from the encroaching acacia-bush veld beyond. The fields are festooned with bunting, and temporary bleachers have been erected down one side. Scratchy sakkie-sakkie (Afrikaner folk music) warbles from the P.A. system. Schoolchildren sit on the bleachers and shout out war cries as their teams compete in various track and field events, supervised by teachers dressed in white. Behind the stands, P.T.A. moms sell doughnuts and hot dogs. The town's leading businessmen are on hand to present trophies. Events like this have been mainstays of country life in South Africa for decades.

Today, though, there is a striking difference: there are almost no whites in the mass of activity on the field. An elementary school that used to be all white, Warmbaths Primary has just been desegregated. For the past two years it has had a smattering of black children, but this year more than one-quarter of its 800 students are black. And today, on the sports field, the school finds itself pitted not against other white schools, as in the past, but against five black schools from Bela-Bela, the black township across the railway line from the white town of Warmbaths.

Warmbaths Primary is in the lead, and things have reached a fever pitch in its stands. Unlike the students from the black schools, who sway through rhythmic, melodic song routines, the home-team boosters exhibit an almost hysterical aggression. "Go, Warries, go!" the children scream, stamping their feet and pointing fingers at the opposition stands. The home-team spectators are fortunate to have a covered stand; next to them, on temporary bleachers, sit the kids from the most ragged, most marginal, most disorganized of the township schools, Hleketani. It is the only school that doesn't have running gear — the kids run in spandex leggings, undershirts, anything.

Between the covered stand and the open bleachers is a water tap that becomes the contact zone between the two sets of children. A white policeman and his friend place themselves strategically at the tap, as if protecting civilization. Slowly, the Hleketani kids migrate to the periphery of the

Warries' stand, looking on with bemusement and not a little envy at the collective hysteria of their hosts. They whisper, giggle and point at the black children in the stands. For their part, the black Warmbaths students identify entirely with their school. The more Hleketani kids come to look, the louder they shout.

Then something snaps. A few of the older Hleketani boys begin a toyi-toyi, the rhythmic dance — mimicking soldiers marching and lobbing hand grenades — that became a symbol of black resistance in the 1980's. More Hleketani kids join in, and they start to sing a liberation anthem, "Shaya ma-Bono," or "Kill the Boers!" The policeman puts his hand on his holster, but finally the heat wins out; the singing subsides, the pupils disperse.

In white Warmbaths, 98 percent of the students graduate from high school; in Bela-Bela, only 11 percent do. In apartheid's segregated schools, the state spent five times more on each white student than it did on a black one. The "Bantu education" system was designed to keep blacks undereducated and thus servile. This, overlaid with the "Liberation Now, Education Later!" ethos that characterized black resistance, means that education in black areas remains in serious crisis three years after South Africa's transition to democracy, despite the fact that this year, for the first time, all public schools are being administered by the same authority.

Little wonder, then, that thousands of black children are flocking to the formerly white schools from which they were previously barred. These schools had been able to keep black kids out by setting high entrance fees or by refusing to teach in any language other than Afrikaans. But South Africa's new Constitution entitles all students to go to the

school of their choice; if a significant number of pupils ask to be taught in English, the school is constitutionally obliged to accommodate them.

In Johannesburg, only two hours' drive south from Warmbaths, the white suburban schools have been comfortably integrated for years now. But Warmbaths lies in the Waterberg region, which is this country's Deep South. Here, claiming their constitutional rights to ethnic "self-determination," Afrikaners have resisted, sometimes violently; the integration of schools has been pockmarked with instances of violence and white redivisism reminiscent of Mississippi and Alabama in the 1960's.

Afrikaner nationalists see their schools as private places where their civilization is to be jealously maintained. Bringing in black people, or other religions, or even the English language thus becomes a threat not just to "standards" (a code word for privilege) but also to Afrikaner identity itself. To compound this anxiety, most of the black students at Warmbaths are middle-class kids who board at the school. This not only makes the dorm overwhelmingly black but also brings the town's whites into intimate contact, for the first time in their lives, with blacks who are not their servants.

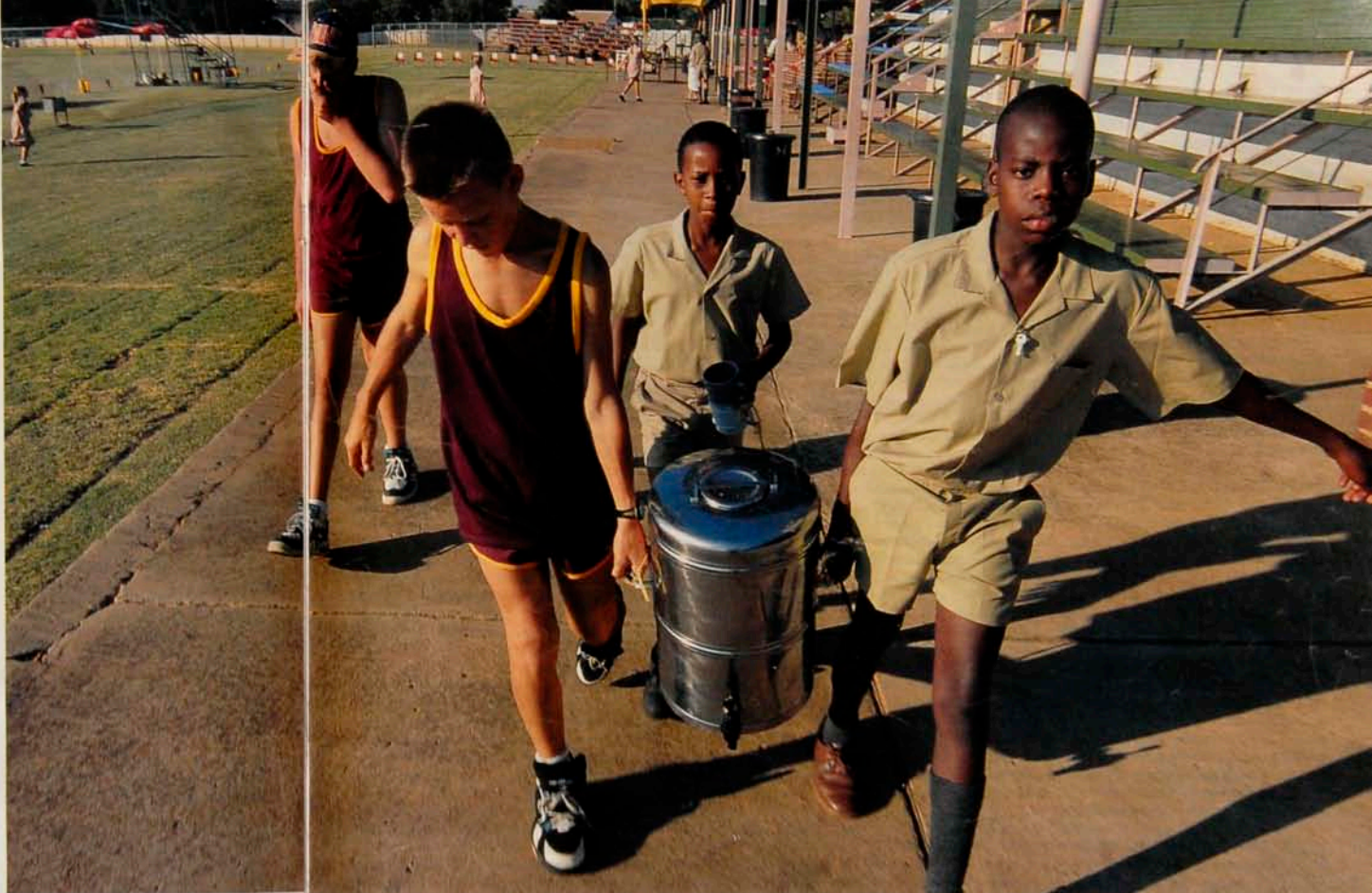
And so, for many in the town, Warmbaths Primary's headmaster, Tom

Beukes, a gruff, thickset Afrikaner, is nothing less than a traitor, a collaborator who wants to curry favor with his new black bosses. Beukes (who has since announced his retirement) is unapologetic: "We are part of a new system now. Change is inevitable, so we must manage it. We must adapt."

Several Afrikaner families have refused to and have founded private Christian Volk Education schools for their children. But despite all the bluster, Warmbaths has lost only 40 of its 600 white pupils to these schools. Pragmatism, rather than religion or language, is at the root of Afrikaner culture. These are frontier people. They do know how to adapt.

Certainly, there has been tension in Warmbaths, and the fears, misconceptions and outright bigotry that have accompanied integration throughout South Africa are clearly on display. But the pragmatism in evidence here is more representative of the way the Afrikaner mainstream is adapting to the end of apartheid than the wildfire confrontation that has characterized school integration in other Waterberg towns.

The region's new director of education, William Mabitsela, who is black,



Warmbaths Primary students, some dressed for competition, gear up for Sports Day.

Mark Gevisser writes regularly on South Africa for *The Nation*, among several other publications. His most recent article for the *Magazine*, on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, appeared in June.

'You'll never get them educated,' a white woman seethes. 'I mean, they can't eat with a knife and fork. ... They don't even know how to drink out of a mug! Who's got the time and the effort to teach them these things?'

sees the school as "an inspiration," and perhaps, in this aggressively polarized society, it is. In the bushveld of hardened attitudes that is the Northern Province, there is something truly inspirational about Tom Beukes's dedication to his project, and something quite moving about the way most of the community, teachers, children and parents are going along with it.

But it is by no means clear that newly integrated schools like Warmbaths are the places where this country's brave new multicultural society is going to be forged. Most of the whites in town have accepted the headmaster's arguments about managing change, but very few of them actually want their children to learn with blacks. Even Beukes's wife, Rehette, who ran the school's dormitory until recently, has taken their own daughter out of a boarding school in Pretoria because it has become predominantly black. "You see," she says, "I'm not like my husband. I want to be with my own people. I do have a problem with them. It's a problem with their culture. I can't go with their culture. It's their upbringing. They're not like us."

One of the P.T.A. moms at the Sports Day is Annemarie Geysen. "I'm gradually getting used to the changes," she says. "But it hasn't been easy. We are scared of a takeover. Not because we don't want them here, but the moment they are the same number as us, they'll force their ways on us."

There is a fear of being overrun, a Mau-Mau-invasion anxiety, that cuts to the heart of white paranoia in a democratic South Africa. It is a fear that is given physical expression at this Sports Day, where blacks outnumber whites by at least 6 to 1.

In the grandstand, watching the events, is Jan de Klerk, a cattle farmer from outside town. His father is F. W. de Klerk, the former President, and his own son, F. W., is a Warmbaths Primary first grader who just placed fifth in his race. Three of the four children who beat him were black. Rather than being furious that his son lost to "kaffirjies" ("little niggers"), as I overheard another parent exclaim, de Klerk seems to welcome it. "This," he says, stretching his arm out over the activity on the field, "is what the world out there looks like. Blacks are the majority. They have the power. So white children better get used to it."

DOWN ON THE FIELD, THE WHITE TEACHERS FROM WARBATHS ARE rushing around with an industry almost as neurotic as their pupils' war cries, bellowing at one another on two-way radios, frantically trying to keep the program on schedule — an agenda their colleagues from the township schools seem intent on subverting by languidly and inefficiently preparing their kids for the events.

"African time!" snorts Louis Schutte, one of the school's deputy principals and the chief official for the day's events. Dressed in his cricket referee's outfit — white pants, flouncy maroon shirt and maroon broad-brimmed hat — he looks like some anachronistic colonial official. He is one of three staff members who voted against bilingual instruction. The majority, he says, voted for it out of pure self-interest, believing that if the school did not take in a significant number of black children, the staff ran the risk of being transferred to black schools. Schutte's politics are extreme. "Perhaps what the Boer people need is for someone like a Hitler to come up," he says, "a nice dictator who can motivate us the way Hitler did the Germans."

And yet here is Louis Schutte, the racist, working double-time to insure that this multicultural event goes off as smoothly as possible. He teaches black children math and coaches them on the athletic field. Even he claims to be a pragmatist. "Let us look and listen and watch," he says, "and then one day we'll get our apartheid again." He uses the school as an allegory

for Afrikaner resistance: "The Afrikaner kids are not fighting the black kids yet because they're still scared of them. But mark my words, the day will come when their fear will go away."

Schutte is in a perpetual rage. His frustration, as he storms about the school, is palpable. (It's a moodiness I detect, actually, in very few of the staff.) Another like Schutte is Ramona Delpont, an older woman who works in the school's dormitory. "It was different in the past," she says with nostalgia. "The children would come up and hug you and kiss you. There was a lot of affection between us and them."

Oh, I ask, are the black children not affectionate then?

"They are! But would you let them touch you?"

Racists like Delpont think black children are irredeemable. "You'll never get them educated," she seethes. "I mean, they can't eat with a knife and fork, they don't like pasta, they want their own cultural meats! They don't even know how to drink out of a mug! Who's got the time and the effort to teach them these things?"

Even those who embrace the prospect of educating black children do so from a missionary perspective. Mariana Potgieter, one of the most open-minded teachers at the school, tells me that "our mission is to bring them up to the same developmental level as us, to help them learn the European way. If we could just teach them to wash every day and to make sure that they're clean, then we've done something good — even if they don't know that one and one equals two."

In a group discussion, some white seventh graders tell me that they are different from their parents, that they are more "tolerant" and "understanding" and don't use the word "kaffir" as freely. "Yes, I am changing," says Nelene Hoffman, the school's Head Girl. "I have got more patience. When I'm trying to discipline them, I'm learning that I can't scream at them. I must talk nice and quiet in a way they'll understand." But ask Nelene, one of the school's most gifted students, whether she has learned anything from the black children and she'll respond with a horrified "No!" There is no genuine multicultural transaction at Warmbaths Primary; no sense, from the teachers or white students at the school, that the black children have anything other than bad habits to offer.

In the days I spend at the school, the only time I hear a black child articulating any kind of response to racism is the night before Sports Day, when a boy named Clement Baloyi is nipped by a dog. He demands to be taken to the hospital for a rabies inoculation, and when the nurse says this is not necessary, he retorts, "I see we are back to apartheid days." Another black kid shushes him. "We don't talk politics here, Clement!"

Certainly, white and black children are slowly learning to relate to each other in a way fundamentally different from their parents'. Occasionally, almost shockingly, you'll see two girls, one white, one black, with their bodies entwined on a swing. While lining up to go into the cafeteria, the white girls will join their black classmates in spirited, shimmying renditions of "black" R & B songs like the Fugees' "Killing Me Softly," one of the rare moments when township culture seems to have come to town.

You will see, as you walk around the school, younger black and white boys playing together, albeit usually through play-fighting of one kind or another. The older boys seldom play recreational sports with each other; there will often be two cricket games at recess — one black, one white. At an event like Sports Day, though, given the highly competitive Afrikaner sports culture, there is much backslapping camaraderie: school colors are more important than skin colors.

But look closely and you'll note the difficulties lurking beneath team spir-

it. In a relay race, just before a black Warmbaths boy is to run, he asks his white teammate to hold his baseball cap. The white boy puts the cap on the head of a white girl standing next to him, who screams and then, as if she has been exposed to a particularly virulent strain of the cooties, throws the cap to the ground. "Just leave it there," the white boy says to the cap's owner. "You can pick it up after the race." The black boy's lightning sprint wins the race for Warmbaths while his cap lies in the dust.

Black South Africans will tell you that one of the most traumatic consequences of apartheid was the fact that whites were so physically repulsed by them that they couldn't even be in the same town, let alone under the same roof. There is not, in black South African societies, the same shame about the body as there is in Calvinist Afrikanerdom. At one point during Sports Day, pupils from one of the black schools sing, "I want to see your figure! Turn around, my baby!" while swinging their hips seductively. "You see!" says one white parent to another as they walk past. "No morals!" Later, a group of white Warmbaths kids giggle about the fact that "the blacks don't wear panties and undies!" The reason why they see this in the first place is that the township schools don't have enough running outfits to go round, so the kids are stripping and changing between races.

WARMBATHS PRIMARY COSTS \$20 A MONTH, AS OPPOSED TO \$5 A year for a township school. And so the black kids have parents who are teachers, nurses, office clerks, entrepreneurs. Many of them get more pocket money than their white classmates. The school, like most in the area, gives its children the option of going barefoot. Most of the white children are without shoes; very few of the blacks are. Many of the white children have a typically workmanlike relationship to their school uniforms; most of the black children fastidiously maintain every crease.

At a very rural school I visited last year just after it had integrated, the whites complained about how the black students, children of peasants, did not know how to use toilets: mess in the bathrooms and defecation on the playground became the expression of the anxiety of integration. At Warmbaths, where the children are familiar with sanitation, white anxiety is expressed through table manners. Almost every white person I speak to at the school talks about how the black kids eat with their hands, as if this were a threat to Western civilization. What is perplexing is that many of the black children and their parents seem to have accepted this themselves. Cindy Masenya, the acting manager of a furniture store, was one of the first black parents to enroll a child, her daughter Bridget, at Warmbaths Primary in 1995. Has Bridget changed at all since she went to Warmbaths? "Oh yes," Masenya says. "She studies rather than watching TV. She has learned discipline and manners. She is different from me. We black people stick to our culture and traditions. Not too many of us like to sit in a dining room and eat with a knife and fork. We don't have table manners! ... She tells me not to talk when I eat, and says that I am not civilized!"

Masenya, like most of the black parents, has nothing but praise for the school's paramilitary approach, a counterpoint to the anarchy in most black schools. She must, though, have an inkling about the value system into which she is sending her child. And herein lies the dilemma for black parents. For a pupil to earn a diploma from a black township school is nothing short of a miracle. The unemployment rate in South Africa cur-



Sports Day winners included F. W. de Klerk, the ex-President's grandson, far right.

certain level of intimacy with her black friend, saying, "There are some things I would never tell her." Meanwhile, the black girl tells me: "I tell her everything. She is my soul sister."

AT WARBATHS PRIMARY, BLACKS KIDS MIGHT BE LEARNING TABLE manners and white kids might be learning patience, but is the curriculum itself working to break down racial stereotypes?

This year, classes in the local African language, Northern Sotho, are compulsory. On the walls of the Northern Sotho class are displays by white children about the black tribes. And so now, black children learn their mother tongue from a white teacher, in the confines of what would have passed as a bad ethnographic display in an apartheid-era museum: "Zulu Man," "The Bushman — the Northern Sotho." In none of the displays is there any indication that the subjects have modern identities: they wear skins, live in huts and, yes, eat with their hands.

Where there has been the most curricular revision is, of course, history. Leon Nigrini is one of the school's liberals. "Who can tell me what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is?" he asks his Afrikaans-language (and thus white) sixth-grade class. The children stare back blankly. "All right," he says, "let's look at reconciliation in our very own school. There are now so many blacks here. Did you always agree with that?"

"No!" the class shouts back in unison.

"Why not?"

A hand goes up. "Sir, because it would cause a drop in our standards, sir!" "Thank you," says Nigrini. "So what can you do about it? You can teach the black child to raise his standards. You can help him in class. You can help him to adapt to our ways. That is reconciliation."

Despite the fact that Nigrini's model for reconciliation — we help them become like us — fits in perfectly with the school's new missionary ethos, the children do not respond any further. And so, exasperated, he retreats into prehistory and teaches a lesson about ancient Egypt.

In his next class, with English-language (and thus black) seventh graders, Nigrini attempts Reconciliation Studies once more. Here he is only slightly more successful. "What apartheid laws affected your nation, the black nation?" he asks. Silence. He tries another tack: "Is everything in this country all right now? Are things going better?" A few hands are raised, tentatively. "In the olden days," says Clement, the most confident black student, "blacks and whites didn't communicate together. Now that apartheid is over, we can communicate."

The olden days. It's an expression that reveals even this switched-on child's lack of identification with his own history, or his desire for amnesia. The olden days were only two years ago. In many ways, though, they still exist in the Waterberg. ■