

My Nyasaland Sporting Life, 1957 to 1973

By Terry Young

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There is no doubt that Britain passed on its multitude of sporting activities throughout its old empire, and Nyasaland was no exception. Short of the winter variety there was sport for everyone. In the main it was the expatriate clubs that provided the facilities normally initiated by enthusiasts from those involved elsewhere in anything from the popular sports of cricket and rugby to the likes of the more obscure games of squash and croquet. It is probably in the nature of most of those who choose to venture to the more remote parts of the world that they look for an active recreational pastime rather than the modern day computer based variety – indeed even on the moon, astronaut Alan Shepard hit two golf shots. However, Nyasaland, with the sporting population generally limited to the expatriates, the available numbers for team selection were small. Thus, being of less than average ability, I was able to play in teams at rugby, cricket, football, hockey and water polo including one match of the latter as a Nyasaland international!

There was squash, which played under a corrugated tin roof negated any need for a sauna cabin, and I think bowls produced one of the first of any Nyasaland team to play in the Commonwealth Games.

Basketball was the police sport which new expatriate entrants to the force were obliged to join in the teams, normally on the Wednesday sports afternoon, made up of members of the Police Mobile force. The dress was ammunition boots, socks, shorts, vests for one



side, bare buff for the other and no particular rules, the object was simple – get the ball in the basket to score. How it got there was of no real consequence and although later on the US Military Attache provided an excellent book on the sport and, in particular, the rules involved; they were never applied as it was generally felt they only detracted from the enjoyment of the game. With more Americans in the country, mainly via the Peace Corps, I am aware that softball, rather than baseball, was introduced and Blantyre Club hosted such a match against a local non-American expat team

With a beautiful lake taking up so much of the country there was water skiing and yachting. Fishing was another popular pastime; chambo was the shoal fish taken by the commercial fisheries but the rod and line exponents caught the more tasty sungwa and the silvery ncheni. Very large catfish could be caught, particularly at night, but was not the best of eating, whereas a relative perhaps, the kampango, was delicious and the lakeshore hotels often served it as “fresh lake fish” with the suggestion that it was chambo. With the arrival of British Army Officers in the early part of the 20th century they could not be denied their hunting or fly-fishing, and rainbow trout have flourished in the dams and streams on the high plateaus of Zomba Mountain and the Vipya in the north.

Further, I also managed some rock climbing on the face of Zomba Mountain and on nearby hills which all afforded some spectacular views. Caving has never appealed to me, but intrigued by the stories surrounding Chingwe's Hole on Zomba Mountain, a descent to its very depth was deemed necessary, but sadly this proved to be pretty shallow with no obvious caverns off and nothing of interest found at the bottom.

Overall, however, it was golf that eventually took over and has been with me ever since, although as time goes on one doesn't always disagree with Mark Twain's assertion that 'golf is a good walk spoiled'. I don't know the Chinyanja for golf other than that my house boy knew it as 'kumenya mpira' – and the translation 'to beat the ball' was surely the most apt of phrases to describe my game. Did the locals sometimes assume, I wonder, that they were watching some frantic attempt to dispatch the most deadly of ophidians? However, golf was very popular with the expatriates and there were courses in all the main centres albeit the standards varied considerably. The greens were 'browns', devoid of grass and laid to sand. Limbe, funded by the then moneyed tobacco industry, was probably the best and was the first, eventually, to establish a grass green (just the one) whereas at Mzuzu it was said that it was unwise to venture off the fairway without at least .475 magnum rifle.

Zomba was bedevilled by waves of army worm which made short shrift of any grass that had been carefully nurtured on the fairways.

Aggressive bees were behind many a desperate dash to immerse oneself out of reach in the club swimming pool and an encounter with a black mamba in the rough proved a better lesson than anything from a professional towards keeping the ball down the middle. Caddies were the big advantage; youngsters who should have been at school, they cheerfully carried the heavy bag of clubs and always supported 'their man'. With dexterous toes they make sure he never got a bad lie and for this the going rate was three shillings for the round plus sixpence tip – in Zomba a labourer for an eight hour day was paid three shillings and four pence.



So, sport there was aplenty and I feel privileged to have played so much of it in such pleasant company and such pleasant surroundings. No doubt the modern Malawian continues to play his sport and probably to a higher standard and in more serious vein than in those years that I am happy to recall.



Zomba - the 9th/18th "green"

