

The Opinion Pages

Father, Apartheid Trailblazer and Domestic Abuser

By **Thandi Mokone-Chase** July 30, 2015 12:03 pm

Editor's note: *Vida Samuel helped in the writing of this post.*

My father, Stephen “Kalamazoo” Mokone, was the first black South African soccer player to play professionally in Europe and to break the color barrier in South Africa during apartheid, which was a remarkable achievement back then. But he was more than that; he was also a violent and abusive man.

Stephen Mokone was incarcerated from 1978 to 1990 in the United States for criminal acts exacted on my mother and her attorney who represented her during their divorce and child custody proceedings. He eventually waived trial and pled guilty to the life-threatening attack on my mother in New Jersey using lye and the hired attack of her attorney, which left her blinded and disfigured from sulfuric acid.

As a famous sports figure, my father had many admirers who overlooked his violent side, or even argued that he had been framed. My father's biographer, Tom Egbers, wrote that my father's conviction was part of a conspiracy involving South Africa's government and U.S. authorities. Egbert was convinced that Stephen Mokone was framed and convicted because he had participated as a young man in anti-apartheid activities. That's just not the case.

Since my father's death March 19 in Washington, D.C., and for the first time in my life, I no longer feel silenced by my fear of him. I've been asked about my desire to “come out” of my silence and “why now?” I am speaking out. His passing has set me free to tell the truth; I can finally own my anger without fear of reprisal. There is very little now that can penetrate the emotional scars I suffered by my father's torment, which included: being physically abused and sexualized; choking my dog in front of me; and hiring an attacker who knocked out my brother's front teeth with the butt of a gun because he became a witness for the prosecution, giving sworn testimony that eventually incriminated our father.

Like many professional athletes in the news today, my father was celebrated for his athletic

achievement. There was a national commemoration of his life in South Africa's FNB Stadium, where the 2010 World Cup final was held, after he died. He was lauded as "a national asset" and "a hidden hero."

The violent, criminal acts for which he was responsible were minimized — if even mentioned. His narrative seems a representation of the violent athlete misogynist, similar to other elite athletes such as Floyd Mayweather, Ray Rice and Oscar Pistorius. How can it be that we excuse abusive behavior with statements such as: "With the pressure of divorce and child custody battle...he simply lost his head," or "Good men sometimes do bad things?"

What message does our society send when the NFL gives Tom Brady a harsher measure of discipline for scheming to deflate footballs than initially brought against Ray Rice for physically and brutally attacking his fiancée?

As Stephen Mokone's daughter, I want survivors of these experiences to be acknowledged and included in the global conversation about violence against women. It is particularly disturbing to watch professional athletes glorified by society in life and in death, leaving behind an agonizing legacy for their victims.

I also want to explain that domestic violence leaves victims, especially female victims of domestic violence, without recourse and resources — scorned by family members and friends. If the partner with the resources assumes a dictatorial role, she is left without means of immediate survival. That difficulty is magnified when the victim is judged in a court of public opinion made up of rabid fans. And when children are impacted, victims are likely to take a cautious approach to news accounts and public requests for corroboration or denial of these events. My mother's only concern was to protect me and ensure my formative years were lived out without incident or in the shadows of an agonizing legacy. For us, it was not a celebration of an athlete but an observation of a life that once was.

I tell my story now with the goal of furthering this global conversation about domestic violence in general and intimate partner violence in particular against women. We need only think as of 17-year-old Anene Booysen, who was gang raped and murdered in South Africa or Boko Haram and its targeting of schoolgirls to consider how women's lives are commodified. We cannot afford to take a lethargic approach to this conversation.

As I observe the treatment of women by athletes such as Mayweather, Rice and Pistorius, silence is no longer an option for me — it is a signal of complicity. My immediate obligation is to challenge the hero-worship that discounts the lives left traumatized by these icons.

Stephen "Kalamazoo" Mokone was referred to as the "Black Meteor" in the Netherlands

and “the Maserati” in Italy. While my father may have been a great soccer player, he was no hero in my life.

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Correction: August 4, 2015

The original post misspelled the surname of the Dutch journalist. He is Tom Egbers, not Egbert.