

I was forever lonely at the time [during his playing time]. Nobody knocked on my door to go for dinner. Teammates used to make plans right in front of me, skipping me out. When walking into the breakfast room, nobody came to sit with me.



Former South Africa pacer MAKHAYA NTINI said back in 2020.

Sports, politics and the ugly by-product

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

In October last year, a 15-year-old black ice hockey player in Quebec, Canada, was pinned to the ground on his face while a teammate knelt on his neck and kept it there until he uttered the words, "I can't breathe."

This was a sick reenactment of what had happened to George Floyd, an African-American person, who was repeatedly saying the same words while a police officer pressed his knee on his neck, suffocating him to death in Minneapolis, US in May of 2020.

The death of Floyd sparked widespread protests in the US, which quickly spread to other parts of the world, as everyone seemingly joined hands in the fight to end the oppression of marginalised people and to put an end to racism.

In October last year, a survey conducted by the European Union on 13 countries in Europe revealed that racism against black people is on the rise at a startling level in the continent.

The survey found racism to be "pervasive and relentless" in all parts of life and the situation was the worst in Germany and Austria, countries where far-right political parties are gaining popularity.

The survey result hints at the direct correlation between the rise in popularity of centralist and right-wing ideologies and racism in the region.

Europe and most countries in the Western hemisphere have been mostly left leaning since the Second World War, a trend that is now changing very quickly.

Italy is being governed by a right wing coalition for the first time since 1946,



other parts of Europe with Spain's La Liga witnessing nine racist incidents last year, according to league's president Javier Tebas, and eight of them were directed towards Real Madrid's Brazilian winger Vinicius Jr.

The Brazilian couldn't hold back tears after being called "monkey" by fans during a La Liga match against Valencia in last year's May.

After the incident, Vinicius, heartbroken, posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, "It was not the first time, nor the second, nor the third. Racism is normal in La Liga."

Germany Under-21 footballers Youssoufa Moukoko and Jessic Ngankam took to social media last year to address the racist abuse they were facing after missing penalties in a European Under-21 Championship match.

"If we win, we're all Germans; if we lose, we're the black guys, then monkey comments come in. Things like this just don't belong in football. It's disgusting," wrote Moukoko.

English players Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka were similarly attacked on social media after missing penalties in the shootout against Italy in the 2022 Euro finals.

These incidents, however, are just the tip of the iceberg.

The racist incidents that occur behind the scenes and in lower divisions hardly get the spotlight and are usually swept under the rug by the people in charge in order to avoid the bad press.

Ironically, sporting bodies and clubs don't miss any opportunity to wave the anti-racism flag at every opportunity to show their support for the movement.

But whether they actually have any intention of ridding the game of this vice or are they doing this only to remain in the good books of the sponsors and advertisers is a valid question.

Premier League players like Wilfred Zaha, Ivan Toney, and Marcos Alonso were disenchanted by the "taking a knee" gesture before every match in 2021, as they felt that it was insufficient in actually fighting racism.

There is also the question of whether it's even possible to end racism in sports if it remains alive in society at large.

"Football can do nothing to change racism," former Liverpool footballer John Barnes, who had bananas thrown at him while playing in England in the 1980s, told Sky Sports in 2021.

"Any discrimination towards any footballer is a very small, minute part of racial discrimination towards black people. Is taking the knee going to change someone who's racially biased?" he added.

The fans of football come from society, and if society, in general, is tipping more towards an ideology that projects everyone who doesn't have the same skin colour or doesn't have the same heritage as them is inferior, the result will inevitably be a rise in racism.

Europe as a continent is in a delicate position at the moment. Countries are trying to cope with the effects of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war while still recuperating from the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and a surge in legal and illegal immigrants.

This is the ideal scene for right-wing parties to spread their message and by the looks of it, they are not letting the chance go begging.

Before trying to fix the racism problem in football or sports in general, Europe has to combat the racism that is taking deeper roots in their society.

Going back to the incident in Quebec, the boys involved in the incident got suspended from the team. But it was a slap in the wrist for the emotional scar they left on that black kid, who eventually left the team.

The racist incidents taking place in sports in the West prove that no matter how many times people

claim that the world of sports resides in a separate bubble, unperturbed by what's happening elsewhere, that's simply not the truth.

Ideally, sports and politics should never mix, but inevitably, sports and politics always mix.



The sporting bodies from around the world also showed their solidarity with the movement and very soon, players of different sports were seen taking a knee right before matches in support.

Such antiracism gestures are hardly anything new in sports. American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos famously did the 'Black Power Salute' in the 1968 Olympics.

More recently, in 2016, American football quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a stance against police brutality in the US against minorities by taking a knee during the national anthem before games - a move that got him unofficially blacklisted by every team in the league.

The most famous incident of an athlete standing up against racism, however, didn't happen on the field.

The great boxer Muhammad Ali refused to enlist in the US Army for the Vietnam War in the 60s, saying, "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam after so called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?"

The US government didn't take kindly to his bold stance, banning him for five years in 1967. The ban was overturned in 1971, but it cost him almost four of his prime years as a boxer.

These gestures have certainly brought the issue of racism to the forefront and started more conversations, however, how much effect they have had in real life is questionable.

Spain's far-right party Vox nearly made it into the coalition government last year after doubling its votes and in Germany, for the first time, a far-right party won the district council election in 2023.

Even in Canada, a country known for its left-wing leaning ways, right-wing populism is steadily going mainstream.

This shift of the right has coincided with a period in which acts of racial violence have increased in the West, a trend that has made its way into sports, most prominently in European football.

In 2019, the head of European football's anti-discrimination watchdog FARE Piara Powar said that Italy is suffering from an "epidemic" of racism in football and he blamed the rise in right-wing ideology for it.

Anyone who keeps a cursory knowledge of Serie A would certainly know that racially fueled incidents have only increased in the last five years.

On January 20, AC Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan was the latest player to fall prey to racist abuse in Italy, as he had to leave the field during a match against Udinese because the rival fans were directing "monkey noises" at him.

Udinese later banned several fans who took part in the abuse, but such bans hardly helped mitigate this issue in the past.

In May of last year, the Italian football administration banned 170 Juventus fans for hurling racist chants at Inter Milan forward Romelu Lukaku, but that hasn't had any significant effect in reducing racist incidents.

Things aren't looking much better in

Anti-discrimination charity Kick It Out reported that it had received 1,007 reports in total, which includes both people playing on amateur and professional teams, as well as incidents on social media, leading to a 65 percent rise in reports of abusive behaviour in the UK in 2023.

Despite former cricketer Azeem Rafiq urging for Yorkshire County Cricket Club chairman Colin Graves not to be allowed to run the club after showing "no contrition" over the racism scandal, Graves got the go-ahead to return to his old role after members approved a special resolution at an extraordinary general meeting on February 2, 2023, with 88 percent of the votes cast in his favour.

HANDFUL OF INSTANCES OF RACISM IN SPORTS



AC Milan and France goalkeeper Mike Maignan led his team off the pitch after Udinese fans allegedly made monkey sounds and other racist chants towards the Frenchman during a Serie A match in Udine last month.

La Liga reported racist insults aimed at Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior ahead of a league match on February 2 at Getafe's stadium to Spanish prosecutors last week. The legal complaint was that some fans yelled "Vinicius, monkey" outside the Coliseum Alfonso Perez stadium before Madrid's 2-0 victory.

La Liga also reported alleged racial abuse of Sevilla's Morocco striker Youssef En-Nesyri during his team's 2-1 win at Rayo Vallecano last week.

Vinicius was also met by fans chanting the word "mono" -- Spanish for monkey -- before he even stepped off the Real Madrid bus outside the Mestalla stadium in Valencia ahead of a La Liga game in May last year. It continued even during the game and the match had to be halted at one point as Vinicius pointed out some of his abusers to the referee.

Napoli striker Victor Osimhen took off his protective face mask and mimicked crying into a pitch-side camera, suggesting he had heard racist abuse before his goal during a Serie A game away at Verona in August, 2022. Hurling racist chants at players is nothing new at Verona, who have a long history of far-right sympathies among their hardcore support.

Six former Yorkshire players were found guilty of using racist language against a former player Azeem Rafiq, who had said in 2021 that he had been a victim of institutional racism at the club during his playing time.



Former South Africa pacer Makhaya Ntini had revealed in 2020 that he used to feel lonely during his playing time, accusing his teammates of deliberately leaving him out of plans and blaming him first for any defeat.

**None of these incidents are one-off instances.

