

Africa's First Encounter with the Olympic Games: The Case Revisited

by Floris van der Merwe

New facts surrounding the participation of the first blacks from Africa in the Olympic Games were made known by van der MERWE at the NASSH convention of 1998¹ as well as in the *Journal of Olympic History* of September 1999.² In these papers it was explained how veterans (black and white) from the Anglo-Boer War acted in the Boer War Spectacle at the World's Fair in St. Louis. The latter, of course, coincided with the Olympic Games of 1904. Without repeating the whole story, the reader's memory should be refreshed as far as the following facts are concerned:

Two blacks and a European represented South Africa in the Olympic marathon race, albeit non-officially (the South African National Olympic Committee was only formed in 1908).³ As the two blacks were illiterate, the American journalists had to spell their names phonetically, hereby creating misspellings like "*Lentauw*" and "*Yamasani*".⁴ The world press dubbed the two blacks as "*Zulus*" ("*from Zululand*").⁵ As it was explained in the earlier publications, they could not have been Zulus due to the meaning of their names, as well as the fact that they fought on the side of the Boers (meaning that they must have been from the Transvaal or the Orange Free State). It is more likely that their names were Len TAU and Jan MASHIANI. In Len TAU'S case, his surname means "lion" in Tswana and Sotho. As Gen. Piet CRONJE, the star of the Boer War Spectacle, was from Tswana country (the Klerksdorp district in South Africa),⁶ it is speculated that they were part of his fighting forces in the war (as batmen and messengers).

In the following citation Bernth LINDFORS leaves us with a theory as to why the American press "decided" that they were Zulus.

"That most circus showmen preferred Art to Nature is evident in their use of the term 'Zulu,' which in American circus jargon gradually expanded its field of reference to include any Negro who participated in the 'spec.' A black laborer or musician employed by the circus could earn a 'Zulu ticket' (a credit slip for more pay) by don-

*ning a costume and parading around the hippodrome track in the grand opening pageant. 'Zulu' thus became synonymous with artifice and disguise."*⁷

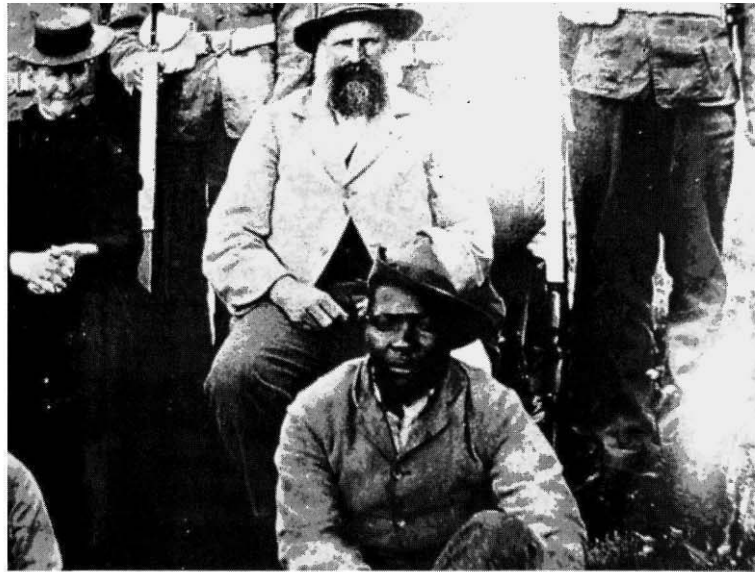
The key figure in the Anglo-Boer War Show was Gen. Piet CRONJE.⁸ His surrender at Paardeberg on 27 February 1900 was a major blow for the Boers early in the war.⁹ They were sent to St. Helena in the S.S. Milwaukee as prisoners-of-war. It is known from the passenger list of the Milwaukee that there were 18 blacks among the prisoners, but none were mentioned by name.¹⁰

From the photo below it is evident that CRONJE'S batman in the war accompanied him into exile. This loyal servant most probably worked for him on his farm and accompanied his employer to the war.

When comparing the man sitting in front of Gen. Piet CRONJE and the runner in no. 36 on the marathon photo, there are definite similarities. It is very unfortunate that these blacks were never mentioned by name, leaving us to speculation. The point of this brief article is to strengthen the claims of my earlier works, namely that TAU and MASHIANI were not Zulus as shown in the Olympic records of 1904 and in numerous secondary sources ever since.



Jan Mashiani (left) and Len Tau before the marathon race of 1904 (Missouri Historical Society, LPE 942)



Gen. Cronje and his wife at St. Helena, with his loyal servant in front
(SMURTHWAITE, David, *The Boer War*, London 2002, p.106.)

Notes

- 1 VAN DER MERWE, Floris J.G., "New facts surrounding Africa's first encounter with the Olympic Games in 1904". 26th Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada, 22-25 May 1998.
- 2 VAN DER MERWE, Floris J.G., "Africa's first encounter with the Olympic Games in 1904", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 5(1999)7, pp. 29-34.
- 3 VAN DER MERWE, Floris J.G., "Die stigting van die Suid-Afrikaanse Olimpiese Komitee" [The formation of the South African National Olympic Association], in: *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation*, 1(1995)18, pp. 95-103.
- 4 These misspellings by the press also crept into the "Official Report". See LUCAS, C.J.P., *The Olympic Games*, 1904. St. Louis 1905.
- 5 LUCAS, 1905, p. 42.
- 6 VAN COLLER, H.P., *Generaal PA. Cronje. 'n Lewenskets* Unpublished doctoral dissertation University of Pretoria, Pretoria 1945, pp. 307, 310.
- 7 LINDFORS, Bernth, "Circus Africans", in: *Journal of American Culture* 2(1983)6, p. 11.
- 8 See VAN DER MERWE, Floris J.G., *Die Boere-sirkus van St. Louis (1904)*, Stellenbosch 1998.
- 9 CLOETE, Pieter G., *The Anglo-Boer war: a chronology*, Pretoria 2000, p. 111.
- 10 WESSELS, Elria, Foto identifikasie? [trans. Photo identification?]. Private email from Wessels [ewessels@anglo-boer.co.za] to Floris van der Merwe [floris@sun.ac.za], 2 July 2004.