**Soccer Grannies: The South African Women Who Inspire the World**

Duffy, Jean. Soccer Grannies: The South African Women Who Inspire the World. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. xix + 264pp. Photos, Chapter Notes, Bibliography, Index, $34.00.

Reviewed by Lisa Timpf

*Soccer Grannies: The South African Women Who Inspire the World* is a non-fiction book that could just as well read as the script of a triumph-against-the-odds movie. *Soccer Grannies* quietly reminds us about what, at the root of it, is important and valuable about sport. The camaraderie. The invitation to enhanced fitness. Sport’s ability to connect people across ethnic divides, across socio-economic classes, across cultural differences, and across continents.

The Soccer Grannies, as Jean Duffy first came to know them, were a team composed, quite literally, of South African grandmothers—women in their 40’s to their 80’s. But as is true of many of the best things in life, these soccer-loving grandmothers came by their love of the sport in a roundabout fashion.

The Soccer Grannies started off as a group of women trying to improve their fitness. After undergoing chemotherapy for colon cancer in 2003, the club’s founder, Rebecca (better known as ‘Beka’) Ntsanwisi, was advised by the doctor to exercise in order to regain her strength. While at the clinic for her appointments, Beka had noticed many older women struggling with medical issues. She rightly assumed that others, too, could use some intervention to help them overcome illnesses that were “robbing South Africa’s women of their twilight years.”

Beka started “an exercise program for ladies who were out of shape and wanted to do something about it.” One day, when the group was exercising in a field, a group of boys accidentally kicked a soccer ball in their direction. When a member of the exercise group booted it back, Beka suggested, half-jokingly, that they try soccer. The idea was greeted with enthusiasm by her companions. Beka hired a coach to instruct them in the basics, and the women found that playing soccer improved their mobility and strength. More than that, “they were also enjoying laughter and friendship—which in turn improved their mental health.”

The Soccer Grannies looked forward to the time spent on the soccer field. That didn’t mean it was easy. They had to overcome cultural obstacles. Some community members argued they should be at home looking after their grandchildren. Others criticized their choice of attire. But the Grannies were steadfast in their determination. The health and social benefits of their time spent on the soccer pitch outweighed social pressure.

*Soccer Grannies* author Jean Duffy was first exposed to the Grannies through a video forwarded to her by a soccer teammate. Jean herself was 51 years old at the time, “only recently switched from soccer momming on the sidelines to chasing the ball.” Jean felt an instant connection, despite the 7,875 miles between her home in Lexington, Massachusetts and the Grannies’ home in Nkowankowa, Limpopo. Jean, along with key figures from her own team and others in the league, began a fundraising campaign to bring the Soccer Grannies to play in the annual Veterans Cup, which in 2010 was scheduled to be held in Massachusetts.

The book describes the ups and downs of the campaign to enable the Grannies make the trip, the experience of hosting the South African team in the United States, and a subsequent visit to South Africa by Duffy and others.

In addition to the description of events, Duffy provides historical context for the Grannies’ endeavours, outlining some of the social and political challenges confronting South Africa women. Brief biographies of several of the Grannies are also included. These profiles provide depth to the book, illustrating the difficulties—poverty, abuse, discrimination, and the like—that the soccer-playing South African women have endured, and triumphed over, in the course of their lives.

The events are recounted in roughly chronological fashion, though in the Author’s Note, Duffy states that some time lines were slightly adjusted to support a logical flow. Duffy took her time writing the book, spending seven years sifting through email correspondence, photographs, formal interviews, newspaper articles, and other sources. She also consulted various sources to get a sense of South African history and culture. An extensive bibliography is provided at the back of the book. Several photos are also included, capturing the Grannies’ visit to the United States as well as a reciprocal visit by Duffy and others to South Africa.

Though at the outset I mentioned a triumph-against-the-odds story, the Grannies did not sweep into town and win every game. But it was never about that. It was about having the opportunity to make the journey, despite the seemingly-staggering logistical difficulties. Reading *Soccer Grannies* reminded me of an article I read in a Philosophy of Sport textbook back in the early 80s. The article revolved around the application of Martin Buber’s I-Thou to sport. An encounter with the Soccer Grannies encourages one to think of playing *with,* rather than *against,* another team.

One doesn’t have to be a soccer fan or soccer player to enjoy *Soccer Grannies*. In my playing days, I gravitated toward softball, and field, ice, and ball hockey, but that didn’t stop me from connecting with the book’s messages. The underlying themes about the power of sport to motivate movement and to engender laughter and camaraderie still apply, regardless of one’s choice of sport. As an older woman, it was also easy for me to appreciate the additional barriers gender and age can place on one’s ability and comfort level in carving out time and space for play.

The story of the Soccer Grannies doesn’t end with Duffy’s book. New chapters in the Grannies’ saga are still being written. As I was preparing this review for SLA, the first-ever Grannies International Football Tournament was underway, with teams from the United States, France, and various countries across Africa participating.

Duffy’s book tells the story of the original Soccer Grannies team, weaving together a compelling tale that tells us something about the power of sport to engender well-being and forge connections. As the cutline from one of the photos notes, “These athletes remind us that sport does not belong to the young alone; bodies of all ages, sizes, and abilities benefit from playing the beautiful game.”

*Soccer Grannies* might appeal to a number of audiences, including, but not limited to, students of comparative sport, individuals interested in women’s sport, and those with an interest in how sport can engender physical and mental health in aging populations.

Though *Soccer Grannies* is Duffy’s first book, she has previously been published in venues like the *Boston Globe*, the *Stamford Advocate*, and the *Concord Monitor*.