

39. Zayn Nabbi

The first time I got a threatening phone call, it threw me. This was not what I expected when I entered sports journalism. After all, we were meant to be the genre of media that inspired hope, a kind of ‘opium for the masses’. But there I was getting an earful from an unhinged individual deriding my work printed in Durban’s Daily News, where I was the beat rugby writer. It was the mid-2000s and the province’s rugby franchise, The Sharks, had not won a major title in a decade, crowds were dwindling, there was pressure to move to a new stadium, and the organisation was failing to transform as they eschewed any opportunity to become more representative and inclusive. I had written about all these issues, and the men who sat in the King’s Park stadium’s ivory towers were, to say the least, irate with me. One of the chief guard dogs of The Sharks top brass would often phone me to complain that my writing was “crap” and accuse me of having an agenda against the province’s administrators. He once told me to “watch my back” when going to Durban Collegians, the team where he used to be the chairman.

I was used to intimidation. But getting threats and abuse from an unknown person was on another level. Being bullied seemed par for the course. There was a time when a former Springbok told me to “watch what I write”, because I was “pissing everyone off”, including his old friend Kevin Putt, who used to coach The Sharks between 2002-2005. He mentioned nobody would talk to me, and my career would be over if I continued to be a negative writer.

I was a young man, and would often listen to my detractors before firing back that I was just doing my job, and, if I had got something factually wrong, to show me. They never did. At one point, I remember even saying if people wanted ‘to bring it’, they had my number, and as a former fetcher flank who had attended age group regional trials, I was happy to square up to whomever wanted a piece of me. Unnecessary bravado, I know.

But rugby, at the best of times, is a testosterone-filled environment. And as a young black journalist, continually getting bombarded in South Africa, at a time when the rugby fraternity was predominantly white, I had to stand up for myself. Even though, if I’m honest, it did get to me. And, at times it was a very lonely place.

Our country officially became a democracy in 1994, and the 1995 Rugby World Cup, where Nelson Mandela stood so proudly behind Francois Pienaar, is an iconic moment in our history. But it was one day of unity, and rugby was still largely seen as the last bastion of white masculinity. Anyone who threatened that hegemony was seen as an unwelcome heathen. Over the course of my career, The Sharks banned me from the stadium twice as they revoked my accreditation. But my determination to stay the course and fight on gave me the professional resilience and toughness to grow in ways I didn’t think I could. You see, the best flowers grow in manure. And as the great rapper and

thought leader Tupac Amaru Shakur once wrote in my favourite poem of all time *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*, the flower proved “nature’s law wrong” as it “learned to walk without having feet” because “by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe fresh air... when no one else ever cared.” (Shakur and Steinberg, 2000). I like to think I was that rose, and the rugby fraternity bore down on me like concrete. But I was going to be damned if they were going to beat me.

“on entering the CNN London newsroom, you saw first-hand people bringing their ‘A-game’ every day, all day”

I also learnt that being the outsider opens you up to others who will provide you with all the right information you need, and you have licence to probe and dig where the other journos just wouldn’t go, for fear of sullyng relations. One of those areas was transformation, and I was able to ask uncomfortable questions about the continued lack of it in the game.

In all, I covered The Sharks for around a decade for both the Daily News and television channel eNews as its correspondent in Durban. While for the most part I didn’t have many colleagues who supported me, one man stood above others. And that was the legendary Farook Khan, who was one of the most gifted storytellers I’ve ever met. He was a bearded beauty in the old Independent Newspapers newsroom. Full of life and laughter, he had two attributes that I loved: a heart bigger than most, and an unflinching backbone. He helped mentor me, and when he could see that I needed backup, he’d confront the agitators without me even knowing. He was street smart and knew how to operate outside the lines to protect us cub reporters. The stuff you don’t get taught in school. I also had an academic powerhouse in my corner, in the form of Professor Ashwin Desai. A brilliant man. What a brain! And somebody who knew, like Farook, that the thing the establishment feared most was educated journalists, who they couldn’t scare or buy off. Ashwin and I teamed up to write academic papers on rugby’s lack of transformation. Black rugby has a history of over a century, and the white rugby fraternity ignored that wilfully, as it perpetuated the narrative that sport was something new for blacks. Just plain wrong. (Desai and Nabbi, 2010). We hit back with research, facts and cogent arguments. That, combined with Farook helping me develop my storytelling, meant I was able to bob, weave, jab

and deliver powerful knockout blows to the naysayers with my keyboard.

During my time at the Daily News and eNews, I had the privilege of telling many stories. My most enjoyable were those that affected change. I had persistently reported about how The Sharks, at the time, refused to rebrand from the old colonial name, Natal. By the mid-2000s, they changed, and I was told by The Sharks board chairman Oregan Hoskins and other black administrators that my continual raising of the issue had made it a discussion point. The power of agenda setting! I did the same about the lack of transformation, which led to more players being selected, and more opportunities for coaches, managers and administrators. There even used to be a caucus of black administrators who used to gather to push for change, and I was invited to give my perspective and share thoughts as a journalist. I was sitting with men old enough to be my dad, but they valued my input and had seen my bravery as we became allies fighting to democratise the game.

Eventually, The Sharks, who had done their best to marginalise me, started to engage me as I was invited to help formulate policy on the future of club rugby, a passion of mine, while also wanting me to get more involved in a transformation think-tank. It was during that time that I remembered the intimidating phone calls, the barking administrators and the times I had my accreditation taken away. As the famous quote goes: “First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they attack you. Then you win.” (O’Carroll, 2011) The oh so sweet smell of victory!

Having had the fortune of working in South Africa for all my professional career, I had long wanted to take a sabbatical and experience life abroad. Ashwin had been pushing me to enrol for a masters qualification, while Farook had regaled me with his adventures in New York and London. In the end, I decided I had to do both. And through the generosity of the British Council, I was fortunate enough to get the Chevening Scholarship to study journalism at City University in London in 2010. Situated in central London, the university is a feeder to every major news organisation in the world. It was a great environment, mainly because I got to interact with journalists from all over the world. Not just the Brits, Irish and Europeans, but people from sub-Saharan and North Africa, the Middle East, Far East, Indian sub-continent, Australians and the Americas. It was a very special nine months, not necessarily because of what I learnt from my professors, but more because meeting these people challenged my thinking in ways that have made me a better person. My struggles don’t come near classmates who’d been part of the green movement in Iran, protesting during the Arab Spring, and some even became part-journalists, part activists during the outbreak of fighting in Syria. These were journalists sacrificing everything they had, to genuinely make their countries better places by ensuring a free flow of information. Wow, I couldn’t hold a candle to these journalists.

Even though I’d worked as a television correspondent before, I did an internship at CNN International while completing the course so that I could see how one of the best networks in 24-hour news operated. I loved that experience. While I’d worked

in journalism and knew the basics of pulling together a package, and going live (I could do that in my sleep, if I’m honest), I really learnt the art of crafting premium content, was taught how to promote it to maximise impact and got to experience access like never before on shoots with the biggest names in the sports world. I always prided myself on my work ethic, but on entering the CNN London newsroom, you saw first-hand people bringing their “A-game” every day, all day. I loved the environment and thought at the end of my four-month internship in 2011 that I was leaving a better journalist. In fact, I had planned to join eNews as their chief sports news reporter in Johannesburg, and was 10 days away from leaving the mud island for good, when my boss, Chris Eldergill, told me the organisation had a one year contract for me to stay on to work during the London Olympics in 2012. I couldn’t resist one more year in London and stayed on. It was a no brainer.

The one year turned into a decade, and I’m now a senior producer in London, focused on delivering cross-platform distinctive content, covering major sporting events and competitions, while also helping with talent identification by bringing in the next generation of sports interns.



Zayn Nabbi with Renata Camaleoa, a local producer/ translator and Amanda Davies, CNN World Sport correspondent at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Sao Paulo, Brazil

I’m eternally grateful to Chris, who backed me to be sponsored by the company, empowered me to do work that I’m passionate about, and gave me a voice to speak honestly about how we shape our content and shows. One of the proudest pieces of work I’ve collaborated on at CNN is our *Fighting Racism in Football* series, where we’ve partnered with award-winning football journalist Darren Lewis. As the lead producer, it’s been a pleasure working with Darren, as we’ve been able to produce agenda-setting content that’s shed light on an issue that’s plagued the sport for too long. Darren is a skilled interviewer, a campaigner and somebody well connected and respected in the game. Combine that with CNN’s 470 million reach and their reputation for credible news, and you’ve got a powerful platform to magnify the issue. We’ve spoken to the likes of Chelsea’s Tammy Abraham, Liverpool’s Gini Wijnaldum, Queens Park Rangers Director of Football, Les Ferdinand, veteran manager Chris Hughton and many, many others to produce a body of

work that's got international traction. Viewers were touched by Tammy's recounting of his mother's tears in the face of the racist abuse aimed at him, while Gini's interview rocked the football world with his vow to walk off the field during a major final if he's subjected to racist abuse. All major United Kingdom (UK) media outlets picked up on the stories, and a rare request by CNN's direct competitor in the UK, Sky News, asked for special permission to run the content, which was granted. This is especially noteworthy because Sky holds the rights to the Premier League. The series was also publicly praised by the UK's biggest anti-discrimination football body, *Kick It Out*. Its chairperson, Sanjay Bhandari, thanked CNN "for maintaining the spotlight and holding the gaze on a tough topic beyond just reacting to incidents." *Kick It Out* even promoted our work on its social platforms (Bhandari, 2020).

I highlight this work because it shows the power of journalism, and also brings it back to the very themes that put a bullseye on my back from the South African rugby fraternity almost 20 years ago. Who knew then that the cuts I was taking would be something setting me up for success now with CNN? Our work has made a difference. One day, we will all pass on, but good journalism, sometimes forged in the painful fires of battle, will live on eternally because it evokes an unmistakable feeling.

As the revered African American author and civil rights activist Maya Angelou famously wrote, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." (Gallo, 2014). Let your storytelling make people feel something, because when they do, ideas are sparked, and change beyond your wildest dreams occurs.

References

1. Bhandari, S. 2020. *Kick it out*. 6 February. Available: <https://twitter.com/SanjayKickItOut/status/1225401467449856003?s=20> (Accessed 10 April 2020).
2. Desai, A and Nabbi, Z. 2010. *The race to transform: Sport in post-apartheid South Africa*. South Africa: HSRC Press
3. Gallo, C. 2014. *The Maya Angelou Quote that will Radically Improve your business*. Available: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2014/05/31/the-maya-angelou-quote-that-will-radically-improve-your-business/> (Accessed 10 April 2020).
4. O'Carroll, E. 2011. *Political misquotes: The 10 most famous things never actually said*. Available: <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2011/0603/Political-misquotes-The-10-most-famous-things-never-actually-said/First-they-ignore-you.-Then-they-laugh-at-you.-Then-they-attack-you.-Then-you-win.-Mohandas-Gandhi> (Accessed 10 April 2020).
5. Shakur, T and Steinberg, L. 2000. *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*. Great Britain: Quartet Books



Zayn Nabbi, a graduate in journalism from the Durban University of Technology, is an award-winning journalist, and works as a senior producer for CNN International in their London bureau. His role on the network's flagship sports show, *World Sport*, is to help lead the channel's coverage at major sports events like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup. He's passionate about social justice issues, and has been the lead producer on CNN's agenda-setting work in their *Fighting Racism in Football* campaign, which has shone a light on institutional racism in the game. In his spare time, Zayn shouts loudly on his couch for Bafana Bafana, Barcelona and the Pittsburgh Steelers.