CHAPTER FIVE

Playing for power
Rugby, Afrikaner nationalism and masculinity in South Africa

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Is there a link between rugby, Afrikaner nationalism and masculinity? The initial responses to this question could range from amused agreement to puzzlement or strong denial. In this chapter, I attempt to supply a more considered answer, starting with an analysis of the growth of rugby in Afrikaner circles. I then evaluate the dynamics of nationalism and the ethos of rugby culture, and look at how these two correlate with each other. Finally, I examine how the perceptions associated with rugby have helped to shape male identity.

Dissemination of rugby among Afrikaners

The role of the University of Stellenbosch in the Western Cape is the key to understanding the historical connection between rugby, Afrikaner nationalism and the dissemination of the sport among the volk. For the best part of the 19th century, Stellenbosch was considered the leading university in influential Afrikaner circles. It was to Afrikaners what the Oxbridge universities were to the national life of Britain and the Ivy League universities were to America.

Stellenbosch grew out of the Victoria College to become the first independent Afrikaans university in 1918. The University Council, representing the Afrikaans community, deliberately aimed to give the university a specific Afrikaner identity to counter that of the neighbouring and predominantly English-speaking University of Cape Town. ‘Stellenbosch’, it was claimed later, was ‘born out of the need of the Afrikaner volk.’ As a ‘true volksuniversiteit, it had to act as a steady light … and beacon, illuminating the road of Afrikanerdon. It was within this context that the game of rugby was played by the sons of the Afrikaner elite.

The first documented proof of a rugby club at Stellenbosch dates back to 1880, but the University Club was only officially founded in 1919. Rugby was already firmly established in Cape Town by the late 19th century, and its close proximity to Stellenbosch undoubtedly facilitated the development of rugby there. Stellenbosch had a head start over Afrikaner communities in the interior, particularly in the northern Boer Republics, where in some rural districts the game was completely unknown at the turn of the century.

Stellenbosch was also the first and, for a while, the only institution where young, predominantly Afrikaner men were concentrated in one place for a reasonable period of time and where they had sufficient leisure to indulge in what has been called a game played ‘by young males in a state of hormonal pugnacity.’ Rugby at Stellenbosch, however, was more than just an outlet for robust males in the prime of manhood. The game became part and parcel of Afrikaner student culture. One commentator regarded ‘the way in which students could transform their fun and play into a reverberating cultural act, as one of the salient features of student life in Stellenbosch’. With the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, rugby became as much part of Afrikaner culture as boeremusiek (popular Afrikaner folk music with nationalistic overtones), volkspele (Afrikaner folk dancing), and celebrations like the 1938 centenary of the Great Trek. The sport became part of a cluster of cultural symbols closely associated with a resurgent Afrikanerdon.

Two outstanding personalities who virtually became rugby legends in their own lifetime, A.F. Markositer and, later, Danie Craven, did much to turn Stellenbosch into the Mecca of 20th century South African rugby. For Craven it was the ‘task of Stellenbosch to train and provide players for the club, Western Province, and South Africa. But it also had to do more. It had to train players for other clubs and provinces’. Stellenbosch Rugby Club regularly took the game further afield through annual tours to the Cape countryside, allowing people...
in ‘areas deprived of the opportunities enjoyed by students’ to savour what was considered ‘sparkling student rugby’. The process of strengthening the rugby fraternity and enhancing the reputation of Stellenbosch spawned its own sub-culture, in which enthusiasm for rugby as an Afrikaner male activity was equated with robust patriotism to the exclusion of other, perhaps more threatening, world-views. F. van Zyl Slabbert, parliamentary leader of the white opposition in the mid-1980s, has graphically recalled how disillusioned he became with this sub-culture during his rugby-playing days at Stellenbosch in the 1960s:

... the post-mortems after the game with pot-bellied, beer-drinking ‘experts’ from way back; the sight of players continually ingratiating themselves with sporting correspondents for some coverage; the pseudo-patriotic ethos that pervaded discussions on the importance of rugby in our national life; seeing successful farmers grovelling at the feet of arrogant second year students simply because we were ‘Maties’ [nickname for Stellenbosch students] on tour in their vicinity. Mentally it was not only escapist, it was a social narcotic to anything else going on in our society..." 

The annual rugby tour was only one way of forging linkages between Stellenbosch and rugby on the platteland (countryside). More intensive and enduring was the role played by Afrikaans-speaking teachers and predikante (ministers of religion) in diffusing and popularising rugby on the platteland. Four years of teacher-training at Stellenbosch, and seven years of divinity studies for predikante at the Dutch Reformed Church seminary which was part of the university, not only equipped young men teachers and predikante with degrees, but added a thorough knowledge of and unbridled enthusiasm for rugby to their educational and theological armoury. From Stellenbosch they sallied forth to towns in the platteland where, as local notables with considerable influence, they encouraged and strengthened the rugby-playing fraternity. In the Karoo town of De Aar, for example, it was a source of pride that in the 1950s the four local predikante not only involved themselves in the game, but that between them they had a sufficient number of sons to field a complete team. More generally, one author claimed in 1956: ‘It is often said, with truth, that Stellenbosch-trained predikants and teachers have had the biggest share in making South Africa so rugby-conscious."

The dissemination of rugby among Afrikaners in the Transvaal followed a somewhat different trajectory. Until the bilingual Transvaal University College was transformed into the more purified Afrikaner and openly nationalistic University of Pretoria in the 1930s, there was no single institution in the North which, like Stellenbosch in the South, could attract a large number of young Afrikaner men. Although competitive rugby had been played at the Transvaal University College since 1909, the institution was less of a focal point for the diffusion of the game in Afrikaner ranks and its influence less pervasive than that of Stellenbosch."

While Stellenbosch was an almost exclusively student town, Pretoria was the administrative capital of the country after unification in 1910, and the subsequent growth of the city was closely linked to the expansion of the civil service and related government agencies. The majority of young men, including Afrikaners, who moved to Pretoria in the early part of the century, came in a working capacity and had less time for leisure activities than students. Those who were interested in sport joined open clubs like Pretoria Rugby Club or Harlequins, but rugby to them was less of an all-consuming interest than it was for students. The popularity of the game fluctuated between 1910 and 1919. However, it survived and began to flourish in the 1920s with the provision of better playing surfaces and through the energetic efforts of administrators, officials and certain players, many of whom had learned their rugby at Stellenbosch before moving to Pretoria.

With the increasing urbanisation of Afrikaners during this period, concerted efforts were made to reach out to young Afrikaners who came from the rural areas and found themselves in a new and strange environment, and to introduce them to rugby as a game which could instill discipline and self-confidence. It was argued at the time that ‘rugby is the best means of helping them to expend their energy that could otherwise steer them in a harmful direction.’ The process at work here was not that dissimilar from what took place in the United
Kingdom during the latter part of the 19th century when ‘muscular Christian’ priests, many of them educated at public schools, took an active part in diffusing rugby among the working classes. The game was regarded as a

means of moral and physical salvation, as activities which could help the denizens of the slums to become strong and physically healthy and to develop traits of character which would enable them to improve their miserable lot.¹⁴

By contrast, in neighbouring Johannesburg, the city of gold and commerce, little was done to draw the Afrikaner working class into the game. The rugby clubs in Johannesburg were predominantly English speaking and middle class. More so than in Pretoria, members of these clubs saw little reason to concern themselves with the recreational activities of working class Afrikanders. Although individual Afrikanders excelled at rugby in some of these clubs, on the whole, until about the 1930s, rugby did not have great appeal for Afrikanders as a group in Johannesburg. Besides the fact that no real attempt was made by the clubs to popularise the game among Afrikanders in Johannesburg, working Afrikanders themselves had relatively little leisure time available to indulge in organised sport.¹⁵ In addition, there was no Afrikaner educational or similar institution in Johannesburg at the time to promote the game.

This, however, should not detract from the fact that even at this early stage, after World War I, a number of Afrikaner players, mainly (though not exclusively) from the Western Province, rose to national prominence. After the war, sport generally experienced a revival and the visit of a New Zealand Imperial Service team in 1919 gave an added spark to the quickening of interest in rugby. This tour paved the way for the first South African rugby tour to Australia and New Zealand in 1921. Afrikaans speakers were well represented in Springbok ranks. Commenting on this, an Australian rugby critic was struck by the way in which

an essentially winter game can flourish in a hot country, and how it can attract men who have not a long heritage of

British sport behind them ... For the Dutch [Afrikaans] South Africans have taken to the rugby game as keenly as their English compatriots. In fact, they seem to outshine the English South Africans.¹⁶

During this period, though, rugby had not yet been invested with a narrow nationalistic Afrikaner ethos. The game was rather seen as an excellent way of promoting understanding between Afrikanders and English speakers and cementing a common bond between the ‘two white sections’ which could foster the notion of a white ‘South Africanism’, and could ultimately act in the interest of ‘the higher scheme of imperial unity’.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the fact that Afrikanders made their mark on the playing field in retrospect singled out the game as a sport with the potential to enhance the self-image of the Afrikaner.

Rugby and Afrikaner nationalism

Writing on the return of the rugby Springboks to the international fold in 1992 after 18 years of isolation, the British journalist, Frank Keating, reflected on the relationship between Afrikaner politics, nationalism and apartheid:

Rugby is the mother’s milk, the lifeblood, the elixir that fuels ... [Afrikaner] arrogance. And clothed in their vestments of green and gold, the Springboks are religious icons and totems to the faith.¹⁸

This is an over-simplification of a more complex set of evolving beliefs, but it does capture some of the essentials of the intimate relationship between rugby and the development of Afrikaner culture and nationalism. It is not, however, a straightforward relationship. The reasons why a marriage between rugby and Afrikaner nationalism took place at all call for an understanding of the historical dynamics of Afrikaner nationalism and the ethos of the game itself.

The 1930s and 1940s were important years. Afrikaner nationalism at this time can be interpreted as a broad social and political response to the different facets of the impact of capitalism on South African
BEYOND THE TRYLINE

society, which left certain groups, including a large number of Afrikaners, stranded. It was within a context of increasing urbanisation and secondary industrialisation, as well as continuing British imperial influence in economic and cultural spheres, that Afrikaner nationalism made headway. Important ideological building blocks in this process were the promotion of a common language, the emphasis on what was perceived to be a common past, the unity of a common sense of religion, and the construction of what was considered a distinct and authentic Afrikaner culture.

A complex network of Afrikaner economic and cultural organisations was established and strengthened as a countervailing force to dominant British institutions and cultural practices. In the financial field, banks (such as Barclays Bank) and insurance companies (like Old Mutual) with large British assets were opposed by Volkskas and Sanlam respectively, which concentrated on mobilising Afrikaner capital in the interest of the volk. At another level, youth movements like the Boy Scouts had their Afrikaner counterpart in the Voortrekkers.19

Representation of history played an important part in the construction of Afrikaner nationalism. The 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek, with nine ox wagons moving slowly from Cape Town to the Northern provinces, turned out to be unprecedented political and cultural theatre. The centenary trek, symbolically rooted in an ideal and heroic past, gave powerful expression to a desire for a more prosperous future, free of British domination. Pre-industrial ‘pure’ Afrikaner culture was emphasised and reflected in dress, dance and Voortrekker kultuur in general.20 It also gave rise to a renewed interest in a sport like jukskie (a form of ten-pin bowling), which had claims of being an original Voortrekker form of recreation. After 1938, jukskie gained some foothold in Afrikaner circles and was organised and played on a competitive basis,21 but in terms of the overall sporting scene it remained very much a minority interest.

It was rugby that continued to capture the imagination of many Afrikaners. The gradual Afrikaner appropriation of the game was not without paradox: given that the main thrust of Afrikaner nationalism was often directed against the perceived hegemony of English culture, why did Afrikaners show such a strong interest in a game that originated in England and epitomised the British upper middle class value system?

Even if nationalist cultural entrepreneurs had hoped to establish a completely new and authentic all-Afrikaner culture, such a project was not always feasible or viable. To create a pure, hermetically sealed culture is not easily accomplished; it is often more practicable to adapt, reshape and mould whatever promising material is at hand. In the case of rugby, Afrikaners had already proved that they could excel at the game, and it made sense to proceed from that vantage point.

The nature of the game itself also appealed to the evolving self-image of nationalist Afrikaners. Implicit in rugby is a certain duality. On the one hand, it can be seen as a collective sport of combat which emphasises stamina, strength, speed and courage; symbolically, the rugged aspects of the game could easily be equated with a resurgent and rampant Afrikaner nationalism. At the same time, despite being a rough affair, it was considered a gentleman’s game and an excellent way of inculcating moral discipline in future leaders. These ambiguous qualities of rugby fitted in well with the physical, psychological and ideological needs of nationalist Afrikaners at a specific historical juncture. It is with considerable justification therefore that authors Archer and Bouillon can claim that rugby was a sport ideally suited to ideological investment and the Afrikaners, who considered themselves to be a civilising elite, a pioneer people conquering barbarism, recognised an image of their own ideology in its symbols.22

In time though, as Afrikaners stamped their authority on the game, certain shifts in values and attitudes took place. Rugby might have originated in England and subsequently been exported to the colonies. But in line with the wider Afrikaner quest for independent nationhood, the game came to be an integral part of the attempt to transform and transcend the imperial heritage by reformulating and modifying the values associated with it. Whereas the British might have projected the game as a training ground for the inculcation and encouragement
of values such as sportsmanship, gentlemanly conduct and fair-mindedness, Afrikaners placed less emphasis on these and more on the game as an opportunity to demonstrate presumed Afrikaner qualities such as ruggedness, endurance, forcefulness and determination. Moreover, while the British regarded rugby as part of the imperial sporting ethos, confirming relations between the different sporting families of the Commonwealth, Afrikaners viewed the game in explicitly nationalistic and ethnic terms. Indeed, as one commentator has noted in general, ‘the playing fields bequeathed by the Empire have become the symbolic sites of post-imperial struggles — for power, for identity, for the style of self-determination’. This was particularly true in South Africa. In other Commonwealth countries, such as New Zealand, the desire for national self-expression through sport was still moderated by a relatively strong sense of imperial kinship. But in South Africa, in Afrikaner ranks in the decades since the 1930s, Springbok rugby carried a thinly disguised anti-imperialistic message.

In analysing the linkages between the discourses of rugby and nationalist ideology it is possible, of course, to overstate the case. It can be argued that there is nothing particularly exceptional or significant in a group of people supporting their country’s team in a specific sport. They do so for a variety of reasons which do not necessarily reflect a wider nationalistic ideology. J.G. Kellas has made the salutary point that

the most popular form of nationalist behaviour in many countries is in sport, where masses of people become highly emotional in support of their national team. But the same people may display no obvious nationalism in politics, such as supporting a nationalist party or demanding home rule or national independence.

In South Africa, however, the situation was somewhat different. Support for the Springboks was much more closely aligned to the overall Afrikaner nationalist enterprise in its various cultural and political manifestations. English-speaking South Africans might also have supported the Springboks, but their support was more muted, tempered by notions of friendly rivalry between different commonwealth countries. For many Afrikaners, this was not the case; support for the Springboks was on the same continuum as membership of the National Party.

For Afrikaners who felt themselves oppressed and disadvantaged by the continuing British influence in South Africa, rugby created an opportunity to beat the English at their own game. It is no surprise that rivalry between Afrikaans and English speakers was particularly fierce on the playing fields. Clashes between Afrikaans and English schools, universities and clubs gave the lie to the cliché that rugby was ‘only a game’. One ‘participant-observer’ at an inter-varsity game between the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria, after the latter had become an autonomous Afrikaner university in the 1930s, has recalled:

When Witwatersrand played Pretoria, it wasn’t just rugby they were playing, there was an enmity and a bitterness and a hatred of each other. The overtones were quite clear. The major goal was to beat the other university not only in the game. I think the competition between two such universities was naturally bitter … because it was the child of the hatred of the Afrikaans — or the English-speaking. It certainly didn’t dissipate the tension.

Much the same could be said for the annual inter-varsities between the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. When South Africa competed internationally, the outcome of matches against British teams was of more than just sporting interest. The Springbok tour to Britain in 1951-52, which saw the South Africans winning 30 out of 31 games, was hailed as a major national triumph; by contrast, when the Springboks lost two test matches against the British Lions during the 1955 tour of South Africa, the result was met with stunned disbelief: ‘How has it happened that a boer has been defeated by an Englishman on the rugby field?’ Some players even received death threats from the public for bringing the ‘national game’ into disrepute by losing against the British.
While Afrikaner-English rivalry was real enough, Afrikaners shared the middle class character of the game with their English counterparts. The steady upward mobility of Afrikaners, particularly under a sympathetic government in power from 1948 onwards, was accompanied by the proliferation of Afrikaner educational institutions with rugby as the main winter game. The pool of potential rugby players from a burgeoning middle class constantly grew. Commenting on the 1956 Springbok tour to Australia and New Zealand, G. Hogg, chairman of the New Zealand Rugby Council, considered the Springboks to be ‘mostly the educated type, whilst the All Blacks are mostly workmen who were used to a hard life’. It was difficult for a player not comfortably employed or who did not have some means of private income or other form of assistance to play top-level rugby for an extended period. This prompted Martin Pelser, a prominent Springbok flank forward in the 1960s who had turned to professional rugby, to remark on the class nature of the union game:

I cannot recount the many days of unpaid leave I had to take for the sake of amateur rugby ... Amateur rugby, and especially Springbok rugby, is a game for rich men’s sons. I, and others like me, could no longer afford it.

In the early 1970s, half of the provincial rugby players could be classified as white collar workers, 21 per cent as professionals, ten per cent as students, eight per cent as farmers, and under ten per cent as blue collar workers. While these statistics are revealing, it has to be borne in mind that in certain areas like Despatch and Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape, the game had a considerable following amongst the white working class employed in the motor manufacturing industry.

In general, soccer did not enjoy the same middle class status as rugby among Afrikaners. Working class children of the 1920s and early 1930s, living in cities like Cape Town, often played soccer instead of rugby. This was mainly because, in the absence of grass playing fields or large suburban lawns, it was easier to kick a soccer ball in some dusty and stony backstreet than to play a hard, physical game like rugby on an unyielding surface. With the rise of organised Afrikanerdom and an assertive middle class, soccer’s working class origins were frowned upon. Moreover, the fact that soccer was a very popular sport among black people gave it, in an increasingly racially stratified society, the tag of being a ‘black man’s game’.34

The middle class character of rugby facilitated its acceptance as a constituent part of the white, and especially Afrikaner, establishment. Many of the players came from more or less the same background, and shared the same values. To play rugby was a respectable pastime that met with the approval and confirmation of wider society. ‘Mr Rugby’ himself, Danie Craven, recalled that in his playing days in the 1930s, the word ‘rugby’ was a name ‘to conjure’ with, a magical word, and a rugby player was admired by all and sundry.35 Admittedly, not all the spectators were middle class, but they were sufficiently ethnically integrated into Afrikaner society not to allow matters of class to affect their support of the game.

The way Afrikaner rugby meshed with the establishment fitted in with the general sociological pattern discernible in other rugby-playing countries. In 1974 Chris Laidlaw, a New Zealand scrumhalf and Oxford scholar, noted in no uncertain terms that:

A central reason for rugby’s international conformity, is the fact that it is, universally, an establishment activity. Distressingly so. It is normally played and administered by conservative elements in society. The ... ‘rugger buggers’ of today are far from radical; rugby’s tradition would hardly have survived if they were. They are acquiring reputations as thundering bores with short hair and a suspicion of ‘lefties’. Today’s players are by and large tomorrow’s Tories.36

Likewise, in the South African context, it has been claimed that players generally hold conservative world views, and that the nature of the game, with its particular traditions, seemed to attract ‘authoritarian personality types’.37 These corollaries are not without significance for Afrikaner nationalism; they reinforced values like respect for perceived tradition, rules and authority, integral to the nationalist movement, and at the same time encouraged a certain cultural conformity.
As a form of popular culture, rugby had considerable self-generating power, but it also needed to be recharged by outside currents in the form of touring teams. Such teams often received tumultuous welcomes and almost saturation media coverage. During the 1970 tour of New Zealand to South Africa, Laidlaw found that

the All Blacks were pictured, pestered, pondered, prodded and praised until every man, woman and child knew that this player ate eggs for breakfast, that one ate spinach, this lock-forward visited the toilet twice a day, and that one twenty times.38

Rugby tours by overseas countries provided a focal point for national interest, an opportunity to showcase a ‘sanitised’ South Africa during the first decades of apartheid and, perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate that the Afrikaner could beat the best the world could offer. Cultural entrepreneurs explicitly stated that such events were important for promoting ethnic self-esteem.39

Rugby’s considerable spectator appeal – for example, the 1955 tour of the British Lions was watched by record-breaking crowds – further contributed to a common consciousness. Interest in rugby can be seen as one element contributing to the shaping of what Benedict Anderson, in a memorable phrase, has called ‘an imagined community’.40 One is hard-pressed to find a clearer expression of this sense of community and the fusion of the private and public worlds than in the official message of Danie Craven upon the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the South African Rugby Board in 1964:

South Africa, this is your celebration, your festival, for the game belongs to you ... You have seen bright and dark days, smiles and tears; you have experienced tension and gaiety; certainty and uncertainty, but they have made you stronger and nobler. They have welded you together as nothing else in our history; and it has been this game which has provided you with a feeling of belongingness, of a oneness which so few people ever feel. It has taken you away from your own world into a larger world ... it has given you friends ...41

Shared sporting enthusiasms hold out the strong possibility of sharing other wider interests as well. In this respect, Eric Hobsbawm has neatly outlined the role of sport in the formulation of a nationalistic consciousness:

What has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individual can identify with the nation as symbolised by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one time in life has wanted, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of 11 named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself.42

In South Africa, rugby performed precisely this function of merging and strengthening affinities. In this sense, the game can be seen as a powerful, if informal, disseminator of nationalist sentiment and a source of identification with the volk at large. For outside visitors to the country, the neat fit between nationalist politics and rugby as an integral element of Afrikaner popular culture was a distinct feature of the social landscape.43

Equally pertinent is the way in which an attempt was made to indigenise and ‘Afrikanerise’ the culture surrounding rugby. One area in which this found expression was the widespread practice of assigning nicknames to prominent players. Nicknames in sport are, of course, not uncommon. They often serve the purpose of decreasing the psychological distance between the successful performer and the average spectator. It can be seen as a symbolic way of ‘cutting a player down to the size of ordinary people’, and drawing the player into a private world of the familiar and the commonplace.44 What is particularly noticeable about rugby nicknames in South Africa is the way in which they reflect an Afrikaner rural background. Approximately 60 per cent of recorded nicknames have rural or related connotations. ‘Jakkals’ (jackal) Keevy, ‘Hasie’ (bunny) Versfeldt, ‘Koei’ (cow) Brink, ‘Skilpad’ (tortoise) Eloff, ‘Padda’ (frog) Melville, ‘Ape’
(monkey) Pretorius, ‘Appels’ (apples) Odendaal, ‘Wa’ (wagon) Lampecht, and ‘Boon’ (bean) Rautenbach were just a few of the names Afrikaner rugby enthusiasts affectionately bestowed on players.\(^45\) The rural imagery evoked by these names correlated with a dimension of Afrikaner nationalism which had, as its representational theme, the notion of Afrikaners as solid, pioneering men of the soil, subsumed under the honorary title ‘boere’.\(^46\) On the basis of this, it is not inconceivable that inter-locking emblematic themes, drawing upon the familiar, acted as a further factor blending nationalism and rugby in the public mind.

**Afrikanerdom and rugby politics**

The question of nationalism and control over the game was closely linked. The Second World War proved to be the catalyst for highlighting this inter-relationship. The decision of the United Party government to participate in the Second World War in 1939 had a deeply divisive effect on the white community. A considerable number of nationalistic Afrikaners opposed South Africa’s entry into the war, arguing that there was no need for South Africa to rush to the aid of the British, who from the days of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 were perceived by many Afrikaners as the traditional ‘enemy’.

These antagonisms spilled over onto the playing fields and clubs when predominantly English-speaking and pro-war administrators collected money for war funds during rugby fixtures and organised games with the specific aim of boosting the war coffers. The anti-war faction retaliated by organising games on behalf of the *Reddingsdaadbond*, an Afrikaner organisation which ostensibly collected funds for ‘poor white’ Afrikaners. This added fuel to the fire, with some rugby unions—most notably Eastern Province and Western Province—being split right down the middle. Dissidents, incensed that rugby should be used to support the war effort, formed their own unions and arranged their own games. Rugby was now divided along pro-war and anti-war lines and the schism had a rough English-Afrikaans correlate.\(^47\)

At the rugby-playing Mecca, the University of Stellenbosch, it was claimed that the club had no option but to break away because the Western Province Union had decided to introduce politics into sport. Conveniently ignoring that the establishment of their own union was equally political, the legendary and influential A.F. Markötter argued that rugby was of greater importance than any other possible concern. Upon leaving the Western Province Union, he exclaimed: ‘Mr Chairman, I have no religion. I have no politics. My religion and politics are rugby. You will not stop Stellenbosch from playing rugby.’\(^48\)

Although the divisions were serious enough at the time, once South Africa’s involvement in the war had ended in 1945, it was possible in the less volatile post-war political atmosphere to work towards a reconciliation between the two factions. After patient negotiations, the breakaway clubs were eventually unconditionally admitted back into the fold.\(^49\) To all intents and purposes, quiet had returned to the rugby front in 1945, but much of it was illusory since the thorny question of political control of the sport remained. Although Afrikaners had taken to rugby in large numbers, they had yet to capture the administration of the game and dictate its politics. Commenting on the emotions engendered by the divisions of the war years, A.J. Pienaar, President of the South African Rugby Board, noted:

*Dissident clubs should remember that rugby football was really an English game, introduced by English pioneers, and fostered in this country by all sections of the community, English, Afrikaans, Jews, Gentiles and coloured people, and that the dissident’s views were not the only views that could be expressed or respected.*\(^50\)

Although unintended, implicit in this was an important message for Afrikaners: unless they had full control of the various bodies involved in rugby, they would be unable to influence the wider social and political dimensions of the sport in South Africa.

Afrikanisation of the rugby establishment was a slow process. In the Transvaal it took at least 20 years for Afrikaners to gain ultimate control of the union. Attempts had already been made in the mid-1940s to oust English speakers from the administration of the union, but it was only in 1965 that J. le Roux was able to take the reins from
the long-serving H.J. Sanderson, as the first Afrikaner president of the Transvaal Rugby Union. Le Roux’s election was preceded by an intensive campaign to influence various clubs and to ensure that members with Afrikaner sympathies were well placed in the organisational structure of the union. Le Roux’s victory did not come as a bolt from the blue; it was carefully orchestrated and meticulously planned. Nothing was left to chance: on the eve of the election arrangements were even made with the employer of a ‘doubtful’ member who, it was suspected, might vote against the Afrikaner faction, to send him out of town on ‘business’ on the crucial day to ensure that he would not be able to cast his vote.51

Of undoubted importance in bringing about Afrikaner control of the rugby administration was the Afrikaner Broederbond (the Brotherhood). The Broederbond was a secret, ostensibly cultural organisation consisting of elite Afrikaners. It worked ceaselessly to promote exclusively Afrikaner interests in different levels of society. Rugby being considered the ‘national’ game of the Afrikaner, it is not surprising to find that, over the years, the Broederbond gained significant influence in the rugby unions.52

What is surprising, however, is that Danie Craven, chairman of the South African Rugby Board from 1956 on, was not a member of the Broederbond. Why was such an important position entrusted to a non-Broeder? Part of the answer is that even though the Broederbond was powerful, it was not omnipotent. Craven, through his long association with rugby in South Africa and his overseas contacts, and by virtue of his forceful personality, managed to attract support from Broeder and non-Broeder alike. Ousting Craven and installing a Broeder would have called for an exceptional effort and a unique candidate to match Craven’s credentials. It seems, too, that in broad ideological terms, the Broederbond was able to live with Craven. While he was more pragmatic and less purist than most Broeders, the division between Craven and the Broederbond was not unbridgeable. Craven had grown used to dealing with Broeders at the University of Stellenbosch, and the rugby world was no different. This does not imply that the two parties trusted each other whole-heartedy. Craven made it clear that he would not tolerate undue interference in rugby affairs by the Broederbond. In turn, at the time of the South African tour to New Zealand in 1956 with Craven as manager, there were widespread rumours that the Broederbond had seen to it that D. de Villiers, a Broeder, was appointed as assistant manager with the deliberate intention that he should keep a watchful eye on Craven.53

While Afrikaner control over the administration of rugby was well established in the 1960s, changes in the social composition of Afrikanerdom began to affect the popularity of rugby as the main, and often only, sporting pursuit of young Afrikaner men. These changes were related to a booming economy and the increasing embourgeoisement of Afrikaners. The South African economy registered a real growth rate of 8.1 per cent in 1963, 6.7 per cent in 1964 and 6.6 per cent in 1965. More and more Afrikaners had come to excel at business and in the professions, and along with their domination of the civil service as an almost exclusive preserve, they gained in confidence and social self-expression. They no longer felt inferior to English speakers. With greater wealth at their disposal and a modified self-image, it was possible to embrace more varied leisure-time interests. Sports such as swimming, cricket, golf and tennis slowly began to compete with rugby.54 It was with some unease that the rugby establishment commented upon these trends. The youth, it was claimed in 1968, was becoming ‘soft’ and ‘King Rugby’ ran the risk of becoming a third-rate sport in South Africa.55 It was an unduly pessimistic view. Although social developments did affect rugby, the game had over the years built up too much support among Afrikaners to be seriously threatened. The linkages between Afrikaner nationalism and rugby might have become slightly more tenuous, but they were not in any danger of being severed. Rugby’s real challenge in the late 1960s was not to come from changing social patterns among Afrikaners, but from an Afrikaner government intent on the rigid application of apartheid regulations.

Apartheid was more than a system of legally entrenched racial discrimination; it also completely skewed the distribution of access to resources. Facilities for whites were far superior to those of blacks. This gave the lie to the often-quoted claim that apartheid provided ‘separate but equal’ opportunities. Having made rugby its ‘national’ game, the Afrikaner establishment had little concern for the rugby being played by other population groups. Although black rugby had
a long history in the Eastern Cape (where missionary influence coupled with the zeal of new rugby converts carried the ball from the late 19th century through to the 1960s), its unions functioned separately from the white ones.\textsuperscript{56} The inequality between white and black rugby was graphically reflected in the contrasting conditions in which the game was played. Mono Badela, a well-known figure in Eastern Cape black rugby circles, highlighted these:

*Talk South African rugby, and the images which spring to mind are fairly obvious. Sweaty white men in green jerseys. Springbok badges on their chests. Titanic battles on the plush green grass of Ellis Park, Loftus Versfeld or Newlands. Currie Cup fever, tours to Australia, France and England ... The pictures are vivid and clear ... but there is another side to South African rugby – the game played in the dusty Eastern Cape townships of New Brighton, Mdantsane, KwaZakhele and Zwid. There, the images are of dilapidated stadiums which look more like cross-country courses than playing fields. Scenes of African and coloured working class people, scrumming down on a dusty stony surface, car headlights illuminating a cold winter’s night.\textsuperscript{57}*

In the 1960s rugby, like almost everything else in South Africa, was strictly segregated. No ‘mixed’ teams, and no matches between black and white teams were allowed. Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, whose name has become synonymous with the period of high apartheid, was not prepared to grant any concessions on this score – even if it involved jeopardising the chances of international tours to South Africa. His announcement to this effect in 1965 effectively scuttled the 1967 All Black tour of South Africa, which would have included some Maoris.

After Verwoerd’s assassination in 1966, his successor, B.J. Vorster, relented somewhat. Vorster, himself having been active in rugby administration in the Eastern Cape during the war years, was sensitive to the importance of rugby as a flag bearer of Afrikaner nationalism in the international arena. Even so, his decision to allow so-called ‘non-whites’ in foreign teams to play in South Africa met with opposition from within and contributed to the breakaway of a few National Party members of parliament to form the Herstigte (Reformed) National Party in 1969. While Vorster had opened the way for the 1970 All Black tour to South Africa, which contained three Maoris and one Samoan, his ‘largesse’ did not extend to cricket, and an English cricket team with a former African coloured player, Basil D’Oliveira, was not allowed to play in South Africa.

Vorster argued, rather unconvincingly, that D’Oliveira’s selection was not based on merit and that he had been deliberately chosen to embarrass the South African government.\textsuperscript{58} What is revealing is that Vorster seems to have been more concerned about the international stature of rugby, the premier Afrikaner sport, than that of cricket, a game played mainly by English speakers and one at which few Afrikanners excelled at international level at that time. Narrow ethnic considerations seem to have been a factor in permitting concessions for rugby, but not for cricket. It is also likely that, at a time of increasing political pressure from those opposed to ‘mixed’ tours, Vorster was keen to placate such elements and willing to sacrifice cricket (but not rugby) in the process.

The end of the 1960s was a turning-point as far as South African rugby relations were concerned. Nothing made this clearer than the 1969-70 tour to Great Britain. Under the guidance of Peter Hain, who had been to school in South Africa, an assortment of anti-apartheid organisations launched large-scale demonstrations against the tour. Through various disruptive tactics they came close to forcing the South African management to disband the tour. In South Africa the conduct of the demonstrators was met with stunned indignation. It was unheard of that the cream of South African rugby should be humiliated and insulted by demonstrators whom the Afrikaans press often described as ‘long-haired, unwashed, drug-taking, communist agitators’. Under these circumstances, nothing gave the Afrikaner rugby public more pleasure than when Mannetjies Roux, a backline replacement, impetuously and unceremoniously kicked a demonstrator in the pants during a pitch invasion at Coventry – an act which immediately elevated the already popular Roux to the ranks of a folk hero among Afrikaners.\textsuperscript{59}
On the return of the South African team from the demo-ridden tour, Danie Craven declared:

We despise the conduct of the demonstrators, the way in which rugby matches were turned into chaos, the childishness and banalities of the demonstrators. We would like to put it clearly and openly that if these people think that they can influence us or that we shall change our way of life because of demonstrations, they are making a grave error.

As the subsequent two decades proved, Craven was wrong. The apartheid order came under serious threat from within and without, and sport isolation certainly played a part, though not necessarily a decisive one, in bringing this about. During this period Afrikanerdom had to choose between its racial politics and international rugby. It was reluctant to make the choice, and it was only in 1990, with the unbanning of political organisations, that the choice was made and that South African rugby was welcomed back into the international fold.

Rugby and masculinity

Much of Afrikaner historiography dealing with the history of the volk has been predominantly ‘conceived of in terms of male actors who create and sustain the nation by military and constitutional or political struggles from which women were by definition excluded’. Such an approach is problematical on three counts: it renders women historically invisible; as a natural corollary it contains no conception of gender relations; and the understanding of nationalism and the volk is restricted to the political, thus lacking inter-locking social and cultural dimensions.

Rugby is an arena where not only nationalism is played out in a particular way; gender relations are also influenced and reinforced. Rugby, in part at least because of the rough, physical nature of the game, has acquired a reputation of being pre-eminently ‘a man’s game’. It has been described as the ‘ultimate man-maker’, inculcating values such as ‘courage, self-control and stamina’. All of these, it is claimed, are the products of the ‘man-to-man’ element in rugby, for to ‘play rugger well, you must play it fiercely, and at the same time, and all the time, remember while doing so that you are a gentleman’.

From a very young age, boys in rugby-playing countries have been socialised into a world where rugby is an important element in the construction of male identity. Although some boys might have spurned the narrow basis upon which male identity was defined, the culture of the sport, imbued with a strong sense of tradition, encouraged conformity. The presumed connection between rugby and manliness was often woven into father-son relationships. An evocative illustration of this ritual transmission is to be found in many photographs of primary school rugby: ‘A real lineout on a full-size field of little boys with bewildered expressions, knobbly knees, and spindly arms, all in real uniforms and short hair. Savage-looking parents patrol the sideline.’

The association between rugby and manliness was often carried over from youth to adulthood, and it was also reinforced off the playing field through the practices and rituals which became part of the rugby-playing community. One such South African practice worth recounting is that of borselling: the team lifts one of the members chest-high and beats him on the backside with bare hands. For some it was meant to be a form of initiation; for others who had transgressed the rules of a touring party it was a form of punishment. But there is also a sense in which this act can be seen as promoting team cohesion and therefore, implicitly, firmer male bonding.

Apart from the players whose ‘maleness’ could find forceful expression on rugby tours, the game also offered male spectators an opportunity of celebrating, however briefly, a collective manhood. A journalist has recalled the importance that watching rugby at Newlands in Cape Town had for her father in the 1950s and early 1960s:

For him it was a vicarious pleasure, a dream of camaraderie and manhood that assured him an escape into a world of physical splendour that was reasonably cheerful and brotherly, a sort of war with rules, and oranges to suck at half-time.
Since the game was such an overpowering male activity, where ‘maleness’ mattered above all else, it is not surprising that because of inadequate contact with members of the opposite sex some rugby men were inclined to stereotype women. Thus, Danie Craven’s view of women was that they ‘should be soft, soft by nature, soft by word of mouth. If they are not soft, they simply do not have influence over a man’. Craven, and probably a host of other young sportsmen of his generation, also tended to shy away from casual affairs. ‘I got to know women late,’ he told a journalist in the mid-1980s.

_I do you know, my dear, I went on four overseas tours and never had a woman. I now think I was a bloody fool, but do you know that my rugby meant so much to me that I thought in those days that if I had a woman it would affect my game, that it would be unfair to my country._

While Craven’s views reflect an outlook usually associated with perceived Victorian values of an earlier era, changing social and sexual mores of later decades brought about corresponding changes in the attitudes of rugby players towards women. Writing approximately 35 years after Craven’s playing days, Chris Laidlaw, who came to South Africa with the All Blacks in 1970, had this to say:

_Unlike beer, women on tour are not compulsory. Sometimes taken, sometimes left, they are a commodity to be utilised only if instantly available and free, which they usually are, in considerable plentitude. The sex scene on rugby tours is a woman’s liberationist’s nightmare._

Besides the attitudes and behaviour of some rugby players on tour, it is also instructive to look at the conduct of rugby enthusiasts in general. An incident which took place in the mid-1960s is particularly revealing since it incorporates and reflects upon a range of attitudes. A journalist has recounted that on the morning before a test match to be played at Ellis Park in Johannesburg, crowds of white men were queuing for standing room. Many of them had had a fair amount of alcohol, and they started pelting black passersby with _naartjies_ (small oranges). To the great merriment of the crowd, the blacks dropped whatever they had with them and quickly retreated in the opposite direction – all of them, that is, but a solitary black woman.

She was fashionably attired with high-heel shoes, make-up and a wig. She summed up the situation, gripped her handbag and strutted past the men. Incensed by such defiance, the men grabbed fistfuls of _naartjies_ and bombarded her. One _naartjie_ dislodged her wig to reveal a cleanly shaven head. The men fell about in paroxysms of laughter. But without any outward show of emotion, she picked up the wig, dusted it, reached into her handbag to find a vanity mirror, and calmly and coolly replaced and adjusted the wig. Proudly and apparently unperturbed, she went on her way.

This incident demonstrates attitudes deeply rooted in class, race and gender antagonisms. The fact that the woman was smartly dressed, in clothes that were probably more expensive than many white women could afford, was one reason why the ire of the crowd was aroused. In her dress she conveyed an upper middle class image which made the men suspect she had ideas above her station. Even more visible, and perhaps more important, was the issue of race. At the height of apartheid in the mid-1960s, the dignity of many blacks had been stripped away along with their citizenship. Many whites were inclined to interpret assertive behaviour on the part of black people as deliberately provocative. For a black person to challenge white supremacist notions in everyday life, especially at Ellis Park and at such a moment, was to open the flood gates of racism. On top of this, the fact that it was a woman who was daring to breach the barricades of a demarcated male public space aroused even greater indignation. Symbolically then, what the woman represented was anathema to an inebriated male crowd. As far as the woman herself was concerned, her individual act of defiance had parallels in the history of the political struggle of black women against apartheid.

In analysing the way gender was refracted through rugby, one also has to account for women who, with apparent enthusiasm, attended rugby matches as spectators. Afrikaner women at Stellenbosch in the 1930s and 1940s attended games and for many of them rugby on Saturdays was a major social occasion. In later years, the importance of having women spectators at rugby matches was officially endorsed.
by the South African Rugby Board. ‘The school girl of today is a spectator of tomorrow’, it was said in 1968.

They will have their families, and if they are rugby... women, their children will be also... We who attended mixed [co-educational] schools know what an important role girls played in our rugby lives and how important rugby was to them too.71

It is not difficult to detect the male assumptions in the position outlined by the South African Rugby Board. Women were welcomed into fold because it served the interest of men and of the sport in general. This is not to deny that some women might have had a genuine interest in the game, and in all likelihood male rugby heroes were also their heroes. Structurally, however, because rugby was such a dominantly male activity, entry into that world, wittingly or unwittingly, could only be on terms predetermined by men. This situation was similar to the place of women in the political mobilisation of Afrikanerdom in the 1930s and 1940s; the ideal of the volksmoeder (mother of the nation) at the time meant that women could only gain social recognition as participants in the lives of their husbands and children.72

It is in the area of gender relations that the question of continuity and discontinuity in the transmitting and appropriating of a sporting culture manifests itself most pertinently. While Afrikaner nationalists attempted, in some respects successfully, to ‘Afrikanerise’ an imperial sport like rugby, the ‘maleness’ of the sport – an historical hallmark of the game in the metropole – was left intact. It was one of the aspects of imperial rugby culture which Afrikaners adopted and even reinforced without a further thought. Ultimately this demonstrates that the transformation of a sporting culture is seldom complete – traces and even substantial elements of the old will be incorporated into the new. It also points to the complexities of interpretation in dealing with the issue of sport in a colonial setting. ‘Where does the promoting hand of the colonial master stop and where does the adapting and assimilating indigenous tradition start?’ is the intriguing and tantalising question.73

Conclusion

In 1989 Tommy Bedford, one of the few English-speaking Springbok captains since 1960, commented critically on the rugby establishment and claimed that over a period of 25 years, it had worked ‘mainly to promote the Afrikaner, his Church, his Party, his Government and the Broederbond, but all of it was to the detriment of rugby, sport and South Africa’.74 This situation, somewhat bluntly described by Bedford, was the outcome of a more complex historical process.

The dynamics of this development, it has been suggested in this chapter, are to be found in the important role played by the University of Stellenbosch, the coupling of rugby symbolism and ethnic nationalism, the middle class character of the sport, the spectator appeal of rugby and its ramifications – including gender implications – and the reinforcement of notions of masculinity, and ultimately effective political control of the game. These factors combined to elevate rugby into the Afrikaners’ ‘national sport’. Even so, the transformation was not complete. In regard to the essential ‘maleness’ and middle class character of the game, much of the older imperial ethos was retained.

Although no sport is ideological per se, the values and norms invested in and associated with rugby, or any other sport, can and often do make it ideological. Afrikaner appropriation of the game in South Africa, coinciding with general Afrikaner nationalistic political ascendancy, was in the final analysis a way of demonstrating and representing a specific brand of ideological power. For this reason, it also set itself up for attack by opposing political forces after 1969.

Notes

19. For the nature of Afrikaner nationalism see D. Moodie, The rise of Afrikanerdom: power, apartheid and the Afrikaner civil religion (Berkeley, 1975); H. Adam and H. Giliomee, The rise of Afrikaner power (Cape Town, 1979); D. O'Meara, Volkspolitik: Capital, class and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism, 1934-1948 (Johannesburg, 1983).
26. Quoted in Archer and Bouillon, The South African game, p. 73.
30. South African Rugby Board Minutes, 4, Meeting with Mr G. Hogg, 10 April 1957.
33. W.G. le Roux, 'Die vermaaklikheid en ontspanning van die amblaanke kind in Kaapstad' (unpublished MA dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1940) p. 82 and passim.
37. J.M. Coetzee in Die Suid-Afrikaans, August 1988, p. 4. See also Williams, 'Sosiologiese onderzoek' p. 55, for views on race.
38. Laidlaw, Mud in your eye pp. 97-98.
39. For example J.R. Albertyn et al, Kerk en Stad (Stellenbosch, 1948) p. 262.
43. Roger, Old heroes, pp. 32-33.
46. Compare Grundlingh and Sapiere, 'From feverish festival' p. 25.
50. South African Rugby Board Minutes, 2, 17 May 1943.
60. Quoted in Booyens, *Craven*, p. 183. (Quotation translated).
67. Laidlaw, *Mud in your eye* p. 58. See also Roger, *Old heroes* p. 90.
68. Vrye Weekblad, 4-10 October 1991, p.25.

69. See for example J. Wells, *We now demand: a history of women’s resistance to pass laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1992).
70. E. Theron, *Sender hoed of handskoen* (Kaapstad, 1983) p. 83; Interview with Ms. B. Sieberhagen, a student at Stellenbosch during the 1930s and 1940s, 6 January 1994.
Beyond the Tryline
Rugby and South African Society

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