

History of SA Rugby



So, what have we learnt so far? Most importantly, that rugby football is essentially a school game. Schools changed rugby from a wild and riotous activity to an instrument of education. As the game we know, it started in a school and takes its name from a school. Much of its mores, terminology and colours that teams play in originated in schools.

The shape of the goal posts, touchlines, scrummage, try, amongst others, come from Rugby School. Rugby School started wearing caps and England play in white because Rugby School did. South Africa play in green because Bishops Old Boys did. Natal play in black and white because Hilton did.

The game flourished wherever you had a concentration of physically active males away from the debilitating force of females. This happened in the schools and universities in the days of single-gender, mainly male education, in the army and, in South Africa, on the mines. But above all, it was in the monastic educational establishments of earlier days. In South Africa it is important not to underestimate the role the schools played in spreading the rugby gospel.

The Pioneers of the Cape Colony

The many adventurers, soldiers, missionaries and teachers who landed in Cape Town, introduced 'Football' to the Cape Colony of Southern Africa in the middle years of the 19th century. These men were predominantly English and they brought with them a number of variations of the game of football that

had emerged in England. The distinctive brand of football played at Rugby School would certainly have had its supporters, and in a young society such as existed in the Cape Colony in those years it is likely that compromise rules of some kind would have been agreed to by the teams involved.

The boys of Diocesan College at Rondebosch were introduced to rugby, in the form of the Winchester Football game, by the new Headmaster, George Ogilvie, in 1861. A Winchester man himself, Ogilvie detested the game of rugby football and considered the game played at his old school to be more civilized and altogether more acceptable. Winchester Football was played with a round ball and allowed for deft dribbling movement similar to what is seen on the soccer field today. The Bishops boys called it 'Gogs Game' or 'Gogball' - Ogilvie's nickname was 'Gog' as his signature was virtually illegible apart from the last three letters

South African College soon followed the Bishops example and the earliest records of a schools football game in South Africa date from that period. However, rugby it was not, and these two schools were not to take up the Rugby game for another two decades.

Rugby's official beginning

Grahamstown, 1855. A tough place in an even tougher time. The year is the founding date of St Andrew's College - a school which can lay claim to being the first school in SA to play rugby as we know it today. All of the staff at St Andrew's

had come over from England or Ireland and would have experienced the rugby game in their student days at Oxford, Cambridge or Trinity in Dublin. Following the general trend 'back at home', the young British teachers also knew that any school of ambition should opt for Rugby as opposed to Association Football and despite the paucity of grass on the fields at College, Rugby Football was introduced to the scholars of St Andrew's in the mid-1870s. Regular matches were soon organised and the first printed rugby match report dates from 1878.

Cape Town changes course

Back in Cape Town, Hamilton Football Club was founded at Queen Point, in July 1875. The next club was in the far-flung village of Rondebosch where the Villager Football Club was formed in 1876. Both of these clubs played the Winchester game introduced at Bishops, but that was about to change. The overwhelming popularity of the Rugby game in England was too great to resist, and in the late 1870s two recently arrived Englishmen started to persuade the football addicts of the Cape to change from 'Gogball' to Rugby Football. They were Billy Simkins of the Hamilton FC and William Mahon of the Villager FC.

In 1878 the Rugby game was introduced to Cape Town for the first time. The local press was not over sanguine of success in commenting upon this new game of football, with the Cape Town Daily News reporting on 18th July 1878: "We fancy the new game will hardly prove a very popular one at the Cape". Four years later and Rugby Football had become the winter game of choice in the Cape.

The Cradle of SA rugby starts a-rocking

The formation of the Stellenbosch Club in 1883 was to have an indelible, far-reaching effect on the future of Rugby in South Africa. Stellenbosch was already the home of the Theological Seminary of the Dutch Reformed Church, one of the widely spread churches in South Africa. And the association of men from the seminary with the game enhanced the prestige of Rugby throughout the land, with the result that the game of rugby spread like wildfire into the farming districts. Within two years clubs had sprung up in most of the other farming districts in the Western Province, becoming the game of choice for Afrikaner men.

The Game Penetrates the Interior

King William's Town was the centre of military operations on the frontier of the old Cape Colony and the British regiments based there had introduced the game of rugby by 1878. The Alberts Club was formed in King William's Town that year and soon games were being played in East London, Grahamstown, and Port Elizabeth. By the mid-1880s then, the game of rugby was well established along the whole of the coastal belt of the old Cape Colony and was gaining popularity every day.

The rugby-playing Xhosa people

While rugby, soccer and cricket became more organised and more widespread across the coastal regions of the country, the records refer mainly to developments in schools and clubs catering for white South Africans. However, in the Eastern Cape missionary zeal remained strong and a number of schools catering for Xhosa people came into existence by the turn of the century. These schools were every bit as good as those catering for the white population - names such as Lovedale, Nvaliza, St Matthew's, Langa and Newell stand tall in the annals of South African education. They aspired to the highest standards and were to produce generations of leading figures in South African society.

In sport too, these schools engendered a love for cricket and rugby among the Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape, Border and Transkei. While the Western Cape can justifiably claim to be the cradle of South African rugby, it is in the Eastern Cape where the heart of South African rugby is to be found.

Natal

Rugby was longer in taking firm root in Natal owing to the fact that the Association game (Soccer) had been introduced there earlier and had become well established. Hilton College, which had been founded in 1872, was taken over by Mr Vaughan Ellis in 1878. An Old Rugbeian, he quickly introduced the Rugby game to the school. For years there was little opposition apart from Bishop's College, Maritzburg, the military or teams selected from the scattered pioneers. But by 1890 clubs had been formed in Pietermaritzburg, the capital, which was also the headquarters of the British Army, and at Durban. Rugby finally became vibrant in the province in the 1920s.

Kimberley

By its very nature, Kimberley attracted many of the more boisterous, adventurous and physically fit young men in the country and rugby quite naturally suited their leisure requirements. Schools, military garrisons and mine towns brought active boys and men together and what better way to channel any excess energy than through a strenuous game of rugby? Kimberley was a wealthy place in those days and sport had good backers, men like Cecil John Rhodes and Barney Barnato. Before long, the sportsmen of Kimberley felt confident enough to test themselves against teams from other big towns.

Rugby tournaments take off

The game probably would not have taken root so quickly without the stimulus of competition and the glory of a trophy or a cup. In 1883 the Western Province Union organised its first club competition for a cup, known as the Grand Challenge Cup. By 1885 the WPU had organized the Country Cup Competition due to the explosion in popularity of the game in the country areas.

The popularity of the rugby game began to explode in the Western Cape and Cape Town invited Grahamstown, Port

Elizabeth and Kimberley to participate in a tournament in 1884. Unfortunately only Kimberley accepted: they trekked by mule train to De Aar to get the steam train to the Cape, travelling for five days. They played seven matches in a fortnight and when they played Villagers there were even 3000 spectators. The matches against Cape Town were close, with the home team emerging victorious.

The following year the first inter-town tournament was held in Grahamstown in 1885, with Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Kimberley competing. Surprisingly Kimberley did not make the final. Instead Cape Town and Grahamstown played-off at St Andrew's, with the home side losing by a goal and five tries to nil. This inter-town tournament was virtually the precursor of the Currie Cup tournament of later years and as such can be seen as a definite milestone in the development on the march of progress.

The South African Rugby Football Board founded

Kimberley came to Cape Town again in 1888. There were numerous squabbles about differences in the laws of the game. As with the International Rugby Board, the South African Rugby Football Board was founded to standardise the Laws governing the way rugby should be played in the country. Two players, Percy Ross Frames of Kimberley and Bill Bisset of Cape Town, were the men who put their heads together. From this union was born the SARFB, founded in Kimberley in 1889. And it also organised a competition, whose trophy was the SA Cup.

Schools get on board

Towards the end of the 19th century, schools began to organise themselves. In 1898, S Pinchin of St George's Grammar School in Cape Town proposed the formation of a schools body. He said that scholars were finding that there was more opportunity for regular football with the Association clubs than with Rugby clubs and that if Rugby was to be properly fostered in schools, immediate action was necessary. Action followed. A schools union was established and competitions instituted which lasted till 1930 when the schools decided they would play only for fun, not for cups, trophies or shields.

The introduction in the 1920s of an invasive weed called 'Kikuyu grass', which could survive in any type of soil and in the most hostile of weather conditions, allowed schools and sports clubs in the drier and colder regions of the country to provide ground cover for their fields for the first time. Suddenly soccer was not the only game that could be played in the wintertime, and within a decade rugby had become the sport of choice for most schools.

Rugby becomes a 'national' game

Around this time, in the farming district of Stellenbosch, some fifty kilometres from Cape Town, there was a charismatic lawyer with a missionary background, August Markötter, son of German missionaries in Haarlem near Uniondale in the South Western Districts. He came to Victoria College, the forerunner of Stellenbosch University, at the age of 14 and there for the

first time he beheld the wonders of rugby football. He wrote to a friend: "I have definitely decided to devote the rest of my life to rugby football." He played for Stellenbosch, went away for a while and came back to captain Stellenbosch. He later went on to coach rugby at Stellenbosch University for a staggering 53 years, once stating "I have no religion. I have no politics. My religion and politics are rugby." Markötter's zeal for the game he so loved proved contagious as Stellenbosch soon became the eye from which rugby missionaries flowed forth into a parched land.

The rugby histories of the schools in the interior commence in this period. Queens College at Queenstown began rugby in 1924 (playing on grassless fields for over six years) and Potchefstroom Boys High had played on grassless pitches for over a decade when they got their first kikuyu field in 1929.

The slowest to adopt rugby was the Johannesburg area, but WSM Wood could report: "Ever since the Great War, no sport in Johannesburg and District has reached such a high state of all-round efficiency, or made such great strides as Rugby football has done in the schools." In 1922, 19 schools formed the Transvaal High Schools Rugby Union. That year Johannesburg Schools played Pretoria Schools and won 7-6. Three great Johannesburg schools - Jeppe Boys, Parktown Boys and King Edward's School - all dropped soccer in favour of rugby in the early 1930s when kikuyu finally arrived in that city. This led to a boom in inter-school competition in the decade to follow, as for the first time it was possible for coastal teams to contemplate tours to the interior.

Not everybody established a formal union. In 1959, the annual general meeting of the schools in Pietermaritzburg proposed the formation of a schools union and there was much excitement about the constitution and what it should contain till the legendary Bill Payne of Durban High Schools said: "Gentlemen, if we have a constitution, headmasters can 'mess' us around." (It was a bit stronger than 'mess'.)

Schools rugby in South Africa went to another level with the establishment of provincial tournaments - the Craven Week for High Schools, Special Schools and Primary Schools, the Academy Week and the Grant Khomo Week. The first to be established was the Craven Week for High Schools, the brain-child of the 1949 Springbok Piet Malan.

A proliferation of tournaments, festivals and derbies around the country has kept the South African schoolboy rugby season very healthy over the past few decades, ensuring that the Springbok selectors are usually spoilt for choice. Most importantly, out of the unique manner in which the game spread around the country there have emerged rugby histories and rivalries between schools that continue to be written season after season.

Over the next few hundred pages we will examine these individual school stories within the context of South African rugby as a whole. Our journey will take the form of a 'roadtrip' around the country, driving as the crow would fly, beginning in Cape Town and ending in Johannesburg. So strap yourself in, for this is some journey.