



# Union High School



FOUNDED: 1922

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## Rugby at Union

Union High started playing rugby almost from its inception. Its first recorded match was against Aberdeen in 1922. That year it also played against neighbouring Volkskool for the first time and the game was drawn 0-0. Kikuyu grass had been planted in 1926, and by 1928 the main rugby field, later named the Puttick Field after the school's first headmaster, had taken shape. Transport to Cradock and other surrounding towns was by a hired lorry with no seats or sides. It was painstakingly slow and boys often used to climb out and run next to the lorry. Ted Slater, brother of Springbok and Kingwood headmaster Jack Slater, was influential in establishing rugby at the school. So too was Lobbie Laubscher, who coached from 1924 to 1934. Though the Volkskool neighbours were a larger school than Union High at the time, it was still an intensely competitive derby. It was reported that in one of the earlier derbies between the schools the "imported" referee had to be escorted to nearby Kendrew to catch the train. The first win against Volkskool came in 1931. It was in this decade that Louis Treadway and Viccie Brummer both played five years of First XV rugby, the former as captain for three seasons and the latter for two. In 1939 a hostel, often the basis of a school's rugby strength, was built and brought an increase in enrolments.

Chum Ochse, the great Springbok wing of the Fifties renowned for his long shorts, played for Union High in the '40s. He played for four different provinces and toured with the '51 Bok side to Britain, who beat Scotland 44-0 when tries were only worth three points. He later taught and coached at Paarl Boys' High. Another Old Boy Springbok was Colin Kroon, the hooker against the Lions in 1955. The balanced Herby Arnott was headmaster from 1947-68. He upgraded the school's buildings and sporting facilities. This was possible largely because of the "wool boom" in the Karoo from 1950 to the early 1960s. The majority of the parent body were wool farmers who generously shared their bounty with the school, allowing the school to secure further fields. James Munnik arrived

## School History

In the early 1900s Graaff-Reinet was a largely Afrikaans community with a few English-speaking residents. In 1918, not long after the Union of South Africa was declared, a number of parents of Graaff-Reinet petitioned to have an English-medium school in the Midlands. The residents guaranteed money and the school started in the Anglican Church Hall in Somerset Street. In 1921 the school moved to new premises. Having grown bigger, it moved again in 1926. In 1963, now with over 600 pupils, the school moved to its present spacious site. Graaff-Reinet attracts many tourists every year, all wishing to visit the national monuments (of which the town boasts more than any other town in South Africa), the Valley of Desolation and the Owl House in nearby Nieu-Bethesda. Another site worthy of a visit are the serene buildings of Union High School on the banks of the Sundays River. Arrive on a Saturday morning in winter to take in the excitement and atmosphere of a traditional rugby derby.





*"One of my abiding memories of Union High rugby is that of passion - the boys displayed incredible guts on the field, often against huge odds, while the support from spectators - parents, past and present pupils, and locals - on Saturdays was superb. This enthusiasm was eminently displayed year after year - and I gather that nothing has changed - in the inter-school derby matches against Volkskool. In both rugby and hockey, referees/umpires were brought up from Port Elizabeth!*



*Tremendous spirit was engendered on the bus trips to Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage and all the Karoo towns. Hollowed out bread, stuffed with crisps, was the boys' favourite food. Richard Schultz and I are now both at SACS in Cape Town, and we often laugh and reminisce about incidents, like my trying to turn our bus on the freeway outside Bloemfontein, but ending up in a ditch! Nobody was impressed at having to pack stones under the rear wheels at 2am!"*

**— John Wegerhoff  
(First XV coach 1974 - 79)**



at the school around the same time. Known as "Puggy", he was an Eastern Province player and the school's best-known rugby coach. He coached at the school from 1950 to 1973. Perhaps the greatest side he coached was the '69 team. They lost their first (and only) game to St Andrew's, but amassed record scores against Grey High, Marlow, Graeme and Kingswood. They contributed 10 players to the North-Eastern Cape Craven Week side, where they were selected to play the final match against Griqualand West — an indication that they were regarded by the selectors as one of the best sides there. They won convincingly. This was also the year where Union High and Volkskool stopped competing bi-annually, and the Interschools became a single fixture. The reasons for this being that the return game tended to degenerate into a "grudge" match, and the rugby was seldom as good as in the first encounter. Ironically, the only game scheduled for 1970 was cancelled due to a flu epidemic. The next year, relentless downpour from the Wednesday before the Saturday fixture, again threatened to postpone the derby. The matches at this time had also always been played at the school's fields, but because of the limited space (people used to park outside the school gates on Thursday afternoons to procure a good position on the Saturday), the senior matches were all played on the main lower field, the so-called Botanics.

Younger siblings tend to follow older brothers to the same school, but the eight Prinsloo brothers coached by Puggie between 1953 and 1973 proved a "feat" unsurpassed by any other coach. All eight received colours for rugby.

The powerful Queen's College, who themselves dispensed of Blomfontein's Grey College a number of times in the '70s, were beaten 26-4 by Union High in 1975 — one of the schools

more memorable victories. Union High has numerous other long-standing derbies. The games against Gill (first played in 1929), Muir (1933), Middelburg (1933), Pearson (1935) and Cradock High School (1936) are all eagerly anticipated matches. KES was also first played in the '50s and a regular derby that lasted a few decades developed. Grey High from Port Elizabeth has been played regularly since 1948, and the Grahamstown schools since the 1952 tour of that town. Union High's greatest rivals, however, are the Volkskool. It is always a festive occasion of drama. There are cheerleaders and bands and often dramatic incidents. Other matches happen. This match is a happening.

Each year, around Easter time, the school runs a tournament which attracts many renowned schools to Graaff-Reinet. Union High has given numerous great players, coaches and ambassadors to South African rugby. Peter Booysen, who played three years of First XV rugby before finishing his schooling at Kingswood in 1948 became the President of the Natal Rugby Union and an executive member of the South African Rugby Board. He was also the vice-principal of Natal University. St Elmo Wilken played for five provinces and was at the 1949 Springbok trials. Fred Rubidge, Tom Spence, Henning Smit and Doom Nel were also Springbok trialists. Chumani Booi, who did a post-matric at Dale College, played Super12 rugby in 2004. Gordon Gilfillan played lock for SA Under-19 in 2003. John Wegerhoff has written an excellent rugby history on Union High rugby from the early days until 1977.

### International

**South Africa:**  
Chum Ochse