

# Exciting rugby, enduring FRIENDSHIPS

Derek van den Berg

## Playing for Western Province and Natal

Playing for Western Province in 1967 was initially a confusing experience for a 21-year-old. I was suddenly playing in a team with many of my boyhood heroes, including Springboks Charlie Cockrell, Andrew Jansen, Tiny Neethling and Tiny Naude.

My self-confidence was low and I was so in awe of the big names that I probably didn't do myself justice on the field. There was very little communication with selectors, management or coaches and when I was dropped, which happened quite regularly, the best chance of finding out why, was to read AC Parker in the *Cape Argus*.

My first coach for Western Province was Hennie Muller and compared to the structured set-up at UCT, the Province scene was very different. After a short warm-up we would have a match practice against Northern's club first team, who were always out to prove a point and usually ran out winners.

The Currie Cup was very intensely contested and there was tremendous pressure to win. We were told that if WP was on top, Springbok rugby was strong; that was supposed to be motivational in itself!

Dr Louis Babrow was a selector and one could see his vision in many of the selections. He also initiated the WP U23 side, who played against smaller rugby unions with great success and was a good feeder for the WP senior side. I eventually played lock, flank and front rank for WP before graduating and moving to Natal.

I continued my provincial career in Natal for five years where I was coached by Izak van Heerden, who had returned from his sojourn in Argentina. His health was not good but he was an outstanding coach and even today one can see his hand in the brand of rugby played by the Pumas. Natal played an exciting, expansive, intelligent game, and as a UCT rugby player I slotted in comfortably. Natal fielded competitive teams with names like Tom Bedford,

Richard Steyn, Martin van Rensburg, Toy Dannhauser, Klippies Kritzinger, Hannes Viljoen and Rex Greyling. I played 50 games for Natal and captained the side on occasions.

I was capped for South Africa while in Natal but returned to the WP side in 1976 and played in a superb team loaded with UCT players like Chris Pope, Peter Whipp, Roy McCallum, Butch Deuchar and Doug Mather. The side was captained by Morné du Plessis; it was a young team and a big responsibility but we played extremely well. Boy Louw was still involved and remains the only selector I know who consulted his senior players regarding selection. We were unbeaten that year but lost the Currie Cup final to OFS in Bloemfontein.

I had played another Currie Cup final for WP in 1969 when a Matie and an Ikey, Teddy Hoffman and I, locked against the Springbok locks Frik du Preez and Johan Spies. We lost that one as well.

Provincial rugby was a wonderful opportunity in those days to make many friends, as teams socialised after every game, and even today those friendships persist.

## Playing for the Springboks

Playing for South Africa was the realisation of an ambition, which I saw as a tribute to my late father Mauritz, who had played for the Boks in 1937.

The road to selection was a long one of repeated Springbok trials, hopes and disappointments. I was eventually chosen for the 1974 touring side to France. This was my only experience of being a full-time rugby player and in the eight weeks I reached levels of fitness I had left behind at UCT.

In 1975 I played in the home series against the French, an unusual touring team in that they had two official captains in Richard Astre and Jacques Fouroux, both scrumhalves! We won both internationals but no series against the Tricolours is without

excitement or incident; this one saw the longest-ever brawl in the history of international rugby.

Of course the pinnacle was the New Zealand tour to SA in 1976, the last official tour before the sporting boycott. The first Test in Durban, which we won, included that classic try scored by Gerrie Germishuys on the left wing. We lost the second Test in Bloemfontein and that resulted in many heads rolling, including mine, and signalled the end of my international rugby career.

A special memory. After a mayoral reception in Bloemfontein the All Blacks and Springboks returned to their respective hotels. After a few beers the Maties and Ikeys in the Bok team commandeered a hotel Combi and gatecrashed the All Black team function. They were delighted and we spent a wonderful evening together.

### Playing for UCT

Playing for Ikeys was definitely the most exciting time of my rugby career. We had total commitment and a wonderful, adventurous attitude to playing winning rugby in the Varsity tradition.

Louis Babrow, the doyen of UCTRFC, kept a benevolent eye on the club and Porky Wells nurtured the U19 teams. I was lucky to experience one season of Tom Hamman's no-nonsense approach to the game.

Cecil Moss arrived in 1966 and revolutionised the senior teams. Blondie Pienaar became the fitness coach and off-season weight trainer. Varsity forwards beefed up and took on anyone at forward on equal terms. Skills training, fitness sessions, the legendary Wednesday practice, and Saturday games filled six days of the week, with only Friday free for a quiet movie with your girlfriend.

The whole atmosphere at UCTRFC had an organised, professional look to it. Doc Moss' intelligent, meticulous approach to every facet of the game paid off for his team and for individuals. De Villiers, the McCallums, Pope, Whipp, Macdonald and Van den Berg all made it to international level under his tutelage.

Supporting Doc at the core of the club was a man whose contribution to the team was immeasurable, Gus Enderstein. The epitome of loyalty to his side, he was an example to all his teammates, an inspirational captain and unselfish in promoting the careers of others. His contribution to any success I achieved was vast.

Above all this, my overwhelming memory is one of unending fun that was integral to every facet of our time with Ikey rugby. Amidst all the sweat and strain, the wit and humour of Richard Nurse and Preston Robertson and Ian McCallum would keep us laughing, interspersed with the more serious retorts

of Doc and Gus. Rugby was our *life* and we thrived on it. The results we achieved will bear witness to that.

Club rugby was tough and every Saturday was a challenge. Gus, Mike Hoard and Dave van Reenen were solid up front, Olaf Henning, Jumbo Anderson and Van den Berg secured plenty of lineout ball and fed creative, incisive running backs like HO de Villiers, Piet Olivier, Peter Swift, Ian and Roy McCallum, Buddy Swartz, Nelson Babrow, Ken Dovey, Richard Nurse and Barry Clements, who would carve holes in the defence. Sweeping continuity was maintained by hard-working, talented loose-forwards John le Roux, Preston Robertson and Steve Hillock.

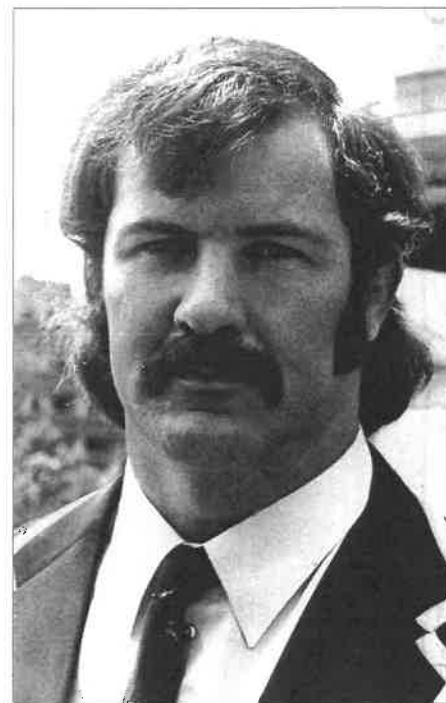
We played all our games at Newlands. Saturday nights witnessed the extraordinary camaraderie unique to Varsity rugby as we partied late into the night.

The highlights of every season were our games played against Stellenbosch University. There was unequalled rivalry as we pitted ourselves against the always star-studded Matie teams. Intervarsity was even more intense, with the build-up of Groot Brag and formal dinners further adding to the tension.

This rivalry seemed to enhance the performance of every player, when Southern University teams were selected. Memorable performances were produced against many overseas touring teams including Cardiff and the 1970 All Blacks.

The mid-year vacation was touring time for Varsity. We toured all over Southern Africa. I toured six times in South Africa and once overseas. I captained UCT at the 1970 SA University tournament held in Rhodesia, where we were presented with a special award for never having kicked for touch during the entire tournament... exciting stuff!

I believe that much of my success on the rugby field was directly attributable to the foundation I received at UCT. Even more important is the enduring friendships which were founded at Varsity. I look back at a multitude of wonderful characters who all had special attributes which I admired and hopefully absorbed something of at unique time of my life.



*Derek van den Berg before a Test match against France in 1975.*