

RUGBY AT BISHOPS BY LEONARD KAPLAN.

The author is in his twenty-fifth year of teaching and coaching at Bishops. He is currently coaching the U15 'A' team, with occasional help from two parents, Nick Mallett and Jake White. At different times he has been a committee member of Western Province and also South African Universities. The views in the article are those of the author and are not necessarily those of others at Bishops.

When Canon George Ogilvie became headmaster of the Diocesan College in Cape Town in 1861 (from early days widely known as *Bishops*) he introduced the game of football, as played at Winchester, to the school. The old game of football, which included handling, was called Gog's Game – after the only legible part of Ogilvie's signature – and is seen as the beginnings of rugby in South Africa. The Winchester game was considered to have more form than the game played at Rugby school and was played at the time in many of the great schools in England.

The national colours emanated from Bishops too. The myrtle green jersey used by the Old Diocesan RFC was worn by South Africa for the first time in 1896 when captain, Barry Heatlie, borrowed a full set of jerseys from his OD club for South Africa to wear in a Test match. Playing in that jersey, South Africa won their first Test match in 1896 and their first series in 1903. They have worn the green jersey ever since.

INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS

Over the years, forty Bishops' old boys have played for South Africa, six for England, four for Scotland and one each for Australia and Canada. Three ODs, Barry Heatlie, Paddy Carolin and Stephen Fry, have captained South Africa and Tuppy Owen-Smith captained England. Old boys have also played for Rhodesia, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Germany and Malawi. They have played rugby at World Cups for four countries – South Africa, England, Australia and Zimbabwe.

At the 2003 Rugby World Cup, Bishops had old boys playing for three countries – Selborne Boome for South Africa, Stuart Abbott for England and Daniel Vickerman for Australia. In addition, Haldane Luscombe had made his Test debut for Wales just before the World Cup.



Stuart Abbott.



Haldane Luscombe.

Other international players of recent vintage have been Guy Kebble, Rob Fleck and Dave von Hoesslin for South Africa, and Christian Stewart who played for Canada before making his Springbok Test debut late in his career.

With Fleck now playing for Bath and Boome for Northampton, there are no ODs in the present Springbok team, but in 2004 Abbott, Vickerman and Luscombe played Test rugby for England, Australia and Wales respectively.

TRADITIONS UNDER PRESSURE?

In the view of most Bishops boys, parents and old boys, rugby remains the pre-eminent game at the school, embracing the finest traditions of Bishops. But the new millennium and a new South Africa bring substantial challenges, and rugby coaches at the school are all too aware that the rugby ethos built up over generations since the middle of the 19th century has to be protected and enhanced with circumspection and vigour.

The Bishops 2010 vision – a detailed plan for ensuring dynamic relevance in a new South Africa – encourages diversity. At present participation in sport, summer and winter, remains compulsory for pupils and, with rare exceptions, those who don't play rugby in winter have to play hockey. The school's philosophy is that playing a team sport is an essential part of education and it remains, for the moment, intact.

But there are people who would like to introduce soccer or allow boys to go surfing, mountain climbing, cycling or jogging instead of playing compulsory team sport. Some would like sport to be merely voluntary.

For whatever reasons, fewer sports coaches get appointed to the teaching staff. There are more women on the academic staff than used to be the case and more men not necessarily interested in sport.

Because boys love the game and the rugby coaches work hard at promoting the sport, Bishops still has over twenty rugby teams, but there are fewer coaches than we need. In recent years, Bishops has had to pay students to coach teams. A hard core of keen, skilful coaches remains at the centre of rugby at the school, but there are also keen coaches lacking in coaching know-how and others who coach only because they are required to. Also, there are now rival schools that do their homework and recruit promising players at all age groups.

All this means that, while Bishops rugby remains a force and a respected opponent in South Africa's schools rugby, those running rugby are having to focus on sustaining the ethos and traditions of Bishops rugby whilst actively promoting the game amongst the boys.

Coaching the coaches has become a priority to facilitate purposeful, skilful coaching of all teams from A team level down to the Under 14 'E' XV and the Under 19 'G' and 'H' teams. Inspiring coaches to marry excellence and enjoyment for their players, while displaying enthusiasm themselves, has become crucial. In order to compete with rival schools, recruitment of talented players has to be a focus. The College Council needs to be convinced that rugby remains important to boys, parents and old boys and that the necessary finance has to be allocated.

For all that, enthusiasm for rugby amongst Bishops boys remains heart-warming. Practices are characterised by ebullient enjoyment, pick-up games of touch rugby are played on every field in the evenings and matches are played, as ever, with skill and passion. Playing in the 'A' teams, and especially the 1st XV, remains the ambition of a host of boys.

OUTSIDE PRESSURES

In each age group there are, as there always have been, players with the talent to go on to play international rugby. With the pressure to achieve academically and professionally after they leave school, some will continue to play the game, others not. Other factors in their decision to pursue their rugby ambitions after school are the perceived quota selection policy at all levels in South Africa and the shambles that much of South African club rugby has degenerated into.

Will I get selected on merit if I'm good enough? Will I get skilful coaching in a well-organised club? Is playing club rugby in front of a handful of sometimes hostile spectators a better option than watching top rugby on TV or hanging out with my mates on a Saturday afternoon? These have become pertinent questions. Violence in club rugby, among players and spectators, is a further issue.

Some schoolboys will have been encouraged by selection for provincial and national representative squads and teams from Under 13 to Under 18 level. But quota selection can play havoc with this and schoolmasters are not necessarily the most astute, accurate assessors of talent, leading to potential stars of the future being omitted from squads and lesser talents being given opportunities ahead of them. There are also just so many thousands of players to choose from that selection is an invidious task.

GAME PLAN?

An ongoing internal debate among Bishops coaches at present – a stimulating, vibrant, positive discussion – embraces the approach to the game itself.

The Bishops 1st XV has, for a few decades now, been at the forefront of the open, running, spread-wide-early, pass-before-contact game in South Africa; there is a positive refusal to play what is perceived as safety-first, conservative rugby, restricting players to largely one-dimensional smashing at opponents. Structures and patterned game-plans have been eschewed as anathema to the spirit of Bishops rugby. The underlying philosophy has been to kick the ball only when absolutely necessary and to “constantly risk absurdity” – high risk, high reward rugby. This has been the 1st XV approach, sometimes followed, sometimes not, by other coaches who have been encouraged but never forced to promote a similar game.

As the modern game has evolved, the discussion is whether this approach remains the most appropriate to Bishops. Is winning games by whatever game plan that has been deemed most opportune against specific opposition more important than coaching an open, exciting fifteen-man style of play? To what extent do we encourage a pattern of play as opposed to allowing players to play off the cuff? Is a specific game plan too restrictive at schoolboy level where the goal is development of players, not merely scoring more points than the opposition? Does structure give players more opportunity to break down defences and display their skills? It's a debate which is perhaps being aired at rugby schools around the world.

Bishops rugby operates within such discussions, this environment and these constraints. At present, rugby remains pivotal in the life of the school and it is approached with passion by many boys and some coaches. The heritage, however, needs to be vigorously guarded.

