

IS THERE ANYBODY LEFT IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE? By David Beck.

The author is a Level 3 coach and is currently coaching at Scarborough RFC.

Those of us born in the Jurassic Age will recall a time when a limit was set on the number of overseas players that could be included on your team sheet. It was three (or was it two, and did that or did that not include bench players?). I don't know what the rationale was for that number, but it seemed to work reasonably comfortably inasmuch as:

- a) the players who had been brought over generally possessed different skill levels usually higher from which our own native species could learn by observation and imitation,
- b) they brought an accompanying, less 'amateur' mindset which was also useful in promoting positive cultural change, and
- c) in a Saturday squad of eighteen, that still left plenty of room for homegrown players to strut their stuff.

It wasn't difficult to identify how many of the opposition were overseas players. They immediately identified themselves on the pitch as soon as they opened their mouths, which was frequently and loudly, and a count could thus be made. Whilst, no doubt, abuses took place from time to time (I recall a visiting side in one of the London leagues composed almost entirely of South African accents but they all claimed to be British nationals), generally speaking everyone knew where he stood.

Then suddenly, and surreptitiously, that limit disappeared. It happened without fanfare in the dead of night when most upright and stolid folk were fast asleep. The gates of Troy swung quietly open and when we woke up, it was to find a Horse standing firmly in our midst. At least it looked vaguely like a horse, but it had some suspiciously marsupial characteristics about it.

Visit any club match this season and the chances are that a large percentage of the players on view will come from the southern hemisphere. The influx usually starts with one player, but within a season or two the numbers have multiplied like a hydra. The process is a familiar one by now. Club committee gets excited about attracting a big sponsor and delusions of grandeur set in. After debate, it's decided to advertise 'down under' through various contacts. A player eventually arrives and makes an impact. At the end of that first season, a conversation takes place along the following lines – with apologies for attempts to replicate in writing the relevant accent:



Coach/Director of rugby: "We need a new prop/flanker/fly half because Big Jim is moving out of the area."

Player: "No wirries mite, I know just the purson. Played with him in Manuwataruarua a few years bick. All he needs is the ear fear and a job. He's got a mite who has also played in the Super 16 squad if you're interisted."

And that's how it happens. I can only speak for junior club level, but I know that's how it happens because I've seen it in operation at the last three clubs I've been involved with, and I see it in others around. Overnight, half your senior team is made up of overseas players. Everyone else in your league gets to hear about it. Club message boards abound with comments along the lines of, "We might be losers, but at least we're proud that we only play home-grown players" (until, that is, they attract the big sponsor of their own). Jovial banter flows from the touchlines every Saturday about passports, visas, mercenaries and does anybody in the opposition speak English. Cue much petty jealousy and bickering by the majority and open abuse by a red-faced, outraged and alcohol-fuelled minority.

At the moment, of course, the answer is a simple one. The rules allow it, our own players aren't good enough and the game has gone professional anyway so wake up and smell the coffee - or get left behind as the train pulls out of the station.

But, as we all surely agree, whilst that may be the pragmatic answer, it can't be the right one. How many younger players are being turned away from the game as they see their club's answer to a problem to be simple recruitment from overseas? How many older players are retiring early or are left sitting on a bench for the same reason? And the RFU has to play its part. Every year for some time now I have received the Level 4 application papers, one of the criteria being, "has shown a commitment to developing English players". Fine words, but another of the criteria is along the lines of "coaching at National League level". And how does your club get anywhere near National League level? This usually gets carried along on the back of overseas players – a bit of a Catch 22 conundrum for any Level 3 coach with a modicum of ambition.

Surely it is time to redress the balance - please. If I wanted to coach a bunch of New Zealanders I'd have moved southwards down there long ago. Come to think of it, that's not a bad idea. There must be a whole generation of lonely ladies down there this winter, wondering where all their young men have disappeared to. Now then, shall I fly or take a long cruise?