

SLOW DEATH

MEMOIRS OF A CRICKET UMPIRE

'For umpires, as for players, you have to be the best to survive at the top. I, for one, feel reassured when I see Rudi at the crease.'

– Jacques Kallis

Rudi Koertzen
with Chris Schoeman



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*To my wife Hyla and my children
Yulali, Eumelda, Rudolf and Luan*

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Foreword

When I appeared on the South African cricket scene as a youngster for Western Province back in 1993/94, Rudi Koertzen had been plying his trade as first-class umpire for 10 years already. Since then our paths have crossed regularly on the cricket field on both the provincial and international scene, and after all these years, Rudi is still at the very top of his career. The agonisingly slow raising of his left finger when ‘Slow Death’ sends players back to the pavilion has become one of the most familiar – and dreaded! – sights in international cricket.

Over the years I have grown to like and respect Rudi both as a person and as an umpire. For umpires, as for players, you have to be the best to survive at the top. And if it is difficult to get to the top, it is even harder to stay there. Rudi is one of those who stood out all along. Players look for consistency in umpires, which they get with Rudi. Like all other umpires, Rudi has made some mistakes in his time, but because of his dedication to be the best and the hard work he puts in, he counts among those who have made the fewest bad decisions. I, for one, feel reassured when I see Rudi at the crease.

From personal experience I know that he commands a lot of respect from players all around the world. On the field he goes about his job very professionally, but he remains an affable bloke

who maintains good relations with the players. I know how much pressure the players try to put on umpires – they will try their luck, for sure. But Rudi doesn't allow the pressure to get to him. It's a trait that he has developed over many years of experience in the hot cauldron of international cricket.

No other umpire in the world has achieved what Rudi has – standing in more than 100 Tests and more than 200 One Day Internationals. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. The one thing I have always admired about Rudi, apart from his on-field umpiring ability, is the incredible passion he feels for the game. He absolutely loves cricket. There are, in fact, some players who could do with his kind of dedication.

From a player's perspective, I have to say I've never envied Rudi and the other umpires their job. They stand out there for hours, for days in a row, having to make crucial decisions all the time, and coping with all kinds of pressure and criticism from the players, the media and the public. Over the past few years television technology has played a positive role in assisting umpires in their decision-making, but I wouldn't like to see every decision taken away from them. We still want a human element as part of the umpiring scene; we don't want them to become robots.

Thanks, Rudi, for what you have given to cricket over such a long period of time. The way you have lived your love for the game has been an example and inspiration to all involved in the sport. It is indeed a privilege to have written a foreword to your autobiography. I know that one day you will hang up your white coat, but your passion for the bat and the ball will live on.

JACQUES KALLIS

Author's note

Apart from his great passion for cricket, I will always remember Rudi for a question he asked one bright Eastern Cape morning of our Sunday-school teacher, a bloke with the nickname Vonk (Spark), derived from his flaming-red hair and his love of fast motorbikes and cars. We were still skinny, knobbly-kneed little brats in primary school. 'Tell me, sir,' Rudi asked, 'how does it work that only 144 000 people will go to heaven, as it says in the Bible?' For a moment we thought Rudi had bowled him a googly, but Vonk quickly responded, 'Now don't you worry about that, *boet*; you just make sure you're one of them.'

One could joke about it and say that the way umpires have cheated batsmen out of runs before the use of technology, Rudi doesn't stand much of a chance! But I have to say, should it depend on one's love for cricket, he would be in the front of the line.

I've been fortunate to have known Rudi since our primary-school days, when as kids we walked the dirt roads of our town and played many cricket games together. So I know exactly where he's come from. After school our ways parted, and years later I started reading about him as a provincial umpire and eventually a Test umpire. At school he'd always been a gutsy little bugger, so I was not surprised that he had risen to those heights. Since then I have watched him on television, umpiring in all corners of the world.

With the exceptional milestones of 100 Tests and 200 One Day Internationals approaching, I thought that his career surely deserved to be immortalised in book form, and I'm grateful to Zebra Press for supporting the idea.

All I can say is: Well done, Rudi, for your wonderful achievements in international cricket. And thanks for sharing your career with me while we worked on this book. I am privileged to have been involved in this way.

CHRIS SCHOEMAN

Abbreviations

- ANC:** African National Congress
BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation
BCCI: Board of Control for Cricket in India
CEO: chief executive officer
D/L: Duckworth-Lewis (method)
DRS: decision review system
FICA: Federation of International Cricketers' Associations
FIFA: International Federation of Association Football
ICC: International Cricket Council
ICL: Indian Cricket League
IPL: Indian Premier League
MCC: Marylebone Cricket Club
MCG: Melbourne Cricket Ground
ODI: One Day International
PCB: Pakistan Cricket Board
PSS: Pakiosothy Saravanamuttu Stadium
QC: Queen's Counsel
SABC: South African Broadcasting Corporation

SCG: Sydney Cricket Ground

SSC: Sinhalese Sports Club

T20: Twenty20

UCBSA: United Cricket Board of South Africa

UPMs: umpires' performance managers

WACA: Western Australian Cricket Association

WICB: West Indies Cricket Board

Introduction

When I started umpiring in 1981, I did it just so that I could be involved with the game that I love. I never dreamt that I would one day be standing on the international stage. As South Africa was barred from international competition at the time, such a thought was far from my mind. But thanks to the country's return to international cricket in 1991, I was given a chance to progress up the ladder of provincial and, eventually, international umpiring.

I have always been a stickler for setting myself goals, and fortunately my longevity in the game enabled me to reach a few significant milestones. When I entered the international ranks, I thought that standing in even 50 One Day Internationals would be quite something. But 50 ODIs came and went, so next I targeted 100 ODIs. In the meantime I was also given the opportunity to stand in more and more Tests, which are, in the final analysis, the benchmark for one's umpiring abilities, and the number of Tests in which I officiated also grew steadily. And so it went on. Today I am very happy with and content in the knowledge that I have stood in 100 Tests and 200 ODIs – a milestone no one had achieved before me. To date, I'm also the only international umpire to have stood in 200 ODIs.

For someone who started international umpiring relatively late in life, these milestones have been a huge personal achievement

and a wonderful dream come true. The only objective that has passed me by all these years was standing in an ICC (International Cricket Council) World Cup final. I was third umpire in 2003 in South Africa and in 2007 in the West Indies. But with the next World Cup only due in 2011, and my retirement imminent, standing in the final may forever remain an unaccomplished goal.

I can ascribe my achievements, such as they are, to my passion for this great game, and – without trying to blow my own trumpet – to dedication and fitness. At the time of achieving my double of 100 Tests and 200 ODIs, the ICC congratulated me for serving the game through my umpiring and for being a role model for and inspiration to young up-and-coming umpires. I sincerely hope that I have achieved the latter.

The job of umpiring has its highs and lows, but I can assure you that the highs far outweigh the lows. Over the years I have officiated on all the big continents of the globe, from the grounds in my home country of South Africa to the colourful, festive grounds of the Caribbean and the graceful ambience of the hallowed ground at Lord's. Being an international cricket umpire has given me the opportunity to travel to a host of different countries, meet an interesting variety of people and learn about different cultures. Over a long period of time, I could also watch the young emerging cricketers of yesterday develop into the great stars of today. For that I will always be extremely grateful to the great game of cricket.

Yes, I've been fortunate to have had so many opportunities, but the real heroes in the story of my life have been my wife Hyla and our four children, Yalali, Eumelda, Rudolf and Luan. I haven't been able to spend too much time with them over the past 17 years because I have been away for so much of each year. I have been fully aware that my absence is a burden on them, but I will be forever grateful for the way they have shown understanding and allowed me to live one of the great passions of my life, which at the same time also happened to be my job.

This long cricketing life has enabled me to collect so many wonderful – and some not so wonderful – memories of players, matches and grounds all around the world, and I can now recount all those reminiscences within the pages of this book.

Every umpire has a trait that makes him unique, and so have I – a trait, in fact, that has given rise to the book's title: *Slow Death*. I have a slow and deliberate way of raising my left finger when giving batsmen out – I can just imagine how they must have dreaded that sign!

When I first started umpiring, I stood with my hands in front of my body, but it meant that every time I moved them after a delivery, batsmen got jumpy because they thought, 'Oh no, here it is,' thinking that I was going to lift my finger and give them out. That's when I decided to stand with my hands behind my back, and since then I have gripped my left wrist with my right hand, which helps to stop me from shooting up my left hand without thinking about a decision. That has become my trademark and has given rise to my nickname of Slow Death.

Traditional or 'real' umpiring to me is standing on-field, and although you can also see a lot from the stand as third or fourth umpire, you're really no more than just another spectator in the ground. But standing on the pitch, among the players ... It lends a different dimension. You get all the vibes and sounds and talking first hand; it is simply the best seat in the whole ground. So, for the purposes of this book, I will largely stick to my on-field umpiring experiences, and only describe what I've seen from behind the stumps and from square leg. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

1

A Huckleberry Finn childhood

“*How I loved the sounds and smells of cricket as a youngster! The leather ball against willow, the sharp thud as the ball hit the boundary pickets, the firm but polite clapping of the spectators. And the smells – linseed oil on bats, brand-new leather balls and freshly mowed outfield.*”

I was born Rudolf Eric Koertzen in Knysna, South Africa, on 26 March 1949, the youngest of three children. My sister Marie is the oldest; then came my other sister, Fonnie, and then me. To put my birth in a South African perspective, I was born within a year of the National Party of Dr DF Malan coming to power after ousting General Jan Christiaan Smuts's United Party from government. At the time, Malan's party was, of course, propagating the policy of apartheid, which would cause the country so much trouble in the future, resulting in our cricket isolation for many years, among other things.

My father, Josef, grew up in the Mossel Bay area, while my mother, Maria, hailed from George, also in the Southern Cape. My father worked as a truck driver for the South African Railways and Harbours, a government department. He spent a lot of time on the road, sometimes only seeing his family over weekends. In

those days loyalty to employers was a main priority, and most men used to stick with the same company for the whole of their working careers. For my father it was no different. He would work for the SA Railways all his life, and by the time I was born in Knysna, he had already been working for them for a fair number of years.

It was almost the norm for Railways employees to be transferred around the country, and from Knysna my father was transferred to Noupoot, a large, dusty railway junction in the Great Karoo. Noupoot was an old, established town; during the Anglo-Boer War, already, it had been used as a military base by the British forces in the Cape Colony. After a few years' service in Noupoot, my father was transferred to the Eastern Cape town of Despatch, and that's where I started my primary-school education at the age of six.

Before 1980, there weren't all that many people who would have been able to tell you exactly where in the country Despatch was situated. At that stage, some had not even heard of it. But then a brilliant rugby player called Danie Gerber put the town on the map. A product of the local Despatch High School, Danie became a Springbok in 1980 and went on to become a world legend.

I think the greatest compliment he was ever given was when the famous BBC commentator Bill McLaren named him as the best outside centre he had seen in his 50-odd years of rugby commentating. Under Danie's leadership, the local rugby club also won the national club championships twice in the 1980s, ahead of club giants like the universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria.

In 1997, the local school produced another Springbok in Rassie Erasmus, who made his debut as a loose forward against Martin Johnson's British Lions. Rassie had vision; he was a rugby genius. Well, he still is. He retired as a player after 36 tests, and then – aged only 33 – coached the Free State Cheetahs to Currie

Cup victory in 2005. Since his move to Cape Town he has been coaching the Stormers in the Super 14 with a fair degree of success.

Internationally known jockey Michael (Muis) Roberts also had a brief stint in our primary school before his parents sent him off to a jockey academy in Port Elizabeth – with spectacular results. Then, of course, Brian Jerling, another current international cricket umpire, spent 15 years of his adult life in Despatch. Brian became a familiar face on local TV some years ago when he appeared in ads for cricket sponsors Toyota.

So you can be sure that, these days, when a man mentions the town's name through the foam of his beer, it's with some respect.

The early townsfolk never liked the Union Jack, but I guess in that Despatch wasn't much different from a lot of towns in the country – except those in Natal, of course! I recall that during the 1960s there was a suggestion that the town be renamed after the then prime minister, John Vorster, which caused quite a stir at the time. Vorster himself had no objection to the idea, but it could be done on one condition only, and that was that the townspeople's decision had to be unanimous. A meeting was held on the town's rugby field – a piece of land that in later years was to be graced by some of the big names in world rugby, as I mentioned – and every living soul was there. The proposed name change, however, died a quick death, as too many people were dead against it.

For as long as I could remember, the town's only hotel, an old building with gables and verandahs, had been there. Set among some big old eucalyptus trees, it was the popular place for sportsmen to quench their thirst, and because of the trees, was affectionately known as the 'Lang Bome' (tall trees). When I was still playing for the local cricket club, we had many a beer at the Lang Bome after the games. Sadly the old landmark eventually ceased to trade, and for a while it served as the headquarters of the De Mist commando.

Our town was mostly populated by blue-collar workers, employed at the SA Railways, or the large General Motors, Volkswagen or tyre factories in the Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage areas. Even though they had to commute some distance, people liked to live in Despatch, as there was more peace and quiet. We lived in Landman Street, which was just a plain dirt road like 90 per cent of the town's streets back then. Most of the houses in our area were modest dwellings built in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, many years later and after stints in Bloemfontein, Kimberley and Port Elizabeth, I live only a few blocks away from my boyhood home with my family – though now, thanks mainly to cricket, in a much larger and more modern house.

My father was a strict but fair man who believed in hard work. I'm not so sure he would have regarded full-time umpiring as a real job! As I said earlier, he spent a lot of time on the roads, and consequently I did not see as much of him as I would have liked. He passed away in 1987, at a time when I was standing in Bloemfontein in my inaugural first-class match. It was a game between Eastern Province and Free State, when Free State had a strong team with three international players in Alan Lamb, Sylvester Clarke and Alvin Kallicharran in their side.

My mother, Maria, was just as strict, and she did more than her share to keep food on the table. I remember her leaving before six in the morning to catch the train to Port Elizabeth, where she worked in a shoe factory, and returning only in the early evening. This meant that in my later high-school years, when my older sister was already out of the house and my younger sister was also working, I had to do some cooking in the afternoons so that there would be supper when my family got home. In between I had to do my schoolwork, a bit of gardening and tend to the chickens in the backyard, so there was little idle time for me then.

In my primary-school years, especially, my friends and I led a wonderful Huckleberry Finn-like childhood, which I wouldn't have traded for all the TV sets and PlayStations in the world. TV

came to South Africa only in 1976, and in our time – thank goodness – we had to entertain ourselves, improvise and be creative.

A popular place for our adventures was the Swartkops River, originating in the Great Winterhoek Mountains and flowing past the town on the northern side on its way to the Indian Ocean. It was a favourite spot for fishing. We would catch carp, or *harders* (mullet), and in the evenings we would fish for freshwater eel in the eddies close to the river bank. The river was also the ideal place for swimming, or for paddling our crudely built canoes.

Beyond the river stretched a few miles of bush, which we explored thoroughly. Birdlife was abundant, and we learnt the name of every kind of bird. On the odd occasion one would see a rabbit, a small buck or even a jackal scurrying away into the undergrowth. Snakes also crossed our path, and we weren't scared of them – but we were careful, nevertheless.

At home we had some time to read comics, and once in a while we would go to the old Plaza bioscope in Uitenhage, where Westerns were our favourites. I recall one afternoon when the boys sat down all excitedly, waiting for a cowboy movie called *Oklahoma* to start. But we didn't realise that we were about to see a musical, and left in disgust when the cowboys started singing instead of shooting!

Like most of the kids who lived on the central and western sides of town, I attended the Susannah Fourie Primary School. Our big rival was the Sonop Primary School – in fact, the town's only other primary school at the time – on the eastern side. Few parents owned motor cars back then, so we foot-slogged to school and back every morning and afternoon, in the heat of summer and the chill of winter, dressed in our neat blue blazers and grey shorts. The English-speaking pupils – those who didn't attend Muir College and other schools in nearby Uitenhage – were accommodated in their own little school in the Dutch Reformed church hall. We didn't exactly fight the Boer War all over again, but there was a healthy rivalry between the Afrikaans and English lads.

Rugby had always been the big sport at both primary and high

school, but we were also coached in cricket, tennis and athletics, and we competed mostly with schools from the Uitenhage, Port Elizabeth, Humansdorp and Sunday's River Valley areas. In primary school I played rugby for the Under-11s, and later for the Under-13s. Because I was a small lad, the coaches tried to hide me at fullback, but they did me no favours, as it was a nightmare trying to stop the bigger boys charging at me.

My favourite sport, though, was cricket. My first acquaintance with the game was at primary school. We only fielded a single Under-13 team, and games against other schools were few. But I just loved the sport and couldn't wait to get to the practices in the school nets in the afternoons. It was a passion that would determine the rest of my life.

Once in high school I played for the Under-14s, and by the age of 16 I made it into the first XI, but I probably had more enthusiasm than real talent. A few blocks away from where we lived there was an open park, but with hardly a small tree it was the ideal ground for our social rugby or cricket games. We had great fun playing cricket there, but the bad part was when we had to recover the ball from the yard of one of the houses across the park with the irate owner glaring at us through the window. Now our old playground and the adjacent old tennis clay courts are all gone, and in their place a retirement home was built many years ago.

Some of my fondest memories from those days revolve around the St George's Park Cricket Ground in Port Elizabeth, a venue where, years later, I would spend many an hour in the sun as club, provincial or Test umpire. Known as the Friendly City, Port Elizabeth was, of course, the home of the famous Pollock brothers, Peter and Graeme. Peter's cricketing talent was inherited by his son, Shaun, who captained South Africa before the current Proteas captain, Graeme Smith, took over.

On provincial match days we would take the train from Despatch to Port Elizabeth and then walk from the station all the way up the steep Donkin Hill to St George's Park. In the hour or two before the start of a match, we would go and watch guys like