GAVIN RICH

THE POISONED CHALICE

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE POST-ISOLATION SPRINGBOK COACHES

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To my wife, Anna, and children, Kate and Peter, for putting up with my absence, sometimes for weeks but often for months and occasionally for several times a year since I covered my first Springbok tour in 1992

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have long felt a need for a book that records the journey the Springboks have travelled over the first two decades since South African rugby was unified, but the idea for a book on the coaches came to me when Peter de Villiers and I were on our book tour after the publication of *Politically Incorrect*, Peter's life story and a book on which we collaborated. So many people asked me if all the Bok coaches' stories were similar to Peter's. My response was that they all had different experiences, but that common threads ran through all of them.

There have been books on the individual coaches, but I resolved to tell the story of the Bok coaches as a collective in the post-isolation era, starting with John Williams, who was appointed in 1992 via a letter that consisted of just one line, through to current coach Heyneke Meyer. I am one of the few rugby writers who travelled on the first tour to France and England who is still on the beat and thus possessed of what someone once referred to as "a long view of the coaches", so I felt I was in a position to write the story. As you will see when you read this book, a lot has changed, but a lot has also stayed the same.

Jake White, who has decided he wants to put his South African chapter behind him and start a new life in Australia, was the only living post-isolation Springbok coach who I did not get to interview, and I am indebted to all those, from Williams through to Meyer, who were able to make the time and were willing to be quizzed by a reporter who some of them, during parts of their reign, must have despised.

It's not easy being a Springbok coach, and much of this book is about the pressures they are confronted with. But while the title suggests sympathy with those who have held down the hottest and most pressured position in South African sport, I agree with those who claim that some coaches have used the obstacles as a convenient excuse for their own poor decisions. So not all the coaches will agree with everything I say about them. But then hopefully that should be an indication that I've done the job I set out to do and that I have

been honest. I made a commitment to all of them that I would be fair, and hopefully I've lived up to that.

To those colleagues who were on the beat in 1992 and have joined me in doing the long haul, my thanks for your companionship over these 21 years. Louis de Villiers, Dan Retief and Mark Keohane are the others who have experienced what I have, and although Dan and Mark have spent some of the past few years off the beat, all three of those guys could have written this story. To Mark in particular, who took some flak from some of the coaches in this book, and maybe even from me, my thanks for the friendship and the shared experiences on those occasions, such as the 2007 World Cup, where we travelled together and shared accommodation.

Talking of good guys, Liam del Carme and Mike Greenaway are strong personal friends with whom I have also shared much of the journey, and I thank them both, as I do Stephen Nell. Craig Ray was a good sounding board when I first started thinking about writing this book. Thanks also to Jon Cardinelli, Clinton van den Berg, Zelim Nel, Jacques van der Westhuizen, Ryan Vrede, Kevin McCallum, Brenden Nel, Andrew Koopman and others who have suffered my madness and resolved to tolerate it.

Talking of madness, a special thanks to Simon Borchardt, who supplied me with 50 scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings he had compiled from 1990 to 2000. As a means to jolt my memory, they were particularly invaluable, and if anyone wants to write a book chronicling sport in our changing country over the first decade of transition, you know where to go. In fact, I might go there myself.

Finally, to my editor, Ronel Richter-Herbert, for pointing me in the right direction when I departed from the chronology of the story from time to time, and just for being patient, and to Marlene Fryer for trusting me enough to bring out this book in what in the end was a much quicker time period than maybe it demanded. Some of the coaches warranted much more than the 10 000 to 12 000 words I dedicated to them, so I hope I have done their individual stories justice.

GAVIN RICH

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Readers may notice that 11 Springbok coaches of the post-isolation era are featured, whereas officially there have been 12 since 1992. Initially I did intend featuring Gerrie Sonnekus, but after being asked nicely not to by someone close to his family, and realising that the book was already in danger of getting way too long, I resolved to leave that part of the Bok coaching story out. Gerrie departed the job before he effectively had a chance to experience it. I cover the reason briefly at the start of Chapter 5.

1

Mad Coaches Disease

Nick Mallett loves a good laugh, but, like most people, he doesn't enjoy being the butt of a joke. And as usual, South African rugby was making a laughing stock of itself. That explained the former Springbok coach's irritation when he arrived at a Sandton hotel on a crisp Highveld morning in September 2006 for the meeting that the whole country seemed to be talking about.

Rudolf Straeuli, who had been keeping a low profile while trying to recover his reputation following the infamous events that tarnished the Springboks' 2003 Rugby World Cup campaign, wasn't doing cartwheels of delight either as he flew in from Durban.

As for Ian McIntosh … well, as an early victim but also a long-standing survivor of the weird, confusing and often cruel machinations of South African rugby politics, the wily veteran had seen it all before. He had, in fact, twice before attended meetings similar to the one he was about to take part in now – once when he himself was the Bok coach, when Louis Luyt had summoned 19 different coaches to Ellis Park the week before a Test against England in 1994, and again three years later, when Carel du Plessis was in charge.

Du Plessis was at the meeting too. He had flown in from the Western Cape, as had Harry Viljoen. In fact, the only living former Springbok coaches from the post-isolation era not at the 2006 meeting, which had been called by South African Rugby Union (SARU) president Oregan Hoskins, were Professor John Williams and André Markgraaff.

Williams lived too far away, on a farm near the Limpopo/Botswana border, to make it to Johannesburg, while Markgraaff had turned his back on rugby the year before, after he had challenged the business practices of the then SARU president, Brian van Rooyen. Markgraaff also disliked the incumbent Springbok coach Jake White, as he felt White too often and too naively poked his nose into rugby politics, which he knew nothing about.

White was to be the focus of the meeting, which was being held to address a crisis largely of his own making: his team had suffered five consecutive defeats. The 18-34 defeat to the All Blacks at Loftus the previous Saturday was the culmination of the negative momentum that had started with a home defeat to France and then haemorrhaged into a 0-49 annihilation at the hands of Australia. The Springboks had also lost to the Kiwis in New Zealand, and again to the Wallabies, in Sydney.

Sections of the media and a great many South African rugby fans were calling for White's head with a passion and vehemence that in some countries would drive a vote of no-confidence in the national president.

So, as Mallett saw it, the meeting wasn't really being held to deal with White at all, but just to placate the media and public.

As he recalls: "I was irritated by the whole thing. It was absolute nonsense. The meeting was being held so Hoskins and the SA Rugby chairman [Mpumelelo Tshume] could report back that they had done something, but what they were really doing was just covering up the fact that they had no clue what to do."

Hence Mallett's reluctance to get involved, and why it took much persuasion from SARU to get him there. Like McIntosh, Mallett had also attended the 1997 coaches' indaba, which was called to help out Bok coach Carel du Plessis. In Mallett's view, it had not achieved much except to make him, Mallett, unpopular with the then South African Rugby Football Union (SARFU) president, Dr Louis Luyt.

Administrators who "have no clue" have long been the bane of Mallett's existence. They're the reason he has refused to get on the grass and coach in South Africa since losing the Springbok job in 2000. And in 1997, he told Luyt straight out, without pulling any punches, that it was *his* cluelessness that had led to the Boks losing the British & Irish Lions series. After all, *he* had appointed Du Plessis, even though the former "Prince of Wings" had no coaching experience worth mentioning.

"I told Luyt that it was his fault that the Springboks were in the mess they were in, because he had appointed Carel to the job when he had no coaching experience. [My words] nearly came back to bite me when, later in the year, I was up for the Bok job myself."

Heading into a similar meeting nine years later, Mallett didn't want to ruffle feathers again. But as he listened to the coaches who spoke before him, he decided what he was going to say when it was his turn. He wanted the

administrators, Hoskins and Tshume, to realise the ridiculousness of the situation. He cleared his throat to speak.

"Listen, you've appointed Jake until the World Cup next year, and he will have his ups and downs, as we have all had as Bok coaches."

He then read out the success rate of the other coaches at the meeting in matches against New Zealand and Australia. He didn't mention his own record, as his success rate was the only one better than White's, which he felt qualified him to raise this point.

"I just wanted to make it quite clear that Jake was actually in a position of strength. His record was far superior to most of the coaches present."

Mallett then proceeded to address each coach in turn.

"Mac, the Boks won only a small percentage of their games during your tenure; André Markgraaff's record in terms of games won and lost wasn't great; Harry and Carel, you were both shocking. So what right do we really have to sit here and judge Jake?"

Mallett was determined to drum home how silly the situation was. "As ex-Bok coaches, all of us had lost the job at some stage, and therefore we were in no position to judge. All we could do for Jake was sympathise with him. I pointed out to Hoskins that having experienced the poisoned chalice ourselves, not one of us sitting around the table would actually want the job.

"What we could do was [empathise] with Jake and what he was going through in the face of the demanding public and media. We had all been through it ourselves, and we knew there had been times when all we'd wanted was some support and a bit of time to get things right. We had all experienced what it was like to be in a situation where the team was struggling, but we felt we had it in our grasp to get it right if we were left to our own devices."

Mallett still thinks the 2006 meeting was a crazy idea, but at least it served some purpose, for Straeuli headed back to his home in Mount Edgecombe feeling far more positive than when he had first arrived.

"It was great to be among people who had shared the same experience and who understood the incredible pressures of the job," he told me. "Looking back, I wish that I had had something like that when I was Bok coach, as one always feels so alone in the job. A lot of positive [input] could come from a group of people who understand what the coach is experiencing, and who can lend a sympathetic ear and operate as a sounding board."

To some extent, McIntosh provided that kind of support to White as his official mentor during White's four years in charge.

"Every Springbok coach reaches a point where the pressure just gets too much and where you need to have friends around you," McIntosh says. "I will never forget Cecil Moss, who coached the Boks during the 1980s, phoning me to congratulate me when I was appointed. He warned me by saying that no one ever knows how lonely the job of Springbok coach is until they've actually experienced it. And it's very true."

But there was only one coach at that particular meeting who was feeling the pinch, and that was White.

Although White described the meeting as just another "unnecessary distraction" in what was the build-up to an important Tri-Nations Test against the All Blacks in Rustenburg, he later recalled it in a more positive light. Like Straeuli, he appreciated the other coaches' empathy.

More importantly, White felt that Hoskins and Tshume now knew that the same complaints he had about the administrators who ran South African rugby had also been voiced by his predecessors. It just showed what little progress had been made in taking Springbok rugby forward.

"I was reassured because the coaches said the things I wanted Hoskins to hear, the things I had been saying all along," White explains in his bestselling autobiography, *In Black and White*. "They were pointing out that we will be inconsistent, that we don't have structures in place, that we worry about the provinces first before Springbok rugby, and that we don't look after the players. The coaches spoke about three-year cycles, and how the team hit the wall in the third year. They said that Hoskins and Tshume could hire any coaches in the world and the situation would remain the same."

The coaches' indaba served another purpose, too: some of what was said during the meeting reinforced White's vision for Springbok rugby and reassured him that he was on the right track.

"Nick Mallett came up with ideas that he thought would be a way forward. I felt better that at least I wasn't going mad. People were seeing things the way I was seeing them."

Ah, there's the word … "mad". White needed convincing that he wasn't going "mad". That word frequently made it into my media coverage at the time. Two weeks before the Sandton meeting, I even wrote a story for the Saturday editions of the SA Independent Group in which I wondered whether White was succumbing to the same ailment all Springbok coaches suffer from at some stage. I called it "Mad Coaches Disease".

White had been contradicting himself with almost every public utterance he had made in the two months leading up to the Sandton meeting. He seemed a shadow of the man who had dragged Springbok rugby from the brink of despair two and a half years previously, when he first took over as coach.

However, even in those early days, when White seemed so together and unflustered, and when he was shocking everyone by coaching his Springboks into winning matches they were expected to lose, wizened hacks in the media were asking among themselves: "So, when is MCD [Mad Coaches Disease] going to set in? When is the pressure going to start taking its toll?"

Those of us who had been around for the duration of the post-isolation period up till that point had seen plenty of examples of MCD. The symptoms usually included contradictory behaviour, poor selection choices, incomprehensible strategies and odd public statements. Even those who seemed immune to the disease at the start, like Nick Mallett, who set off with a long winning streak, succumbed to MCD eventually.

All the coaches reacted to the pressure in different ways, but at some stage MCD would strike and people would start asking, "Has this guy lost it?" Harry Viljoen, for example, had told his players not to kick the ball before his first Test in charge, and had then gone to the opposite extreme by selecting a team that could *only* kick. MCD even drove him to unexpectedly resign his job, but at least he was honest enough to admit that the pressure from the media and the public was one of the main reasons why he was standing down.

But is it really any mystery that MCD exists in a country where rugby is followed and supported so passionately, and where the Springboks are expected to win every game? Not to mention the other factors at play … For instance, no other rugby-playing country has the divided past of South Africa. It is hard to think of a national team in any sporting code in other countries that had once been as reviled as the Springboks by a majority of their countrymen. And after the apartheid years, rugby was intensely scrutinised during the transformation phase, which made demands many of the coaches were not equipped to deal with.

Even now, with both South African rugby and the country as a whole having made such great progress towards normalisation, there are still constant reminders of an unseen power struggle that underpins the game in this country.

"Maybe I should give the game back to the Afrikaners," South Africa's first black coach, Peter de Villiers, said bitterly when he was threatened with

a sex-tape revelation in 2008. De Villiers subsequently apologised for his comment, and made the point that he wasn't referring to Afrikaners per se. But everyone understood what he meant, as rugby had for so long been dominated by the Afrikaner elite. If you look back at the pre-isolation days, how many Afrikaans doctors, lawyers and businessmen were in prominent positions in rugby administration? And a behind-the-scenes struggle for control continues to this day.

Many of the Bok coaches of the last 20-odd years were ordinary, normal people who loved the game but, once they were in the job, discovered that it was about so much more than just rugby. Rugby has come to mean an almost disproportionate amount to a population group that has felt increasingly marginalised and stripped of its identity, and in this environment the coach has assumed a position of tremendous importance. What is expected of the Springbok coach is almost impossible.

In his book, *The Real McCaw*, All Black captain Richie McCaw describes how his coach, Graham Henry, changed their whole approach to the 2011 World Cup on the basis of what he had seen in the Springbok dressing room after a Tri-Nations match in 2009. Henry told his players that he had realised whereas the South Africans played for their country, the All Blacks played for the team. It inspired him to introduce nationalism as a motivational tool for the All Blacks.

Sean Fitzpatrick, another All Black skipper, had said something similar after the 1995 World Cup final, when his disappointment at losing was diffused by the experience of participating in an event that was so much more to the South African nation than a mere sports competition.

That level of emotional investment brings pressure and responsibilities that transcend anything a coach of a national sports team normally experiences. In South Africa, you don't just coach and lead the team; in a sense, you become the leader of a country. It's small wonder then that so few have lived up to the massive expectations.

"It takes a certain type of character to be a Springbok coach, and I don't think I had the character for it, and I don't think most of the coaches who have taken the job have had the right personality for it," reflects André Markgraaff.

As well as being a former Bok mentor himself, for many years Markgraaff also worked on the other side as one of the officials who appointed and selected the coaches. Given his experience in the game and the high-ranking role he

played for much of the time, Markgraaff's opinion on how Springbok coaches are selected is damning, and may explain why some of them appeared somewhat out of their depth.

As he explains: "Too often it was just a case of choosing a guy because he appealed to some people in the executive and satisfied some faction. Jake White was the only coach [who was] appointed through a proper professional process where there was a commitment to objectively arrive at the best [man] for the job."

Indeed. It also explains, as Mallett has said, why the journey of the post-isolation Springbok coaches has encountered so much turbulence.

"What was amazing about that 2006 meeting was how many of us had shared the same experiences, encountered the same problems, and yet still, many years later, nothing had been done to redress shortfalls that should have been staring the administrators in the face. For me, half the problem is that people who have made the coaching appointments haven't been qualified to do so."

When Mallett was interviewed for the Springbok job in 1997, he wasn't even asked about his rugby philosophy. Not one of the people who appointed him had played or coached at the highest level. With the exception of 2004, when Markgraaff's technical committee appeared to get it right with White, this remains the status quo. A committee, which consisted mostly of administrators, many whom had their own political agenda, appointed Peter de Villiers in 2008. One would have thought that former players and coaches would have been more qualified to assess the potential of the candidates.

Says Mallett: "I can talk about my experience when England approached me for the national coaching job, and it doesn't compare to any experiences I've heard about when Bok coaches are appointed. I wasn't interviewed by the Rugby Football Union (RFU), but by a rugby committee. The committee was headed by the high-performance director, Rob Andrew, and comprised of the former flanker, Richard Hill, Ian McGeechan [former British & Irish Lions coach] and Connor O'Shea. It was really interesting and we had a proper rugby discussion.

"The RFU then asked the committee for their recommendation. I thought it was a very fair way of doing it. In South Africa, fairness and thoroughness have been lacking, and the elected officials and board members who make the decisions aren't really qualified to make coaching appointments."

South Africa has a lot of coaching expertise and experience to draw on when coaching appointments are made, but Mallett says only one union has ever approached him to help identify or select a suitable candidate.

"When I was still Springbok coach, the Bulls approached me and told me they had a list of candidates they were looking at but didn't know what they should be looking for, and would I help them out. I really respected them for their honesty. I was one of the people who would have helped them make the decision to appoint Heyneke Meyer as [the Bulls] coach.

"But at first they wanted to appoint him for only one year. I said no, they needed to give him time to get things right. South Africa has too much of a short-term view about their coaches, and I think generally there is a lack of calmness about everything. It's because for most of the past 20 years the people running the game haven't understood what they are looking for in a coach and, as a result, when a crisis hits, like it did in 2006, they don't know how to react to it."

That lack of clarity has had a direct impact on Springbok performances, and it has probably destroyed not just a few coaching careers, but also a few playing careers. Mark Andrews, who apart from Joost van der Westhuizen played under more Bok coaches than any other wearer of the green and gold, reckons the turnover of national coaches during his playing career had a massive impact on results.

"When people ask me about my greatest achievement, I don't tell them it was winning the World Cup; I tell them it was being able to adjust my game to suit six different national coaches," Andrews says. "I played my first Test in 1994 and my last in 2001. That's a different coach more frequently than every 18 months, and Nick Mallett was the only one who lasted for longer than that. Every coach had a different idea on how I should play."

This may explain why South African rugby, despite the two World Cup triumphs, has so often given the impression that it's lagging behind the top teams in the world.

It might also have helped South African rugby if it had a better perspective of its capabilities when the curtain was lifted in 1992 and the Springboks were allowed back onto the international stage.

Instead, it lived in dreamland …

2

"Welcome to your worst nightmare!"

There was never any danger of the New Zealand All Blacks underestimating the challenge posed by the Springboks as they arrived in Johannesburg for the first post-isolation tour of this country. The South African public told them exactly what to expect.

"Welcome to your worst nightmare!" screamed several banners brandished by locals who greeted Sean Fitzpatrick and his team as they walked through the arrivals hall at Johannesburg airport on a Sunday evening in August 1992.

It wasn't just an isolated pocket of arrogance. In his book *The Winning Way*, Wallaby World Cup–winning coach Bob Dwyer described his irritation at the aggressive way South African fans insisted on informing him that the Springboks, and not *his* team, were the true world champions.

Perhaps one shouldn't describe the South Africans' attitude as arrogance, for it is true that there are none so blind as those who cannot see. Being denied international competition for so long had rendered South African sports fans incapable of assessing how good, or bad, their teams were.

The mood on the eve of the All Black visit was driven by three factors: the naivety that had resulted from many seasons of isolation from international rugby; a domestic competition, the Currie Cup, which had been trumpeted as the toughest rugby competition in the world; and a desperate desire to see a country struggling with its identity and undergoing massive changes assert itself in a sport at which it had historically excelled.

The national cricket team had made a good fist of it in an epoch-making comeback year, which had started with a tour to India under the captaincy of Clive Rice, and it had then captured the public imagination early in 1992

by reaching the semi-finals of the Cricket World Cup, with Kepler Wessels as captain. Even though they exited against England in controversial circumstances in a rain-reduced game, the tournament had inspired those South Africans who were about to vote in a referendum on whether or not to accept President F.W. de Klerk's political reforms.

Transfixed as South Africans were by the World Cup in this time of political uncertainty, it became clear then that sport was going to play a big role in determining the nation's self-esteem in future. After all, the country had been the pariah of the world for decades because of race-driven government policies and ideologies. After years of being criticised, banned, expelled and isolated by the rest of the world, it would have been understandable if an inferiority complex had started permeating the South African population.

Not that there was any noticeable feeling of inferiority in the rugby community. A year before their return to international rugby, the Springboks had played a festival game against the Junior Springboks at Durban's Kings Park Stadium. It was designed to give South Africa's top players the opportunity to play together and to get a feel for the green-and-gold jersey ahead of a possible return to international sport. The first-choice team won comprehensively enough to spark at least some optimism.

"It's this, this is what it's all about," said Springbok selector Mickey Gerber, pointing to the emblem on his blazer pocket when I approached him for his thoughts after the game. "Believe me, we can take on New Zealand at 1 a.m., Australia at 3 a.m. and England at 5 a.m., and we will beat them all on the same day," he continued.

His sentiments were echoed those months later, when the All Blacks were preparing for their opening tour match against Natal at the same stadium. Led by the hulking flanker Wahl Bartmann, Natal were top of the Currie Cup table and en route to their second Currie Cup title. Michael du Plessis, who had led the Boks against the Junior Boks in 1991 but had subsequently retired, wasn't shy to tell me that the confidence fans had exhibited at the airport a few nights earlier was thoroughly justified.

"I think Natal will win by around 20 points," said Du Plessis by telephone from his dental surgery in Port Elizabeth.

Noting the incredulity in the tone of the interviewer, Du Plessis extrapolated. "I just think South African rugby has moved on during isolation and forged ahead of the rest of the world."

Phew! Talk about giving the All Blacks motivation. And talk about piling the pressure on South Africa's first post-isolation Springbok coach, John Williams. A former Bok lock, Williams had coached Northern Transvaal to some significant successes in the latter part of the 1980s, but when the All Blacks arrived, he hadn't coached since 1989.

Eugene van Wyk had coached Northerns in the interim, but the movers and shakers on the South African rugby-coaching firmament at the time were Natal's wily, experienced and innovative Ian McIntosh, who had engineered that province's historic first-ever Currie Cup title in 1990, and Transvaal's dynamic young Harry Viljoen. In 1992, those were the two teams that played in the final, and they got there by employing a style that was far more modern than the 10-man rugby Northern Transvaal espoused.

But both McIntosh and Viljoen had one glaring deficiency in their respective CVs: neither of them had played for the Springboks and was in possession of the distinctive green-and-gold ceremonial blazer. At the time, with the ageing Dr Danie Craven still calling the shots in South African rugby's administrative leadership, being a Springbok was a prerequisite to becoming the national coach.*

So it came down to a choice between Williams and Western Province's Dawie Snyman. The latter lost out because his provincial team's influence had waned considerably since they had last touched silverware, when they'd shared the Currie Cup with Williams's team in 1989.

If it seems bizarre that South African rugby turned to a coach who had not actually coached in three years to guide the Springboks out of isolation, it was only one of several decisions Craven and his fellow administrators took that smacked of arrogance. The newly formed South African Rugby Football Union was an organisation that was out of touch with reality.

For a start, there was the schedule that they accepted. The Springboks had not played official Test rugby since a South American team and an England side, led by John Scott, had toured South Africa in 1984. There had been an unofficial series against the New Zealand Cavaliers in 1986, and then a mini-series against a weak World XV in 1989 to celebrate the old South African Rugby Board's centenary.

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* The South African Rugby Football Union (SARFU) was formed on 23 March 1992, when the unification of the former whites-only South African Rugby Board (SARB) and the non-racial South African Rugby Union (SARU) was signed at the Kimberley Sun. Craven and Ebrahim Patel were joint presidents, but Craven was vested with the executive power.

The Boks had impressed against a Cavaliers team that included all but two of the players selected for the aborted All Black tour scheduled for the year before, and perhaps it was the memory of how special players such as Carel and Michael du Plessis, Johan Heunis, Danie Gerber, Naas Botha and Uli Schmidt had performed that inspired such confidence six years later. But the 1989 World XV, although beaten in the big match at Newlands, had exposed shortcomings in the South African game. By 1992 both Du Plessis brothers had retired, and the legendary duo of Gerber and Botha were in their mid-30s and coming to the end of their illustrious careers.

While the old traditional rivals, New Zealand, were slated to play the comeback game at Ellis Park, world champions Australia were to tour at the same time and would play the Boks in Cape Town a week after the Johannesburg match. A plan to play Italy and Romania before the tour had fallen through, and thus the Boks were denied the gentle warm-up they needed to prepare for the world's two top teams.

So to Williams fell the unenviable task of coaching the Springboks in their comeback Tests against the two best teams in the world, and that against the background of public expectation on the one side (whites), and the trepidation and very reserved support of a majority population, which, during the apartheid years, had seen the Springbok emblem as a symbol of oppression, on the other.

Not that everyone in South Africa was that gung-ho about the Springboks' chances. A few wise men who had travelled overseas and closely studied the international rugby environment had their doubts. Ian McIntosh had gone to Australia in early 1992 in an attempt to broaden his own coaching education, and after his return I interviewed him for the *Natal Mercury*. He sounded a warning that South African rugby might well be in a time warp similar to the one that had tripped up Rice's cricket team in India.

Piet Strydom, the selection convener for Natal, also noted his concern. He had travelled to Italy as an official with a South African Students team – captained by talented loose forward Andrew Aitken – which participated in the Students World Cup.

"The All Blacks are going to murder us in the rucks," he predicted.

According to Strydom, the ball was coming back from the rucks much quicker than the South African players were used to.

Although influenced by the likes of Michael du Plessis, as a young rugby writer living in Durban, I also had my doubts. Or at least an article that

appeared under my name in the programme to the Natal/All Black game suggested I did.

"Nowhere in South Africa has the ball retention been up to the standard we have seen in the NZ/Australia Bledisloe Cup Test," was my contribution to the cautionary lobby. Former Transvaal, Ireland and British Lions scrum-half John Robbie was, however, perhaps the person who best summed up what those first post-isolation Test matches were going to reveal. In his column in the *Rugby World and Post* magazine ahead of the tour, Robbie wrote: "The Boks are either the true world champions or a collection of dinosaurs hopelessly out of touch with the modern game and in for a rude awakening."

Ah, those were to prove prophetic words …

But on the eve of the All Black match against Natal, the Durban media displayed a remarkable air of optimism. It was partly fuelled by the confidence of Michael du Plessis, but also by rather inconsequential things, such as the fact that All Black lock Murray Pierce had been playing club rugby in Durban for two years and had hardly had a look-in for the provincial team behind the much bigger trio of Rudi Visagie, André Botha and Steve Atherton.

That, though, might actually just have indicated how much the game had changed overseas; players had become far more mobile than the Rudi Visagies of this world. Certainly the game against Natal served as a wake-up call to anyone who expected the All Blacks to be burnt alive. If anyone was facing a nightmare it was the Boks, and this quickly became apparent as Va'aiga Tuigamala, the giant All Black wing, contemptuously ran over Tony Watson, supposedly one of Natal's better players, as if he wasn't even there.

The scores were close for a bit, but the All Blacks were always in control, and they eventually ran out as victors by the same 20-point margin some had predicted would be the deficit they would face at the final whistle. What was even more disturbing was the way in which Wahl Bartmann, the influential Natal captain and, by all expectations, a big factor for the Springboks in the Test, went missing in action as the hosts were shown to be too ponderous in the battle for the loose ball.

The All Black dirt-trackers also didn't have too much trouble winning their next fixture, against Free State in Bloemfontein, a match that will be remembered for Brendan Venter, anticipated to be an important cog in the Springbok backline, breaking his leg. And so onward to the match against the Junior Springboks at Loftus Versfeld, a clash that everyone hoped would

give the All Blacks a proper taste and feel for the strength and depth available to South African rugby.

In his book *Endless Winter*, acclaimed British rugby writer Stephen Jones wrote that the international media had very high expectations as they waited to catch sight of the Junior Springboks at a Pretoria training session.

"We waited on the touchlines for training to start. Now, at last, we would see some Springboks, could prepare the superlatives. We heard so much about these giants, how they would come back into their own with an irresistible surge … Now, at last, we would see these gleaming specimens in the flesh."

But Jones went on to write that the session was one of the most "desultory" he had ever seen. "Kobus Wiese and Drikus Hattingh, next to, say, Wade Doolley or Martin Bayfield, were short."

He never did find the giants he was hoping for, did Jones. Instead, props up and down the country were "porkers in the old style of the years before the conditioning penny dropped", and Springbok lock Adolf Malan was "a trier, but way too spindly".

Again, like they had against Natal the week before, the All Blacks gave the impression that they didn't need to dig too deep to deal with the Junior Springboks, who were captained by Tiaan Strauss, and the challenge they posed.

The All Blacks won 25-10, the game proving to Jones that the South African playing style had been left behind. Writing in the London *Sunday Times*, he described the South African game as one dominated by kicking and in which forwards and backs simply did not combine. The tour was proving that "isolation hammers your game".

After the match, Bok coach John Williams made the first controversial pronouncement of his tenure. The overseas media had criticised the blatant lifting of the home team's line-out forward, Drikus Hattingh, and Williams was moved to defend his team's tactics.

"We don't call it lifting," he said. "We prefer to call it supporting. To us, it is a way of securing clean possession, which must be good for the game."

Indeed, Williams was simply expressing the views of South African rugby experts at the time. The problem was that South Africa was just one nation with its own interpretation, one with which the rest of the world didn't agree.

While it was true that "support" for the jumper was allowed *after* he had jumped on his own steam, the overseas referees did not allow the forwards to be lifted *to* the ball, which was what was happening in South Africa.

South African Albert Adams refereed the Junior Springbok game, and he allowed lifting, but the Test match was going to be officiated by a neutral international referee, who would bring a different interpretation to the law.

Jones wrote that Williams's defence of Adams "wasn't all lies and deception, it was just the first indication that South African rugby in isolation just hadn't kept up".

South African rugby hadn't kept up on other levels, too. In the pre-isolation era, at the time John Williams would have been a player and throughout Danie Craven's tenure as president of the South African Rugby Board, national trials were a massive part of the build-up to any major Test series or tour. There is a long list of players one can consult to prove that trials did have their place in years gone by. Obviously one had to scout for talent in the country areas, and selectors couldn't be everywhere at once. But that was before the advent of television coverage.

By 1992, players considered national trials antiquated. After all, their workload in a season was far heavier than that of a few decades earlier. In calling national trials, the Bok management – Williams and selection convener Daan Swiegers included – was immediately excoriated by the players.

Then, of course, there was another problem, but it was not new to the post-isolation era. This problem was provincialism, and it was exacerbated by the many years in which the Currie Cup had been the primary theatre of conflict for South African players. There had been few Bok teams selected in the preceding years where players from different provinces could bond; instead, players from the various provinces had grown used to playing against each other.

Both Williams and Swiegers were from Pretoria, and they were closely observed for any sign that they may favour the Northern Transvaal players. But there could not have been too many displeased observers from outside Pretoria when, on a calm, early spring evening on the Highveld after the Junior Springbok game, Swiegers announced the first Springbok team of the post-isolation era.

There were just four Northern Transvaal players in the side, although some of the players from other provinces, such as Natal's Robert du Preez and Transvaal's Theo van Rensburg and Heinrich Rodgers, had started off their careers playing for the Blue Bulls under Williams. Du Preez was one of only three Natal players selected for the Boks, and as that province was at the top of the Currie Cup log at the time, there were some murmurs of dissent from the Durban rugby scribes.

What raised *my* hackles, however, was the selection of Northern Transvaal second-string hooker Andries Truscott as understudy to Uli Schmidt, when Natal's first-choice hooker, John Allan, boasted international experience with Scotland. So I phoned the genial Swiegers at his home on the Sunday afternoon following the Saturday-night announcement.

Parts of our conversation were run in the *Natal Mercury*, such as when Swiegers kept on asking, "John who?" before finally saying, "Oh, you mean the *hooker*." I was young back then, and young reporters do stupid things. I doubt I would run a similar conversation in a newspaper if I had my time again. But this anecdotal aside does underline how difficult it is for the Springbok coach and his assistants to make everyone happy.

The Springbok team to play New Zealand read as follows: Theo van Rensburg, James Small, Danie Gerber, Pieter Muller, Pieter Hendriks, Naas Botha, Robert du Preez, Jannie Breedt, Ian Macdonald, Wahl Bartmann, Adolf Malan, Adri Geldenhuys, Lood Muller, Uli Schmidt, Heinrich Rodgers.

Gerber and Botha were the most experienced international players and were the sole survivors of the eventful 1981 tour of New Zealand. But Gerber was now 35 and no longer the player he had been, and was only in the team because of Brendan Venter's broken leg. Eight of the players had not played Test rugby before – not even the soft Tests of the latter part of the post-isolation era.

It would, to put it mildly, be one heck of a thing to play the All Blacks and Australia on consecutive weekends …

3

"Hello, am I the coach?"

John Williams did not start 1992 thinking that nine months into the year he would be taking charge of the first Springbok team to play a Test match in the post-isolation era.

A professor in the discipline of sports sociology, Williams had left top-level coaching after taking Northern Transvaal to three successive Currie Cup titles, the last one shared with Western Province in 1989. Williams left Pretoria to take up the position of Dean of Students at Potchefstroom University.

It was not the first time that Williams's academic career had forced him to make rugby a secondary interest in his life. In 1976, when his cheekbone and nose were broken playing for the Springboks in the second Test against the All Blacks, in Bloemfontein, Williams decided to call time on a playing career in which he had won 13 international caps and played 64 games for Northern Transvaal.

In those days you accumulated caps a lot slower than in the modern era, as matches were less frequent then, and Williams was already 32 at the time. During his playing career he had coached at school level while also teaching, but he took a break from rugby for the first few years after he retired from the game, as he was working on his PhD. In his own words, the academic world didn't care much for his rugby history.

However, while Williams was lecturing at Waterloo University in Canada towards the end of 1977, Roger Downer, a Zoology head of department, asked him to help coach the three university teams. That was the start of a coaching career that saw Williams guide Pretoria University to three successive Carlton League titles in the first part of the 1980s before he took over at Northern Transvaal.

"When I got the offer to take up a new position at Potch in 1989, I couldn't turn it down; it was my dream job. I served as vice-president of Western Transvaal and president of Potchefstroom University Rugby Club, but I did not actually coach in those years," Williams explained when I caught up with him on his farm near the Limpopo/Botswana border, 60 kilometres from Alldays, where he has lived for the past 14 years.

A hulking giant of a man, as you would expect from a former lock, Williams did retain enough interest in the game to travel to the 1991 World Cup in order to study playing trends.

However, although he would have had long-term ambitions to be the Bok coach if South Africa was readmitted, he was not thinking of it at the time and certainly did not actively seek out the job.

Indeed, the first Springbok team to play a Test match in the post-isolation era was coached by a man who found out from third parties that he had been appointed, and who had to make several phone calls over a period of time to confirm that he actually had the job.

"I started to get phone calls from people in around April 1992 saying that they believed I had been appointed as the Springbok coach," recalled Williams. "I told them that it couldn't be true. Surely there would have been a letter of appointment? At the very least I would have received a phone call from someone at SARFU. But I had nothing of the sort, so I assumed it was all just rumour."

But as 1992 proceeded, the "rumour" persisted. And people in the know kept on phoning him to tell him that he had been appointed as the Springbok coach.

"Eventually I decided that something must be wrong. So I went to Johan Claassen, whom I knew and who had coached me when I was a player. He was on the SARFU executive. I asked him if it was true that I was the Springbok coach. Johan said that as far as he knew, I had been appointed at an earlier executive meeting.

"This was already May, and the Springboks were due to play at the end of August. If we were going to play two tough Test matches so soon, I needed to get cracking with preparations. And yet I still hadn't been officially informed. So I phoned the SARFU general manager Arrie Oberholzer, who also confirmed [that] I had been appointed.

"'Arrie,' I said, 'there are a lot of things that need to be done.' I told him I had had no official notification, no terms of reference. I asked him if I could

please be sent something [that would] officially notify me [that] I had the job so [that] I could get cracking with the planning. I had an important job at Potchefstroom University and needed to schedule around that.

"So about a week later I got a letter from Doc Craven. It read as follows: 'You've been appointed as Springbok rugby coach for 1992.' That's all it said."

With his appointment letter now filed away, Williams applied himself to the task of planning for the imminent arrival of the two top teams in world rugby. There was little time, and he needed everything to be plain sailing if the Boks were to be ready by the time they played the All Blacks.

What followed, though, was anything but plain sailing. In fact, events bordered on the insane, with the confusion and disorganisation that had started even before Williams was appointed continuing into the early days of his coaching reign.

"When I asked Arrie if I could fly down from Pretoria to Cape Town to speak to him and start the planning, he said, 'Just carry on with it yourself.' I asked him about the dates for the trial matches. Arrie said, 'You'll be informed in due course. Daan Swiegers will let you know, as he is the convener of selectors.'"

Williams's attempts to get help from Arrie Oberholzer in those early days were akin to smashing into a brick wall over and over again. It wasn't so much the paid employee, Oberholzer, who was the stumbling block, but the SARFU joint president, the ageing patriarch Craven, and an executive dominated by people who, for years, had cared only for the provincial unions over which they presided.

Recalls Williams: "Way back in the day there used to be a system enforced by the International Rugby Board (IRB) prohibiting international teams from beginning their preparations earlier than a Wednesday before a Saturday match. I was good friends with Australian coach Bob Dwyer, and he told me it was nonsense, that it was ridiculous to expect a Test team to be prepared in three days.

"I told Arrie this, and he referred me to fellow SARFU employee Steven Roos. I told Steven that it was impossible to prepare a team for a Test match in three days, but Steven said I wouldn't get my wish, as Transvaal president Louis Luyt had insisted that his provincial team had a Currie Cup to prepare for. So we played against the All Blacks, after nearly 10 years without official Test rugby, with what was effectively three days' preparation."

If the first post-isolation Springbok coach had to put up with that, it is easy to have sympathy for him now. But at the time, Williams was the man who carried the can for every failure. The media was oblivious to the rugby administrators' weird machinations and the amateurish behaviour that had surrounded Williams's appointment and hampered the execution of his duties. What we saw at the time was a man who seemed very much a product of the Northern Transvaal culture – hard, uncompromising and a little dour.

He also didn't have much to say to people he didn't trust or know well, and rugby reporters suspected that he favoured Quintus van Rooyen, the late rugby scribe who was long regarded as the oracle of Northern Transvaal rugby. A colleague of mine recalls trying to interview Williams as he walked through the arrivals hall of D.F. Malan Airport (now Cape Town International Airport) in the build-up to the Australian Test and, in response to questions about the game, all the big man would say, over and over again, was, "We're going to look at it."

In the week leading up to the Ellis Park Test, the All Black midweek team beat a Central Unions team 39-6 after leading 22-0 at half-time, and the Wallabies arrived to start their tour. On their arrival, the Australians weren't greeted with the same level of arrogance reserved for the All Blacks a week earlier, but an advertising campaign that depicted a Wallaby skin drying in the sun with David Campese's No. 14 on the back made up for that.

The world champions started their tour with a regulation 46-13 win over Western Transvaal, then beat a Northern Transvaal team without Naas Botha and their other Boks 24-17 at Loftus the night before the Ellis Park Test match.

South Africa's comeback Test will forever be remembered more for the events around the game than for what actually happened on the field. Because rugby had been perceived as a morale-booster for white people during the years of apartheid, far greater political sensitivity surrounded the Springbok return to the international sporting arena than had been the case with the Proteas, the national cricket side, or, for that matter, the South African swimmers and athletes to the Olympic Games, which was being staged at the same time as the rugby internationals.

That sensitivity was to become an important factor in the considerations and actions of future Bok coaches, and may even have derailed one or two Springbok campaigns. But back in 1992, Williams was relatively shielded from what was taking place off the field. The first post-isolation Bok team,

for instance, was all white, and no one batted an eyelid. This may not seem significant, but Errol Tobias had become the first black Springbok as long ago as 1981, and Avril Williams had joined him in the 1984 team that played John Scott's England.

Says John Williams: "We had selectors who didn't know anything about rugby who had been put there for the purposes of the new South Africa, and that was obviously a bit frustrating when you were trying to select for Test matches against New Zealand and Australia in consecutive weeks. But there was no pressure placed on me, as there were no black players coming through at the time."

For the Test to go ahead at Ellis Park, the ANC had laid down certain conditions, to which SARFU had agreed. These were that the old South African flag, which was officially still the national flag, would not be flown, that the national anthem, "Die Stem", would not be sung, that a minute's silence would be held at all Test venues for victims of political violence in the country, and that a message would appear in the match programme that expressed SARFU's support for peace and democracy in South Africa.

When the big day arrived, a few South African flags were waved around, but there was no noticeable demonstration or protest around the ground or in the Doornfontein precinct of Johannesburg, where Ellis Park is situated. But then came the clanger: after having played the New Zealand anthem, "God defend New Zealand", the band – the official band, that is – struck up the chords of the "white" South African anthem, "Die Stem".

Transvaal president Louis Luyt, along with Danie Craven, had been part of the delegation that had visited the ANC when it was still considered to be taboo. But in explaining his decision to play "Die Stem" in his autobiography, *Walking Proud*, Luyt displayed a political naivety and complete lack of sensitivity to the realities of why South Africa was being allowed back into international competition.

"For weeks leading up to the Test, a debate raged in the press and over radio as to whether it would be appropriate to play 'Die Stem' at Ellis Park before the game. I disagreed with newspaper pundits who strongly opposed the playing of our national anthem on this occasion while raising no objection to 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' being played at soccer matches.

"After all, 'Die Stem' was still our official anthem. And even without the overwhelming support of the rugby public, I would still have pressed ahead. This was, in my view, an issue of principle. I was not about to deny the

existence of a national anthem merely to please the ANC or any of the wimps who wished to roll over and play dead."

Of course, as Dan Retief noted in his book on South Africa's quest for World Cup success, *The Springboks and the Holy Grail*, when Luyt spoke of "principle", he conveniently neglected to mention the lack of principle he'd displayed in not sticking to the agreement that the anthem would not be played.

Understandably, the ANC was furious. Sports minister Steve Tshwete thundered that "Verwoerd will not be allowed to rule this nation from his grave." Australian rugby head Joe French declared that if the ANC wanted his team to fly home and not play the match against the Springboks at Newlands the following Saturday, then that is what they would do.

In the end, thanks to the efforts of Tshwete, the Australian part of the tour was saved.

But back to Ellis Park and the Springboks' first post-isolation clash against the mighty All Blacks … The Kiwis dominated the first three-quarters of the match, leading 27-10 as the game headed into the last quarter. However, perhaps because they were unfamiliar with the effects of altitude, and also because they perhaps felt the game was already won and it had been a long competitive year for most of their players, the New Zealanders released the pressure in the final 20 minutes and the Boks ran in three great tries, contributed by centres Danie Gerber and Pieter Muller.

The next day, in between all the space devoted to the political backlash over the playing of "Die Stem", the newspapers lamented James Small's knock-on when he had the line at his mercy during the second-half renaissance. Had it not been for that, the Boks would have won – or so they said. They seemed to ignore the fact that the Boks' third try, the second to Gerber, was only scored deep in injury time.

"I won't say we felt the coaching was disorganised, but it was a very different style from what a lot of us, who didn't play for Northern Transvaal, were used to," recalls Muller. "Naas and Danie were the older guys in the team, and as a youngster you didn't have a chance to put a marker down. It was all very quick, we didn't have much time to prepare, so I suppose that might explain why there wasn't much that was new in our approach, and [the game plan] seemed very old-fashioned and basic.

"But it was just so exciting to be playing in what, for most of us, was our first Test match, so we were probably oblivious to the other factors surrounding

the management. We noticed that more on the end-of-year tour. At Ellis Park, we played on adrenaline."

Muller said that the squad had been fairly oblivious to the shenanigans surrounding the playing of the anthem. "We were told on the way to the stadium that there would be no anthem. But then, when we got to the field, we were told it would be played after all."

The day after the Ellis Park match, the ANC issued a press release in which they stated that the crowd at Newlands held the future of South Africa in its hands. A repeat of Ellis Park would not be tolerated.

"They [the Newlands crowd] can make rugby a reconciler of people or they can use it as a ritual that celebrates conquest and domination of black people," the statement read.

The crowd was informed that there would be no official flags or anthems, and a minute's silence would be observed for victims of the violence. If these appeals were not adhered to, the ANC would oppose future tours to and from South Africa and also the hosting of the 1995 World Cup.

So Australia proceeded with their tour, and beat Eastern Province 34-8 at Boet Erasmus. Incidentally, Christie Noble played that day and was the only black player the Australians and New Zealanders would encounter on their respective tours.

For the Newlands Test, the Boks retained the same team that played at Ellis Park, but the build-up to this game reflected a completely different mood to the one that had prevailed in Johannesburg. No anthem was played, and the minute's silence was properly observed. Unfortunately for the Boks, however, the game itself was also completely different from the one in Johannesburg.

At Ellis Park the Boks had given the impression that they were competitive, but at Newlands they were properly caned in a game that the Aussies won 26-3. Admittedly most of the points were scored towards the end, but the Boks were outplayed at the line-outs where, for the second week running, it became apparent that the South African refereeing approach to lifting in the years of isolation had done the players no favours.

Wahl Bartmann, too, was clearly playing the old tackle laws, and the Springboks appeared extremely naive, both in their approach to the breakdowns and in the general way they played the game.

There was an inevitable media backlash, although *Sunday Times* sports editor Edward Griffiths, perhaps acknowledging the folly of thinking that