

Expect Boks debate to linger

NOBEL peace laureate Desmond Tutu this week called for more black players in the Springboks, criticising the “tortoise pace” of racial integration in our national rugby team.

Special mention was made of “the hurtful selection of black players as peripheral squad members, never given the chance to settle down and earn their spurs”.

This is an issue that simmers in the background of SA sport, occasionally coming to the boil, such as when only two black players are named in the Springbok squad, neither making the starting XV. Or when a government report finds that a threefold increase in black representation is needed to hit targets, as happened earlier this year.

It is easy to dismiss Tutu's claims as the latest in the meddling of politicians without any rugby knowledge. The “politicisation” of sport angers fans more than any other issue, and the reaction to Tutu's comments was predictably hostile.

South Africans want a winning team, and respond to calls for transformation with a position that winning is the only thing that matters, and so high performance and politics don't belong together.

There is, however, a high performance argument in favour of transformation (and Tutu's call, to some extent). The starting point is the realisation that we currently compete against the All Blacks, Australia and England at perhaps only 30% of our capacity.

Effective transformation would allow selection from the entire pool of talent, rather than a small portion that is eligible only because of historical discrimination.

In other words, if South Africa has 10 million boys aged five to 16, we have 10 million future Springboks.

DOCTOR KNOW

ROSS TUCKER



What sense does it make to continue to pick from only three million of them?

Even if the remaining seven million can provide only five world-class Boks, what Springbok fan would not want those five players in green and gold?

The concept of transformation, in the sense that it would expand the resource pool by adding black players preferentially, is thus crucial for performance.

The point is made when you consider the opposite scenario — imagine New Zealand decided tomorrow that players of Maori

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ancestry would no longer be eligible to wear the All Black jersey. That would be a policy detrimental to performance.

Just because we have produced a similar situation slowly does not change the implication — our team would be stronger if we expanded the group from which players could be chosen.

Where our attempts at transformation fail, however, is as a short-term solution, and this is where the politicians have consistently faltered. Tutu's own quote reveals this when he bemoans the lack of opportunity for

black players “to settle down and earn their spurs”.

The problem is that the “spurs” he refers to are in fact the Springbok jersey, and in sport, that is earned before selection, not after. Forcing the selection of black players, and then still making coaches accountable for results, means that two criteria — performance and transformation — are in competition with one another.

The coach will obey the most pressing. Because that is performance, it actually encourages the “hurtful selection of black players as peripheral squad members”.

The point is, transformation doesn't work as a “pulling” concept. The downsides outweigh potential benefits, and you will keep returning to the same situation.

That's why the Springboks, or any other professional team, cannot be the barometer by which transformation is judged. And while the SA Rugby Union can point to attempts at transformation at lower levels, the constant media attention and focus on the pinnacle has created the “tortoise pace” perception that Tutu refers to.

In the middle of all this is the question of whether the target population (those 10 million boys) actually wants to play rugby? The decision-makers may well be forcing their ambitions on a population that doesn't actually share it.

There's much data on the numbers of players at different levels, but I've yet to see anyone quantify that which is not there, including the choices made by young boys.

That may be social and cultural, and can't be resolved by policies that pull players through before earning their spurs.

Expect the pot to keep simmering.

WP go top as defence takes teeth out of Lions

CRAIG RAY

WESTERN Province have laid down a marker proving that they possess several ways to win a rugby game after their gritty 27-14 victory over the Golden Lions on Saturday.

The result lifted WP to the top of the Currie Cup standings, a point clear of the Sharks, who now remain the only other unbeaten team in the competition after they secured a 19-16 win over the Cheetahs in Durban.

At Newlands the Lions enjoyed most of the territory and possession but simply couldn't crack WP's defence or discipline. After conceding 34 penalties in their opening two games, WP were exemplary in all facets of play.

Fullback Cheslin Kolbe, a

man who could sidestep someone in a shoe box, always posed danger when there was a sniff of a turnover, while wings Kobus van Wyk and Seabelo Senatla were willing accomplices.

However, the platform for victory was laid by WP's superior work at the breakdown, where flank Siya Kolisi in particular, was a Trojan.

Lesser teams would have folded under the weight of possession the Lions enjoyed but WP have tapped into their defensive DNA, which has been part of the game plan since 2009, and made the most of their chances.

They held their nerve even when they were forced to defend for 19 phases and inevitably

forced the Lions into poor decisions, or found a way to snaffle possession themselves.

In all the home team scored three tries and can now head to Loftus for their return match against the Blue Bulls this weekend confident that they can win under any circumstances.

“We were one try away from a bonus in the end and when you don't earn one, it's important to prevent the opposition from scoring a bonus point and we did that,” coach Allister Coetzee said.

The Lions' Johan Ackermann was unhappy with his team's execution. “We created many half-chances but lost patience with our execution,” Ackermann said.