

Safa scores an own goal

There's just no plan to develop local football

AS THE 2014 African Nations Championship meanders towards a conclusion without its hosts, there has been much reflection about another first-round exit by Bafana Bafana in an international tournament.

In the aftermath of our exit at the hands of Nigeria, there was an understandable mix of disappointment, frustration, some anger, with a great deal of resignation and an air of inevitability — at least by my very unscientific scouring of the social media world. That's never a good sign.

When the stakeholders of a sport — its fans and potential future players — become resigned to inevitable disappointment, it may require an entirely new generation of players and management to turn it around, because performance tends to become imprinted on the “DNA” of a sporting system.

There was no such resignation from the minister of sport who, only months after hailing the team for beating world champions Spain called them “a bunch of losers — unbearable, useless individuals”.

While this approach does at least shake the establishment and deny it a sense of apathy, it carries the downside of becoming the focal point of discussion rather than inspire constructive discourse.

Ten coaching changes since 2004, combined with warp-speed player churn are symptomatic of those problems. Consider, for instance, that Gordon Igesund has used an average of three new players a match during his tenure.

Pitso Mosimane used an average of 3.8 new players a match in the year after the 2010 World Cup. Ephraim Mashaba holds the record, selecting 4.06 new players a match back in 2003.

These statistics have significant implications because if you believe that minister Fikile Mbalula is correct in his assessment of our players, then this high player turnover implies that we have struggled to produce even a small squad of players who are better than “loser” standard for a long time. It thus begs the question: “Do we give our coaches the quality of player to deliver the results we expect?”

If not, it is telling, and should worry Safa since it is an indictment not only on the players, but the football system, and those who oversee it.

After all, at the international level in sport, on-field performance is the thermometer by which the sport's health is measured, and that is the responsibility of management, who are ultimately accountable for the standard of the game at all levels, which in turn drives the standard

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of its elite 30 players.

We have fallen short in this area, not just in January 2014 but for a long period before, and the only constant over the period has been leadership, not of the team, but of the system.

Key to this issue is the problem of “ownership” — who owns the future of South African football? Is it Safa, which has the mandate for the national team, but little influence (and many potential conflicts of interest) over PSL teams who ultimately employ the professionals? Is it the PSL and other clubs, then, or can they claim to inherit talent at 18 when it is too late to influence? In that case, is it schools?

This is a vital question because sporting health needs talent development, which is incredibly complex but actually boils down to a really simple set of questions: In 2028, Bafana want to be represented by a squad of 28-year-old winners at the World Cup.

That squad is thus 14 years old as you read this. Where are they today, what are they doing, and who is doing it with them? And is the goal even viable?

These are the questions Germany, Spain and Brazil can answer, each by different means. In South Africa, divergence of authority, conflicted agendas, and a lack of cohesive or centralised strategy have hindered strategic intent. But until Safa, or PSL teams answer those questions, we will produce mediocrity by design, and excellence only by luck.

Lots for Jake to chew on

CRAIG RAY

JAKE White's first competitive game as coach of the Sharks ended in a 23-15 defeat to English pacesetters Saracens in London on Saturday, giving him something to ponder.

Of course, this was the Sharks' first outing of the year against the best side in England, and the result was not the main aim of the game. In terms of performance, it was typically rusty from one of the favourites for this year's Super 15 title.

The pack, despite being loaded with Springboks, never got going in the scrums, while yellow cards for locks Etienne Oosthuizen and Pieter-Steph du Toit were unnecessary. Both were for silly off-the-ball infringements that could be chalked down to overenthusiasm, but that kind of ill-discipline could be costly in more important matches.

Young centre André Esterhuizen had some good moments and looks like a decent prospect, scoring a try with a nice straight angle and he was solid in everything he did throughout the match.

Flyhalf Tim Swiel showed some

promise, but will be very much the understudy to Pat Lambie this season, while Esterhuizen will also have to bide his time behind Frans Steyn.

Namibian captain Jacques Burger, who made his first appearance for Saracens in months after an injury lay-off, was full of praise for his team-mates.

“We knew that their big guys would be coming around the corner out there pretty hard, and if you let these guys play then they will dominate you,” Burger told Saracens.com.

“We knew they were going to be pretty physical, which meant we had to get in their faces and not give them a second. We are proud of our performance.

“Everyone really stepped up today.”

● In Port Elizabeth, the Cheetahs won their third straight Super 15 warm-up game with a 36-21 victory over the EP Kings. The Cheetahs trailed 21-12 at half-time against a spirited Kings, but rallied in the second half, outscoring the home team by six tries to three in the match.

● A Lions “second” team beat the Leopards Vodacom Cup side 34-21, and the “first” team beat NWU Pukke 52-14.