

Too soon to judge Russell

He has taken on a difficult job with high expectations

LAST year, I attended a High-Performance Sports Summit in New York and, among the speakers, was David Moyes, fresh off the announcement that he would inherit control of Manchester United after the almost 27-year, 38-trophy tenure of Sir Alex Ferguson.

Moyes was cagey about his prospects, undoubtedly aware of the enormous weight of expectation he would soon carry.

Red Devils fans initially made all the right noises, but I got the impression that Moyes was acutely aware that those noises would quickly turn antagonistic if he failed to satisfy the club's conditioned hunger for silverware.

Two-thirds of the way through a tumultuous and frustrating first season, his trials and tribulations demonstrate three of the significant challenges encountered when inheriting a team at the height of its performance cycle.

The first is expectation. When leadership of a successful team is changed at a time when they are at their performance peak, fans are conditioned to expect more of the

same. Following victory, an incumbent might be forgiven a poor season, because memories persist, giving them a grace period.

An incoming leader receives no such favour, at a time when it may be needed more than ever.

The market, driven by passionate fans, thus pushes new leaders into decisions they would not normally make, by applying subtle pressures they would not normally face.

It is the high-performance coaching equivalent of an investor buying shares 'at the top', knowing their price is only likely to drop, and then hearing his clients beating down the door for profits.

Second, new leaders face a challenging dilemma of how to juggle their desire for independence with an established culture of "how we do things around here".

Moyes was certainly aware of it in New York, where he tried to explain his desire to impose his own coaching personality in the

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face of the legacy of the most successful manager in British football history. Any person who takes over from a much-loved and incredibly successful leader must realise that, however brightly they burn, their own light may well be lost in the

afterglow of their predecessor.

Much of this is ego-driven, and I suspect that many leadership transitions fail because of overcompensation by the incoming coaches in their efforts to stand out. They alienate players, and the entire team sinks by 5% — and that's enough. Alternatively, failure is just as likely if a coach sacrifices his or her style and personality on an altar of established culture. It is a very difficult balance.

Finally, leadership transitions often signify the end of an era, coinciding with changes in playing personnel. Moyes has not faced this challenge yet. Injuries and a somewhat stagnant squad suggest he may well in the future, if he survives to see it.

Bringing the discussion closer to home, I wonder to what extent the same factors may soon exist for our cricket side. Russell Domingo inherited a team that was led to the top by Gary Kirsten. As is often the

case with a stable team, an established culture of excellence keeps the winning momentum going for a short period, effectively allowing an incoming coach to pick the fruits of a tree planted by his or her predecessor. However, the wheel of performance always turns, and the three above challenges will eventually be faced.

In Domingo's case, Gary Kirsten's credibility as a player, his coaching success with India and South Africa and his uniquely progressive style leave a powerful afterglow. In addition, expectations for SA cricket will always be high, but never higher than for a team ranked No 1 in the world.

Finally, Domingo is now experiencing a delayed but challenging loss of key players to retirement. So he is facing down expectation plus legacy, while trying to replace cornerstone players. This takes time, so Domingo should not be judged too harshly on the results of an Australian tour, or even the T20 World Cup. As difficult as it may be, judgment is best made after a second season in charge.

Lions put telling bite on Blues

LIAM DEL CARME

SO, the Lions' earlier success against South African opposition in the Super 15 was no fluke.

That much is clear after they edged the Blues 39-36 in a thriller at Ellis Park on Saturday.

They did not throw as many punches as the former Super rugby heavyweights, but they landed the more telling blows.

They again defied the odds by absorbing everything the error-ridden Blues threw at them in the first half, before hanging on grimly in the face of a swashbuckling assault in the closing stages.

It was the Lions' third win from five starts, which elevated them to second place in the South African conference and fourth behind the Sharks, Chiefs and Brumbies on the combined log.

The Lions may not possess the

“We made too many mistakes in the first half

most potent attack, or the most watertight defence, but they operate as a unit and unflinchingly commit to both disciplines when the occasion demands it.

Then there is the boot of flyhalf Marnitz Boshoff, which has been the biggest contributing factor to their unexpected place on the log.

He added 24 more points to his tally and extended his lead on the Super 15 individual points scoring list. He has scored 94 points from five matches and is a staggering 40 points clear of Johan Goosen, who is in second place.

Boshoff has converted all eight of the Lions' tries in the competition but has set himself apart by converting seven more penalties and four more dropped goals than anybody else.

"His confidence is obviously very high," acknowledged Lions coach Johan Ackermann.

"His decision-making is good ... when to kick for the corner, when to run or to go for the drop goal. It's great when a player is that confident because he gives that con-



THE BEGINNING: A picture taken on March 19 2000 shows Irish centre Brian O'Driscoll celebrating his team's victory over France at the Stade de France in Paris
Picture: AFP

fidence to the rest of the team."

Much of the Lions' success against the Blues was built on their first-half toil.

"The pressure we kept on them in the first half was outstanding,"

gushed captain Warren Whiteley.

"We knew by their body language that things could change," said Ackermann. "In the second half we could reap the rewards in the scrums and the line-outs."

While disappointed at the way his team misfired in the first half, Blues coach John Kirwan was generous in his praise of the Lions.

"You have to give credit to the Lions. They play with enthusiasm.

O'Driscoll goes out in glory

IRISH rugby legend Brian O'Driscoll said ending his stellar international career with a rare win away against France and taking the Six Nations title to boot was a moment he would treasure for life.

The 35-year-old centre — the world record caps holder with 141 — bowed out in the best possible way as Ireland beat France 22-20 in a pulsating encounter at the Stade de France, which also secured them the championship by virtue of a superior points difference over England.

He may not have added to his 47 Test tries, but he was instrumental in the third try, scored by Jonathan Sexton, which saw them to only their second win in 42 years in Paris.

Suitably it came at the same ground where in 2000 and almost 14 years to the day (the match was on March 19) a callow 21-year-old O'Driscoll had announced he was a great talent by scoring a hat-trick of tries as Ireland beat the French.

"There have been lots of good memories in between," said O'Driscoll.

"Obviously 2000 was amazing because it had been 28 years since we won in Paris and to do it 14 years later is incredibly special."

O'Driscoll said that his decision to stay on and play for one more year after a poor Six Nations in 2013 had paid off.

"It is a feeling of sheer delight to have played on for one more year," said O'Driscoll.

"I was hoping for a win over the All Blacks and that didn't happen (the Irish led until the final minute in their November Test before losing to a converted try).

"I was also hoping to win the Six Nations and that did happen. You can't have it all but you take what you get." — AFP

We didn't deserve to win because we made too many mistakes in the first half. But I was really proud of the boys for that fightback," Kirwan said of a second-half effort that yielded 36 points.