

Crouch... touch... pause... respect!



THINKING MAN'S GAME: Every junior Stormers player has to show respect for the senior players, says the writer

Liz McGregor

IT ALWAYS surprises me, a relative newcomer to the febrile, fast-moving inner world of rugby, how little is made of the fact that Western Province has produced the first - and only - black Super Rugby coach.

And it has happened naturally, organically, the way people always want these things to happen. Allister Coetzee has painstakingly worked his way up the ranks: he was backline coach in Jake White's 2007 World Cup winning team; then Western Province Currie Cup coach, then Stormers head coach.

And now, with the departure of Rassie Erasmus earlier this year, he is supreme commander of Western Province's elite forces.

It might be tempting fate to point out that he is also in charge of the team that tops the overall Super Rugby log.

Someone competitive about degrees of blackness might point out that Coetzee is coloured, rather than ethnic African. But in the rugby-specific test of previous disadvantage, he is right up there: from boyhood he was passionate about the game and a talented and committed player at the highest level available to him.

But he had to come to terms with the knowledge that he could not aspire to the ultimate dream of playing for his country, solely because of the colour of his skin.

His reward is that he now gets to lead a team in which the rising stars are a prodigiously talented bunch of born-frees: Eben Etzebeth, Steven Kitshoff, Nizaam Carr and Siya Kolisi - born in 1991 and 1992, just after the watershed year of Nelson Mandela's release from prison.

Siya Kolisi, incidentally, was born on Freedom Day, June 16, in 1991.

What always intrigues me about rugby at this level is the high degree of emotional intelligence that is required.

Just after the Stormers' return from their triumphant April tour of New Zealand and Australia in which a series of injuries forced them to rely heavily on these youngsters, I had a conversation with Tiaan Liebenberg in the corridors of the

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Stormers' High Performance Centre in Bellville.

Liebenberg, a hooker, at the grinding piston edge of the scrum, is not one of the articulate glamour boys of the team, but he explained a concept I thought quite emotionally subtle. The role of senior players such as himself, he said, was to contain the younger guys, who were still blessed with the sense of invincibility that only the young possess.

His role was to protect them and make them feel safe enough to exploit this to full. Liebenberg himself is only 30 but, in rugby years, that is already advanced. By 35, you are approaching retirement.

Leading a team at this level is a highly complex business. Not only does Coetzee have to coach these youngsters to play a ceaselessly evolving game at international level, he also has to provide off-field mentorship.

None of this is left to chance: there is a constantly refined system in place. Each of the youngsters is assigned a mentor who is a member of the coaching team. They have regular one-on-one meetings to discuss any issues affecting them, from problems with girlfriends to technical and discipline issues.

Then the senior player group forms the next layer of surrogate father and coach. Schalk Burger, Jean de Villiers, Bryan Habana, Andries Bekker, Gio Aplon, Peter Grant, Andries Bekker, Juan de Jongh, Dewaldt Duvenage and Tiaan Liebenberg are all in this group.

This mixture of role models, black and white, English and Afrikaans, is important.

Few other franchises have anything like this diversity in their senior group. And, given the very different backgrounds of the new boys coming through, it is important.

Nizaam Carr is from English-

speaking Bishops and is a practising Muslim; Steven Kitshoff is from the elite Afrikaner rugby school, Paul Roos. Siya Kolisi, from a poor Eastern Cape family, won a place at the Port Elizabeth-based Grey High School with his rugby talent; Eben Etzebeth, an Afrikaans speaker from Cape Town's northern suburbs, went to Tygerberg High School.

Coetzee says the way they contain all these different cultures and meld them into one team with a single purpose is by enforcing a single religion: respect.

Every member of the team is required to show respect for the beliefs and background of his team-mate.

Every junior player has to show respect for the senior players: not out of mindless age-driven hierarchy but because every one of the senior players has, at one time or another, made the same mistakes as the juniors are making.

So they have to listen when a senior player speaks and learn very quickly how to correct those mistakes. Because if they don't, in this ultimate team sport, all will be losers.

It has to be thorough and ruthless - the process of breaking in, refining and maturing these youngsters. Because rugby, with all its magnificent physicality, renders them vulnerable. Look at Nizaam Carr, who so recently flew so close to the sun, now on the sidelines enduring painful rehabilitation. Or Schalk Burger, forced to watch his team play on without him. So you always need to be bleeding a fresh supply.

Whatever Coetzee and his team are doing, it's working. They are winning, which always does wonders for morale and team spirit. At press conferences at the HPC and Newlands, there is a sense of lightness. Captain Jean de Villiers, an intelligent man with a lovely dry wit, sparks off Coetzee.

Although, underlying all this, of course, is a deadly seriousness of purpose. They are only too aware that today's elation could be tomorrow's despair.

● McGregor is the author *Touch, Pause, Engage! Exploring the Heart of South African* (Jonathan Ball Publishers).