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Was Jake a victim of Tall Poppy Syndrome?



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In his forthcoming autobiography, In Black and White, Jake White relives the political and internal rugby power struggles that were raging during his tenure and left him the latest high-profile victim.

It was President Thabo Mbeki who, two days after the World Cup win, came out in support of Jake White, stating, "It would indeed be odd that, in the moment of victory, which comes after a long period of preparation, you say, 'Thank you for your services, White, goodbye'.

"Here is this team that went right through the tournament without losing a single game. We end up with the Player of the Year, Bryan Habana, the Coach of the Year and the Team of the Year. Drop the coach why?"

Twice in 2006 White came within a game of being fired as Springbok coach (before the Boks had beaten the All Blacks in Rustenburg and England at Twickenham).

He himself has acknowledged powerful enemies in SA Rugby who want to see the back of him. At his exit press conference in Cape Town, White went on record stating that "it is well documented that there are certain people on the board of the President's Council who said the working relationship with me wasn't healthy. Now someone had to go and the reality is some of the board members and presidents aren't going to go".

The day before White's resignation, Harold Verster, the longest-serving member of the President's Council, elaborated on the nature of certain working relationships within SA Rugby, saying: "Jake aggravated a lot of people in the council by attacking them through the media and making all sorts of statements.

By saying these things, he was seen as trying to put pressure on the council by lobbying the support of the players and the rugby public.

They hate that and say: 'He is still doing it! Will this man never learn and will he always be outspoken in the media and cause problems that are bigger than the game itself and the council?'

Verster told the Daily News that the President's Council would have been prepared to entertain the World Cup-winning coach for a second term or in another capacity if White had accepted the President's Council and not White controlled South African rugby and had the decision-making power.

Reading between the lines, White appears to have fallen victim to a phenomenon that is know as the Tall Poppy Syndrome. The term originates from accounts in Livy's

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History of Rome where the Roman King, Lucius Tarquinius, received a messenger from his son Sextus, asking what he should do next in the newly occupied town of Gabii.

Rather than answering the messenger, Lucius went into his garden, took a stick, and symbolically swept it across his garden, thus cutting off the heads of the tallest poppies that were growing there.

The messenger, tired of waiting for an answer, returned to Gabii and told Sextus what he had seen. Sextus realised that his father wished him to put to death all of the most eminent people of Gabii, which he then did.

Earlier this year, former Springbok captain Bob Skinstad said in an interview with Rugby Newz Magazine: "At times, South Africans are their own biggest enemy. It is the crab bucket mentality. Whenever one sticks out their head, the others are pulling him back."

It is a phenomenon that former springbok prop Ollie le Roux summed up after last year's Super 14 series: "There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. As long as you don't underestimate the opposition, what's wrong with believing in your ability?"

Muhammad Ali, Pat Cash, Jose Mourinho, Nick Mallett and Bob Skinstad are just some examples of sportsmen suffering tall poppy syndrome who were branded arrogant. The difference is they all had personality and produced when it really counted."

The Tall Poppy Syndrome has been known to be prevalent in other rugby geographies, especially Australia and New Zealand. Marino Harker-Smith, a journalist from the Wairua Star, said: "New Zealand has a terrible case of tall poppy syndrome with people constantly being knocked down for simply letting themselves shine. People are criticised by their peers for merely striving to achieve the best, yet society wonders why a lot of young people settle for mere mediocrity in their academic studies."

It was Australia's Prime Minister John Howard who declared back in 1999, "If there's one thing we need to get rid of in this country it is our tall poppy syndrome." It appears Jake White was determined from an early age not to let anyone discourage him from reaching for his dream.

In a recently published essay that was written in 1981 by a 17-year old schoolboy at Jeppe Boys' High School, Jake White said this about the power of self-belief: "What are my dreams for the future?"

My greatest dream is to play rugby, especially for the Springboks. But even to become their coach. I have seen how you can make people believe in themselves, how you can show people that every single person can be a winner if you want it. The secret is not being part of a large pack just be yourself and run like crazy.

That feeling of success is like no other. So I am going to continue to dream. If I make it, it will make me the happiest in the world. Imagine playing on an international field and winning? That's another essay altogether."

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It was Madiba who said, "Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so people won't feel insecure around us ... As we let our own light shine we unconsciously give others permission to do the same."

Looking forward to defending the Rugby World Cup in 2011, maybe we should allow each other to let our lights shine collectively rather than blowing out other candles the minute they threaten to overshadow ours.

- Dr Nikolaus Eberl is the author of BrandOvation?: How Germany won the World Cup of Nation Branding (Academy Press 2007).

His forthcoming sequel is called BrandOvation? 2010: Hosting the Best World Cup Ever (scheduled for release in January 2008). He can be contacted for seminars and keynote addresses at www.brandovation.com or e-mail at nikolaus@brandovation.com

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