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Tall Poppy Syndrome

12 November 2007
Back to haunt SA rugby

Just 12 days after the Springboks brought the Rugby World Cup "home where it belongs", the latest episode in the Jake White v SA Rugby Union saga is threatening.

The episode is threatening to undo much of the brand equity earned by the players.

It was President Thabo Mbeki who was the first to come out in support for White, stating on air that "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?"

His sentiment was echoed by Bheki Khumalo, spokesman for the Springboks' main sponsor, Sasol: "We have always believed he (White) should stay within SA rugby, either as coach or as director of rugby."

Twice last year 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 news 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



BOUND: President Thabo Mbeki and Jake White swap ties during the Springboks Rugby World Cup win celebration ticker tape parade in Pretoria and Johannesburg. PHOTO: Gallo Images



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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.

Verster told the Daily News that the President 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 known as the Tall Poppy Syndrome.

The term originates from accounts in Livy's 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.

The 18th century American Benjamin Franklin alluded to this concept, when he stated: "You cannot strengthen one by weakening another; and you cannot add to the stature of a dwarf by cutting off the leg of a giant."

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 from the tall poppy syndrome who were branded arrogant. The difference is they all had personality and produced when it really counted."

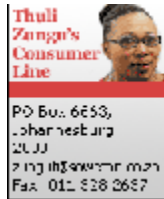
The tall poppy syndrome has been known to be prevalent in other rugby geographies, especially Australia and New Zealand. Says Marino Harker-Smith, a journalist from the Wairoa Star: "New Zealand has a terrible case of tall poppy syndrome with people being knocked down for simply letting themselves shine.

"People are criticised by their peers for striving to achieve the best, yet society wonders why young people settle for

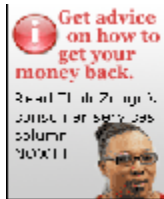
mere mediocrity in their academic studies ... A common thread among New Zealanders is the fear of standing out from the crowd and being better than their peers."

- Dr Nikolaus Eberl is the author of BrandOvation™: How Germany won the World Cup of Nation Branding".
- We welcome your views and you can send them to mikam@sowetan.co.za OR to rabothatas@sowetan.co.za.

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