

# Jaguars RFC: the pride of Sydenham

Part one of a series of excerpts from Ashwin Desai's new book

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IN MARCH 2009, the only black rugby team in the KwaZulu-Natal Premier League, Jaguars, held a sevens tournament at their headquarters in Sydenham.

A total of 16 teams participated, including three teams from the Jaguars Rugby Club and one visiting team from outside the province. On the Saturday afternoon there were hundreds of people at the ground. A sound system belted out music and there was a brisk trade in boerewors and beer. Some of the teams barely had the funds to put a kit together and the lunch pack was the only meal they would have for the day. But there was joy and excitement here – a grassroots feel and a feast of running rugby in about 40 matches.

Jaguars are a household name in club rugby in the province. It is no secret that opponents find it extremely uncomfortable to play at their home ground, Capell Road, which has come to be known as the

“House of Pain”, like the famous Carisbrook Stadium in Dunedin, New Zealand.

Barely concealed behind the carnival of rugby in March 2009, however, was a great deal of tension and worry in the ranks of the Jaguars administrators. Old-style black community clubs like Jaguars face tremendous pressures.

They have only one main playing field. This means that the senior teams constantly vie with junior teams and women's teams for access to the ground to train.

Pressure on the old white rugby clubs to “deracialise” sees them looting Jaguars of black players who are already “finished product”, or nearly there.

## Financial problems

Hanging on to players, hiring top-class coaches, and providing transport, equipment and floodlights all mean that sponsors have to be found to keep the club going.

With Jaguars seen as the home of black rugby in KwaZulu-Natal, players from various coloured and black townships often join the club. However, many of these players do not have their own transport, or cannot afford to pay for public transport. Accordingly, the club

forks out money to run minibuses taxis to Wentworth, Newlands East, Ntuzuma and Marianridge.

The funds come out of the Jaguars' budget and cost the club about 40 percent of its grant and sponsorship money. This kind of financial outlay is not carried by any of the other premier division clubs, whose player bases are mainly white and black players from the middle class.

The Jaguars' financial problems have been compounded by a player drain. The club's success and production of Springboks, like J P Pieterse, Wayne Murray and Etienne Fynn, have seen Jaguars games attended by scouts from rugby clubs across the country, and there has been a steady migration of players to other clubs within KwaZulu-Natal and even across provincial boundaries.

Francois Louis, a Jaguars official, says the problem with white clubs is that “they only want the finished product. They don't want to invest money or resources into developing black players. That's why it's easy for them to poach players from us”.

Fifteen years after winning the World Cup, and close to two decades after “unity”, there is still only one club from a disadvan-

tagged background in the premier rugby league in the province. It would appear that the agenda is to create an elite group of players, while the broadening of the game has fallen off the list of priorities.

It has been suggested that the only way for Jaguars to survive is to subsume itself under the banner of one of the white clubs. What effect would this have on the sense of community, on the way ex-players stay in the game, and on the environment created in which black players in an overwhelmingly white rugby culture can “find their feet”?

## Truck and trailer

Truck and trailer is a metaphor that can be used to understand transformation in South African rugby. The national team and the approach to the running of the game that flows from this – with its emphasis on elite academies and the professionalisation and commercialisation of the game, allied to the need to have winning teams – are increasingly delinked from the way rugby is managed and played at local level.

The ideal situation would be for the transformative agenda to function seamlessly from bottom to top. One of the central challenges is

that, without a strong intervention by government or rugby officials, the truck of professional rugby could be uncoupled from the trailer of what is left of amateur club rugby in black areas. Without funding, the Saru Transformation Charter will remain another set of good intentions, at best “deracialising” rugby through the development of a network of “non-racial” elites.

Back on “home ground”, cut off from feeder schools, unable to convince talented young players to come to the club, and facing growing financial pressures, it is not difficult to discern the challenges Jaguars face to keep going as a club, let alone continue to produce Springboks.

That the Jaguars' home ground came to be known as “the House of Pain” attests to their fighting spirit at a time when the odds were stacked against them.

One can only hope that this spirit sees them survive in the present difficult period, otherwise the name of their home ground could soon come to have a completely different meaning.

● From *The Race to Transform: Sport in Post-apartheid South Africa*, Ashwin Desai (ed), HSRC Press.



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