

## **RACE AND SOUTH AFRICAN RUGBY: A REVIEW OF THE 1919 “ALL BLACK” TOUR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In as much as British civil rugby leagues were suppressed during the First World War, rugby in military guise experienced a revival. The highlight was the Inter-services Tournament in 1919 in which Great Britain and the Dominions competed for the King George V Cup. New Zealand was the eventual winner of this trophy. In South Africa the South African Rugby Board wanted to boost local rugby after a lull caused by the war. Thus they invited the New Zealand Services team to tour South Africa for six weeks on their way home. The negative aspect of this tour was the prior request of the South African Rugby Board for them not to bring any coloured players. The South African High Commissioner in London, W.P. Schreiner, extended the invitation and was satisfied with the coloureds being included in the team, but it was his son, Bill Schreiner, who voted against it at the Rugby Board meeting. The players concerned were Ranji Wilson and Parekura Tureia. This scandal would rock the rugby world only years later. The positive aspect of the tour was the new ideas and enthusiasm the tour brought to South African rugby. South African forward play and tackling were subsequently improved. It also gave new impetus to the Springboks' desire to tour New Zealand. This tour only became a reality in 1921.*

**Key words:** Rugby; New Zealand; South Africa; 1919 “All Black” tour;  
Ranji Wilson; Parekura Tureia; First World War.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nine days after the declaration of the First World War on 4 August 1914, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) urged all rugby players to join the Forces. All national, regional and club matches were suspended. Special matches, however, were arranged in aid of war funds. Barbarian Service sides, for example, played six matches for this purpose as well as for recruiting purposes. One of these matches between the Barbarians and the South African Forces was played on the Richmond Athletic Ground on Saturday, 20 November 1915 (Owen, 1955: 280). The proceeds were in aid of comforts for the colonial troops (Twickenham Rugby Museum).

As the RFU believed the game served a much more moral purpose than mere recreation (such as preparing young men to become future leaders of the British Empire), it wanted to do justice to the game within the defence forces. Initially the British army did not share the RFU's sentiments, as soccer had been their sport, but judging by reports rugby did come into its own in the First World War. In so far as institutionalised rugby was suppressed during the war, it survived in military format. Already with the arrival of the first volunteers in the

training camps the game was played and inter-platoon tournaments soon started. Matches were even played between battalions and nearby schools. At the beginning of 1915 at least 10 military teams in London were ready to play regular matches, as were a number of public schools. Although soccer was still more popular and rugby was regarded as a game for officers only, the large influx of troops from South Africa, New Zealand and Australia in 1916 changed the situation. The number of games played increased dramatically and even quasi-international matches took place (Collins, 2009: 49-50, 54-57).

Between 1895 and 1914 the RFU experienced one crisis after the other and its position of authority was in jeopardy. After the war (by 1920) the sport was more united than ever before, with the RFU firmly at the helm. It took the first, and up to that stage the largest, rugby tournament in the world to accomplish this (Collins, 2007).

In March 1919 the Army Rugby Union organised an inter-services tournament with the King George V Cup at stake. Great Britain had two teams, namely Mother Country and Royal Air Force (with 10 South Africans in their ranks), while the other participating teams represented Canada (Canadian Expeditionary Force), Australia (Australian Imperial Forces), New Zealand (New Zealand Services) and South Africa (South African Forces). Between 1 March and 16 April 16 matches were played, with New Zealand the ultimate winner of the King's Cup at Twickenham when they beat Mother Country 11-3. The "All Blacks"<sup>1</sup> then also played and defeated a French Forces fifteen at Twickenham (Owen, 1955: 281; Dobson, 1996: 14).

#### **NEGATIVE POLITICAL IMAGE**

According to the Transvaal Rugby Union it was decided at its executive committee meeting on 7 April 1919 to invite a military team from Australia and New Zealand to undertake a short tour here on their way home (Ferreira *et al.*, 1989: 28). The reason was to revive local rugby after the war. A defence force team that could stop off here on their way home would mean a substantial cost saving (Dobson, 1996: 15).

Yet it is evident in the minutes of the South African Rugby Board (SARB) that it had already been decided at its annual general meeting on 31 March 1919 to invite a New Zealand defence force rugby team to tour this country. This resulted in the following cablegram being sent to the High Commissioner in London on 1 April 1919:

"From: Rugby Board

To: High Commissioner, London

Personal

Would it be possible to arrange representative Australian or New Zealand Army Rugby Team break journey Cape Town Stop Tour Union for six weeks or less Stop Travelling and hotel expenses paid Stop Pardon liberty Stop Reply paid Stop and end." (Nieman & Laubscher, 2000: 24)

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<sup>1</sup> It was of course not a fully representative team of their nation.

William Philip Schreiner, former president of the SA Rugby Board and Prime Minister of the Cape Colony was treated for heart problems in Germany in April 1914 and within days of his return to London war broke out. Later that year he took office as the Union's High Commissioner in London for the duration of the war (De Kock & Krüger, 1972: 655).

On 19 May 1919 Schreiner replied:

"Your message second April Stop Arrangements now provisionally completed successful Stop New Zealand Services Team personnel twenty nine visit Union six weeks tour Stop You paying inland travelling and hotel expenses Stop Team leaving England about end May Stop Voyage contemplated three weeks Stop Please cable prompt confirmation Stop and end." (Nieman & Laubscher, 2000: 25)

The SARB's cablegram in reply read: "Arrangements confirmed Stop Cable when leaving and ship Stop and ends" (Nieman & Laubscher, 2000: 25).

On 2 June Schreiner replied as follows :

"New Zealand Team leaving Cappelenia [sic] Stop Sailing seventh June Stop Should arrive Cape Town about twenty eight Stop Presume Union officials will accompany team as tour manager Stop Team asks if possible cable fixtures Stop and end." (Nieman & Laubscher, 2000: 26)

This was the same day on which the SARB met in Cape Town and only then realised that the visiting team might include Maoris...

"The Board then discussed the question of the visit clashing with the Cape Universities tour in the Transvaal and also the question of procedure in view of the fact that the New Zealand team was believed to contain one of more Maoris. After a long discussion it was decided, by 8 votes to 6, on the motion of Mr. [R.] McIntyre seconded by Mr. [Bill] Schreiner that the following cablegram should be sent to the High Commissioner in London:-

Confidential if visitors include Maoris tour would be wrecked and immense harm politically and otherwise would follow. Please explain position fully and try arrange exclusion.

The question of finance was then considered, ..." (South African Rugby Board, 1919:2)

The "full" report on this meeting appeared in the *Cape Times* (1919b: 8). What was interesting, however, is the fact that this virtually verbatim report on the meeting did not include the above extract. Whether this was done on the instruction of the SARB or the editor of the newspaper will probably never be known. The fact remains that the request was conveyed and successfully executed in England. It is not known how this was done.

Two New Zealand newspapers, the *Poverty Bay Herald* of 6 June 1919 (p.3) and the *Grey River Argus* of 7 June 1919 (p.2) reported that the New Zealand rugby team had left England and was on its way to South Africa ... "All the inter-service team is included except Taurei [sic] and A. Wilson". Greg Ryan, a New Zealand historian who has conducted extensive research on this topic could find no other reference to [Sgt. A.] Wilson or [Corp. P.] Tureia

(Ryan, 2010). However, the *Poverty Bay Herald* (5 November 1919, p.2) did publish the following report on Tureia's return to Gisborne, New Zealand:

“...while in France [he] was a member of the team which represented the NZ Division in a football match against the French Army in Paris. He subsequently was chosen to play in the All Black team which won the service competition in England and was later selected to tour South Africa with the team. Unfortunately, he missed the steamer which was taking the team to South Africa, and then returned to New Zealand via the Panama. Mr. Tureia is the first Gisborne footballer to gain international honours.” (Palenski, 2010)

Nathaniel Arthur Wilson (18 May 1886 – 11 August 1953) (Wikipedia), nicknamed Ranji (derived from the Anglo-Indian cricketer, Ranjitsinhji) (Palenski, 2010), was born in Christchurch. He was not a Maori, as his mother was British and his father West Indian. Ranji played for the All Blacks in 1908, 1910, 1913 and 1914 and was also an All Black selector in 1924-1925. During the First World War he was one of the starts in the New Zealand defence force team (Wikipedia). The first name of Parekura Tureia (5 January 1897 – 23 November 1941) (NZETC) means “to fight a battle”(Casualty details). Apart from his contribution to the New Zealand defence force team, he also played for the New Zealand Maoris in 1921 and 1923 (Ryan, 2010).

Smith's (1999: 108) version that Wilson had to remain on board the ship when they arrived in Cape Town is therefore not quite correct. In newspaper reports it is evident that Wilson did meet his team-mates later when the ship called at Durban on its way home. At the time of the touring team's visit to Durban in late August 1919 two ships with New Zealand troops on board were in the harbour, namely the SS Cardona and the SS Hororata (*Natal Mercury*, 1919: 14). “Amongst the troops on the New Zealand transport is their great forward, Ranji Wilson, who had already met and fraternised with his old comrades” (*Natal Witness*, 1919a: 5). However, no questions were asked in the media about why Ranji was not part of the touring side. The following report makes it even more interesting:

“The Pacific Islander, Wilson, just arrived from England, is perhaps the greatest player in the Service team and it would be a good thing if his inclusion could be arranged. He was a very popular player in the Home matches.” (*Natal Witness*, 1919b: 5) (At this stage the touring team had already played 10 of its 15 matches.)

That Tureia missed the Cap Polonio is also not true. One just wonders how they had managed to persuade him to persist with this story. Nevertheless, this was the first international racial incident in rugby on South African soil, although it would only come to light much later.

## **POSITIVE TRAINING SCHOOL FOR SOUTH AFRICAN RUGBY**

An aspect that received a lot of media attention prior to the tour was the New Zealand scrum formation. In South Africa the forwards used a 3-2-3 formation as they arrived at the scrum (“...the first men up are to be the first men down”) (*Cape Times*, 1919h: 9; *Cape Times*, 1919i: 7). Thus there were no specialist forward positions as there are today. The New Zealanders, on the other hand, used a diamond-shaped 2-3-2 scrum formation. Everything revolved around the player in the centre of the second row (lock). He had to bind the scrum

and keep it together. He bound the two hookers in front of him, while the two players on either side of him, as well as the two players behind him, also bound to him. There was no pushing forward, but the inward energy had to stabilise the scrum just long enough for the ball to come out. The lock kept his legs wide apart so the ball could roll cleanly through to the halfback at the base of the scrum (*Cape Times*, 1919i: 7). They had found that their unique scrum formation allowed the forwards to break apart much more quickly once the ball had been hooked, which happened much faster than in the case of the South Africans. When these seven forwards bound well, they looked just as strong as our eight forwards (*Cape Times*, 1919h: 9).

In the backline they played two halves, followed by two five-eighths, then three three-quarters and finally the fullback (a triple backline). With the scrum breaking up more quickly, this formation could also change direction faster and the two five-eighths could support the centres in defence or attack. Like today, the South Africans used two halves, four three-quarters and a fullback (*Cape Times*, 1919h: 9).

Another aspect of their game was the use of a rover. This other halfback played with the wing-forward (flank) and the latter nearly always put the ball in the scrum. This wing-forward played, depending on the situation, on the left or the right of the scrum. In the 1930s the use of a rover was made illegal and the All Black scrum also became eight players (*Cape Times*, 1919e: 11; Nieman, 2010).

The very same Bill Schreiner, who would become a national rugby selector from 1912 till 1952, said the following about this team's visit:

"There can be no two opinions as to the benefit derived by South Africa from the visit of this team. It gave a much needed impetus and fillip to the game, and everywhere large crowds attended the games, and the greatest enthusiasm prevailed" (Dobson, 1996: 16).

This was confirmed by the *Cape Times*: "The value of their visit will be reflected in our football ere long, and this will be to the advantage of the game, for theirs is more enterprising than ours" (1919k: 11) and "That their forwards are magnificent in attack and in defence is undeniable – they have taught us almost more than we can hope to learn ..." (1919k: 8).

The visitors' effective tackling also made a huge impression on those concerned with local rugby. A.W. Lawton, chairman of the WP Rugby Football Union, referred to just that when he reproached the local players for having become lax in this regard (*Cape Times*, 1919j: 8).

After the tour the New Zealanders expressed their opinion on the state of rugby in South Africa. According to them the New Zealand style of play was superior as it gave them an extra player in the backline, without losing possession of the ball in the scrums. They regarded the South African forwards as excellent players in many respects, but said they were not able to open up the game. They left that to their backs (*Cape Times*, 1919l: 11). H.J. Sanderson (former president of the Transvaal Rugby Union) confirmed this by saying that no one passed the ball to a forward in those days. Not for one moment were they expected to

catch the ball or pass it – this was exclusively the work of the backs (Sanderson, 1964: 198). And in 1919 this was the main difference between the two countries.

In his farewell speech, the president of the SARB, J. Heynemann, paid them the following compliment:

“The New Zealanders would never realise the great service which they had rendered to Rugby football in South Africa by their visit, and by their conduct on and off the field. Their play had come as a revelation, particularly in respect to their handling and tackling. In administering the hiding as they had done, they had done the game a world of good. It had taught the players a good, sound, honest lesson.” (*Cape Times*, 1919: 11)

According to the *Cape Times* (1919k: 8) the tour had been a huge success. It had brought new ideas to South Africa, eliminated wrong impressions, and given new impetus to a possible tour to New Zealand. In fact, at the farewell function the touring team expressed the wish that a South African team would visit their country in the not too distant future (*Cape Times*, 1919l: 11).

## SUMMARY

Although New Zealand soldiers played against a South African team in Johannesburg during the Anglo-Boer War and won (Dobson, 1996: 11), the contact on the rugby field during the First World War constituted the first “international” matches between these later arch-enemies. Admittedly, after the Anglo-Boer War (on 14 October 1904) South Africa did try to forge rugby links with New Zealand, but to no avail. The idea was for the All Blacks to stop off here for a few games on their way to Britain for their 1905 tour, but they sailed around Cape Horn instead of the Cape of Good Hope and on their return via New York. In 1907 New Zealand in turn invited the Springboks for a tour, but the invitation was declined. They extended another invitation in late 1911 for a tour in 1912, but the SARB was of the opinion that it would take too long to raise the necessary funds. In 1913 an invitation for a tour in 1914 was declined for the same reason (Dobson, 1996: 12-13).

Rugby contact between these two countries during and shortly after the war rekindled South Africa’s need to pit its strength against New Zealand: “... they caused serious pondering among the locals over how difficult it must be to take on a fully representative side from the two little islands way down under” (Greyvenstein, 1978: 64). However, this would only become a reality in 1921.

Another interesting aspect of these post-war visits by Australasian defence force teams (on their way home a number of Australian teams also played against local teams) was the proposal by two prominent Australian rugby officials that a triangular competition of two tests each between Australia, New Zealand and South Africa should be considered (*Cape Times*, 1919g: 9). This dream was only realised in 1996 when the present Tri Nations competition was launched.

It is proved that sport during the war had a positive effect on the morale of civil as well as military lives. In fact, the dominions such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa made an exciting contribution to this (Collins, 2009: 68-69). It is just a pity that a negative political stigma is attached to these events of 1919. The racial ban, and not the positive aspects I attempted to highlight here, is all that is associated with it.

The timing of W.P. Schreiner's death is probably a coincidence, but one does wonder to what extent the South African Rugby Board's ban on Maoris played a role. Like his sister, Olive, Schreiner was very liberal and a great believer in "equal rights to all civilised men South of the Zambezi" (*Cape Times*, 1919c: 6). He would definitely not have had a problem with Maoris in the team. Yet his own son, William Francis (better known as Bill) (South African Rugby Board, 1964: 180), supported the motion against the inclusion of coloured players in the team. This must surely have been a huge shock and disappointment to him. We know that, owing to ill health, he went to Llandrindad Wells in Wales for two weeks shortly afterwards to recuperate, but died on Saturday, 28 June (National Library). One can only speculate about whether these events had played a role. Schreiner had been ill since the summer of 1917 and was laid low by flu in 1918. In May 1919 he once again required medical assistance. Incidentally, he died on the same day the Treaty of Versailles was signed (Walker, 1937: 379-380).

In an interview with the manager of the New Zealand defence force team, he made no mention of the two players that had been omitted (*Cape Argus*, 1919d: 8). In a reply to the question as to whether it was their strongest team available, their captain, staff sergeant Charles Brown said: "Undoubtedly, this is the best team that we could get. We have got everyone that we wanted" (*Cape Times*, 1919h: 9). The irony is that the South African team had already played against Wilson in their Inter-Services Rugby tournament match on March 29 (*Cape Times*, 1919a: 7).

Until now most secondary sources have focused only on Ranji Wilson and ignored Parekura Tureia. Although there were a number of players who had played for the New Zealand military side in Europe on occasion but had not been included in the touring team, Tureia was the only one singled out. This gives the impression that he had been a candidate for the touring side but had ultimately not been selected. Incidentally, Tureia did play for the New Zealand Maoris later, in 1921 and 1923 (Ryan, 2010).

The last aspect that deserves attention is the Transvaal Rugby Football Union's claim that they were responsible for this tour initiative (*Cape Times*, 1919f: 7; *Cape Times*, 1919j: 8; Ferreira *et al.*, 1989: 28). This creates a problem as, unless Ferreira *et al.* (1989: 28) were wrong about the date, it could not have been their initiative. According to these authors the SARB, at the recommendation of the Transvaal Rugby Football Union, was to invite the defence force team. However, this meeting in Johannesburg was only held a week after the governing body had taken a similar decision.

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