

# Rugby lessons for SA soccer

**P**RESIDENT Thabo Mbeki must be a very relieved man. Or at least he was a few weeks ago. Amid a national crisis, the Springboks won the Rugby World Cup and the nation celebrated: we stood proud and united and forgot our problems for a moment.

Hoisted high above the shoulders of the Bok team, the president rejoiced, forgot about the succession battle, and ignored claims in a recent biography about his aloof and emotionally disconnected personality.

But the national euphoria was, not unpredictably, short-lived, partly occasioned by the stark realities we have to face as a nation, but more pointedly by the Jake White debacle.

At the end of the day, it didn't matter who was right or wrong in the matter of the national coach's prospective retention, or his imminent departure. The fact is that the South African Rugby Union (Saru), through bad management and woeful leadership, allowed the situation to occur in the first place. It provides a number of lessons as to how the management and administration of 2010 needs to occur over the next thirty months.

I have written before of the abominable state of soccer administration under the auspices of the South African Football Association (Safa). This has been aggravated more recently by claims of match-fixing in the Premier Soccer League (PSL), and the recent furore around the bonuses paid to executive members of the PSL for successfully negotiating sponsorship rights with Absa.

What is required immediately, as we move into a critical 2010 planning phase, is a more optimally structured relationship between all the major 2010 players, from Fifa to the local organising committee (LOC) to Safa. It is not too late for consensus to be reached on time frames for major milestones; budget allocations beyond stadium construction; how press engagements are to be



handled (for instance, who speaks, on what, and on whose behalf); how disputes, notably of the industrial kind, are managed; how outstanding tender procedures proceed; and how international anxieties are allayed.

But beyond all of this, major local actors (Safa, LOC, and the sport and recreation department) need to collectively get behind our national coach, despite the fact that our 2010 aspirations as a

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football team remain incredibly modest. Sadly, cracks are already starting to emerge.

Simmering tensions in South African rugby administration prior to the recent Rugby World Cup were contained so that our national team could get on with the job. Things, however, sadly came undone no more than a week after the team returned, landing a huge blow to the sense of nationhood and pride occasioned by the victory. Radio talks show hosts will remind us of the sadness voiced by callers, believing that a unique moment in the country's history had been lost.

The 2010 Fifa World Cup simply cannot afford either pre- or post-2007 Rugby World Cup



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scenarios. Despite many reasons that mitigate against the branding and marketing success of the 2006 World Cup in Germany, 2010 still represents a promising opportunity to invigorate our national psyche and give people hope. While the more material or tangible benefits — job creation business opportunities, and accelerated growth — are likely to be slight, 2010 gives the nation something to hold onto. It would be a tragedy if this is ruined by bad management and leadership, and poor decision-making by our soccer administrators. Self-interests masquerading as national goals also need attention.

While South African soccer is not battling with transformation imperatives, it is beset with many other problems, not least of which has been the historic lack of faith and confidence in our numerous national coaches.

The last thing Fifa needs to hear now — in the midst of a series of national strikes and renewed concern about crime levels and the lack of an integrated crime prevention strategy — is Carlos Parreira lamenting the state of soccer administration in this country, or expressions of a lack of faith in him as head coach.

If our national coach walks, we're in a perilous situation. We must scrupulously guard against this and everything else that has the potential, if not to entirely derail the event, to cast a long and ominous shadow over it.

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