

GUEST EDITORIAL

The country has at last shed the straightjacket which an abomination of a political system fitted around it. All of a sudden, besides some very serious after-effects, most of us are experiencing a new lightness of step and a welcome breath of fresh air. Not least of which are included the country's sportspeople. Only since sporting contacts with the rest of the world have been opened and normalised have many of us realised the extent of our isolation and how much we have missed during our years in coventry.

And some of our sportspersons have revelled in their new found freedom. We have seen our cricketers adapt to international competition with remarkable speed and establish themselves amongst the top five. Our netball girls have surprised all with a fine display, Ernie Els is ranked third in the world and Ockert Brits, Elana Meyer and Penny Heyns are world class competitors.

But what really sent the adrenalin surging and made the pulses quicken was our rugby players. Winning the World Cup was an achievement of major proportions which enriched our sporting history and brought honour and glory. But of much greater consequence was the incredible response it elicited. For many of us, never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that rugby, of all the sports, could engender such intense emotions throughout the country irrespective of colour, gender, age or whether lover or detractor of the game. Much of this throat clogging response was engendered by an open minded, highly charismatic and very wise State President. To this one can add the achievements of a few road runners, some professional boxers, one or two tennis players and then the list is virtually complete.

Which means that the majority of our sportspersons are still very far from effective international competition. To place our sportspersons closer to the forefront would require a firm three-pronged thrust. A major effort at re-organisation and a determined change in mind-set is required amongst our coaches, amongst our sports administrators and amongst our sports scientists.

South African coaching is mostly in the hands of previous generation sportspersons who largely apply the training techniques of their generation to the generation they are training, with an inevitable stagnation of training methods. Those coaches that are willing to apply the latest sports science principles to their training, usually lack the academic background to make these training methods effectual. However, an effective, appropriate, and well constructed course on the basics of applied sports science principles by good teachers to willing students would soon remedy the problem. In Australia more and more of the coaches have one or other degree in sport science.

As the new era in our sporting history dawned, the thrust by our sports administrators towards a new vision in sport began with great promise. From amongst the best qualified persons in the country, the sports administrators set up a number of commissions which spent about two years formulating a bright and

shiny sports policy for the new South Africa. After signing and sealing, the hours of sifting, assessing, rethinking and rewriting was presented to the sports administrators. But there it has stalled. A time which required flair, vision and imagination was met instead by procrastination, petty bureaucracy and power struggles. One only has to be reminded of the debacle around the Cape Town Olympic Bid to realise the depths to which our sports administrators are capable of sinking.

Our sports administrators are a crucial element in the development of our sport, both at the grass roots as well as at an elite level. Any disruption in the effective administration of our sport can have serious and long-lasting effects on sport in the country.

The third trust in identifying our sporting talent and converting that talent into world class excellence is perhaps the most crucial of all. This key element of sporting development at this stage of our sporting history lies in the hands of the sports scientists.

Because of the years of isolation, the standard of the sports science taught at our universities has not really been adequately tested against the best overseas standards. The research performed in our sports science laboratories however can be readily tested against world standards through the number and quality of the publications which appear in the top overseas journals. Based on these criteria there are at most 2-3 laboratories in the country of any consequence.

The ability of our sport scientists to apply directly or indirectly through the coaches, sport science principles effectively enough so that sporting performances are raised to, or near to, Olympic medal or world record standards, is virtually non-existent. One has only to compare the huge disparity between South African and world class performances in track and field, swimming, rowing, canoeing, cycling, tennis, hockey, soccer etc amongst others to realise how ineffective the application of sport science principles still are in this country compared to Australia, the United States and Europe.

Sports science is effectively controlled in many corners of this country by what can only be termed the "bulldust brigade". These are persons who are medically qualified, or have physiotherapy degrees, or human movement science degrees or biokinetics degrees or pure science degrees but are hugely inexperienced in the practice of sports science. These types of persons, who owe their positions of influence in sport science to politically correct behaviour, bluster and quasi-science, cannot run the science of sport in this country simple because, with the best will in the world, they just do not have the expertise, the knowledge, the qualifications or the experience to do so. After obtaining an appropriate post graduate degree persons qualify as relevant sports scientists, once they have served an apprenticeship of at least five years teaching experience, ten publications in leading overseas journals and five years experience in the application of sports science principles.

■ *Geoff Rogers*♣