

# RUGBY IN MY TIME

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## (15) SKINNER AND THE SPRINGBOKS

THE night the New Zealand team for the third Test was announced I was in Taranaki. That was the day Taranaki drew with the Springboks 3-all, and if ever a team should have won a game, morally and every other way, it was Taranaki that day. I was sitting in the lounge of my hotel when the chairman of the New Zealand Rugby Union, Mr Cuth Hogg, came on the air with the third Test team. He gave us the full-back: D. B. Clarke, of Waikato. Not much significance in that for anybody, I suppose. Well, Don Clarke was, of course, full-back for Waikato in the first game of the tour. He hadn't played well in the trials, you couldn't have put him in the New Zealand team. Not long after the start of that first game he placed the ball on his own 10-yard mark. The Springboks told me later that as they went back for the kick at goal they laughed to themselves and thought that this was just a country hick showing off. But when that kick of Mr Clarke's passed just outside the posts and about four feet over the bar the word went around: "Watch it. No infringements anywhere near half-way." They couldn't risk it. Then there was that audacious left foot drop kick from the Springbok 10-yard mark. The ball was just tossed back to him and he moved across a few paces and swung his left foot with the most tremendous drop kick you ever saw. And he kicked a couple of goals.

So when Don Clarke's name was mentioned they didn't like it—ooer, they murmured. Jarden in the team—OK. Down he came through the backs. Ponty Reid, the skipper of the team

that had beaten them at Waikato, was half-back—a good little player, Ponty, they knew him. Very good. We came into the forwards. Bill Clark was back in. Mr Jones was in the team. He'd played against them at Whangarei and they'd felt his calibre then. So Cuth went on giving us the team, and the last name mentioned was—K. . . Skinner. That's how he said it: K. . . Skinner. . . You could feel there and then that the Springboks were not too sure of themselves. It was a better New Zealand team all round, and they had no show of upsetting a front row with Skinner in it—and they knew it. Because they'd both—Bekker and Koch—played against him before.

So what happens? There has been a lot of talk about how many fights there were and how many hits Skinner had. Skinner had his first hit in the second lineout in the Christchurch Test. Chris Koch stepped across him which blocked him from coming through, and Skinner warned him: "Don't do it." I think they're about the only words he spoke to them the whole of the tour. The ball went into touch and Koch did it again. So Skinner clocked him. Otherwise it would have just kept on happening. He was cheating, so Skinner said, Don't cheat. There was no trouble in that front row. The word went around that Skinner had said to Ian Clarke: "How are you getting on over there with Bekker?" And Ian Clarke was supposed to have said: "Oh, I can't sort of handle him at all." "Well, hop over here and I'll soon fix him."

Now what happened was this, as Skinner told me himself after the last

Test in Auckland, when we were out that night. Ian has one of the loveliest cauliflower ears on his right hand side that you've seen. It comes up like a billiard ball, and it skins. And Skinner said he noticed that Ian was sort of pulling at this ear. He had cotton wool on it and a bandage under his headgear, you see. Skinner said, "What's wrong?" Ian said, "My ear's a bit sore." And Skinner said, "Oh, well listen, hop over this side and I'll take over on your side for a while to relieve you"—you see, just to relieve his ear.

That's how these stories get about. But it is a fact that Skinner was brought to his knees by Bekker the moment he got in there. So he hit him. If he hadn't they'd have had an upset scrum from the word go. And from then on nothing else happened in the front row—never. Skinner's only two other hits were in Auckland. He had a hit at Newton Walker, down on my left over by the goalposts, because he felt that Newton Walker was going in with the boot on one of the players too much. He missed with that hook—he got a penalty against him. The other one was when Tiny White got kicked in the back towards the end of the game and was suffering on the ground, and then Skinner had a hit at Bekker, the man who'd kicked Tiny. They were the only times.

But what I'm trying to emphasise is that this domination in the front row ended when Skinner went in, and there didn't have to be any strong-arm stuff or anything else. They respected him and they knew that if they tried anything he would just stop them from doing it. Mind you, I still delight in what Jaapie Bekker told me about Skinner. At the dinner after the third Test I was sitting with Jaapie, Tommy van Vollenhoven, Newton Walker and one or two others. Jaapie said, "Winston, wasn't Kevin

STRYDOM reaches for the ball—an action shot from the fourth Test. Others in the picture are (left to right), Hemi, Duff, Bekker, Ian Clarke (in headgear), and Relief



Skinner the heavy-weight champion of New Zealand?" I said, "Ja, that's right. Back in 1947 I think it was, Jaapie. Heavy-weight amateur champion." He said, "Does he still box in the ring?" "Oh, no," I said. "Gee, Kev hasn't been in the ring since 1947." Jaapie said, "Well, tell him to take it on again. He's bloody good."

What are the lessons that could be learned from that tour? I know the New Zealand selectors have been castigated for the type of game that was played. Look, I know those selectors. Selectors aren't morons—they go out and try to play to win. And they knew that so much depended on winning those Tests from the New Zealand public's point of view that they had to be won. Tom Morrison knew—he wasn't going to listen to any of this "open the game up." He saw the weaknesses in the Springbok team. Mr Sullivan, a very astute gentleman, knew them; Arthur Marslin also, from Central Otago—they knew the answers right along. And after they'd seen the Springboks in action I'm sure they'd worked out their line of action. I'm sure of that, because they called on Bob Stuart to coach the forwards. Bob coaching forwards in 1953 in England when he captained the team was absolutely perfect—he made a wonderful pack out of them. Of course he's a great personality, he can get the confidence of the chaps with his nice sense of humour and everything else. And he settled down on to those forwards, because Tom Morrison told him the type of game the selectors wanted to play.

All right. So in the third Test we had little Ponty Reid. He was the right man for the job because he had been behind a Waikato pack that had played this same type of football for so long—the short punt over your forwards, keep it on the blind side, keep it away from their open backs, and let us slog through, and when we get a chance near the line let's have a go. Ponty did a grand job. And they stuck to it through thick and thin. After we'd won the first Test, lost the second and won the third, people throughout the country were still

