

---

## Rocnation? What's that in English?

**Author: Simnikiwe Xabanisa**

NOT long after Siya Kolisi became the Springboks' first black captain in 2018, the Gwijo Squad – a passionate and particularly vocal group of young black professionals who revived an old tradition of singing Xhosa songs at sporting events – factored his name into the lyrics of an old favourite.

Said song goes: “UKolisi lo, abamaziyo, abazange bambona!” The loose translation is: Those who know Kolisi have never seen him.

As bafflingly as that interpretation comes across, the underlying meaning is that the name Kolisi is so mythical that it has reached places where even those who have never seen him know who he is – a bit like Nelson Mandela when he was in Jail.

For the majority of the ensuing 18 months after that tune first saw the light of day it was just that, a song sung by the Gwijo Squad in honour of the first black Springbok captain. But once he lifted the Webb Ellis Cup at the conclusion of the 2019 Rugby World Cup, the name Kolisi did reverberate around the world.

As he picked up his World Peace and Sport Champion award; a BBC World Sports Star of the Year nomination; a Jurgen Klopp hug (a collector's item for a Liverpool fan) at Anfield; and hobnobbed with basketballer Kevin Durant in New York that champagne-soaked summer, Kolisi's journey from the kid who went to bed hungry in Zwile Township, in Port Elizabeth, to a sporting Nobel Laureate of sorts seemed complete.

Enter Rocnation – the brainchild of Hip Hop mogul Jay-Z, which began as an artist management company in 2008 and branched into sports representation five years later – who wanted to bottle the inspiration of Kolisi's story and pay it forward to kids the world over by telling it on the global stage.

To be on the client roster of Rocnation, an organisation which, in typically American fashion, has dubbed itself “the world's preeminent entertainment company” and has over a billion followers across its social media platforms, is to rub virtual shoulders with Alicia Keys, J Cole, Rihanna et al on the music front, and global footballers Marcus Rashford, Kevin de Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku.

Having initially said its involvement with the Springbok captain wasn't a “move into rugby”, Rocnation has since signed England's Maro Itoje, Kolisi's teammate Cheslin Kolbe and Proteas cricketer Lungi Ngidi.

The common thread between the recent signings and Kolisi is evident enough.

Itoje, a politics graduate with his roots in Nigeria, has first black England captain written all over him; Kolbe – who is incidentally world 400m record holder Wayde van Niekerk's cousin – survived gangs in his neighbourhood and sizeist taunts to become arguably the best player in the world; while Ngidi has the outlandish story of being born to domestic workers and schooling at Hilton College.

But given its global footprint and the fact that its headquarters are in New York, this still begs the question of how Rocnation aims to introduce faces from quaint sporting codes to an audience which thinks American football, with its pads and helmets, is tough and mistakes cricket for a noisy insect.

“It's not about rugby versus basketball versus American football versus cricket versus golf,” says Michael Yormark, president and chief of branding and strategy at Rocnation. “We don't talk about Siya Kolisi or Cheslin Kolbe as rugby players – they're much bigger than that.”

“If we can educate the South African athletes on why they matter, why they’re important and how their lives, journeys and overcoming challenges can inspire and motivate people, not only in South Africa but around the world, then people are going to follow them regardless of what they play.

“Do you know what the how is? You have to transcend your sport. Siya Kolisi is so much bigger than just a rugby player.”

But Yormark, who exudes the chutzpah of a man with a booze plan during lockdown, is a little befuddled by how self-deprecating his SA clients are: “Working with Siya, Cheslin and Lungi, I’ve gotten a sense that athletes in South Africa are very humble. They almost don’t believe they deserve to be successful.

“And because of that they don’t [believe they] deserve the right to think about amplifying their brand or thinking about global opportunities, or even working with a global company like ours. One of the things I’ve had to remind them is that they deserve these opportunities, to have their stories told and think beyond the boundaries of South Africa because they’ve earned that right.

“That’s the difference I’ve experienced between South African athletes and American and European athletes, they almost don’t feel like they deserve it and don’t realise how special they and their stories are.”

Not that this has stopped Kolisi from being the most recognisable face in South Africa, what with his endorsements of anything ranging from energy drinks to sanitisers.

Listening to Yormark outline Rocnation’s rough plans for its South African constituents – “helping them to achieve their goals on or off the field, continue to tell their stories, enhance their visibility and exposure, maximise their opportunities...” – it sounds pretty much like most agencies.

“But ultimately it’s not about what we want to do with them. Each of these individuals are the CEOs of their own brands. Our relationship with them is to create opportunity and help guide them, but they have to make their own decisions about what they want to accomplish.

“Lungi probably needs us more than Siya, Cheslin and Maro. He’s outspoken about the right things, he’s a remarkable young man who wants to inspire and to motivate the next generation of athletes through his experiences and his journey.”

Asked what it is that makes Rocnation more Jerry Maguire than Bob Sugar as sporting representation, Yormark gets a touch philosophical: “The biggest difference we have with people that may have represented these athletes in the past is our purpose as a company is vastly different.

“This is not about grabbing a couple of dollars. This is truly about supporting these athletes to achieve their life goals and objectives, that’s the only thing we think about when we get up in the morning because we understand that if they win, we win.”

But he does concede that by committing to South African, Rocnation has stolen a march on its global competition.

“The guiding principles of our company are about helping, but listen, we think this is a good business opportunity, we’re building a business in South Africa, too,” he explains. “We’re going to represent special athletes, both men and women, and we’ll be announcing a couple of new relationships on the consulting side, helping professional sports club with their business.

“This is similar to what we do in Europe with AC Milan and Leeds United. We see this as an opportunity for us because our global competitors have never identified South Africa as a real [business] opportunity.

“There aren’t a lot of big companies like ours around the world that have said we want to be in South Africa, we want to help. We are the first, we want to help, we want to support, but we also want to build a business.”