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## When the guy in the changing room corner ends up as your coach one day

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In a classic case of gamekeeper turned poacher, French international referee Alexandre Ruiz recently quit officiating to become a defence coach for club side Montpellier.

As someone who needed to score in the region of 100% on his rugby laws exam, at some level the left-field nature of the appointment makes sense because he should really know his rugby – certainly in theory.

But the leap from neutral arbiter to knee-deep partisan participant also takes some getting used to, particularly when you consider that Montpellier had, over the past season, leaked so many points in their matches one could only conclude they were defending with the firmness of wet toast.

South Africans may have stopped short of going the French route by getting rid of the box altogether in finding new ways of hiring coaches, but they, too, have allowed their imagination to go a little vivid when it comes to hiring their mentors. The Springboks went for career physiotherapist Jacques Nienaber as their head coach of choice to defend their world title; the Lions promoted fitness trainer Ivan van Rooyen to the top job; and the University of Cape Town recently surprised by hiring Tom Dawson-Squibb – who identifies as a high-performance coach but is widely used as a sports psychologist by the teams he works with – as the man to stabilise their Varsity Cup performances.

This is a far cry from the days when rugby used to go for authority figures like ex-teachers (think of the Springboks' Jake White, Australia's Eddie Jones and New Zealand's Graham Henry) or former policemen (the All Blacks' Steve Hansen or the Bulls' "Brigadier" Buurman van Zyl) in choosing their coaches.

And just when the SA public was getting used to the idea of ex-player coaches taking over the coaching reins long before their six-packs had faded, the likes of Nienaber, Dawson-Squibb, et al, were thrown under the spotlight as proof that the pathways to coaching at the top had changed.

At the time of Nienaber's appointment, it fell to his predecessor, Rassie Erasmus, to explain why he'd heavily influenced SA Rugby to hire his mate and confidant of 29 years, instead of looking for a prominent international coach to guide the then newly minted world champions.

"As a physio way back in 1996 he was sending messages from the coaches to me as the captain," Erasmus said of Nienaber, whose thirst for self-improvement would also see him become a conditioning coach as well as a defence coach. "To do that you actually need to know the game plan and the calls, and not just relay messages. Lying on his physio bed back then he would chat rugby for a whole 90-minute session, and you'd realise that 'oh shit, this guy's talking a lot more sense than many of the coaches'.

"People will say that's a weird pathway to take, but if you look at all the top head coaches, work ethic, being passionate about the game, and loving the players they work with is the constant thing. Everyone's got a different story to tell about how he got to where he is."

Dawson-Squibb, whose UCT team had an impressive Varsity Cup campaign this year – going unbeaten throughout the competition until the very last hurdle against the University of Pretoria in the final – wants clarity on what constitutes a coaching pathway.

“It would be interesting to think what a pathway is,” began Dawson-Squibb, whose coaching before his UCT job had been as the resident sports shrink for the university’s team, Western Province, the Stormers, the Sharks and the Melbourne Rebels.

“I’ve coached under-nine rugby all the way to under-20s at UCT. I’ve probably done 10 years of rugby coaching, and if that’s not a pathway then I’m not really sure what is. Am I only exclusively a rugby coach? No.

“In terms of walking the pathway, I’m probably a little less concerned about it than others are because I have coached. People might just know me as the mind guy or the mental coach, and that’s cool, but ultimately I have coached before.” A Business Science (Organisational Psychology) graduate who also has a diploma in systemic team coaching, Dawson-Squibb admitted to laughing out loud the first time UCT sounded him out about the possibility of being their head coach. “I’d been involved at UCT years ago as a mental coach, then I became the under-20s coach,” he explained. “But then I left and spent some time in Australia on a Super Rugby campaign with the Rebels.

“When I came back I was asked if I was interested and I started laughing, saying I hadn’t thought about it. Maybe that was a slight lie because ever since I started at UCT I’d fallen in love with it and thought one day I’d love to take the first team. “I laughed because I thought my time would only be in the future. I’d coached rugby teams in my time but I’m well aware that I’m not a seasoned rugby coach. When I said I laughed I might have giggled briefly but when I spoke to a couple of confidants my mentor said: ‘Tom you’ve made your decision.’”

While his initial steps in the role have been nothing short of assured, the 37-year-old hasn’t been immune to the odd bout of impostor syndrome.

“I’m coaching against Pote Human, who’s coached Super Rugby; I’m coaching against Paul Treu; who’s won the IRB Sevens series; I’m coaching against Dewey Swartbooi and Nico Luus, who’ve played professional rugby; Andre Pretorius who won the 2007 World Cup as a player – you definitely look around and go, ‘Jeepers! What do I know?’

“But I also can’t sit there and tell my players they’ve got to believe in themselves and not do the same thing. I can genuinely say that I know what I know and I’m good at what I’m good at, but like any coach I’ve got to make sure I get people around me who are good at what I’m not good at.”

A leadership coach who “helps teams be the best they can be” in the corporate sector, Dawson-Squibb has always made a point of describing himself as a “High-Performance Coach” instead of a sports psychologist, regardless of his extensive work in that area.

“I’m not a registered psychologist,” was his explanation of the distinction. “If you want to call yourself a psychologist you need to be registered with the Health Professionals Council. So I feel I can’t ethically call myself a shrink or psychologist.” Given his unusual pathway to coaching, there is the question: why would he be comfortable calling himself a coach? “The entry to being a psychologist and the entry to being a rugby coach are very different.

“Not every Tom, Dick and Harry can call himself a psychologist, but anyone can say I coached rugby at a local club, so the two are apples and pears, really. I respect all those levels you have to do [to be a coach] and stuff – I’ve done up to level two and would like to get to level three – but I didn’t appoint myself, you know.

“Someone somewhere thought it would be a good idea to have me running a team. I feel you have to remain humble enough to always be learning.”

Dawson-Squibb’s capacity to “steal” coaching ideas while sitting unobtrusively in a corner of some changing room or another, and translate them into a cogent coaching methodology, makes him that cliché of a student of the game people usually allude to.

"I'm massive like that, I pick up a lot of things," he said. "If I go back to [former UCT coach] Kevin Foote I learnt about creating a story and inspiring; from Kevin Musikanth [also ex-UCT] I learnt a lot about winning and finding a way; I learnt about creativity and creating an energy for the group from [Stormers coach] John Dobson.

"I learnt about analysis and professionalism from Gary Gold at the Sharks and from Dave [Wessels, the former Rebels coach] I learnt about intensity and intensity in training."

The stint in Australia was particularly pivotal: "I took bits of that and added to my own personality, that's why I say I wouldn't have been able to do this job if I hadn't been to Australia. It's not about the environment here..."

"It was more about me getting out of my comfort zone and being immersed in one space exclusively for seven months, which gave me the confidence and a bit more knowledge to be able to take this job. It was a personal journey in which I needed to get out of my little bubble."