

Is it the jockey, the horse or the trainer?

What makes a champion, a champion team and champion performances? In the racehorse world of champion thoroughbred Black Caviar, is it the horse herself, is it the jockey Luke Nolen, or is it the trainer Peter Moody?

In the world of Australian rugby, is it the Players, is it the coach Robbie Deans, or is it the administrators of the Australian Rugby Union who are responsible?

The answer is simple. It is a **partnership** of all of those parties involved in the delivery of the performance. If the planning and execution of the trainer (read ARU administrators) is flawed then the horse (read players) or the jockey (read coach) are left with a greatly reduced capacity to produce a champion performance. However this does not reduce the onus on horse (players) or the jockey (coach) to perform. It is a simple principle of everyone doing their job.

It is with this in mind that I read two interesting rugby articles in The Australian newspaper on Monday 22 August 2012. The two journalists, Wayne Smith and Bret Harris, for a long period of time now have consistently espoused intrinsically different positions on the state of Australian rugby and the manner in which it is administered. Performances on the playing field, such as those which have occurred between the Wallabies and the All Blacks over the last fortnight, provide the impetus for much speculation and opinion.

Smith's analysis of the reasons behind the disappointing performances of the Wallabies, in particular those performances against the All Blacks, during the tenure of current Wallabies coach, Robbie Deans, are:

- There is no vision for Australian rugby;
- Australian rugby suffers from division and disunity;
- Australian rugby has chosen to take a top-down approach rather than the bottom-up method; and
- Australian rugby appointed the wrong coach in Robbie Deans and that the process involved in his appointment was flawed.

Smith is also critical of the culture of the ARU in not making public "the investigation into why the Wallabies performed so poorly" at the Rugby World Cup. In summary Smith states that "The whole organisation of the ARU has to be torn down and rebuilt, with all the dry rot cut away".

The 'take no prisoner's approach' to the ARU and in particular, to the current ARU administration of the game, has consistently been advocated by Smith.

In essence for Smith, the trainer and the jockey are predominantly to blame.

On the other hand in defense of the jockey, Wallabies coach, Robbie Deans, and by implication and association the trainer, the ARU, Bret Harris in his article in The Australian states that "no Wallabies team can beat the All Blacks without being at full strength and having an ounce of luck on its side". Neither of which did the Wallabies have on Saturday night in Auckland he goes on to claim.

Following on from Harris' statement the Wallabies therefore had no chance of winning on Saturday night given they were without seven regular starters -- second-rower James Horwill, openside flanker David Pocock, utility back James O'Connor, inside back Pat McCabe, hooker Tatafu Polota-Nau, number eight Wycliff Palu and tighthead prop Sekope Kepu -- and reserve backrower Ben McCalman. Not to mention the recent attrition of world class players such as Rocky Elsom and Dan Vickerman.

Harris then states " if you took the equivalent players out of the All Blacks, they would be left without Sam Whitelock, Richie McCaw, Dan Carter, Sonny Bill Williams, Keven Mealamu, Owen Franks, Kieran Read and Victor Vito" -- and that they (the All Blacks), would obviously not go as well.

But the Achilles' heel to Harris' analysis and argument is that the All Blacks even without these players would still expect to win the Bledisloe Cup and have the depth of player talent available to the team to do so. Any national team who can play its 4th or 5th ranked fly- half and still win the Rugby World Cup has surreal depth in its playing ranks. And depth of talent is really the defining element in determining success or failure in a professional team sporting contest, especially in a collision sport such as rugby where injuries are so prevalent.

For Harris, the trainer and the jockey are fine but we do not have enough quality horses in the stable to be competitive.

International rugby is a weight for age event, not a handicap. There are no such instruments providing equalization of the contest such as a draft, salary cap or wealth tax as utilized by the Australian Football League (AFL), the National Rugby League (NRL) or American sports, such as baseball. The paramount factor which any sporting competition requires is the contest. The only course of action to ensure a contest against the highest standard in international rugby then is to improve Australian rugby's capacity to compete at the contest. Indeed a much stiffer benchmark than that which confronts the AFL or the NRL in Australia.

How does Australian rugby manage to be competitive with the All Blacks and match New Zealand's capacity to produce international class rugby players in order to supply Australia's five Super Rugby franchises, the national 7's squad and the Wallabies?

It is undeniable that the recent performances of the Wallabies against the All Blacks, and those of the Australian teams in the 2012 Super Rugby competition, have been disappointing. Even more disconcerting, with regards to the future, was the performance of the Australian under-20 team in finishing eighth at the recent Junior World Cup in South Africa in June.

Any analysis of the factors responsible for these disappointing performances needs to be fair and objective and needs to provide appropriate strategies to ensure better outcomes in the future. The ARU is the body responsible for the development and implementation of such strategies. There can be no argument about this. However it is essential that all the stakeholders who are in the choir are singing off the same song sheet for Smith is correct in that " Division is death in any sport".

Australian rugby obviously needs to develop and implement strategies to expand its resources of players and coaches in the extremely competitive Australian sporting market place in order to be internationally competitive on a regular basis with two much better resourced rugby economies in New Zealand and South Africa.

Smith's proposal is quite simple in that "the ARU has to be torn down and rebuilt". The key word in this rather radical statement is however the term "rebuilt". Before one attempts to rebuild it is essential that a proper assessment of the current landscape is undertaken.

The principal challenge in the Australian rugby landscape is not the rugby contests with the All Blacks, the Springboks or any of the other international rugby teams. The principal challenge for rugby is the competition for a share of the elite athletes and the potential commercial revenues in the Australian sporting market place.

There are a number of factors which determine the capacity of Australian rugby to generate the revenues which it receives for its major commercial product, international rugby. These factors include:

- media coverage and income;
- participation rates;
- the actual entertainment value of the game;
- the capacity of the national body to amend the laws of the game to make the game more attractive and hence increase its entertainment value;
- the international competitiveness of the teams;
- the relationships with strategic partners including corporations, governments and educational institutions;
- the structure of the competitions in which the teams compete; and
- the standards of corporate governance and administration of the game.

The commercial revenues generated from the sale of the rugby product are essential to the capacity of the game to underwrite game development and to pay the professional players, coaches and staff. Australian rugby here has a manifest disadvantage when compared to its traditional international rugby opponents.

Neither South Africa nor New Zealand respectively are forced to compete with other major football codes such as the AFL, the NRL and the A-League for commercial revenues, let alone athletes. Competing in the Rugby World Cup in 2011 also severely impacted on the commercial revenues of Australian rugby.

Australian rugby also has a manifest disadvantage when compared to the AFL and the NRL. It is a relatively easy process for either the AFL or the NRL to amend the laws of their respective games in order to improve the entertainment value of their product. The ARU does not have such indulgence available to it as the laws of rugby are determined by the International Rugby Board. On one hand the international factor is rugby's point of difference and on the other a significant handicap.

Rugby's entertainment value has received considerable publicity recently with respect to the actual amount of playing time which occurs in both Super Rugby and international rugby matches. The structure of the game and the referee's application of the laws have significantly reduced the playing time and thus the entertainment value of the game, especially when compared to the AFL and the NRL.

There can be no doubt that the principal objective for any business is to be commercially viable. For Australian rugby to be commercially viable it is essential that there are sufficient quality coaches and players to supply the five Australian Super Rugby franchises and for them in turn to supply the Wallabies. If the production line falters and these teams are not

competitive on the playing field then this in turn will be reflected in poor commercial outcomes for the game at provincial and national levels.

Thus the real challenge for Australian rugby is to develop strategies for expanding and developing the talent pool of rugby players and coaches in Australia. For this to occur it is essential that strategic partnerships are established in order to create enhanced pathways and by broadening the elite talent base by the implementation of innovative strategies for the identification, recruitment and development of elite players and coaches.

"Losses of the humiliating magnitude of those suffered by the Wallabies over the past two weekends do not happen by chance, nor do they happen overnight. Victors often talk of how many years went into the making of their triumphs but the corollary also applies. Many years also can go into the making of defeats, especially defeats on this scale."

The above is a rather severe comment from Smith. However one thing for certain is that there is a time lag in determining whether the programs for the development of elite and professional players and coaches which are being implemented today are the best use of available resources to maximize future rugby outcomes.

Smith is not on his own when predicting a gloomy future for the game. Mark Ella recently stated "We haven't won the Bledisloe Cup for 10 years - and I think it's going to be another 10 years before we get there."

Is Harris correct in that we do not have enough quality horses in the stable at the moment to be competitive with New Zealand and South Africa?

As a result of commercial pressures on the ARU, created by the financial impact of the Rugby World Cup, did Australian rugby falter in not providing the quality horses in the stable with a 1 in 4 year spell, as did New Zealand and South Africa, and instead commit to a northern spring tour in 2011? Has this had a detrimental impact on performances in 2012?

Rugby's football competitors in the Australian athlete marketplace, the AFL, the NRL and even the A-League, have national pathway competitions for their transitional athletes. The AFL and the NRL have just secured massive media rights funding, the benefits of which will be passed on to their current and future athletes. These outcomes will no doubt provide Australian rugby with even greater competition in its endeavours to attract Australia's elite athletic talent in the future.

It is a fact that Australian rugby currently has a massive challenge to supply five Australian Super Rugby franchises and the national 7's squad form the two traditional rugby hubs of Sydney and Brisbane. This is an even greater challenge going forward given the consequences of the potential for developments in the AFL and the NRL which are detailed in the paragraph above.

The Rugby Union Players' Association (RUPA) has a major stake in all of the above challenges to the Australian rugby landscape.

RUPA's key stakeholders are the current and future elite and professional Australian rugby players. It is thus a responsibility of RUPA to ensure that the interests and opportunities afforded to the current and future elite and professional rugby players in Australia are optimized. This can only occur if the game of rugby in Australia is in healthy state, from junior development to the Wallabies.

Australia's elite and professional rugby players through their participation in Super Rugby and international rugby matches deliver, either directly or indirectly, virtually all of the Australian rugby revenues. Through the Collective Bargaining Agreement with the Australian rugby bodies the RUPA playing membership are entitled to receive 26% of the income generated by the players. Accordingly the RUPA playing membership are arguably the key stakeholder group in Australian rugby.

RUPA acknowledges that an extremely important part of rebuilding Australian rugby has already been undertaken by the ARU through its corporate governance review. RUPA congratulates the ARU on this initiative and looks forward to the findings of this study. RUPA also notes that Cricket Australia (CA) has recently adopted the recommendations of a similar review into its governance model.

This should be a step in the right direction by the ARU and will hopefully ameliorate some of the concerns raised by Smith with respect to the poor culture, lack of vision and the division and disunity which he claims exist in Australian rugby.

In order to ensure that the concerns raised by Harris over the number of quality horses (players) required for the Wallabies to be competitive and those concerns of Smith over the quality of the jockeys (coaches) and the trainer (ARU High Performance Program) RUPA would propose that the ARU consider following another Cricket Australia initiative in conducting an independent review of the Australian Rugby High Performance Program.

The Cricket Australia initiative was called the Australian Team Performance Review (ATPR). The Review was chaired by eminent businessman Don Argus, with former Australian Cricket Board and International Cricket Council CEO Malcolm Speed and former captains Allan Border, Steve Waugh and Mark Taylor as its other members. The Board also received advice on cultural aspects of the team from international leadership advisory firm Heidrick and Struggles.

CA Chairman Jack Clarke stressed that the Review was not about looking for scapegoats but looking to the future and what CA needed to do to improve.

"It is clear with the wisdom of hindsight that there are some issues that could have been addressed earlier. The right time for fundamental change to structures and processes is not always easy to pick, particularly with a system that has worked so well for so long. However, it is clear the world has moved on and a system that once worked is now in need of change. Australian cricket has many passionate, dedicated, professional and intelligent people working in their playing, coaching, selection and administrative roles. They cannot achieve success unless the system we give them allows them to be successful."

There are some obvious synergies here for Australian rugby. Adversity after all creates opportunity.

The Executive Summary of the CA Report was publicly released. An action that no doubt would please Smith in the light of his criticisms of the failure of the ARU to make public the review into Australia's performances at the 2011 RWC.

One of ATPR's key recommendations, which would be very relevant to Australian rugby, was how to better align and co-ordinate the CA and state cricket associations' high performance systems and to set up accountable, performance-related incentive systems through all levels of cricket.

The current High Performance Manager of Australian Cricket is former Wallaby and current RUPA Board member Patrick Howard. Howard is also a former High Performance Manager of Australian Rugby and has extensive international rugby experience as a player and coach with Leicester in the UK. This presents a fortunate juxtaposition of circumstances providing Australian rugby with the potential to capitalise on Howard's knowledge of elite and professional sport.

The ATPR was the most significant examination of Australian cricket ever undertaken. A similar independent examination of the Australian Rugby High Performance Program would be supported by RUPA and no doubt by other key stakeholders in the Australian rugby community.

Whether this course of action is pursued is a decision to be made by the ARU Board, in particular, the new Chairman, Michael Hawker and the ARU Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, John O'Neill.

We might even manage to get the right **partnership** with the right horse, jockey and trainer for Australian rugby's version of Black Caviar, 22 wins in a row wouldn't be bad, and in the process have Smith and Harris on the same page of The Australian.

Greg Harris

Chief Executive Officer, RUPA