

# Rugby in the Prisoner-of-War Camps During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902

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## Abstract

During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, 24,000 Boers and their sympathisers from all over the world were sent to prisoner-of-war camps beyond the shores of South Africa. Fourteen camps were set up in India, six in Bermuda, five in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and two on St. Helena. Some other prisoners were also sent to Portugal. Initially, however, some prisoners were kept in camps near Cape Town (Simon's Town and Greenpoint). The most popular sporting activity in these camps was rugby and it was mainly played by the Boers. It seems that in all the camps there were some experienced players who organised and promoted the game to the wider camp community. In cases where there were no experienced players, the prisoners initially watched the men of the garrison play before they indulged in a semblance of a game of their own. In each camp several clubs were formed with prisoners often braving the elements in order to play the game. As a result of their camp experiences, former prisoners look the game back to many areas of southern Africa and thus aided in the rapid development of rugby outside its early strongholds of the large urban centres.

## Introduction

The study undertaken found that the prisoner-of-war camps of the Anglo-Boer War were instrumental in promoting the game of rugby union football amongst a vast number of Afrikaners (Boers) who had not played the game before. In the case of Portugal, it appears that the Boers introduced rugby to the Portuguese. Secondly, rugby was a powerful weapon against the stress and boredom of wartime imprisonment.

The war between Great Britain and the two Boer republics, the South African Republic or Transvaal and the Orange Free State, broke out on 11 October 1899. Ten days later the first Boer prisoners-of-war were captured (van Schoor, 1983, pp. 1-2). The British military had to send the prisoners to camps abroad in order to prevent them being freed by countrymen and joining the Boer forces again, to prevent them from escaping and to demoralise the Boer forces in the field (Rood-Coetzee, 1949, p. 507). During the war, 27,000 Boers were taken prisoner and 24,000 of them spent time in overseas prisoner of war camps. The prisoners ranged in age from seven to 78 (van Schoor, 1983, pp. 1-2).

## Rugby in the Prisoner-of-War Camps

Whilst researching the whole context of sports and games amongst the prisoners-of-war during the Anglo-Boer War (van der Merwe, 1995), it was found that rugby was the most popular pastime in most of the camps, with the exception of Bermuda where the rocky surfaces made the holding of rugby matches impossible at the time. Initially, many prisoners were kept temporarily on ships which made team sports impossible to play, but rugby was played in transit camps like Tin Town in Ladysmith and Umbilo in Durban as well as in the POW camps in Greenpoint and Simon's Town.

As part of an athletic meeting in Tin Town, five-a-side football was played (Africana Museum). Unfortunately, sources do not specify what kind of football was played - soccer or rugby. If it was rugby, this could be an early precursor to later smaller size varieties of rugby such as sevens. South Camp in Simon's Town had a cricket and football field, but since the camp filled rapidly, the playing fields were soon covered with tents. A complaint was even addressed to the Prime Minister (Simon's Town Museum). When a large number of prisoners were transferred from Greenpoint Camp in Cape Town to Simon's Town, football in Simon's Town received a boost, especially amongst the younger players (van Wyk, 1987, p. 135). Greenpoint had two camps. The first one was furnished inside the old athletics and cycling stadium. In the middle of the stadium the football field was left intact and used for all kinds of sport (van der Merwe, 1995, p. 8). Later another camp was built nearby surrounded by high corrugated iron fences, with the appropriate name of 'Skyview'. Whilst rugby was played at Skyview, cricket also appeared, though often degenerating into something more resembling football. The editor of the camp newspaper the *Skyview Parrot* lamented:

The weather, at present, is not very suitable for football, but this does not prevent, at least, half the camp going mad with excitement and running wildly and ferociously with deafening uproar after an eight and sixpence piece of inflated leather which has the shape of a badly mutilated egg . . . and whilst they are engaged in its pursuit, the game of cricket becomes a thing of the past, and they trample with redoubled energy upon the cricket pitch . . . who will undertake to do away with this nuisance . . . a pin or a needle on the toe of a boot is all that is required and the game-loving and peaceful heroes of Skyview will feel greatly obliged to the person who removes this pest from the path of enjoyment (Parliament Library).

The first POW camps outside of South Africa were established on the island of St. Helena and the two main camps were called Deadwood and Broadbottom.

They were occupied from April 1900 (van der Merwe, 1995, p. 13). Sporting equipment was forwarded to the camps from sympathisers in the Netherlands and included eight rugby balls and six soccer balls (Minnaar, 1936b, p. 37). The prisoners subsequently founded a football club for rugby and soccer (de Graaf, 1950). Although both football codes were played on the island, rugby was the most popular (van der Merwe, 1995, p. 15). Soon after their arrival, whilst still waiting for sporting equipment to arrive, fourteen players were rounded up in Deadwood camp (Minnaar, 1936a, p. 95). Amongst them was Sommie Morkel, a future Springbok who later played in all four tests on the first Spingbok rugby tour of Britain and France in 1906-07 (Laubscher, 1991). These players initially had to play with an old soccer ball supplied by the garrison members (Minnaar, 1936a, p. 95), who incidentally only played soccer and refused to play rugby against the Boers (Minnaar, 1936c, p. 85). Soon afterwards fourteen more players joined (du Toit, 1946, p. 19).

To supplement the number of rugby players, sixteen boys who appeared keen to learn the game were recruited to make up the numbers so that the adult prisoners could play matches (Minnaar, 1936a, p. 95). Two years later the youngsters on St. Helena had enough players to organise their own rugby tournament (Free State Archive). According to a prisoner, I J Minnaar, none of them will ever forget these rugby matches on St. Helena, which were wrestling contests rather than rugby matches (Minnaar, 1936a, p. 95). Rugby grew in popularity and by December 1900 several teams played matches against each other (War Museum, 5878/1). Teams from the two main camps also played each other on a regular basis. The first team of Deadwood boasted three players who played for South Africa against the touring English before the war (Van Niekerk, 1972, p. 120).

Due to the overpopulation of the camps on St. Helena, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) became the next venue for Boer prisoner camps. The first prisoners arrived there in August 1900. Altogether five camps were erected in Ceylon, the biggest being Diyatalawa with 4,000 prisoners. The men formed two groups, Transvalers versus Free Staters, and they called their 'towns' Krugersdorp (for the Transvalers) and Steynsburg (Free Staters). Sports teams were also organised along these lines (van der Merwe, 1995, pp. 37, 40). Three months after their arrival, the Free State had already beaten Transvaal by ten points in rugby (War Museum, 3079/3). In July 1901 it was Transvaal's turn - winning by three points in one of the best matches seen in Diyatalawa (Transvaal Archive, A 1483). The match took place in front of 1,500 spectators. All the players apparently left the held with some sort of injury (War Museum, 6102/1). It is reported that no mercy was shown and since they played rugby six days a week, the camp newspaper claimed 'the men cannot last at that rate' (War Museum, 4656/7). One of the last matches in Diyatalawa was played in torrential rain. When the ball eventually

collapsed due to the wet conditions, the players started a mud fight that did not take long to involve the spectators as well (War Museum, 5678/4).

From April 1901 Boer prisoners were sent to fourteen camps in India where they were exposed to terrible heat and sand storms (van der Merwe, 1995, p. 60). The research found that in most camps football and other sports were played in the late afternoon when it was somewhat cooler (van der Merwe, 1995, p. 62). Judging from the voluminous reports about soccer in India, compared to other camps in the British Empire, it seems that the heat caused the prisoners to kick the ball around rather than run, tackle and scrum for it (Van der Merwe, 1995, pp. 62-5).

Six of the Bermuda islands became the next deposit zone for Boer prisoners with the first prisoners arriving in June 1901. Although there were 4,590 prisoners by May 1902, rugby was never a major sport due to the limited space. The rocky surface of the island made the playing of football and cricket nearly impossible (van der Merwe, 1995, pp. 71, 74-5, 80).

More than 1,000 men, women and children were interned in Portugal from March 1901. They were housed in six towns, mostly north of Lisbon (van der Merwe, 1995, p. 84). Darius de Klerk, who stayed in Portugal after the war, made the following comments in his book, *The Boers in Portugal*:

Fotball [sic] was quite unheard of in Portugal in those days, at least in the provinces. The public in Alcobaca enjoyed watching the Boers play this new game, but the rules had their followers baffled for a long, long time (de Klerk, 1985, p. 38).

and:

When the Boers arrived, it [the park in Caldas de Rainha] was no more than barren ground so it was not long before they were using it to play some sort of ball game. Of course, the locals had not heard of football in those days (de Klerk, 1985, p. 48).

### **Significance of Rugby in the Camps**

Rugby was significant in the POW camps for at least two reasons. First, the game was introduced to a vast number of men who had neither played it before nor seen a rugby match played by others. Secondly, rugby was important activity for the alleviation of stress brought on by imprisonment. With 24,000 Boers and their sympathisers in the POW camps, coming from all parts of southern Africa, it is reasonable to assume that many of these men from rural areas had no prior exposure to rugby. This is illustrated in a comment made on football at Diyatalawa:

Football in particular claimed a remarkable measure of enthusiasm and it was specially noticeable how very keenly the Boer fell to this purely British game. In the beginning they were content to watch the soccer men of the garrison dribble, or to applaud the dexterous handling of the oval. Then they joined in during practice play and indulged in a primitive game of their own. It did not take them long to learn the intricacies of combinations, and ceasing to borrow the Gloucester Regiment's ball, they has nearly a dozen of their own (War Museum, 4833/67).

Before the war rugby was not widely played in the Transvaal and even less so in the Orange Free State. From Ivor Difford's *History of South African Rugby Football* (1933) it is evident that institutionalised rugby in these two Boer Republics was only found in city centres and on the mines and apparently not at all in the rural areas. In Difford, the oldest Free State club mentioned is the Collegians Rugby Football Club in Bloemfontein and it was only founded in 1902. On the other hand, major urban areas in the Transvaal, Johannesburg and Pretoria, had clubs much earlier, though founded by English-speaking men. Johannesburg clubs like Wanderers (1887) and Pirates (1888) and the Pretoria Club (1889) were all founded in the late 1880s.

According to Platnauer (1908, pp. 73-4) rugby started in the Transvaal in about 1886. It came to a halt when the war broke out and in 1903, with the return to normal conditions, there was a great expansion of the game. In 1903 the touring British team found the local teams far stronger than ever before. South Africa even won its first test series that year with two draws and a win. Difford agrees with Platnauer stating that:

Ever since the Great War, no sport in Johannesburg and District has reached such a high state of all-round efficiency, or made such great strides as Rugby football has done in the schools. Up to the end of the season 1914, a good deal of spade work had been done. (Difford, 1933, p. 636).

Rugby imperialism in POW camps certainly had something to do with these successes, culminating in the famous 1906-07 Springbok tour to Britain and France. This was South Africa's first overseas tour and also where the Springbok emblem was worn for the first time. The team of Paul Roos played 28 matches of which they won 25 and lost only two. They scored 130 tries accumulating 553 points for and allowing only 79 points against them (Greyvenstein, 1978, p. 264).

As far as Portugal is concerned, one can say that the Boers introduced rugby to the Portuguese at the beginning of the century; if this game was 'unheard of in Portugal in those days' surely it must have been rugby and not soccer. Unfortunately de Klerk did not mention if any local Portuguese started to play the game with the Boers.

Prisoners-of-war are exposed to specific types of stress, such as threats to life and health; discomfort from pain, heat, cold, dampness, fatigue and poor food; loss of means of subsistence, whether in the form of money, jobs, business or poverty; deprivation of sexual satisfaction; enforced idleness; restriction of movement; isolation; threats to children, family members and friends; rejection, dislike and ridicule from other people; capricious and unpredictable behaviour on the part of those in authority upon whom one's own welfare depends (Leighton, 1964, p. 252). According to Bondy (1943) it is almost impossible for an individual to stay in an internment camp for a long period without undergoing radical physical, mental and moral changes (see van der Merwe, 1992). Although cases of insanity were reported (Transvaal Archive, A 766) many prisoners loved the open air and found solace in sport. In the majority of camps rugby was the favourite sport and often the same players also indulged in cricket, tennis and other sports and games. This way they could fight boredom and physical deterioration.

## **Conclusion**

In this research it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between rugby and soccer as many documents would only refer to 'voetbal' (football). It could be determined that rugby was the most popular of the two. By 1897 Parker remarked that 'socker [sic] in South Africa is not such a venerable sport as Rugby' (Parker, 1987, p. 73). Andree, writing on the Boer prisoners in Ceylon, verifies this finding with the following comment:

Suffice it to say that the Boers are keen on all forms of sport, especially cricket and the two sections of football, and they play Rugby a great deal better than they do Association (War Museum, 6201/11).

It is evident from Parker's *South African Sports* that rugby was favoured in the Transvaal, but soccer was quite widely played in the Free State countryside before the Anglo-Boer War (Parker, 1897). This seems to have changed after the war.

A number of provincial players and even Springboks learned their rugby in the camps. Koot Reynecke, for instance, was an eighteen year old Free Stater when he and his friends learned to play rugby in Ceylon. After the war he went to

Victoria College in Stellenbosch and in 1910 he played for South Africa against the touring British team of Tommy Smythe (Craven, 1980). In each camp there were prisoners who initiated the sports organisation of games such as rugby, tennis, gymnastics or chess. In Diyatalawa, for example, it was the formidable L. Edmeades, of whom ‘the very sight of him suggests a [rugby] match’ (War Museum, 5678/4). Due to the efforts of these rugby fanatics, the game was promoted amongst former non-playing Boers of all ages. The irony of this early push in South African rugby development is that whilst hating and fighting the ‘Tommies’, these Boer prisoners truly loved their opponents’ rugby and within decades even claimed it as their own ‘national’ game.

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