RACE AND SOUTH AFRICAN RUGBY:
A REVIEW OF THE 1919 “ALL BLACK” TOUR

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ABSTRACT

In as much as British civil rugby leagues were suppressed during the First World War, rugby in military guise experienced a revival. The highlight was the Inter-services Tournament in 1919 in which Great Britain and the Dominions competed for the King George V Cup. New Zealand was the eventual winner of this trophy. In South Africa the South African Rugby Board wanted to boost local rugby after a lull caused by the war. Thus they invited the New Zealand Services team to tour South Africa for six weeks on their way home. The negative aspect of this tour was the prior request of the South African Rugby Board for them not to bring any coloured players. The South African High Commissioner in London, W.P. Schreiner, extended the invitation and was satisfied with the coloureds being included in the team, but it was his son, Bill Schreiner, who voted against it at the Rugby Board meeting. The players concerned were Ranji Wilson and Parekura Tureia. This scandal would rock the rugby world only years later. The positive aspect of the tour was the new ideas and enthusiasm the tour brought to South African rugby. South African forward play and tackling were subsequently improved. It also gave new impetus to the Springboks’ desire to tour New Zealand. This tour only became a reality in 1921.

Key words: Rugby; New Zealand; South Africa; 1919 “All Black” tour; Ranji Wilson; Parekura Tureia; First World War.

INTRODUCTION

Nine days after the declaration of the First World War on 4 August 1914, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) urged all rugby players to join the Forces. All national, regional and club matches were suspended. Special matches, however, were arranged in aid of war funds. Barbarian Service sides, for example, played six matches for this purpose as well as for recruiting purposes. One of these matches between the Barbarians and the South African Forces was played on the Richmond Athletic Ground on Saturday, 20 November 1915 (Owen, 1955: 280). The proceeds were in aid of comforts for the colonial troops (Twickenham Rugby Museum).

As the RFU believed the game served a much more moral purpose than mere recreation (such as preparing young men to become future leaders of the British Empire), it wanted to do justice to the game within the defence forces. Initially the British army did not share the RFU’s sentiments, as soccer had been their sport, but judging by reports rugby did come into its own in the First World War. In so far as institutionalised rugby was suppressed during the war, it survived in military format. Already with the arrival of the first volunteers in the