

On faith, friendship and being good men

As the All Blacks chase Rugby World Cup glory, coach Steve Hansen has been keeping his superstars' feet on the ground. Gregor Paul reports from London that the old-school values are being embraced by a team keen to stay humble.

By Gregor Paul

All Blacks coach Steve Hansen will seek out Heyneke Meyer after the semifinal clash tomorrow and the respective coaches will have a beer and reflect on 80 minutes of physical carnage.



The closeness of their relationship has held its place among the background chatter in the build-up and the context could easily be misunderstood - to conclude that Hansen and Meyer have bonded as part of a historic rivalry between the two nations that is built on mutual respect.

That doesn't do justice, however, to the scale of change within the All Blacks since Hansen took over. Results have been hugely important, but he doesn't want them to be the sole mechanism by which his team is judged. Nearly as important is the manner in which his team conduct themselves.

Whatever the result tomorrow, the All Blacks won't rush to leave Twickenham. There is post-match protocol to observe and that is not just the media and drug-testing obligations.

The All Blacks post-match protocol looks just like it did 30 years ago, because Hansen has placed considerable importance on his team embracing what can only be called old-school values.

The stakes couldn't be higher, the pressure couldn't be greater but Hansen can't see why that should prevent rugby tradition from being observed.

The game was fostered on a spirit of fraternity and shared experience and to not observe that is to disrespect a core tenet of the game. The third half, as the French call it, has always been rugby's greatest point of difference.

If no one bothered to engage with the opposition; to put aside the past 80 minutes and realise that everyone involved is chasing the same dream and united by the same beliefs, how long before rugby would morph into football in regard to culture and attitudes?

How long before players would leave the ground with barely a nod and a handshake, jump into expensive sports cars, already having forgotten who they have played and still not certain they know the first name of all the players in their own team?

Hansen has made a stand to preserve the parts of rugby that make it the game it is. "One of the important things to me about rugby is enjoying it," he says. "When you are in such a big pressure cooker as the All Blacks, it can easily be lost.

"The first thing we had to acknowledge was to stop and enjoy each test. We do that sensibly but we acknowledge we have played another group of men who have tried to do what we have done. So we say, 'would you guys like to come in? [to our changing room]'.

"Not all teams accept that. Some do and South Africa are one that always comes in. When we are over there we go in. When I played, some of the best moments in rugby were with the guys who you have just gone 80 minutes with and you find out they are just like us. They are ordinary guys and you make lifelong friendships."

The extent to how the old-school culture pervades has been striking at this World Cup. The All Blacks, tournament favourites and loaded with superstars, have been impeccably professional on the field, proudly amateur in ethos off it.

Namibia were blown away to be invited into the All Blacks' changing room after their match at Olympic Park. Their players queued for the opportunity to be pictured with Richie McCaw and Dan Carter and didn't want to leave.

It was a massive gesture by the All Blacks - few champion teams would extend that sort of invitation and engage for so long and readily with any opponent.

The Georgians weren't so different when their invitation came - arriving with kit to hopefully swap and cellphones poised. They had been expecting ferocity on the field and had no idea they would encounter such warmth and camaraderie off it.



After the match in Newcastle, the Tongan team dropped to their knees in a circle to pray. Jerome Kaino, Waisake Naholo and Liam Messam came over, space was made in the group and they bowed their heads as part of the huddle. A few minutes later, and many of the All Blacks players, most notably Sonny Bill Williams, had scooped up some of the Tongan players' kids who had come on to the field. Williams stood and chatted with the opposition, his arms laden with various children, while other family members of the Tongan players took pictures.

The All Blacks were aware that it was Tonga's final game of the competition and wanted to acknowledge their contribution to the tournament.

"I thought I would join them because faith is a huge part of our Island culture and, regardless of what you do on the field, once the whistle goes you are all friends and brothers and not just the Island teams," says Kaino about his decision to pray with the Tongans.



"It is the guys in the rugby circle. We get on quite well. I love being that kind of person and love the sort of person that plays hard - plays to win but off the field afterwards you are mates.

"That is one of the things I really like about Steve [Hansen] and the management, how they push being humble. You play to win, you play hard but afterwards you are humble. Sharing a beer or a moment with the opposition after is the best way to do it. I love that part of the game."

Professional rugby wasn't totally broken before Hansen became head coach but it was definitely missing some of its soul. In the amateur era, what happened after a test was often more enduring than what happened during it.

Legendary stories have arisen from that period: tales of an Englishman drinking a bottle of aftershave; an unfortunate night for the Calcutta Cup when it was "borrowed" by Dean Richards of England and John Jeffrey of Scotland and kicked through the streets of Edinburgh.



Post-match functions used to be grand, formal affairs - number ones; compulsory attendance and more often than not, a food fight between the respective players which was often the way to break the ice to begin the serious business of which team could neck the most beer. It didn't take long, though, to drift to the other extreme once the game turned professional. The infestation of sports scientists led to new thinking about post-match behaviour. Alcohol was suddenly the exception not the norm. The emphasis was on protein shakes, ice baths, rub-downs and off to bed. The fun disappeared. The formal dinners were binned and the third half was effectively cancelled.

There was an unseemly rush to begin focusing on the next game - to almost immediately forget the events of the night. Besides, the arrival of Super Rugby and the increased number of tests meant there was a growing familiarity between opponents. It was a false sense of knowledge though, as players only knew opponents' names - they had no real concept of who they really were or what they were all about. The concept of friendship was anathema.

The post-match protocol was reduced to a quick handshake and off. For the last part of the past decade things were worse because the All Blacks' schedule was dominated by tests against the Wallabies.

The relationship between the two was strained, awkward and, at times, plain awful. The Wallabies rejected an invitation to join the All Blacks in their changing room after a 2010 test in Christchurch. A few months later in Hong Kong they accepted - after they had won in the last minute and had aggressively and endlessly celebrated. The invitation hadn't been accepted so they could genuinely reflect on the test but seemed to be more about taking the opportunity to gloat. It was a powerful moment - confirming for Hansen that if he ever landed the top job, he would instil in his players the courage and depth of character to be the same person regardless of outcome.



"When you play really well and get beaten you have to accept it," he says. "You can't change it - it has happened, you have had your chance and you have to do that with the same humbleness that you do winning. We have got to respect the way we want to be respected ourselves and there is nothing worse than seeing a winner gloating or a team that loses sulking.

"It is okay to hurt but you don't have to be arrogant and I think rugby is a great game in teaching you some core values of being grateful and being humble.

"I don't think it is driven by being liked. It is driven by that's how we want to live. That's the identity we believe the legacy of the All Blacks has demanded from us. It is really important to us that we live that way - that identity and those values all the time."

The players have taken to this idea that good values are entwined with being a New Zealander. The All Blacks' culture is seen by the players as an extension of the system which they came through.

Being gracious and humble is not a contrived or specific All Blacks trait - it is an inherent part of what it means to be a Kiwi.

"I think as rugby players in New Zealand from under-5s up, players, parents, supporters, coaches instil it in you," says lock Sam Whitelock. "Those old-school things like making sure your gear is nice and tidy, you have got clean boots before a big game, you shake hands, you look opponents in the eye. That is crucial and I think this team is really good on a number of things.

"Steve has definitely increased that but there are a number of different people who have helped in different areas.

"After a game it is really good spending time with the opposition. The changing room is pretty sacred to both teams but it is awesome to play 80 minutes of hard rugby and then sit down, have a beer if you want, and have a yarn. Even if you are a little bit scratchy, you have got to treat people as you would like to be treated."

Hansen has not only been the architect of this old-school culture, he has lived by example. Meyer revealed last week that their friendship was sparked when he was taking his first defeat to the All Blacks about as hard as anyone could.

Hansen eventually found him that night, stuck a beer in his hand and talked it through. The relationship shifted to a new level last year at Ellis Park when South Africa won for the first time against the All Blacks in Meyer's tenure.

"I have been waiting for my beer," said Hansen, when Meyer found him and the All Blacks coach's graciousness in defeat confirmed to both men that their bond was genuine and built on a foundation of honesty and mutual respect.

Just because he was smiling, didn't mean Hansen wasn't hurting, but his example sent such a strong message to his players. It said that the twin imposters of triumph and defeat had to be treated the same and that the All Blacks' culture was always, not sometimes.

That may be tested in the most extreme way this weekend. It will be a devastating blow to whichever team doesn't make the final. There will be tears; there will be broken hearts and pain that will take months, if not years to rescind.

But if it is the All Blacks who lose, they will stand by the values they have adopted and the values that make them the team they have become.

"People find out a lot about you when you win, but I think they find out more when you lose," says Kaino. "In adversity when you are having a hard time, sometimes that is when people's real character comes out.

"You want to be the gracious loser and still share a beer with people. When other people have lost they find the time to come see you so you have to do the same.

" It is hard. You are competitive and you want to win all the time. You realise it is just a game and you come back to work on Monday and start the hard work all over again."