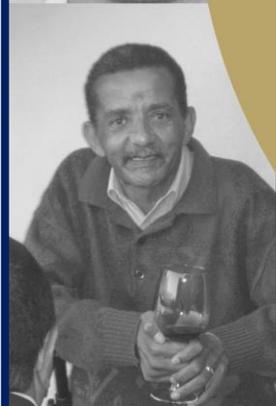


CHRIS BURGER
**PLAYERS
FUND**
PETRO JACKSON

40 YEARS
1980-2020
Rugby's Caring Hands

**COMMEMORATIVE
MEDIA CAMPAIGN**

WRITTEN BY
QUINTIN VAN JAARSVELD



BACKGROUND

2020 was meant to be one of commemoration and celebration, by recognising and applauding all those who have made a 40-year history a reality for the Players' Fund – Rugby's Caring Hands.

With the COVID-19 Pandemic restrictions, we decided to take some of our commemorative plans online. Quintin van Jaarsveld, recipient of the Players' Fund and award-winning journalist was recruited to write a series of articles about the Players' Fund in a 40th anniversary commemorative media campaign. The theme of each of the stories was to highlight the reason the Players' Fund exists and share stories from several significant Fund "personalities" that have all, in one way or another contributed to the strong and sustainable position that the Fund finds itself in today. It has been 40 years since Morné du Plessis and his Western Province Teammates chose to take the values of rugby off the field and turn a tragedy into a triumph and support seriously injured rugby players in South Africa.

Each week for eight weeks a story was written and distributed online and for our #SupportSquad's enjoyment. With special mention and thanks to Simon Borchardt from RugbyRocks and De Jongh Borchardt at SA Rugby for their tremendous support, making sure that the rugby community at large were aware of the campaign, as they diligently shared the articles through their platforms each week. The purpose of the campaign was also to document some of the key moment's and role players in the Players' Fund. This was done to entomb the journey of an organisation which has weathered the storm of time, that finds strength and direction from the recipients it partners with on their journeys following serious injury.

QUINTIN VAN JAARSVELD



Quintin van Jaarsveld is a former Media Development and Diversity Agency Sanlam South African Local Sports Journalist of the Year and three-time Vodacom KwaZulu-Natal ports Journalist of the Year.

Based in Shelly Beach on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast, he's the sports editor at eHowzit.co.za and is available for freelance work. He is also a recipient of the Fund, having sustained a spinal cord injury in a first team match while playing scrumhalf for Hoërskool Suid-Natal against Durban North College in 2000. Passionate and hardworking, Quintin has carved out a name for himself as a reputable sports journalist over the past 15 years.

Quintin proved to be a valuable partner in this initiative with fantastic journalism skills and rugby knowledge. Coupled with the fact that he is a recipient of the Fund and therefore had a vested interest in discovering and sharing some of the inner qualities of the Fund, which has been a pillar of support to him and his family for 20 years as well as to many others over the last 40 years.

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1.

TRAGEDY AND BROTHERHOOD

The birth of the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund

The depth of the brotherhood forged on the rugby field came to light following the tragic death of Western Province fullback Chris Burger during a Currie Cup match against Free State in Bloemfontein on August 30, 1980.

Surging back to collect a kick in the final moments of the match, Burger was caught in possession by two charging Free State forwards and a maul ensued. The 28-year-old suffered a broken neck during the play and passed away in hospital in the early hours of the following morning.

Burger's death sent shockwaves through South African rugby. However, it also brought forth change - meaningful and ever-evolving change - as the Western Province star's teammates founded the Chris Burger Players' Memorial Fund on September 9. Then Springbok and Western Province captain Morné du Plessis played a leading role in the creation of the fund and its legacy, serving as Chairman for 38 years.

"It was a tragic day," recalled Du Plessis. "When you know something is serious, you don't have to be told, but Chris was still conscious when I arrived at the hospital. When we started talking, he spoke about the play and said he hoped he didn't let the team down and I said, 'Don't worry about that.'

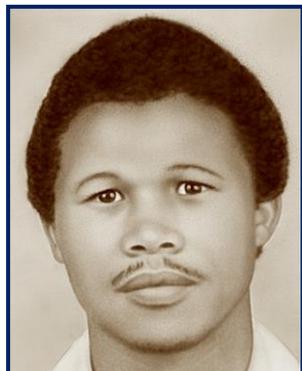
"Then he said, 'Please look after my family and ask the guys to see that they're okay.' Even then, being a young man, I still didn't fully realise the gravity of the situation and two hours later, he passed. We were absolutely devastated.

"That last conversation spurred us on to do something and it was also a trigger to question things that weren't in place. Those weren't popular topics but it was the reality and fortunately, over the years, everyone understood that it's rugby's responsibility to support players and do whatever possible to prevent serious injuries."



Chris Burger & Morné du Plessis in 1980

Du Plessis said of his former teammate, “Chris was a very fun and jovial guy and extremely well-liked in the team. He was very fast and versatile; he had the skill to play flyhalf through to fullback, but his preferred position was No.15. He was an attacking fullback, which is probably why he decided to come to Villagers [from Police] and made him a valuable asset to the club and Western Province.”



Petro Jackson

Seven years after Burger’s accident, the same forlorn fate befell Petro Jackson. Playing on the wing for hosts Kylemore against Excelsior in a zone competition game on April 11, 1987, Jackson was tackled near the touchline.

The momentum of the tackle carried the diminutive dynamo over a gravel path that ran alongside the field and into an asbestos barrier. A passionate and popular player among his teammates, “Spekkie”, as he was affectionately known, passed away before the arrival of the ambulance.

The 23-year-old’s death prompted the South African Rugby Union to establish the Petro Jackson Memorial Fund, which was spearheaded by Dr. Ismail Jakoet. As Chairman of the respective funds, Du Plessis and “Doc” drove the merger in 1992 following the unification of the South African Rugby Board and South African Rugby Union. The amalgamation, according to Jakoet, was integral not only to the Players’ Fund’s continuing existence, but also, its evolution.

“The Chris Burger Fund looked after their players, however, it was not representative of the SA Rugby Board at the time, whereas the Petro Jackson Fund formed part of SARU but didn’t have the infrastructure to provide the same level of support to its players, with the one and only recipient of the fund being Ian Jacobs from Kimberly, who was injured on July 15, 1989.

“If we wanted to make strides, it was imperative for the fund to become part of South African rugby. The merger meant that we now had one fund to assist ALL injured players - and - very significantly, that it was accommodated by the new board.



Dr. Ismail Jakoet

“That established the fact that the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players’ Fund should be the baby of South African rugby, and that’s what it ultimately became. Sponsorships drastically improved from there and the relationship between the fund and South African rugby grew from strength to strength,” said Jakoet.

Jakoet, a legendary South African rugby administrator, was the Players’ Fund’s other great pillar for 36 years, contributing in a multitude of manners including as a Trustee, Assistance Committee member, Executive and as a driving force behind the world-renowned BokSmart national rugby safety programme.

Over the past four decades, the Players' Fund has aided over 500 fallen heroes and currently assists 107 recipients who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries on the rugby field.

"I'm incredibly proud to be part of the history of the Fund and it's wonderful to see what it has become," said Jakoet. "From not having an office when Morné and I started," he laughed, "to it still going strong all these years later, not just in terms of supporting injured players but, crucially, also establishing BokSmart, which is now widely recognised as one of the best rugby safety and injury prevention programmes in the world, is simply wonderful."

The fund's history from 1980-2010 is chronicled in the book Samaritan of South African Rugby, which is still available from the Players' Fund office.

2.

BOK KINSHIP & TACKLING INJURIES

The Players' Fund's Green and Gold connection

Green and Gold blood runs through Rugby's Caring Hands' veins.

A kinship exists between SA Rugby and the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund, who supports players who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries.



Rugby's roots run deep, and the ties that bind are set in stone with the Fund being the official charity of SA Rugby.

Jurie Roux, the current SA Rugby CEO, served on the board of the Fund from 2011 to 2016, during which time he gained a greater understanding of the life-saving and wide-ranging workings of the organisation, and has been a driving force behind the national body's continued support of the cause ever since.

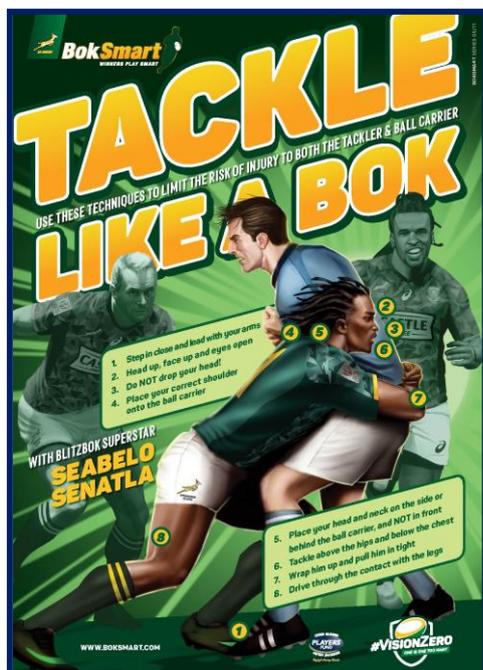
"Rugby is more than what happens on the field - it's a game where family values and camaraderie are strong. That means also assisting those in need, which is why SA Rugby's support is vitally important, and it was a great driver to ensure the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund became our official charity a few years ago."

SA Rugby provides a substantial grant that constitutes 50% of the Fund's annual budget, however, its support stretches across all areas, with the Springboks themselves playing a pivotal role in raising money and awareness by sporting the Fund's logo on their shorts, attending the annual banquet and visiting injured players.

Roux said SA Rugby is proud of the partnership and praised the impact made by the Fund, saying it's become a cornerstone for rugby in the country as it's aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years and currently assists 107 recipients.

"The hard work being put in by the Players' Fund's Board of Trustees is not often seen, but it makes a great difference in the lives of many people associated with our great sport. From SA Rugby's side, we are eternally grateful for the wonderful work done by the Players' Fund for the last 40 years, and we wish them nothing but success going forward."

The Fund will receive further support and a roaring endorsement as the official charity of next year's much-anticipated British & Irish Lions tour. The last time the Home Nations' elite came to South African shores, coincidentally, the Springboks enjoyed a banner year. The men in Green and Gold clinched the 2009 series 2-1 and defeated the All Blacks on three occasions en route to winning their third Tri-Nations title.



Even more significantly in the bigger scheme of things, SA Rugby, in conjunction with the Fund, launched the BokSmart national rugby safety programme in 2009. This came after the number of seriously injured players had reached record highs (18 in both 2005 and 2006 and 21 in 2007).

“That period of chaos made it clear that a programme was needed to reduce the unacceptably high number of serious injuries, if not eliminate them altogether,” said SA Rugby Senior Medical Manager, Clint Readhead, who’s been involved with BokSmart since its inception.

Developed and headed by SA Rugby Senior Manager for Rugby Safety, Dr. Wayne Viljoen, the programme comprises three elements - a compulsory workshop for coaches and referees at all levels, a medic programme and a SpineLine operated by ER24, which fast tracks the treatment, medical management and transportation of a player with suspected serious injuries.

SA Rugby’s dedicated research department plays a pivotal role in the continuous improvement and updating of the programme, added Readhead, who’s also a member of the Fund’s Board of Trustees.

“We do intensive research, which underpins our strategies on injury prevention and safety, and enables us to identify injury trends. This information is then used to tailor-make the next phase of the BokSmart programme, of which we’re now at phase five, and this requires coaches and referees to recertify every two years as per SA Rugby regulations.”



Clint Readhead

Readhead, who was the physiotherapist of the 2007 World Cup-winning Springbok squad, said BokSmart also boasts a ground-breaking element.

“Something that’s unique to South Africa is that we’ve introduced a random audit system whereby an auditor assigned by a respective union attends a schoolboy, club or even a provincial match and monitors whether all the BokSmart safety standards and requirements are adhered to. This is another aspect that’s bearing fruit.”

BokSmart has proved to be a game-changer and statistics underline why it's widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive rugby safety programmes in the world.

"In school's rugby, there's been a 63% decrease in acute spinal cord injuries, which is massive and something we're very proud of. Schoolboy rugby is the safest it's ever been and that's a great message that we're able to give parents," said Readhead.

"From a club rugby perspective, there's been a decrease of 52% in permanent catastrophic injuries, which is also very encouraging. Both are well ahead of expectations, but we can't and won't rest on our laurels.

"We are driven by #VisionZero - a belief that one catastrophic injury is one too many. Some might say that avoiding serious injuries altogether is an unattainable goal, but by trying to reach that goal, we'll ensure that we leave no stone unturned to look after the health and safety of the players."



The 2014 Springbok Squad and five recipients at the annual fundraising banquet at Montecasino

3.

IMPACT PLAYERS

From Springboks to Players' Fund Trustees

Stars who have donned the Green and Gold are part of the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund's DNA.

Springboks have been at the very core of the charity since its inception, with then-South African captain Morné du Plessis having launched the Fund in honour of his Western Province teammate Chris Burger, who'd sustained a fatal neck injury during a Currie Cup match in 1980.

A Springbok thread forms the spine of the Fund - such has been the consistent contributions of former players to the organisation's legacy. Known as Rugby's Caring Hands, the Fund has aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years and currently assists 107 recipients who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries.

Currently, eight of the 14 Trustees making up the board are ex-Springboks. As the Fund nears its 40th anniversary on September 9, Du Plessis remains a pillar and is one of four former captains on the board. He's joined by Jean de Villiers, who succeeded Du Plessis as Chairman in 2018, scrumming down between them, appropriately, is John Smit, with Tiaan Strauss being the fourth.

Hanyani Shimange serves as Deputy Chairman and sits alongside long-serving Trustees FC Smit, Jowa Abrahams and Wayne Fyvie, each bringing with them - like they did in their playing days - individual strengths on top of a shared passion. HO de Villiers, Peter Whipp and 1995 World Cup-winning duo Joel Stransky and Chester Williams are the other former Springboks who sat on the board in the past.

"Having an ex-rugby contingent as part of the board, I believe, gives us a rounded view of how to approach the various challenges and tasks the Fund faces to continue to raise funds and help injured players," said Smit, who led the Springboks to a second World Cup crown in 2007.

Smit, who captained South Africa a record 83 times and played 111 Tests, has been involved with the Fund for the past 20 years. "My introduction to the Players' Fund was when I first made the Springbok squad in 2000. We still did the telethons back then. Everyone was calling in to speak to the likes of Joost van der Westhuizen, Bobby Skinstad and Rassie Erasmus, so I mostly had to explain who I was and that those guys were busy on the other lines," he quipped.

The telethons turned into banquets which the Springboks, and often their opponents of that given weekend, attend annually. The Fund's marquee fundraiser is not only a highlight for the charity and the recipients in attendance, but the Springbok stars themselves, said Smit.

"As the official charity of SA Rugby, the Fund becomes part and parcel of your life as a Springbok. Every rugby player knows the risks involved when they run on to the field and when the opportunity comes to help those who've unfortunately had accidents, you jump on it.

"The Springboks, as a collective, don't do many functions; not even the title sponsor gets that type of exposure, but the Players' Fund banquet isn't just any function. As captain, it was the easiest function to motivate guys for because nothing needed to be said. The players were eager to do their bit for the cause and the evenings were always highly enjoyable."



Wayne Fyvie, Gail Baerecke and John Smit

The Springbok and Sharks legend had a serious injury scare himself during a Super Rugby match against the Bulls in Pretoria in 2010. "My neck got jammed in a scrum and I immediately knew that there was something wrong. Fortunately, all it did was cause an impingement on my spine, but that did lead to a lack of power and intense pain over the following months.

"I ended up having surgery - to fuse the C5 and C6 vertebrae - and had the best possible outcome. It hit me, when I woke up, how fortunate I was! I wish it always works out like that, but not having an organisation like the Fund would make a very difficult situation even tougher."

Smit cemented his role within Rugby's Caring Hands when he joined the Board of Trustees in 2013. "I'd just come back to South Africa after finishing my career at Saracens. I received a call from Morné asking me to come on board as a Trustee and I gladly accepted."

Through his experiences as both a player and a Trustee, Smit said he has the utmost respect for the recipients. “Every time I meet a recipient, I’m in awe of their bravery and positivity. One never knows how you’ll respond to such a challenge until it happens and I haven’t met a single recipient who’s bitter, which speaks to their incredible character and love for the game.”



John with recipient Lifa Hlongwa

Smit said he’s learned that every case is unique, even if players sustained the same level of spinal cord injury. “Every single recipient has individual needs that are different from the last. Their challenges all differ from one to the other and this is where [Fund General Manager] Gail [Baerecke] and the ladies on the ground do a fantastic job of going out and understanding the mobility requirements at a recipient’s home for example.”

Like Smit, Fyvie represented the Springboks (making his third and final Test appearance in the 44-21 win over Argentina in Buenos Aires in 1996) and captained the Sharks. He retired in 2001 and has been involved with the Fund ever since.

“I was really fortunate to get a lot out of rugby and I wanted to give back to the game,” he explained. “I attended the Fund’s banquet in 2001 and that’s when I realised that the Fund was going to be how I was going to do that. My purpose has always been to add value to people; the wonderful work that the Fund does aligns with who I am in my DNA, so I had to get involved.”

Fyvie first assisted through his business, greenOFFICE. “The market has drastically changed, but at that stage, we had the ability to collect empty ink and laser cartridges and turn that into an opportunity for guys to create an income. They would oversee collection in their communities and we’d then buy the empty cartridges from them and remanufacture them.

“In that way, we empowered recipients on top of helping them where we can. Through that, we also established greenABLE, which incubates, educates and empowers previously unemployed disabled individuals and through this non-profit organisation, we’re creating between 30 and 50 jobs per year.”

Fyvie entrenched himself in the Fund when he became its KwaZulu-Natal representative in 2005 and he’s been on the Board of Trustees since 2009. The former flank says his commitment to the cause has been flamed that much more by the friendships he’s forged.

“Catastrophic injuries are very unfortunate and through BokSmart, the Fund and SA Rugby are doing everything possible to avoid another serious injury. I was fortunate in that I had my fair share of injuries but nothing major, but where I’ve been even more fortunate is being lucky enough to have met many of the injured players, all of whom remain passionate about the game, and forming a bond with them.



“I got really close with Pierre Lamont and his family in particular. Pierre passed away three years ago, but he was an amazing guy with a great sense of humour and added a lot of value to my life. To be on this tough journey with injured players and to see how they grow as people is incredibly humbling and special.”

Jean de Villiers with Pierre

Lamont - 2014

4.

BIG TREES OF THE BOARDROOM

A decorated and diverse group of boardroom personalities form part of the legacy of the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund.

Former Springbok eighth man Yusuf "Jowa" Abrahams personifies the past, present, passion and pedigree of those who power Rugby's Caring Hands.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary on September 9, the official charity of SA Rugby currently assists 107 recipients who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries and has aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years.



Jowa Abrahams

Abrahams, who represented the non-racial South African Rugby Union (SARU) team in 1968, is as much of a Fund legend as he is of the game itself - as a player, the Life President of Primrose Rugby Club and a life member of Western Province Rugby, having served the union as an Executive and board member for over a decade.

"When the Chris Burger Fund and Petro Jackson Fund amalgamated in 1992, SARU nominated Peter Jooste and me as former SARU players to serve on the board and I'm proud to still be involved 28 years on," he said.

At 77, Abrahams is one of the elder statesmen of the Fund and remains a pillar of strength as a Trustee, Executive and a member of the Assistance Committee. "It's an honour and privilege to be able to play a part in seeing to the welfare of those who are unfortunate to be seriously injured on the rugby field."



HO de Villiers

Abrahams added, "If you look at the history of the Fund, Petro Jackson came from an impoverished family in Kylemore. When he, as a breadwinner, passed away on the field in 1987, the Fund was able to assist his family to build a small cottage. That's the type of support the Fund has been able to provide in addition to wheelchairs and medical equipment over the years."

Big trees on the Fund's Board of Trustees have fallen over the years. Mike Meintjes, Tubby Teubes, Dr. Francois Majoos, Judge Pat Tebbutt and 1995 World Cup-winning Springbok wing Chester Williams passed, and are sorely missed, while the likes of HO de Villiers, Dr. Ismail Jakoet, George Rautenbach and Norman Mbiko made way for new blood.

Paying tribute to the Fund's late legends, Abrahams said, "We were all brought together by a deep love of the game and we became close. Mike was a fantastic field worker if I can put it that way. He played a pivotal role in assisting [then-General Manager] Lynn Allen and then [current General Manager] Gail Baerecke to visit injured players and establish relationships with them.

"Tubby and HO were consultants at Old Mutual and besides being involved with fundraising and other activities, they saw to it that the Fund made the most of the funds raised. Francois was always a dedicated Trustee, from his days [as part of the medical staff] at Tygerberg and SARU to his time at Western Province and the Stormers.

"Judge Pat was over 90 and still served on the board; he was just a fantastic person. Chester was still very involved with rugby, coaching at the University of the Western Cape, but he also made a valuable contribution to the Fund and it was fantastic to have him on the board."

Whereas the Springboks have alignment and training camps to regain synergy and fine-tune their game plan, the Fund has quarterly board meetings to ensure its continued success.

"Our main order of business at these meetings is the injured players - that's who we're there for. We are provided with and evaluate the finances - the amount of funds raised and how it was or should be used to support the players.



Mike Meintjies, Pat Tebbutt, Chester Williams, Tubby Teubes and Dr. Francois Majoos

"We do an overview of the number of recipients and how they're doing, and focus on any new cases of seriously injured players and assess how we responded to them, not only in

terms of providing financial assistance, which is one thing, but also on a personal level, which is vitally important.

“Meeting with the players and their families, firstly, and then building those personal relationships by keeping in close communication with them is a big part of what puts the care in Rugby’s Caring Hands.”

Abrahams spoke with awe about his interactions with recipients. “I visited a number of injured players at Conradie and later Lentegeur Hospital and have been fortunate to meet a number of remarkable people, who’ve risen above their challenges and disadvantages.”

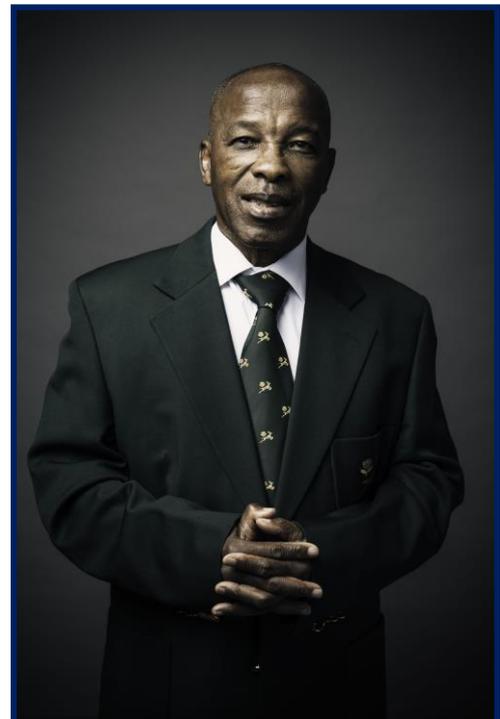
A case close to home and heart for Abrahams is that of Primrose youth player, Yusuf Price. One of the Fund’s great success stories, Price is able to walk after initially using a wheelchair and has carved out a wonderful career for himself.

“We had a large group of youth and Yusuf was playing in the Under-16 team when he was injured in 2001. I wasn’t at the field on the day, but I was called and told of his unfortunate accident,” recalled Abrahams.

“Had it not been for the intervention of the Fund, the availability of the SpineLine number and the fact that ambulances had been placed on call, his condition could’ve been far worse. Instead, he now works as a qualified biokineticist at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa.”



Frikkie, Morné and George Rautenbach receiving Protea artwork created by recipients of the Players’ Fund



Norman Mbiko

5.

GAIL FORCE

The Players' Fund's MVP



General Manager Gail Baerecke has been the key driving force of the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund for the past 15 years.

When Lynn Allen, a great servant of the Fund in her own right, ended her watch in 2005, Baerecke emerged as a Godsend.

Gail visiting a recipient at Groot Schuur Hospital

Both an experienced nurse and private hospital client service manager, Baerecke boasted the perfect blend of medical background, understanding of hospital work as well as managerial skills to take over the reins. Over the past decade-and-a-half, she's been the beating heart of the organisation. An unwavering workhorse, she's the Fund's most valuable player.

Baerecke's the Pieter-Steph du Toit of the Fund - a tireless Terminator who pours her heart and soul into supporting seriously injured players and their families on their life-changing journeys with genuine care.

The passion that poured out of Du Toit after his career-defining performance in the Springboks' famous 36-34 win over the All Blacks in Wellington in 2018 is the same passion Baerecke brings to the table on a daily basis.

"This is much more than a job, it's a passion and encompasses everything in life," said Baerecke.

"I realised very quickly that we [the Fund] are family to the recipients, by virtue of them not always having family or due to a lack of resources. We care about them and that care extends beyond the recipients - it's a concern, a passion, an understanding and an empathy toward the circumstances that a family finds themselves in - we see them as a unit."

She said of serving as General Manager, "It's the greatest privilege of my career, if not my life. The recipients have been my biggest life teachers; they've taught me humility, how to face and overcome adversity, and how to be grateful every day for what I do have and not so concerned with what I don't have. They're incredibly inspirational."

The official charity of SA Rugby, the Fund has aided over 500 players who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries on the field as it approaches its 40th anniversary on September 9.

Baerecke insists much of the credit for the Fund's success and sustainability should go to the Green and Gold-tinted Board of Trustees. Currently, eight of the 14 Trustees are former Springboks - Chairman Jean de Villiers, founder and former long-serving Chairman Morné du Plessis, Deputy Chairman Hanyani Shimange, John Smit, Tiaan Strauss, Wayne Fyvie, FC Smit and Jowa Abrahams. Chester Williams also served prior to his untimely death nearly a year ago.



AGM Luncheon – August 2018

“The value of the Fund is the intellectual property we have on the Board. [Marketing Manager] Tori [Gardner] and [General and Financial Administrator] Aashia [Hendricks] and I are the worker bees, but the guidance and expertise from a philanthropic, networking and business perspective come from our Trustees and who they are...we would never manage without them.

“They keep on saying they'd never manage without us, but it goes both ways. It's a match made in heaven. They are incredible men and women, who give of their time freely and make things happen. They have leveraging powers that surpass most businesses because they're respected former Springboks, respected businessmen and most of all, respected good people.”

Rugby's Caring Hands currently assists 107 recipients. “Our recipients cover the full spectrum of our demographic - from highly educated and resourced with access to support to those who are less fortunate and we have to ensure that everyone gets the same level of care. Everyone has different needs, so we look at everyone personally and provide support based on their individual needs,” said Baerecke.

That support starts from day one and includes helping injured players and their families understand the situation they find themselves in and the road ahead. “There's a lot of teaching and learning that needs to be done. Spinal cord injuries are complex and affect many different organs and systems in the body, so it's important to have an understanding of

that - what must and mustn't be done daily - and then for recipients to take responsibility for their own health to ensure, for example, that they don't develop pressure sores."

The support of the Fund is ever-evolving and, in recent years, there's been a particular focus on empowering recipients. "The Fund has always been there to provide mobility equipment and that will continue, but we now partner with our recipients to empower them using the slogan #fromthechair2where.

"Yes, their lives have unfortunately drastically changed, but it's not over or necessarily shortened. We urge recipients to think about and work toward new goals, be it finishing school, pursuing tertiary education or a new line of work. In doing so, they realise that they're still valuable assets and contributing members of their communities."

Knowledge and prevention are pivotal pillars of the medical field and to this end, Baerecke doubles as the Serious Injury Case Manager for BokSmart, the national rugby safety programme established by the Fund and SA Rugby in 2009.

"In the unfortunate event of a serious head, neck or spine injury, I receive the BokSmart Serious Injury Report and follow-up with the patient, family and school or club," she explained.

"We look at, in great detail, all aspects of the injury - how it happened, in the player's own words and in what phase of play, when it happened - in the first or second half, the start, middle or latter part of the season and how the referee and medics handled the situation.

"We then identify the high-risk trends and flesh them out when we roll out the new phase of BokSmart every two years. For many years, there were an unacceptable number of scrum injuries, up to six one year, which prompted BokSmart to change the scrum laws prior to World Rugby adopting them, so South Africa drove the change to the scrum laws as they are today and as a result we've seen a huge reduction in the number of scrum injuries."



2019 Rugby Safety & Player Welfare Conference - Australia

In addition, the Fund spearheaded groundbreaking international collaboration with similar organisations in countries including New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, England and Japan by conceptualising a bi-annual International Rugby Safety and Player Welfare Conference. New Zealand hosted the inaugural conference in 2015, South Africa hosted the second, while Australia hosted the 2019 edition.

"The International Rugby Safety and Player Welfare Conference is extremely important as travel is part of the game - from the highest level down to school tours.

Injuries can occur to our players abroad and vice versa, so it's crucial that we're connected and work together so that, should such a case unfortunately arise, the player receives the right care and ultimately returns home safely.

"The other primary purpose of this conference is to learn from one another; we've learned an enormous amount of valuable information from other countries and so have they from us. They're very complimentary of us and say the work we do in a third world country inspires them to continue to develop, which is a big feather in our cap," remarked Baerecke.

What's more, the Fund in 2016 partnered with Marelise Badenhorst, a physiotherapist and PhD student at the University of Cape Town, to conduct a first-of-its-kind quality of life study - an in-depth investigation of the consequences of catastrophic injuries suffered by South African rugby players.

"The most important requirement of the study was for the interviews to be conducted face-to-face, because of the varying backgrounds and circumstances of the recipients, to obtain the most accurate information possible, so we travelled across the country," explained Baerecke.

"The study was a real eye-opener. We gained a greater degree of insight into the challenges our recipients face - difficulties gaining employment due to inaccessibility and/or the fact that they're disabled, a lack of transport and what was important to them.

"It highlighted just how important it is to stay close to the affected family, especially immediately after the injury; to provide emotional and psychosocial support during those first few weeks are so critical and appreciated.

"We also analysed the field-side care and established that the majority of the players knew that they were paralysed and that's important because that's life or death-type of information for paramedics to see that they stabilise the neck and spine and immediately transport the player to the right hospital.

"We gained significant scientific-based data and information that we can use to leverage change and continue to evolve," concluded Baerecke.

6.

SORROW TO SUCCESS

Players' Fund recipients rise above adversity

The Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund is an organisation that doesn't want new 'members,' for 'members' all suffered the misfortune of sustaining catastrophic head, neck or spinal injuries on the rugby field.

In one tragic moment, the lives of an unfortunate player and his family are forever altered, their world turned upside down. Known as Rugby's Caring Hands, the Fund enters the fold to support them in their time of heartache and panic, and remains a constant companion on their life journey, offering wide-ranging support.



The official charity of SA Rugby has aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years and currently assists 107 recipients. Ahead of the Fund's 40th anniversary on September 9, three recipients from different walks of life shared their stories.

LEFT: Morné with recipients Juan Dreyer, Dyllan Benneckhe, Quintin van Jaarsveld & Dan Lombard at 2016 Play the Bounce Dinner

May 2, 1984 was the ill-fated day of George Visser's injury. He was 21 and playing hooker for the Kanniedood residence at Rand Afrikaans University, now known as the University of Johannesburg.

"Hostel rugby was quite hostile back then," said Visser. "We had a lineout five metres from the opposition's tryline; I threw in and we set-up a driving maul. I joined in to rip and recycle the ball from the lock when the referee blew the whistle.

"With the whistle having gone, I relaxed and then, suddenly, a teammate of mine barged in and crashed into me from beyond. My head was still on the lock's chest and stomach area and I just heard my neck snap twice and I immediately fell to the ground.

"I've had a lot of luck with the bad luck, I must say. I suffered a dislocation of my C4/5 vertebrae, and an incomplete injury of the spinal cord, so I still have some sensation, on the left side more than the right. I'm more of a paraplegic than a quadriplegic.



Gail & George

“I was very weak in the beginning; I couldn’t even lift up my arms the first few months and when the physiotherapist and nurses tried to sit me up in the wheelchair, I would pass out.

“Fortunately, with a lot of physiotherapy and exercising, I was eventually able to push myself in the chair and transfer in and out of the bed and car later on.”

Speaking of cars, Hartenbos-based Visser added, “We bought the first co-driver, a mechanism that allows you to manoeuvre the accelerator and brake with one lever from Neville Cohen from Chairman Industries, which my dad fitted for me. At that time, I’d never heard of or seen someone in a wheelchair capable of driving a vehicle, so that was very empowering.”

Visser said his strong support system shaped his future as a functioning and contributing member of society, from obtaining a BA degree through Unisa to working in the SANDF and private sector, to his current position as financial manager at the Marius van Coller Group of Companies, to getting married and becoming a father.

“My parents stood by me tremendously - my dad was actually there that evening when it happened. Their support is what saved me and, looking back, what made my future so much easier, and I now have a beautiful daughter, who’s in Grade 10.”

The 57-year-old has high praise for the Fund, saying, “The Fund assisted me with the purchase of a hoist and every year, we as the recipients receive a Christmas ‘bonus’, which is great.

“Again, I’m very fortunate that I’m not as dependent on the Fund as some of the other guys. I see what some of the recipients go through - some of them really battle - and the Fund does a fantastic job to assist them.

“Thank you to all those who’ve made this long history of the Fund possible. I’m sure I speak on behalf of all recipients and their families by saying we’re so grateful for the support we’ve been receiving.

“For being there when it matters and making us feel welcome in the family. God bless the founders, the staff and the donors.”

On May 20, 1990, six years after Visser’s injury, the same forlorn fate befell 18-year-old Amos Mzimeli in Mooiplaas in the Eastern Cape.

“I was still in school at the time, playing for the school and my local club. I was playing flank and captained Moonlight Rugby Club’s first team that day,” said Mzimeli.

“I was carrying the ball and as I was about to take contact, I lost my balance because of the bad ground we were playing on. My opponent and I ended up having a head-to-head collision and I broke my neck [C5 vertebra].”

He said the support of the Fund was particularly crucial in the early, most difficult days. “I went into a deep depression after the injury. It hit me that I would never walk or be able to use my hands again and I felt like my life was over. The Fund’s helped me in many ways - they helped me out of that dark period and helped put some food on the table during that time.”

Having made an all-important mental shift, Mzimeli completed his schooling and earned a diploma in computer literacy. In 2000, he tied the knot and has three children, including a set of twins.

Fully embracing life, he became a shining light in Soto village, situated near Haga Haga in the Eastern Cape, by project-managing the concept and building of the Great Kei Disability Multipurpose Centre with the help of Lottery funding.



Amos in his office at the Great Kei Disability Multipurpose Centre

“Because of what I went through, I decided to do something for others with disabilities,” he explained. “In doing research, I went from village to village and it was shocking to find out that most people with disabilities were either physically, emotionally or sexually abused, as well as neglected.

“In many cases, the government grants the disabled person received were being spent by other family members, while many parents didn’t bother trying to educate their children...they believe disabled people are useless.

“Instead of wheelchairs, some were being pushed in wheelbarrows and others were being carried on a mattress. It was terrible to discover these things. With the support of partners and sponsors, we were able to purchase 15 wheelchairs, including four electric ones.”

The centre opened in 2014 and continues to go from strength to strength with Mzimeli as the key figure. “We started with 24 beneficiaries and we now have 129. The local municipality has built us a beautiful facility with an office, classes, hall and kitchen.

“We offer learnership programmes and we have programmes that employ people with disabilities. We have dozens of graduates every year and had 24 last year.”

The community pillar was invited by the Japan International Cooperation Agency to attend its world-class workshops in Japan and Thailand last year, which he described as an opportunity of a lifetime.



Amos in Japan - 2019

“Representing South Africa as one of nine countries was an honour for me and it was a great experience. I learned a great deal about independent living,” said a proud and grateful Mzimeli.

The 48-year-old’s wonderful work hasn’t gone unnoticed. He’s earned a number of accolades, including a Local Hero award from the Daily Dispatch in 2019 and a service excellence award earlier this year. “The awards I’ve received are wonderful. I love the work that I do...it’s extremely rewarding.”

Mzimeli insists he wouldn’t be where he is today without the Fund. “The Fund plays a huge role in my life. If they weren’t part of my life, I would probably have passed away years ago.

“It’s so comforting to know you have their support and that support goes a long way to help you make something of your life.

“They’ve supplied me with electric wheelchairs and assist me when it needs to be serviced. They’ve become family; Gail is like my mother...she’s always there when I need her.”

Aubrey Saal is an example of where not all recipients are fortunate enough to be taken care of at home on a long-term basis and where there are few opportunities in small rural towns for those living with a disability.

The most recent of the three cases, Saal suffered a broken neck on August 8, 2010, moments before the 23-year-old Desert Daisies hooker was set to run out in a crunch clash in Springbok in the Northern Cape.

“We were warming up for the second division final. The first scrum drill went fine, but we engaged too quickly for the second. Our heads collided and I just collapsed. I was conscious, but I couldn’t move a muscle,” recalled Saal. He had broken his C4 vertebra.

“Paramedics put me on a trauma board and I was taken to Springbok Hospital by ambulance. They did the x-ray and told me I needed an operation, but they couldn’t fly me to Kimberley [some 800km away] because of bad weather.

“The following morning, we still couldn’t fly so at noon, they decided to drive me to Upington and from Upington airport, they flew me to Kimberley Hospital where I arrived at about 7pm.

“When my aunt arrived the next day, the doctors told her I was in ICU and that my lung had collapsed. Through all this and being in ICU, I had also developed a bedsore, which ultimately left me bedridden for three years.”

Saal said the Fund was instrumental in turning his fortunes around. “The Fund and the hospital arranged for me to be transported to the Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre to treat the bedsore.

“Early on, we didn’t know how we were going to cope, me personally and my people - they didn’t know how they were going to take care of me. The Fund helped us through that; they gave us perspective, and they gave us hope.

“They helped me with upgrades to the home to make it accessible - they built a ramp and revamped my room with an accessible bathroom. They’ve assisted me with wheelchairs and they continue to help me with accommodation, medical supplies and wheelchair repairs.”

Back at his aunt’s residence in Concordia, Springbok, he found motivation and courage to pursue a life worth living. “I was at home for about a year-and-a-half and one day I decided that I don’t want to just sit at home and achieve nothing.

“There’s not much wheelchair accessibility or employment opportunities there, so I asked the Fund if they could help me with accommodation so I could look for opportunities.”

In 2016, he moved into the Eric Miles Cheshire Home in Milnerton, where a whole new world opened up to him. “It’s wonderful to live here! You have nurses to assist you, but you also have privacy. Milnerton is the centre point of Cape Town, where accessibility is so much better - we even have disabled transport - and there are a lot more opportunities.



Aubrey at his graduation
with Gail

“Not even a month after I moved here, I received a Learnership from Engen and I’ve been studying through DYNA Training ever since.” The 33-year-old is currently studying Level 5 Generic Management.

“I’ve really enjoyed my studies and I’m very grateful for the opportunity and for everything the Fund’s done for me,” said Saal.

7.

GAME-CHANGING GARDNER

The Players' Fund's playmaker

Every team needs a playmaker, and Tori Gardner fills that role for Rugby's Caring Hands.

Just like a scrumhalf is the link between the forwards and backs, Marketing Manager Gardner is the glue between the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund Board of Trustees, sponsors and recipients.

The official charity of SA Rugby, which celebrates its 40th anniversary on September 9, has aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years and currently assists 107 recipients who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries on the field.

Gardner brings the creativity and vision of a world-class playmaker like Springbok No.9 Faf de Klerk to the Fund. She ensures the (fundraising) game is played in the right areas of the field with tactical nous and sound decision-making.

"I've always been a very sporty person and understanding that these rugby players once ran onto the field with youth and exuberance that was taken away so quickly, really struck a chord," she said of joining the Fund in 2014.



Tori visiting recipients (Siko & Vuyo) with a film crew in PE in 2017

Like rugby has evolved over the years, so, too, has marketing and fundraising. The posts have shifted from traditional print to the digital realm, where Gardner has taken the Fund into

the future with innovative ideas and consistently engaging communication through all available platforms.

Primary to Gardner’s plan was introducing a fresh, personal and powerful approach to raising funds and awareness.

“We take great pride in the strong communication strategy we’ve developed, which is highlighting the incredible stories our office has the privilege of getting to know with each of our recipients,” she said.

“We’ve taken it on as our responsibility to share their stories of strength, courage and resilience with not only our support squad but the public at large. The mind-set our recipients’ have of focusing on what they have rather than what they don’t have and the positive and powerful way they face their challenges transcends sport.

“Through social media, we’re able to share these inspirational stories to a wider audience and it’s been very well received. There is a deep appreciation for the impact that each story has on our audience, with many followers applauding our remarkable recipients and sharing how their stories have given them newfound perspective on their own lives.”

The campaign sees the Fund work hand-in-hand with recipients to ensure they are comfortable to share their stories and that they bring their individual messages of fortitude and rising above adversity into light.

To this end, the Canon SA-sponsored Project Hero video campaign, featuring five phenomenal recipients, proved extremely popular and profound.



Charles Oppelt – One of the Project Hero Stories

With a solid foundation, core values and intentional interactions, the Fund’s built strong and lasting relationships that stand them in good stead for the next 40 years.

“While being clear and concise, there’s always been a personal element to our communication with every sponsor, individual donor and recipient. We’ve taken the best elements out of the previous era, like letter writing, online to enhance and cement many relationships within the rugby community.

“We couldn’t do any of the work that has been achieved over the past 40 years without relationships, which are as strong as they are because of the values that have extended from the Board room to the office and into our everyday actions.

“We genuinely care about our recipients, their families and our partners; we’re approachable, accountable, dependable and transparent. With the strong foundations we have in our Board and in the office, we work together well as a team and that gives us stability, which is more important than ever in the Covid-19 era,” said Gardner.

“The rugby fraternity at large have been incredibly supportive. All 14 unions and organisations like MyPlayers, the SA Rugby Legends, The Sharks Former Players Association, The Barbarians and Barney’s Army see us as part of their teams and we know that when collaboration opportunities arise, that they’ll be there,” she added.

With its strong online presence and new communication strategy, there’s now greater awareness of the Fund than ever before.

“There’s a clearer understanding of what we do,” said Gardner. “When I came in, there were a lot of preconceptions that we only assist professional players when, in fact, our support spans all levels of the game and areas of the country.

“More people are now also aware that our support isn’t once-off. Recipients of the Fund become members of the family; we partner with them and their loved ones on their life journeys.

“It’s not just a case of supplying wheelchairs - we take a holistic approach. It’s understanding each individual’s level of injury and unique circumstances to improve their quality of life based on their individual needs, be it, for example, secondary rehabilitation or mobility in and out of their home.

“It’s about encouragement with every interaction, to motivate recipients to strive toward a goal, in rehabilitation, education or workwise. It’s about helping the family of the recipient as well, being there for them in their heartache and during the challenges of trying to support the player after their injury.”

Crucial to the sustainability of the Fund has been the support it receives from SA Rugby and the Springboks.

“Being the official charity of SA Rugby is a great honour, and the support of the Springboks has been key in our fundraising efforts over the years.

“From the old telethons on SuperSport to formal dinners and other special events like braais, none of the large-scale events we’ve held would’ve been possible without the Springboks’ personalised support for the Fund and the sponsors they attract.

“Being able to get the entire Springbok squad and management team into a room is a highly sought after ‘trump card’ that very few charities have - that ability to give back to the corporates and individuals who support us with exclusive access to our national heroes.

“What’s more, we’re in a fortunate position to be a public benefit as well as a non-profit organisation. In this day and age, when making donations it’s always nice for donors to receive a Section 18A Certificate for tax relief purposes.”

Gardner admits the Covid-19 crisis has created grave challenges but added that the Fund is rolling with the pandemic punches.

“From a fundraising perspective, it is a scary environment to be in, but we remain positive and we’re tackling it head-on. We have the responsibility of looking after our recipients, so we have the motivation to keep pushing on and adapting.

“Given the current circumstances, hosting one particular marquee event like the annual formal dinner seems less likely going forward, so we’ve had to adapt and think of new ways to make use of the special relationship we have.”

In this regard, the Fund presented an eight-week webinar series featuring some of the biggest names in South African rugby history. Hosted by Dr. Dean Allen, Jean de Villiers (Fund Chairman), Schalk Burger, Bryan Habana, John Smit (Fund Trustee), Victor Matfield, Tendai Mtawarira and Jake White reflected on their illustrious careers and revealed new nuggets of information with fans in the Zoom Room.

The series also included a 25-year anniversary special of the Springboks’ 1995 World Cup triumph featuring four of the key figures of the iconic squad - captain Francois Pienaar, Os du Randt, Joel Stransky and manager Morné du Plessis (who founded the Fund and served as Chairman for 38 years).

Pienaar wrapped up the Class of '95 virtual event by announcing the launch of limited edition Springbok Supporters’ face masks in celebration of their epic triumph at Ellis Park, with all funds raised through the sales from Pick n Pay stores going to Rugby’s Caring Hands.

“The Legends Series led to the Women in Rugby campaign, which gave us an opportunity to shine the spotlight on leading ladies and strong pillars of support off the field. The fact that we have had such a stellar line-up is an honour and we have been able to showcase some remarkable women in Women’s Month.”

Guests in this Series - sponsored by BrightRock - included hosts Jean de Villiers, Dr. Phatho Zondi, Xola Ntshinga and Cato Louw, who interviewed Zintle Mpupha, Babalwa Latsha, Zelda la Grange, Anne Lee Murray, Bridget van Zyl, Janine Habana, Saskia Snyman and Layla Kolbe.

The ‘new normal’, Gardner indicated, is an opportunity for more novel fundraising initiatives, while hope of a roaring 2021 is on the horizon.

“Through GivenGain and BackaBuddy, we have a number of support squad members who raise funds on their own by competing in the 94.7 or Cape Epic, for example, and I believe this will become a much stronger form of fundraising in this new era.

“Next year’s British and Irish Lions tour is mightily exciting not only for fans but for us as well, being the chosen charity of the tour. We’re really looking forward to working with SA Rugby and the players; it’s such a rare highlight and the possibilities from a fundraising perspective are endless.”

On a personal note, Gardner said her involvement with the Fund has been life-changing.

“It’s been an incredible privilege to get to know the recipients, to travel the rocky road with them and make fond memories, like watching a live rugby game together or facilitating the meeting of their favourite players.

“I’ll never forget going to visit Amos Mzimeli in Soto village in the Eastern Cape. Being welcomed into his home, meeting his wife and children and visiting the Great Kei Disability Multipurpose Centre he championed, it was so fulfilling. I felt more in-tune with our country and considered this visit, like many others, an enormous privilege.

“On the other side of things, it’s been incredibly rewarding working with the Board of Trustees - getting to know and work alongside absolute legends of the game I grew up watching and seeing their passion to assist those who were seriously injured playing the game they love.”

8.

BACK TO THE FUTURE:

From Bok captain to Players' Fund chairman

No-one is more uniquely equipped to lead the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players' Fund into the future than Jean de Villiers.

The former Springbok captain has proven exactly that since he took over the reins as Chairman of Rugby's Caring Hands from another ex-Springbok skipper at the end of 2018.



The Changing of the Guard - 2018

Morné du Plessis, Jean de Villiers, Hanyani Shimange and Frikkie Naudé

Morné du Plessis played a leading role in the creation of the Fund after his Western Province teammate Chris Burger suffered a fatal neck injury in a clash against Free State during the 1980 Currie Cup and served as Chairman for an astounding 38 years.

The Fund, which celebrates its 40th anniversary on Wednesday, 9 September, has aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years and currently assists 107 recipients who sustained catastrophic head, neck and spinal injuries.

The arrival of the next generation of Green and Gold 'impact players', spearheaded by De Villiers, put Du Plessis at ease.

"The new blood that's come in - Jean de Villiers, Hanyani Shimange [vice-chairman], John Smit and Tiaan Strauss [both Trustees] - is very heartening to me," said the Springbok legend.

"With their passion, dynamic new ideas and relationships with SA Rugby and the media, I can rest assured knowing that the Fund is in good hands," added Du Plessis, who remains involved as a Trustee.



Jean at a Springbok practice
in 2009

*Take note of the Players' Fund on
the official shorts

As Chairman of the Fund, De Villiers is the total package. One of the greatest Springboks of all-time, he ran out in 109 Tests and captained his country on 38 occasions.

True rugby royalty, he's the most-capped midfielder in Springbok history (94 Tests), a two-time South African Player of the Year (2008 and 2013) as well as a World Cup, British & Irish Lions series and Tri-Nations winner.

Making his résumé even more remarkable is the fact that De Villiers was plagued by serious injury throughout his career. The high of realising his Springbok dream against France in 2002 lasted just seven minutes before he sustained a devastating knee injury.

He was the victim of a World Cup 'curse', which started with a shoulder injury that saw him miss out on the 2003 global showpiece. The Springboks' triumphant 2007 campaign was bittersweet for De Villiers as he tore his biceps during their

opening match against Samoa and missed the remainder of the tournament.

Four years later, he injured a rib in South Africa's opening match against Wales. He managed to return for the quarter-final against the Wallabies, only for the Springboks to controversially crash out of the tournament. His third and final World Cup, in 2015, was also cut short when he fractured his jaw during the second match against Samoa.

This after he'd made a near-miraculous comeback from a horror knee injury that would've ended most men's careers against Wales in Cardiff the previous year.

Now, that adversity is an asset.

"I think my history with injuries puts me in a position to have a deeper understanding of the Fund and appreciation for the role they play," said De Villiers.

"Every time I sustained an injury, I dealt with it with perspective - perspective of knowing that the game of rugby can be taken away from you in a second and that others have been affected far more severely.

"In my position as Chairman, I now look back on those instances where I got injured and the hardships and struggles I went through to come back, then I put myself in a recipient's position and know that it's completely different.

"To see the strength and courage with which the recipients and their families adapt to and overcome their challenges on a daily basis is extremely motivational and I have the utmost respect for every one of them."

As much of a gentleman off the field as the warrior he was on it, De Villiers is respected the world over. A Laureus Sport for Good ambassador, his stature as an icon of the game coupled with his professional prowess as Head of Philanthropy at Citadel made him the perfect person to succeed Du Plessis.

“It’s an honour to serve as Chairman of the Fund. I have big shoes to fill because Morné did such a phenomenal job. It’s a big challenge - one I’ve really enjoyed - and my role at Citadel has certainly helped me to understand the nuances and challenges of a non-profit organisation,” said the 39-year-old.

The humble, former hard-running centre insists he’s no ‘chosen one’ but rather the leader of a tremendous team who operates with Springbok-like synergy.

“There are a number of Trustees that could take over and do a great job. Just like I had a core group of senior players around me as Springbok captain, I have a litany of leaders around me who I lean on,” he said.

“The majority of the Board of Trustees have been involved with rugby for a very long time, either playing or from an administrative or medical point of view, so we understand what it takes to be a successful team and we all have a deep passion for rugby.

“The ladies in the office do a sterling job on a daily basis and we on the Board know that we need to step up and deliver. The team dynamic has worked really well and whenever I call on one of the Trustees to help, they deliver.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the official charity of SA Rugby’s fundraising challenges. However, as De Villiers proved - and the Fund’s recipients continue to demonstrate - adversity is there to be overcome.



Jean and John together with recipient Charles Oppelt

Creativity and more digitally-driven projects, such as the popular recent legends and women in rugby webinars, will be key to the Fund’s continued success and sustainability.

“It’s important for us to have continuity and to constantly come up with new ideas to not only keep doing what we’re doing, but improve and help make the lives of the recipients a bit easier.”

Now, more than ever, support is needed from rugby-loving South Africans.

“A large majority of our funding comes from SA Rugby and there’s a responsibility there to look after those who are seriously injured playing the game we love. However, being heavily dependent on that grant puts the Fund at risk,” noted De Villiers.

“If we’re in a position where we have a greater variety and consistency of donors and become more self-sustainable, we’d be able to do so much more.

“In the current climate, being a non-profit organisation is difficult. There’s definite donor fatigue out there - everyone’s under pressure - so for us, it’s a case of tapping into South Africa’s passion for rugby and getting more businesses and people involved.”

De Villiers is buoyed by the support the Fund receives from current Springbok stars, saying, “For a lot of us, rugby’s given so much but, unfortunately, rugby’s also taken away a lot and there’s a responsibility to give back to those negatively impacted by the game.

“The current crop of Springboks understand that and we’re grateful for their support in visiting injured players and assisting in fundraisers. It’s encouraging to see because they’ll be the generation that takes over from us.”

In these unprecedented, uncertain times, what is certain is the burning passion and drive De Villiers and the rest of the ‘Fund family’ have to remain a rock recipients can rely on won’t wane.

“When we see or hear positive feedback from our recipients on the success they achieve despite their challenges and hear, in their words, how the Fund’s contributed to that is extremely rewarding.

“To hear that we have helped in one way or another and to see the positivity the recipients still have toward rugby is fantastic.”

9.

THE CHRIS BURGER PETRO JACKSON PLAYERS' FUND HOPE – 40 years on

For four decades, Rugby's Caring Hands have helped turned tragedy into triumph, writes Quintin van Jaarsveld.

Laying helpless in a hospital bed, hours removed from breaking his neck during a Currie Cup match against Free State in Bloemfontein on August 30, 1980, Western Province fullback Chris Burger spoke with his captain Morné du Plessis for the final time.

“He said, ‘Please look after my family and ask the guys to see that they’re okay,’” recalls Du Plessis 40 years on. “Even then, being a young man, I still didn’t fully realise the gravity of the situation and two hours later, he passed. We were absolutely devastated.”

Moved to action by that last conversation, Burger’s teammates founded a fund in his honour on September 9. The true depth of rugby’s brotherhood had been cemented, the legacy of Rugby’s Caring Hands born. On April 11, 1987, South African rugby was rocked to its core once more as Kylemore wing Petro Jackson passed away on the field after having suffered a broken neck during a zone club competition match against Excelsior. A similar fund was established in his memory, with the two merging in 1992.

“Rugby brings people together. Whether you play at school, club or professional level, there’s an undeniable bond between all who play the game and an unwritten rule that we look after each other,” says Springbok great and Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players’ Fund Chairman, Jean de Villiers.



Charles Oppelt & Franklin Prins

“Rugby is more than what happens on the field - it’s a game where family values and camaraderie are strong,” remarks Jurie Roux, SA Rugby CEO. “That means also assisting those in need, which is why SA Rugby’s support is vitally important, and it was a great driver to ensure the Chris Burger Petro Jackson Players’ Fund became our official charity a few years ago.”

With a Springbok spine, which includes De Villiers, Du Plessis, Hanyani Shimange (Deputy Chairman), John Smit, FC Smit, Jowa Abrahams, Tiaan Strauss and Wayne Fyvie on the current Board of Trustees,

and the support of SA Rugby, the Fund has aided over 500 fallen heroes over the years.

This has come at a cost of R50m, but ask any of the 107 recipients Rugby's Caring Hands currently assists and they'd say the support is priceless. For hidden in its name lies the true power of the Fund as for the past four decades, it has been a source of hope for those catastrophically injured playing the game they love. Hope of a life worth living, a second chance at happiness despite seemingly overwhelming obstacles.



Amos Mzimeli working at the Greater Kei Disability Multipurpose Centre

“The Fund plays a huge role in my life. If they weren’t part of my life, I would probably have passed away years ago,” says Amos Mzimeli. Left a quadriplegic after breaking his neck at the age of 18 while playing for Moonlight Rugby Club on May 20, 1990, the former loose forward “fell into a deep depression”, his will to live snuffed out by a cruel twist of fate.

Thirty years on, he’s a multi-award-winning pillar of strength, championing the Great Kei Disability Multipurpose Centre in Soto Village, where he’s now a beacon of hope. The happily married father of three insists he wouldn’t be where he is today without the Fund, saying, “It’s so comforting to know you have their support and that support goes a long way to help you make something of your life. They’ve become family; [General Manager] Gail [Baerecke] is like my mother...she’s always there when I need her.”

Mzimeli is one of many success stories, of a recipient finding remarkable resolve and conquering cruel challenges on a daily basis with the support of family, both blood and rugby’s band of brothers and sisters. The Fund epitomises what rugby is at its core, says founder and Trustee Du Plessis, who served as Chairman for an astounding 38 years.

“Both is about teamwork and passion,” notes the Springbok icon. “There’s a sense of family among everyone linked by the Fund. As much as we love it, there’s much more important things in life than the game, and the scoreboard.

“Witnessing the sheer bravery of the recipients and the unbelievable dedication of the families for 40 years has had an incredible impact on my life. I’ve learned so much from them and I’m so honoured to have had that privilege.”

Offering wide-ranging support based on each recipient’s individual needs, the Fund is a lifelong companion for fallen heroes and their families. It’s also been at the forefront of further significant change.

Tackling injuries head-on, the Fund and SA Rugby launched the BokSmart national rugby safety programme in 2009. The all-encompassing, scientific-based project has been game-changing, producing a 63% decrease in acute spinal cord injuries in schoolboy rugby and a 52% decrease in permanent catastrophic injuries in the club game.

Players who’ve suffered the misfortune of disabling despair are left with a daunting task. Amidst the heartache and broken dreams, they’re forced to adapt to a “new normal.” For them, this term has been a way of life long before it was thrust into popular culture by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Bakkies Botha & Juan Smith at the 2012 Telethon

Similar to its recipients, the Fund’s had to constantly adapt to adversity in terms of fundraising, which has become increasingly difficult every year. Inspired by the unbroken will of those it supports, the Fund has gallantly crusaded against the grain to remain the lifeline it is, hosting marquee events like the telethons of old on SuperSport, formal banquets and other special events, all attended by the entire Springbok squad.

Fund family’s steely determination remains unshaken. However, the stark reality the non-profit organisation finds itself in is that it’s facing its gravest challenge yet in an invisible enemy that changed the world as we knew it, one that’s threatening to suffocate South African rugby’s greatest ‘impact players’.

With its Springbok legends, as well as health and industry professionals, the

“Fundraising for all charities has been hugely affected as a result of the pandemic. We are no exception as a result of no rugby being played, where much of our funding is generated. Corporate donors are also having to weather their own storm,” says Baerecke, the Fund’s passionate General Manager for the past 15 years.

“What hasn’t changed for us during this time is the support that our recipients have needed from us, be it monthly subsistence for those who are needy, replacement and or repairs to their mobility equipment, or transport to and from vital clinic and hospital appointments.

“Our costs have also escalated during this time as a result of our recipients’ household economic situations having been impacted. We are, therefore, humbly appealing for financial help so that we can meet the essential needs of our particularly vulnerable group of recipients.”

Nelson Mandela famously said, “Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair.”



Koben Hofmeyr eagerly awaiting a Springbok Test at Loftus - 2019

Now, more than ever, there’s a dire need for rugby-loving South Africans to rally behind the sport’s most meaningful cause and prove, like the world-beating Springboks reminded the Rainbow Nation in Japan last year, that we are indeed **#StrongerTogether**.

Support the Fund via the following options:

DIRECT DEPOSIT:

Account Name: Chris Burger Petro Jackson Fundraiser

Bank: Standard Bank of SA

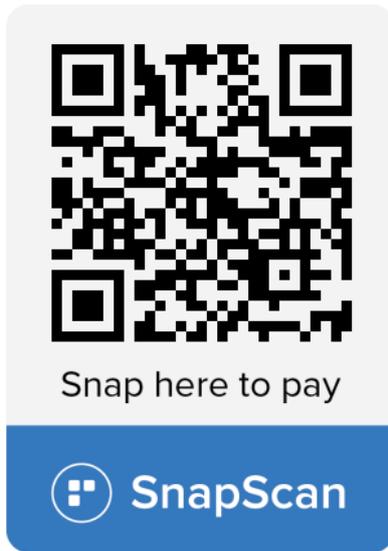
Branch Code: Rondebosch 025009

Account Number: 071 499 776

Reference to use for an EFT Payment: Name and Telephone number

If you make use of internet banking, why not consider setting up a recurring monthly payment to pledge your ongoing support?

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For more information, visit www.playersfund.org.za/ and follow the Fund on social media:

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