

How do we leap over a 'black hole'?

THERE are few more volatile and controversial issues in South African sport than transformation.

It is a unique problem with insurmountable challenges, because, regardless of actions taken, somewhere in the system there is a negative outcome for someone. The challenge is finding solutions that have the best long-term outcome for the most people. The key point is that transformation is critical, and failure to do it is short-sighted.

The analogy is that of a farmer who has 100ha of arable land, but chooses to use only 10 — leaving the other 90ha to lie dormant for eternity. If South Africa has 20 million potential sports stars, yet we continue to "farm" only two million of them, we are underachieving relative to our potential. Transformation is key to accessing that talent.

Where disagreement arises is around the issue of how to achieve this. Forced transformation — in the form of quotas — is the most controversial and extreme action, and its effects, good and bad, have been the subject of much debate.

However, one aspect that is overlooked, and which goes to the heart of the problem, is that quotas at junior level create a "black hole" at the point where players graduate to senior level, and make it impossible to accurately gauge the performance of development programmes.

Consider the following hypothetical situation: authorities in a given sport notice that, at junior level, black African players make up 40% to 50% of the teams.

At the senior level, they bemoan the fact that only 10-15% of players come from these previously disadvantaged groups, instigating a firestorm of accusations of bias at senior level. Then follows the on-off-on-off implementation of quotas at senior level, all the while being blinded by the fact that the 40% to 50% at junior level was artificially inflated by quotas to begin with.

Quotas have, in effect, made it impossible to judge the quality rather than the quantity of players being developed at junior level.

In this climate, where transformation is quantity-driven at the expense of monitoring quality, snap judgments are the norm, driven by political and emotional incentives rather than proper understanding of challenges and barriers faced by athletes. This is allied to the staggering lack of research tracking the appearance, and,

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more importantly, the disappearance of talent within each sport.

SA Cricket has begun to invest expertise in these questions, but SA Rugby leads the way. My colleagues, Professor Mike Lambert and Justin Durandt, of the Sports Science Institute of South Africa's High Performance Centre, have over a decade of data from Craven Weeks, and a picture is beginning to emerge of where players come from, where they go, and, most importantly, why they may fail.

Until this information is known, transformation will remain numerically skewed at the expense of quality. Economically, it creates inefficiencies, where limited resources are invested in the wrong places.

Imagine for a moment you are a basketball scout from the NBA in the US. Are you going to spend money finding superstars among the pygmy population of Congo, whose average height is 1.60m? Or do you go to Eastern Europe, where 1.85m is the average height?

The answer is obvious, but this extreme example illustrates that one cannot force participation and success without first realising that some populations may be excluded from success because of physical factors. Here, too, we simply do not know if this applies in South African sport, because too little research has taken place.

Ultimately, efforts at transformation are hampered by "blindness", which is why we repeatedly stagger and stumble over the same barriers. Until the success, failure and causative factors are quantified and understood properly, we are hoping for the best. Even with better data, creating a sporting culture and dealing with the consequences of transformation is a huge challenge, one where business holds many insights. These are for discussion next time.

Miller rescues Dolphins

DAVID Miller steered the Dolphins to a six-wicket victory over the Lions in a Domestic One-Day Cup game at Senwes Park in Potchefstroom yesterday.

Miller was unbeaten on a better-than-a run-a-ball innings of 76 off 68 deliveries as his side chased down a target of 172 in 36.2 overs.

Winning the toss, the Dolphins chose to field, which proved an excellent decision. The pitch had dished up a severely uneven bounce in the Lions innings but had flattened out by the time that the Dolphins came in to bat.

Miller, however, came to the wicket with his side busy making a mess of their run chase as the Dolphins had fallen to 25/3.

Miller, together with Vaughn van Jaarsveld (56), restored the chase of the meagre total as they put together a partnership of 85.

Van Jaarsveld was dismissed on 110 but Miller was able to push on and help his side to the six-wicket win.

Earlier, in the Lions innings, Quinton de Kock fell for a duck in the first over wafting at a wide delivery and being caught in the slips by Van Jaarsveld.

A period of cautious consolidation followed. But after a 32-run partnership between captain Stephen Cook (14) and Rassie van der Dussen (22), young Dolphins seamer Calvin Savage removed the pair in quick succession.

Both fell to inside edges onto their stumps to be dismissed in almost identical fashion to leave the Lions on 40/3.

Next to fall was Temba Bavuma for four. A Robbie Frylinck delivery kept low on an uneven Potchefstroom pitch and Bavuma was castled with the Lions wobbling on 49/4.

A 75-run partnership followed between Jean Symes and Devon Conway.

Savage again struck, this time to remove Conway, who edged behind to keeper Morne van Wyk, leaving the score on 124/5.

Symes was bowled by Frylinck with the score on 150, becoming the third Lions batsman to play the ball onto his stumps.

Despite a patient innings of 29 off 60 balls by Shaylin Pillay, the Lions were bowled out for 171 in 47.3 overs.

After the first round of fixtures, the Dolphins lead the standing with a maximum five points, followed by the Warriors and the Cape Cobras, who share second spot on four points.

The Warriors beat the Knights by 11 runs on Saturday and the Cobras squeaked past the Titans by two runs, thanks to the D/L method, on Friday.

● All South African first-class teams must include at least one black African player from October 16, Cricket South Africa announced yesterday.

CSA chief executive Haroon Lorgat said the initiative was part of a drive to make cricket more representative of South Africa's population.

Only five black African players have represented South Africa since the nation was readmitted to international cricket in 1992. — Sapa and Reuters