

# The fairer boks

## Ladies are making a name for themselves on the international rugby scene

**H**ere's a true conundrum: If someone wears the Springbok colours, but no-one knows that they're doing it, are they still representing the country?

Unbeknown to many South Africans, women's rugby is one of the fastest growing sports in the country. There are currently 78 women's clubs and roughly 4 000 female rugby players in the country.

The women's game was formally recognised by the South African Rugby Union in 2001 and the first national side was selected to represent South Africa against a touring England Development side in 2003. The national team was finally given Springbok status in 2004 and earlier this year these Springboks played their first international games abroad when they toured to the UK.

In 2006 South Africa will field a side in the Women's Rugby World Cup being played in Canada.

Unfortunately the growth of the game has not been matched by a commensurate growth of public or media support. Rather, the question that most people outside the small circle of those that know about women's rugby ask is:

"Why would a woman want to play rugby?"

"Why?" indeed. Why would anyone want to play a game where there is little or no corporate sponsorship, where the media regard you as an oddity to be covered only when the international tiddlywinks championship in Reykjavik is snowed out and where, until a few years ago, there wasn't even an official national side?

For men rugby is a legitimate career alternative, but for the South African women who play rugby the game is what happens when they've finished work for the day. So why do they want to play rugby? The answer, it seems, is because they're passionate about the game.

Lorinda Brown is one of the younger players on the Springbok team, but she demonstrates a single-mindedness of purpose typical of most great sportspeople.

She started playing rugby with her father and notes that her greatest dream had always been "to wear the green and gold." She says she was therefore immensely disappointed when the national team played their first game in 2003 wearing blue and white.

When she wasn't selected for the Springbok side in 2004 she realised that she

had to focus on what she wanted and work towards achieving it.

In 2005 that focus paid off and she was selected for the UK tour. She describes this as her proudest moment and says that when she was standing on the field before the game against England, finally wearing the green and gold, she was so overcome with emotion that she struggled to sing the national anthem.

Lorinda's approach to life is simple: "Achieve what you want to achieve, don't worry about what others are saying about you. Don't let other people run you down. Focus on what's important to you. If you believe in yourself you can achieve anything."

Nomsa Tendekwani was also part of that Springbok team. She claims this tour was one of the highlights of her life though she concedes that the weather wasn't something a woman from South Africa was used to!

One of the things Nomsa discovered during the UK tour was the enormous support for the women's game internationally and she hopes that this will become the case in South Africa.

Like many of her team-mates, Nomsa was a netball player who stumbled onto rugby by accident. But when she did, she was



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Nomsa Tendekwane - Women Springbok wing



Daughters of Africa team: Pippa Hetherington, Thami Ngubeni and Siobhan Cleary

hooked. As a wing, she says her focus is on scoring tries to help the team win each and every game they play. At the moment she's preparing herself physically and mentally for next year's World Cup.

It's not surprising given the infancy of women's rugby in South Africa that many of the role models for these women are their male counterparts. Nadine Barnard cites Joe van Niekerk as her source of inspiration. Like Joe she is working her way back into the national team after sustaining an injury that required two knee operations. But the man to whom she attributes her success is former coach Dawid Welman. In her words, "When Dawid first saw me playing, I was playing outside centre. He told me I wasn't an outside centre, I was a flank. Now I'm playing flank for the Springboks." Nadine believes she will stay involved with rugby even when she is no longer playing as either a coach or part of the growing ranks of female referees.

To those who are sceptical about women's ability to play rugby she has only this to say: "If we can fly aeroplanes, we can play rugby."

Nomsebenzi Tsotsobe is a part-time model who sports the No. 8 jersey and has captained the national side since its inception. A former provincial basketball and netball player, Nomsebenzi's first foray into rugby was when she started exercising with her brother's rugby team (playing touch rugby).

She enjoyed it so much that she and some friends established a "proper" rugby team. She was selected to captain the first Eastern Province team in 2001 and the national side in 2003.

When asked about the challenge of being a female in a male-dominated sport her response is straightforward: "When I started playing rugby I didn't focus on the fact that I was a woman. To me it's the same as being the CEO of a company – it might be a male dominated business, but if you have the skills and qualities that are needed and you

want to do it, then you must just go ahead and become CEO. Your gender is irrelevant."

These profiles and images form part of the Daughters of Africa project, conceived to celebrate the role of African women in society. Pippa Hetherington, Thami Ngubeni and Siobhan Cleary established the society in 2005 with the aim of creating greater awareness of African women and their achievements through the use of photo essays and documentaries.

Like the Springbok women rugby players, Daughters of Africa is what Pippa, Thami and Siobhan do when they're not focused on earning an income: Pippa as a photographer and documentary producer, Thami as an actress, producer and writer and Siobhan as a freelance strategy consultant.▲

*Pippa Hetherington*

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