

STORY: MICHAEL HOLMAN

## Forget Ellis Park for a moment. Deep in the heart of Afrikanerdom there's rugby drama aplenty

*Seeing the writing on the wall, the Patensie rugby club – a bastion of Afrikaner pride in a small town – has opened to all. Although it is all smiles on the surface, the rifts caused by apartheid linger on in the club's uneasy relationship with its township counterpart*

Grumbling good-naturedly, Espie Ferreira, white farmer, Afrikaner patriarch and president of Patensie rugby club, set off in search of the first team's missing black player.

A scavenging dog scuttled between the corrugated-iron shanties, and a couple standing outside the coloured township shebeen blinked in the powerful headlights of Espie's Mercedes as it nosed its way down the rutted dirt track.

Drifting up from the valley below, carried on the chill night air, came the sounds of boots on leather, the grunts of players and exhortations from the coach, as Patensie prepared for Saturday's big game against Port Elizabeth Harlequins.

But Manie Nelson was missing, and Espie was determined that practice should not go ahead without him.

And as we drove from the field, up the hill and into the township, I listened to an extraordinary tale. Of how rugby became a force for change and tolerance in a small town, deep in the heart of conservative, Afrikaans-speaking South Africa.

It was about a year after Nelson Mandela's release but two years before the

election that brought him to power, that Espie Ferreira warned that what was once unthinkable had become an imperative. The club for which he played as a youth and which had become his cause had to open its doors to black members.

The story of what followed, including Espie's attempt to persuade the township coloured rugby club to throw in its lot with its wealthier, better-equipped counterpart, was told in a moving BBC television documentary last year.

As South Africa underwent its political revolution, Patensie was undergoing its own traumatic changes as Espie persuaded what was then an all-white XV not only to play in black townships, but to accept black teammates.

Eighteen months later, Patensie is still adjusting. The white club now has black members, but the town's black club still clings to its independence.

Black frustration and white apprehension lie not far below a tranquil surface. And yet, from the perspective of this picturesque hamlet shaped by apartheid, the presence of a black man in the once all-white rugby team seems as remarkable in its own way as Nelson Mandela in the

presidency. For Patensie is platteland where the old white values die hard.

Stand on the terrace of Espie's home high above the valley and the symbols and structure of the apartheid era, of Afrikaner power and the white tribe's way of life seem as potent as ever, standing out in the ordered beauty of the town they dominate.

Immediately below the house is the whitewashed police station, under a clump of eucalyptus trees. Behind a desk in a room that is more like a parlour, sits Marius de Klerk, Patensie police chief and rugby club secretary, with the build of a prop and the eyes of the big-city detective he once was.

Beyond is the tiny commercial centre, with the Volkskas bank, the garage, the Ripple Valley hotel with red polished stoep. And in between all these landmarks lie neat citrus orchards, 300 hectares of which are farmed by Espie and his three sons. Speckled with ripening oranges, the trees stretch as far as the eye can see, into the foothills of the mountains.

But the most evocative sight of all, at the heart of the Afrikaner community, and nestling in the bend of the Gamtoos river

which winds through the valley, is the rugby field. For generations, Patensie's social life had revolved around its rugby club, with its modest pavilion and modern clubhouse.

So strong a hold has the sport exercised that a white town and farming community of a couple of thousand families has been able to field four teams. In the Eastern Cape, however, rugby is not a white preserve. The history of black and coloured enthusiasm for the national sport of the Afrikaner goes back more than a hundred years, born on the playing fields of mission schools when the Cape was a British colony.

In Patensie this tradition survives in the form of the United Barbarians Rugby Football Club. But this poor relation is out of sight. Patensie township is concealed behind the brow of the valley.

And home to Manie Nelson, who looms out of the night when he spots the Mercedes' searching beam, greets Espie in Afrikaans and climbs into the car.

We drive back to the field, but it is too cold to watch from the sidelines as Manie and his teammates limber up, and Espie takes me home for dinner. Over rusks and

coffee, rugby and politics become intertwined and it is late in the evening when I risk causing offence. "So you're a *kaffir-boetie*," I said to Espie Ferreira.

For a split second I thought he might have misunderstood my intent, but he chuckled and repeated the phrase, rolling it around his palate, implicitly correcting my English-speaker's pronunciation.

Espie's anger at what apartheid had done to South Africa comes to the surface and the mood in the kitchen changes.

Few people could have held such political views in Patensie and survived without Espie's rugby pedigree. Capped for Eastern Province eight times during the early 1950s, he came close to lasting fame: he was reserve in the 1955 team for the game with the British Lions.

Memorabilia from the era as well as more recent memories line the walls of Espie's den.

It was here that I talked to Manie, on the day before the game with Harlequins. Fluent in Afrikaans, less articulate in English, but enough to convey the pain of insults from some white players when he first joined the club 18 months ago, and which soon stopped after Espie and Mar-

ius expelled the three worst offenders.

And he expressed satisfaction at being able to play in the Eastern Cape premier league, several divisions above the United Barbarians. He relishes the friendships now established, but hints at his new friends' failure to invite him to join in excursions after away games.

At breakfast the next day, conversation moves back to rugby. But the big one between South Africa and Canada, taking place in nearby Port Elizabeth, takes second place to the fixture coming up between Harlequins and Patensie.

And now comes the first indication that not all is well in Patensie rugby. It seems the sport is losing its grip on the town. Turnout at practices is not what it was. Television and the city lights take their toll, but many of the white supporters have been deterred, it seems, by the changed atmosphere at home games. They complain that black supporters are raucous, rude, or undisciplined.

Later that morning we drive back to the township to meet Johannes du Plooy, the president of United Barbarians and teacher at the township's primary school. He explains why he will not agree to the

amalgamation of Patensie and Barbarians. Espie says he has offered to share the committee posts equally with Barbarians, but Johannes does not seem reassured. "Their voices will not be heard," he says.

Driving back, Espie shakes his head in frustration. "I know Johannes well," he says. "His father worked on the farm." Later Espie tells me how he made his home available to Johannes for his wedding reception.

In Patensie, the club has to spread its appeal if it is to flourish. Espie Ferreira has the facilities, but perhaps the son of the man who used to work for him as a labourer has the whip hand.

And perhaps the politics of Patensie provide less scope for magnanimity than the politics of the nation.

Apropos of nothing that has cropped up in the conversation, I tell the apocryphal story of the politician who is puzzled by an opponent's bitter attack.

"Why does he dislike me so much?" the puzzled politician asked his aide: "I've never done him any favours."

Marius gives a throaty chuckle, Espie is silent, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Neither asks why I told the story.