

Maritzburg College - Inaugural Captains' Dinner

Speech by Paul Harris

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When I was in College, Clark House, photos of the rugby and cricket teams going back to the early 1900s, and maybe even into the late 1800s, adorned the passages. I was always intrigued with them. Not only to identify the good players who subsequently became famous players, but also to identify the fathers, brothers and friends of the College boys at Clarks. My Dad, who passed away in March this year was in the rugby side of 1942. Some of our mates had grandfathers in the pictures and they were at College in the first decade of the 1900s, about fifty years earlier when I was in 6th form. So, for the youngsters of today, looking back 50 years gets them to 1967. Scary thought! Sobering indeed but also highlights that I can trace a direct connection and feeling of commonality, however tenuous, with College boys that span 100 years. It is something that we cherish and must never allow to die and this function is yet another building block in building and cementing this bond.

When I was invited to talk at this dinner I started thinking back on the captains of the teams and the Dux's when I was in my last years at College. Kevin Podmore, water polo, and Lynton Cousins, tennis, (who are here tonight) were captains of sports I did not participate in. The Dux was John Frankish who became a professor at Oxford. Niel Tennant, was a champion athlete and Dux in the previous year. He too became a prof in several US universities and is still considered as one of the greatest mathematicians in the world.

The cricket captain in my last year was Tim Larkin, who was also the hockey captain. I haven't seen him since school but have heard that he has been a very successful business man in the US. Loosely described by someone as a property mogul. I don't remember much about the cricket but did enjoy digging up the annual magazine recently. I must say we were a reasonable team.

As an aside and strictly speaking for historical accuracy, College and DHS did not have First XIs, we had First 12s. DHS had Les Theobald and we had Backie Larkin, the umpires. What I do remember about Tim is him turning up at about 10 o'clock at night, late for a party on our farm. Nothing unusual about that except that our farm was in Greytown and he had nicked his Dad's moped and ridden it from Maritzburg that night. And then back to Maritzburg after the party after midnight.

My cricket captain in 4th and 5th form was Gerald Katz who is with us this evening. Those who have only got to know Katzie in later years will not be surprised to know that he could be described as a smoothie. Never a hair out of place and impeccably dressed. I was a fourth former and the youngster in the team and on the KES tour I was given the job of looking after his blazer. We threw our blazers over our shoulders but Katzie's was on a coat hanger. I momentarily lost concentration and someone spilt Brillcream over it. Needless to say, he went apoplectic.

In both my last two years, Rick Andries was the rugby captain. Rick, who is here tonight, was highly respected and a great captain. A tradition, which I am not certain has survived the age of political correctness, is that the order in which you sat at table at meals was the order of the rugby team you played in. So, the first team players sat at the top, second team next and so on. Now what was important was that the food was served from the top so the best rugby players got the most food. Like a black-maned lion at a kill. Invariably the food ran out before it got to the end of the table. So, the guys in the lower teams at the end had to "swing". A practice where an empty plate is passed around and everyone who has food puts a little bit onto the scrawny guy's plate. Often, they had to swing again and again. Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest was applied at College and maybe that is why we have been such a good rugby school. Looking around the hall today it does strike me that many old boys have taken that tradition into their own homes and sit at the top of the table irrespective of what team they played in.

I have one thing that I carry to this day that reminds me of my time as Head Boy and that is the scar above my left eye. How I got it is an interesting tale. I don't know if this still happens today but in those days after supper on Sunday, we walked from College to church through the park and into town. Boys could nominate which church they wanted to go to and every church got a look in. The selection criteria involved where the best GHS and Epworth girls were. Some of the deeper souls in 6K elected the Spiritualist Church and being a progressive school, they were not prevented from going. It also enabled them to bunk church easier.

However, church was not always the main attraction on Sunday nights, it was the soccer game in the park between teams that bunked church. Games were played in underpants and their number ones were left in piles on the side of the field. If a prefect or master appeared they would grab their clothes and easily outrun them in the dark. One night a scrum half, Basil Wulfson, picked up the six-foot-one, Udu Kock's clothes, in the dark. He looked like Charlie Chaplin when he returned. Udu looked like those body builders that shop for t-shirts in the kiddie's department.

As prefects, this was a practice we had to stamp out and besides, catching boys bunking church was more fun than sitting in church. So many a Sunday night involved the prefects trying to catch the guys bunking church. We seldom had any luck because the players could see us coming from a mile away. In typical College

style the unwritten rule was if you were identified you were reported and got six of the best but usually they outran us in the dark.

However, one Sunday one of the prefects, Dave Moore, who had just had his twenty-first, arrived at school with a car that looked like a hearse. We called it the Black Maria. So, the scene was set for a big chase. At roll call there were some tell-tale signs. Some guys wore their rugby boots. I think Kevin Podmore was one. Erskine had a whistle around his neck, obviously the ref.

When we got to the park we set a trap by opening the car doors at various places around the park but not getting out the car. The interior light going on and off would make the soccer players think we had got out the car and know where we were. When we did get out the car we took the bulb out the light so it didn't go on and they didn't know where we were. The plan worked like a bomb and before they knew it we were right in amongst them. The underpants-clad players took off with the prefects in hot pursuit. As I reached full speed I ran into a wire across the path. It poleaxed me and cut me above my eye.

What then happened was typical of the College spirit. The soccer players came to my aid and Dave Moore took me to hospital to have stitches and that is how I got this scar. The next morning, they all owned up and got the mandatory six of the best for bunking church. Again, typical of the College spirit.

We all have similar wonderful memories from our days at College and have made lifelong friends. As an aside we also got a decent education and learnt a value system that we could carry through life. When I was asked to talk tonight, Chris asked that I talk about the future of College in the face of the challenges College faces in the South Africa of today. The objectives must surely be to perpetuate, adapt and build on the legacy while being a positive force for good in the country. I think College can do it and continue to go from strength to strength.

After College I went to Stellenbosch University. I was in a residence, Wilgenhof, where Doctor Danie Craven was warden and many sportsmen stayed there. In my time there were 7 Springboks and several other international sportsmen. He was a wonderful man, a great leader and a philosopher who taught us a huge amount about life. He was passionate about Stellenbosch but especially about Wilgenhof that has a very similar culture to College. Even in those days "oumanne" lamented that the Res was not what it used to be and was going to pot. We used to say "die plek is in sy moer". In this, the last outpost of the British Empire, it means "the place is stuffed". But Doc encouraged this because he said that it demonstrated that people cared and this would ensure that that they would do something about it and that this would prevent it from being "stuffed". I think the same applies at College.

Worrying about its possible decline is exactly what is needed to arrest the decline. If we step back for a moment, College certainly has not declined. In fact, it has gone from strength to strength and continues to do so. It has a headmaster, staff, pupils and Old Boys who feel passionate about it and will over time adapt to the changing times, uphold all the good things and discard the bad things.

I am often asked about the most important lessons I have learnt in business. My response is that all good businesses are built on a good corporate culture. The culture is the single most important asset of a company and I would submit, a school. It is an asset that needs to be managed in the same way as other assets. In the first 10 years after RMB merged with FNB and formed FirstRand, Sizwe Nxasana, our banking CEO, and I, as group CEO, spent a full day each month with staff and new recruits. We spoke about our culture and got buy-in to what we call the FirstRand business philosophy.

There are many characteristics of that culture that are common to what I have always believed is the College culture. It is based on four basic principles:

Firstly, its foundation is a set of values that everyone ascribes to. What are those values? They are the values your mother taught you and College boys know what those are. Honesty, caring, humility, etc.

Secondly, there is a deep respect for the uniqueness of each individual. This is something that we in South Africa have not always had and lots of work needs to be done to change attitudes in this respect. Each individual is unique in respect of where they come from, their background, the people and influences that have shaped their lives, their financial status etc. Respecting this diversity is a strength because the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. In business I say that we are a team, not a family, and I think there are some aspects of that, that are applicable to College. In a family everyone is more or less the same. They have grown up in the same circumstances and been shaped by the same environment. Whereas in a team one can tap into the diverse skills and influences that a diversity of team members offer. To use a rugby analogy, a team of 15 scrum-halves or locks will never beat a team with the appropriate players in each position that bring different skills to the game.

Thirdly, we believe in empowerment of our business units. It flows from the respect for the individual. We believe that the more power you give away, the more you have. People that are trusted seldom let you down. What is important is that people collectively decide what they want to achieve, how to get there and how to measure milestones along the way. Once this has been decided, we leave them alone. You don't need to babysit adults. You cannot fly a plane from the ground, only a pilot can.

Fourthly, we believe in breaking a big business into lots of small businesses. Plant lots of little seeds and some will germinate to be big trees. Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon are the biggest companies in the world and they were started in garages and university dormitories in the last 20 years. We started Rand Merchant Bank with R10,000 and Discovery and OUTsurance also as small companies with little amounts of capital. In the social space, my daughter started a small foundation teaching kids to read which now teaches 40,000 kids to read. All this possible by trusting and empowering people and planting lots of little seeds.

From the limited exposure I have had to College my overwhelming impression is that all stakeholders of College value its culture and live by it. However, I could not emphasise more that it is an asset that needs to be managed. Most important, we need to talk about our culture and values and articulate what we believe in. We need to solicit the views of everybody, no matter how different they may be to conventional thinking. Be like a team rather than a family. I am sure that this will make it easier to deal with the type of issue that recently had so much airtime in the media.

Another question that always comes up is whether “South Africa is in its moer”. How much energy has been wasted discussing, complaining, worrying and generally whingeing about the state of the country? I know people who only ever talk about this subject. Generally, they have two things in common. First, they do nothing about it, and second, they are unhappy.

As with all periods in South Africa’s history, we currently have our problems that to some appear insurmountable. Look around you at College and see the future that other generations of College boys had to face when they were at College. Look at the war memorials commemorating the hundreds of old boys that perished in wars every few decades. Think of the horrific environment created by Apartheid and the uncertainty about what would replace it. There has not been a period where people have not predicted the country’s imminent demise and this one is no exception. Of course, we should be concerned about corruption, the undermining of the institutions designed to protect us from it and the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality. But on the positive side, civil society and leaders across the political spectrum are stepping up to the plate and saying enough is enough.

We may not win this battle in the short term but this is a resilient country with wonderful people that have achieved and survived far worse. It is also a country where each individual, institution and school, like College, can make a difference.

At FirstRand I started what we called the Volunteers program. It encouraged small groups of people in the company to voluntarily do things that make a difference, however small. We match-funded whatever financial contribution they made personally. We pushed on an open door. Many people wanted to contribute but

didn't know how. When I retired we had hundreds of such projects, from taking grannies to movies, to painting schools at weekends, to redistributing second-hand school shoes, to teaching children to read, etc, etc. Many people told me that this had changed their lives and had given them a purpose. It was a great alternative to complaining and it made them happier.

So, my hope, my new year's resolution, which I invite you to share, is:

No more wasted energy in whingeing but rather spend the energy on doing something that makes a difference.

South Africa has been described as a country where the sun is very bright but the shadows very dark. One moment you can feel insecure and despondent and the next exhilarated and inspired by a good deed and an amazing accomplishment against the odds. This is what makes it such an exciting country in which to live. Above all it is a country where we as individuals and this great school, Maritzburg College, can make a difference.

I thank you.