

The Sydney Morning Herald

Wallabies' proud history of fight against apartheid

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On October 8, 1969 the lead letter in The Sydney Morning Herald was headlined: South Africa and Sport.

"Sir, The issue as to whether Australian sporting teams should compete against those of the Republic of South Africa has been raised on various occasions in your newspaper. As a member of the Australian rugby union side which has just completed a tour of the Republic, the opportunity has been afforded me to experience first-hand the problems involved with this issue. Whether Australian sporting bodies wish to accept the implications of current competition is a matter they and Australians generally must decide. But they cannot pretend such implications do not exist."

The writer was the Wallabies second-rower, Anthony Abrahams. His letter is one of the significant documents involving Australian rugby. It was a call for a boycott on the scheduled Springboks tour of Australia in 1971. And, just as significantly, it was a call for a loyal opposition within the rugby community, especially from Wallabies, to stop the tour. In my opinion, this loyal opposition saved the integrity of Australian rugby. There was no (un)civil rugby war here as there was in New Zealand in 1981.

In 1963 a great Wallabies side squared the Test series with South Africa 2-2. Jim Boyce, a star winger who played 17 matches and all four Tests, saw so much racism on the tour he returned to Australia an implacable enemy of apartheid.

He was appalled, for instance, at the instigation of separate, small enclosures for blacks at the Test grounds and the brutal bashing blacks received for supporting the Wallabies. Boyce became an inspirational and thoughtful leader of the opposition within the rugby community to the 1971 tour.

On October 12 at Sydney bookstore Gleebooks, *Pitched Battle*, written by Larry Writer, will be launched. The book is a vivid account of the fractious 1971 Springboks tour of Australia, with its on-field riots and the State of Emergency in Queensland. A group of Wallabies, Jim Boyce, Tony Abrahams, Paul Darveniza, Terry Forman, Barry McDonald, James Roxburgh, Bruce Taafe - the Rugby Seven - will be honoured for their unprecedented stance in refusing to play against the Springboks and for their intelligent, non-violent opposition to sporting contact with apartheid South Africa.

Thousands of copies of their leaflet titled *Australia - South Africa: an appeal from some Wallabies* were distributed to great effect during the protests. On the 1963 tour, Boyce was told by John Vorster, South Africa's Justice Minister: "No black man will ever wear a Springbok jersey." Boyce gave his four Springboks jerseys to Aboriginal activists to wear while they were demonstrating against the 1971 tour.

This link between black rights in South Africa and Australia created a profound change in the Wallabies. During the 1980s a stream of gifted Aborigines were selected for the side, led by the fabulous Ella brothers. The 1990s, with Toutai Kefu providing the inspiration, saw Pasifika players gaining selection. For the first time ever, in 1991 and 1999, the Wallabies were the undisputed best team in world rugby.

Right now there are 12 players of Pacific Islands background in Michael Cheika's touring squad. Not one of these players would have been eligible for either the 1963 or 1969 tours.

On Sunday (AEST time), Cheika's Wallabies will be playing the Springboks at Loftus Versfeld, the heartland of the Afrikaner spirit in rugby. The Wallabies are looking to defeat the Springboks twice in a calendar year for the first time since 2011. The Wallabies, though, have lost all six of their Tests at the stadium.

Memo to the Wallabies: This is the time to win one for the Rugby Seven and break the Loftus Versfeld stadium hoodoo.