



OLD-SCHOOL. John Wright, international hockey Umpire-of-the-Year for 2017, still values the sport's old club traditions in the professional era. Picture: Jacques Nelles

He's made of the Wright stuff

INTERNATIONALLY-ACCLAIMED HOCKEY UMPIRE WILL NOT BE LOST TO THE SPORT

Ken Borland

South Africa has a proud sporting tradition and we are particularly blessed to have a history of top officials across many sporting codes.

The name of Pretoria resident John Wright should be right up there with the very best officials this country has produced, having capped his remarkable career as a hockey umpire with the award for international male Umpire-of-the-Year for 2017 from the FIH this week in Berlin.

Wright has stood in more than 200 Tests, one of only four umpires to do so, as well as being in charge of three World Cup finals and going to five Olympic Games, including blowing the Rio de Janeiro final in 2016.

Because hockey is basically an amateur sport in South Africa, the 47-year-old Wright is steeped in the ethos of club sport and is the senior sports organiser at the Tshwane University of Technology. But he also has one foot firmly planted in the world of professional sport because he is the chairman of the Titans cricket franchise and president of the Northern Cricket Union.

"I'm very much a club man, I support the old traditions. Clubs have been critical, but we're also moving into a very professional era. The days of volunteers running the show are few and far between. We need the right mix of club and professional peo-

ple to steer us in the right direction," Wright said.

And just to prove that he is one of those rare administrators who do not have a personal agenda but rather sees the bigger picture, Wright praises the University of Pretoria, his rivals at Tshwane Tech.

"I know it's not the opinion of all the clubs, but Tuks are an extremely valuable asset for us. If we draw comparisons with other franchises who don't have a strong university, then we see they battle. Tuks are at the forefront of coaching and performance in South Africa and their record speaks for itself.

"They must be doing something right and their professionalism and ethics must rub off positively on the other clubs. So I see no reason to clip their wings, it would only be to the detriment of the franchise," Wright said.

While Wright has officially retired from international hockey umpiring – the FIH have a 47-year-old cut-off – and his six-year term at the head of the Titans is due to finish soon as well, neither hockey nor cricket are about to lose one of their gems.

"I have accomplished most things in terms of hockey umpiring, but I still want to contribute, although I do also have a huge responsibility to cricket. I was very pleased to receive the award in Germany and very grateful to all the hockey umpires who voted for me. It's a great way for me to end my career.

"I've had a wonderful 20-odd years of international umpiring. I've been

able to travel the world. Hockey has been really great to me and I'm really appreciative of it," Wright said.

Wright said he will help out with umpire management in South Africa, but is also looking to get into the technical side of officiating, looking to become a tournament director (they are much like the match referee in cricket).

In terms of cricket, he will stay involved in the Northern union and, judging by the way he has not been afraid to express his disappointment over certain aspects of the way Cricket South Africa run the game, he will continue to keep his fellow administrators on their toes.

Having told off some of the greatest – and stroppiest – hockey players in the world during his time as one of the firmest but fairest umpires on the circuit, Wright is certainly no shrinking violet in the boardroom.

"I think my umpiring does help at board meetings. I've learnt to listen and operate under pressure, how to deal with personalities," he said.

A product of Selborne College in East London, it is going to take a lot to keep Wright, who is the father of two children with his wife, Megan, out of either of the games given his tremendous passion for sport and his unstinting belief that "the game comes first".



John (right) with his brother Peter after officiating at the FIH Hockey World League Men's Semifinals last year. Picture: Getty Images

