



## APHIWE DYANTYI

Six years ago, Aphiwe Dyantyi was told he was too small to play top-flight rugby. After representing the Dale College 3rd XV in his matric year, Dyantyi decided to quit rugby and focus on his studies at the University of Johannesburg. His sport of choice was soccer and at that point it appeared as if his rugby dream was over.

Then fate intervened. Dyantyi's friends at the university asked if he would play for their *koshuis* team. The side was short a couple of players. Would he help them out?

He played one game, and then another. Eventually he caught the eye of the local coaches, and was invited to train with UJ's Varsity Cup squad.

Dyantyi represented UJ's Young Guns and sevens teams in 2014. A year later, he was

backed to play for the senior side in the Varsity Cup and made an immediate impression. A call-up to the Golden Lions U21 team followed. He graduated to the Lions senior side in 2017 and was in the starting side that featured in the semi-final against eventual Currie Cup champions Western Province.

Opportunity knocked again in 2018. Springbok wings Ruan Combrinck and Court'nall Skosan were ruled out of the early rounds of the Super Rugby tournament due to injuries. Could Dyantyi fill the gap for the Lions at No 11, or would a perceived lack of size compromise the team in the wider channels?

That question was emphatically answered after Dyantyi scored five tries in his first five Super Rugby matches – making him the competition's joint top try-scorer. Most of

the experts, including Springbok coach Rassie Erasmus and former South African mentor Nick Mallett, were in agreement that a new star was on the rise.

'I'm really excited about him,' Erasmus said when asked about how far Dyantyi could go.

The Boks will face Wales in Washington DC in June before tackling England in a three-match series at home. In a twist of fate, Dyantyi himself was sidelined for a reported six weeks with a pectoral injury during the Super Rugby tournament, but could well feature in at least one of those Tests.

'Aphiwe's aerial skills are good,' Erasmus added. 'He showed real skill at the breakdowns and we all know that he attacks well. We'll see how he does when he faces a few big challenges on defence, but I'd be lying if I said I haven't taken notice of him. There's still a lot ahead for him, like playing away and overseas [for the Lions]. But if Aphiwe gets through that, he's going to be a massively good player and then I will definitely look at him.'

Mallett was clearly impressed by the 23-year-old's performances in the early stages of the competition. The Lions, who won the South African conference in 2016 and 2017 and featured in the finals of both tournaments, have begun the 2018 season in encouraging fashion. The addition of Dyantyi clearly hasn't hurt their cause.

'We have witnessed the arrival of a very talented young player,' said the former Bok coach after the Lions thrashed the Jaguares 47-27 in round two. Dyantyi scored two tries



The Lions wing's rise is a good-news story for South African rugby. By **Jon Cardinelli**



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**APHIWE DYANTYI**

in that fixture and was named Man of the Match for the second week in succession.

'He made very few mistakes,' Mallett said. 'His acceleration and the timing of his pass at that last try was outstanding. The pace that he showed to run on to the pass and travel 70m to score ... he made three Jaguares trip up and sidestepped the fullback.'

'I was so excited every time Dyantyi got the ball. I just felt like everyone was running at three-quarter pace and then suddenly he would get the ball and ... bang! The game would speed

**GRADUATING WITH TOP HONOURS**

Three Varsity Cup stars who have gone on to represent the Springboks

**EREN ETZEBETH (UCT)**

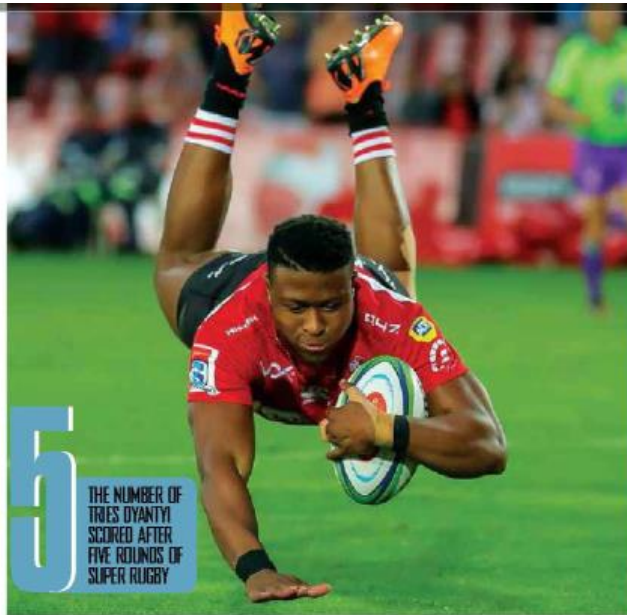
Etzebeth first caught the eye as a lanky lock representing the University of Cape Town in the 2011 Varsity Cup, a tournament that witnessed the 'keys' first title triumph. Since then, Etzebeth has become a stalwart at the Stormers and Springboks (representing the latter in 67 Tests). In 2017, he led the Boks in 11 games after regular skipper Warren Whiteley broke down with injury.

**OUPI MOHOJE (SHIMLAS)**

Mohoje spent three years in the Free State University side before he got his opportunity with the Cheetahs in 2014. On the back of some impressive showings at Super Rugby level, the flank was selected for the Springbok team that season. Mohoje has played 19 Tests to date.

**HANDRE POLLARD (TUKS)**

After moving from Cape Town to Pretoria in 2012, Pollard (right) went on to help Tucs win the 2013 Varsity Cup. He made his Super Rugby and Springbok debuts in 2014, and travelled to the 2015 World Cup as the Boks' first-choice flyhalf. While serious injuries have limited his involvement, the 24-year-old has already played 26 Tests.



**5** THE NUMBER OF TRIES DYANTYI SCORED AFTER FIVE ROUNDS OF SUPER RUGBY

up. He has a lovely, confident way about him. He looks for work, defends well and gives 100%.

'Dyantyi is a real gem and it's going to be tough to drop him [when those Bok players return to fitness],' Mallett added. 'Well done to this youngster; it's a pleasure to watch him in Super Rugby. We are broadening our strength in depth in that position in South Africa.'

There is a lot more Dyantyi wants to achieve as a rugby player. That said, he does feel his story can be used to inspire other youngsters who are looking to force their way into the professional ranks.

'It all happened so quickly,' he said when asked about his journey. 'One moment, I was just playing to help out a few friends and then more and more opportunities came my way. It just proves that if you have a passion, don't let anyone allow you to believe you're not good enough. If you have the talent and work ethic, you can achieve anything you set out for yourself.'

'The Varsity Cup was an important stepping stone, especially in terms of exposure,' he continued. 'I've also had time to study as a student athlete, graduating with a Bcom honours degree [in 2017]. Now I want to

**'THE VARSITY CUP WAS AN IMPORTANT STEPPING STONE. NOW I WANT TO FOCUS ON MY RUGBY AND CONTINUE TICKING THE RIGHT BOXES'**

focus on my rugby and continue ticking the right boxes for the team and coaches.

'I appreciate UJ and the Lions for all the opportunities they've given me. I've learned so much over a short space of time, from the senior players and coaches.'

Lions head coach Swys de Bruin believes the youngster is 'special' and should continue to make an impact at Super Rugby level. A Bok call-up may not be too far away.

'I have to encourage the absolute effort to try things, even when it's not on,' said De Bruin, who also has a reputation for thinking outside the box. 'That's what you want to see. If we look after him very well and make sure he earns his colours, he'll become a legend.'

'He's got an honours degree, he's a mature young man and he's a clever guy. I'm very happy with him at the moment.'

Given the big impact Dyantyi's made at Super Rugby level this season, a lot of South African rugby fans probably feel the same way. ■



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