

# Stepping out of the shadow

## Morné Steyn

**S**pringbok pivot Morné Steyn has gone from being Derick Hougaard's understudy at the Blue Bulls, to the form flyhalf in world rugby lately. I recently was able to track down the Super 14 standout before lacing up his boots for another dominating performance against France in Cape Town.

The Bafana Bafana vibe in Cape Town is palpable as I manoeuvre my vehicle around the corner of the Cape Town International Convention Centre and into a solitary parking slot in front of the hotel where the Boks are staying.

On the curb, the Springbok bus – blazing in green and gold – looms like a sleeping giant.

Vuvuzelas reverberate from every corner and pedestrians' faces are the picture of unification and excitement as they stroll the sun-kissed streets in feverish anticipation of the opening of the Fifa Soccer World Cup.

But South Africans would not be South Africans if they did not root for their boys, and the Springbok buzz is alive and well in anticipation for the match against the French at Newlands Stadium.

It is the second Springbok season for Steyn, whose meteoric rise to rugby stardom has been nothing short of phenomenal.

Summoned from the reserve bench by skipper John Smit to replace flyhalf Ruan Pienaar in the second half of the Test match against the British and Irish Lions in 2009, Steyn's presence on the field stunned crowds when he won the match for the Boks during the last minutes of the game by slotting the

ball between the posts from a gargantuan distance of 53 metres.

Steyn had been playing understudy to Hougaard for the Bulls since 2003, but shot to an almost legendary performance shortly after Hougaard left to join the Leicester Tigers in England.

He set numerous records during the 2009 Super 14 series, including footing four drop goals in a single match against the Crusaders in the semifinal at Loftus. He scored another nine points in the same match, leading the Bulls to victory through a triumphant 36-23 win and earning him the title of 2009 Super 14 Player of the Year, as well as the Players' Player of the Year.

But this was only the beginning. The man in the number-10 green jersey amazed the crowds yet again as he broke new records against New Zealand during the 2009 Tri-Nations match in Durban. The Boks claimed conquest by a 31-19 advantage over the All Blacks; owing entirely to Steyn's scoring every single last point of the match through eight penalty kicks and a converted try.

Despite taking the rugby world by storm and becoming the *liefling* of the Loftus Versfeld crowd, Steyn is a remarkably down-to-earth young man.

I meet Steyn after the descending mob of journalists have satiated their hunger, petering out of the press conference room and leaving Steyn and fellow Springboks Schalk Burger and Victor Matfield to their day.

He opts to sit in a quiet corner, so as not to be easily disturbed, and settles down for the interview wearing white shorts and a grey

hoodie thrown over his green Springbok jersey. Unfazed by the spotlight in which he has found himself, Steyn is calm, in control and quietly spoken, even somewhat reserved.

He was born a Capetonian, but moved with his parents to Bloemfontein as a toddler, where he attended Fichardt Park Primary School with fellow flyhalf, Pienaar.

They parted ways when Steyn moved on to Sand du Plessis High School, whereas Pienaar attended Grey College, regarded by many as "the" rugby school.

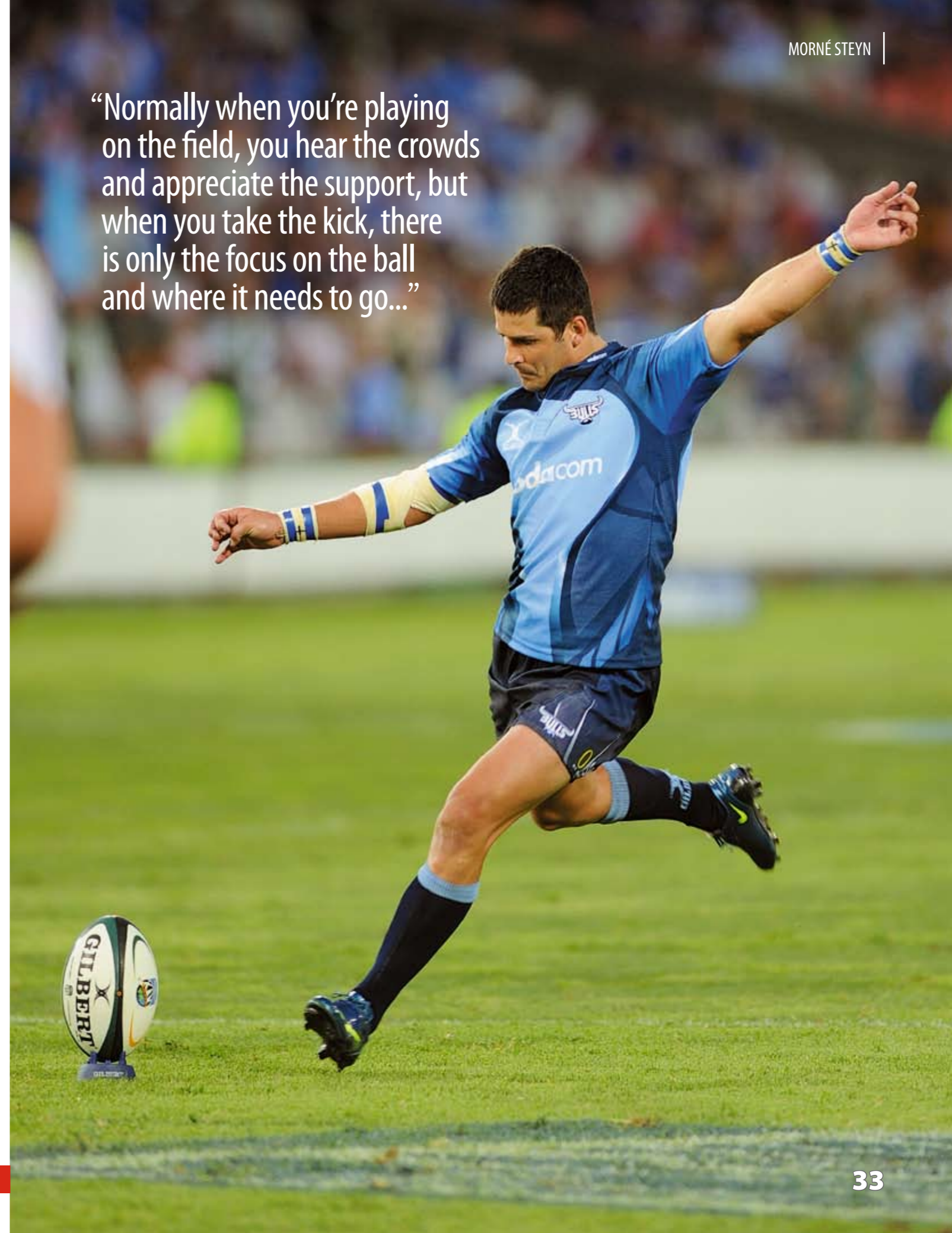
In 2003, at the tender age of 19, Steyn moved to Pretoria to play for the Bulls and, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

He admits that playing professional rugby, and becoming a Springbok, had been a childhood dream. "Rugby has always been a big part of my life; my dad played rugby and he and Ruan's dad were close friends", he says, referring to former Springbok player, Gysie Pienaar.

But those days are long gone and Steyn has since become a celebrity. I ask him if it has changed his life, and he chuckles. "I was just chatting to Wynand (Olivier) about it the other day", he says, commenting on my mentioning rugby fame. "We were just saying how really big all this is – really big. It's just awesome to be amongst the best players in the country but..." he reflects, "it's probably something that you can only really fathom much later in life, when you can look back on it all."

He concurs that so much of it is also a matter of perspective. "It's kind of funny. We were just talking about that, too."

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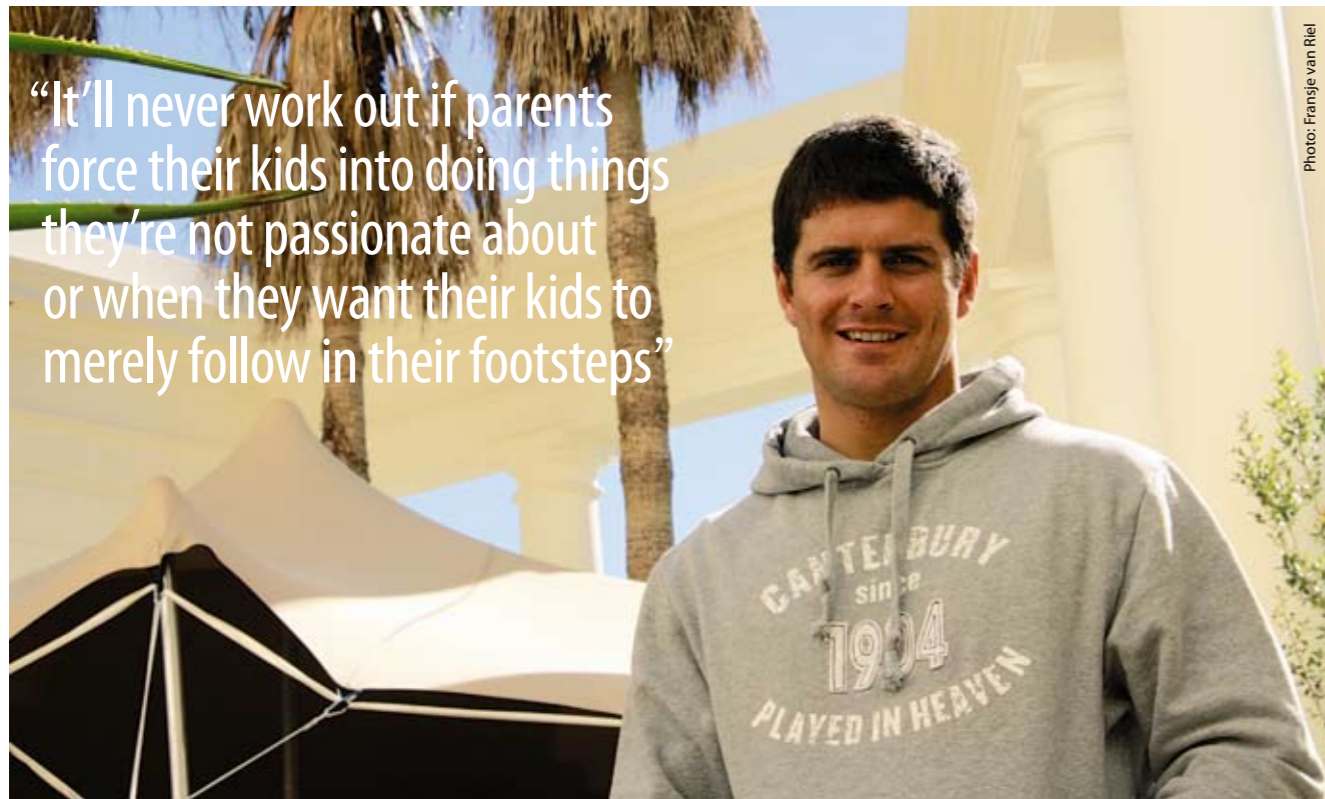


Photo: Fransje van Riel

“It’ll never work out if parents force their kids into doing things they’re not passionate about or when they want their kids to merely follow in their footsteps”

“The crowd cheers for you in green, but boos you if you’re playing against their provincial team!”

It is refreshing to listen to Steyn’s modest approach to his success, and to listen to him as he acknowledges the people involved and the support from family.

“It starts with the parents,” he tells me, explaining how grateful he is for having been given the opportunity to follow his dreams and to pursue what he loves doing best.

“It’ll never work out if parents force their kids into doing things they’re not passionate about or when they want their kids to merely follow in their footsteps.

“For kids to be able to achieve their dreams, their dreams need to be theirs. You have to enjoy what you are doing because it takes a lot of self-discipline to get there. You have to go full out and do what it takes,” adds Steyn.

Wise words, indeed.

It is ironic that Steyn began his rugby career as a running flyhalf and was not known for his kicking game.

“It’s all thanks to Vlok”, he tells me, explaining that he was advised and coached to develop his kicking skills to diversify and

better his overall playing performance by Bulls kicking coach, Vlok Cilliers.

The dividends certainly paid off. With 643 points and 11 drop goals under his belt, and being leading points scorer in the 2009 Super Rugby season, statistics reveal that Steyn’s overall kicking performance this year is at 80% – 6% higher than this time last year.

I ask him how it feels to be standing at the centre of the stadium’s attention as he prepares to take that kick. The corner of his mouth curls up and he breaks into a modest smile.

“That’s when you just zone everything else out. Normally, when you’re playing on the field, you hear the crowds and appreciate the support, but when you take the kick, there is only the focus on the ball and where it needs to go.”

It is no secret that Steyn has been a long-term fan of England flyhalf, Jonny Wilkinson.

He read Wilkinson’s latest book two years ago and it left an indelible impression, instilling him with inspiration and enforcing a strong sense of determination and perseverance to bring into his game.

And the results speak for themselves. Polishing off the Super 14 series in May this year with a kick that propelled the Bulls toward a

25-17 victory in the final against the Stormers at Orlando Stadium in Soweto, Steyn grossed 20 out of the 25 winning points.

We part in the lobby of the hotel and I wish him luck for Saturday’s game. With a wave, he turns and walks away, blending into the crowd.

Two days later, in a capacity-filled Newlands Stadium, Steyn does it again and collectively bags 12 points by way of three penalties and three conversions, adding insult to injury to the French after early tries scored by Pierre Spies and Gio Aplon, resulting in a 42-17 win.

With Steyn’s consistent kicking genius over the past year, he is destined to become one of South Africa’s greatest rugby players, but despite offers, he is not keen to swap the blue and green for any other colour jersey.

“It’s really great to see all these places, but I don’t want to play for any other country than South Africa,” he says, beaming with national pride.

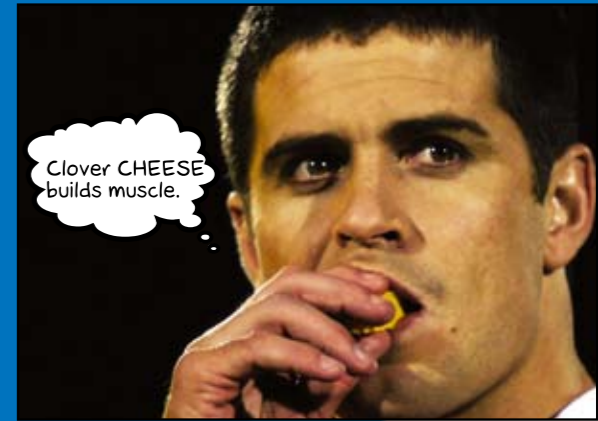
Steyn’s boyhood dream has come true. A dream that looks to continue for some time to come.

Fransje van Riel

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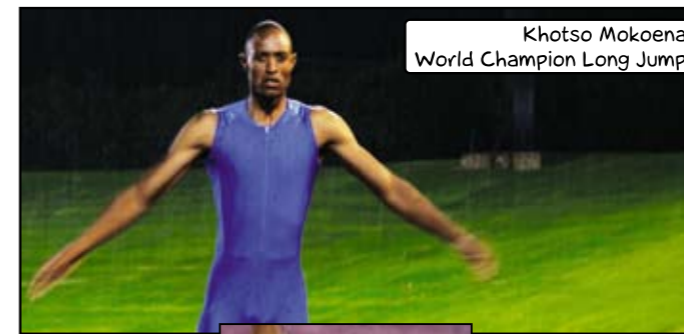
Morné Steyn  
Internationally Acclaimed Flyhalf



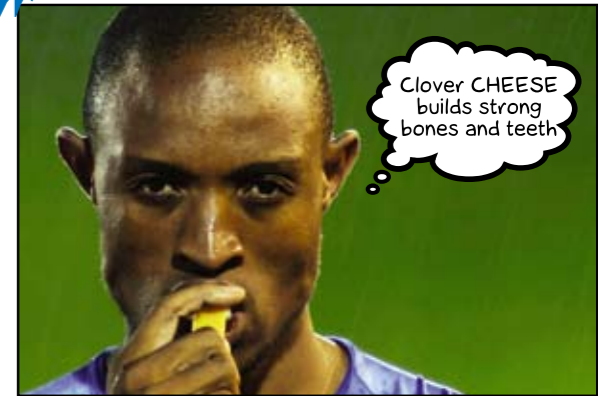
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