



Foreword

By Eben Etzebeth

The 2023 trophy tour across the country was like the 2019 homecoming on steroids. It was simply unreal to see so many happy South Africans celebrating the Springboks.

Every neighbourhood we went to, rich or poor, was a joyful scene and to see that from the top of a bus with your teammates was extraordinary. It will be with me always.

In 2019, the country couldn't grasp what had happened because we had not been expected to win. Back then, Rassie (Erasmus)' goal had always been to win the 2023 World Cup and if we could pull off a 2019 victory, it would be a bonus.

But in 2023 our fans expected us to win and there was far more pressure on us because we had a mature squad and a title to defend. Nothing but a win would satisfy South Africa.

A great deal was said about our "Pool of Death", and our approach to surviving it was to treat the opening game against Scotland as if it was the final. If we won it, the pressure was off us in terms of qualifying. With respect to Tonga and Romania, we were expected to beat them, so if there was a mishap against Ireland and we had beaten Scotland, we would still go through.

There was enormous relief when we strangled the Scots out of the game.

Early in the tournament, we lost Malcolm (Marx) to injury and it was a massive blow for us because the Bomb Squad can only fire if you have a world-class front row on the bench. Once Malcolm got injured, it diminished the impact of the Bomb Squad because he and Bongi (Mbonambi) had

been the only recognised hookers.

Then we heard Handré (Pollard) was replacing Malcolm. I have never seen Handré play hooker but it was good to see him! We knew the calmness he would bring and how important that would be in the playoff games. Handré's arrival put a smile on our faces.

In terms of rewiring the Bomb Squad after Malcolm left, Deon (Fourie) came through magnificently as the new hooker, and the problem was solved.

The Ireland game stands out to me as pivotal in us winning the tournament, which might sound strange considering we lost. But witnessing how their players celebrated, with their army of fans singing "Zombie" at deafening levels, was tough to take.

The pain of that loss was the turnaround for me in the World Cup. Yes, if we had beaten Ireland, we might still have gone all the way but losing changed our mindset. It made us more desperate. The focus in our preparations sharpened.

We would go on to win three playoff games by one point and I have my opinion of why that was no fluke.

I put it down to the warrior fabric in our squad that has been sewn from the diverse backgrounds of the players. In the past, a Springbok squad would have big representations from the traditional rugby schools. You would have, say, five top schools providing five players each, but this time players came from 30 different schools.