



## Sport

BY RICHARD BECHT

# Try and wow me

Another trying time in the Tri Nations? Give us a test series worth remembering.

**T**ri Nations time should mean buckling up and enjoying the ride. Whether it does is moot these days.

Of course, passion levels always rise when New Zealand engages with its most familiar rugby union rivals.

Though I risk sounding old-fashioned – or just plain old – by saying this, rugby union is simply not the same and never has been since the Tri Nations emerged with so many promises about this professional beast's brave new existence.

With the exception of the very first year in 1996, that is. At least then there was a transitional phase combining the best of the new in the Tri Nations and best of the old in the form of an unforgettable test series between New Zealand and South Africa.

Remember what a test series was? And that's the point, because the All Blacks

Take me on: Springbok Ricky Januarie gives Richie McCaw the eye in Cape Town, 2008.



and the Springboks haven't had another since, not in the traditional style, yet cricket continues to revel in the excesses a test series can deliver. Look no further than the Ashes, a wonderful advertisement for all that is good – and sometimes unsavoury – about time-honoured sporting fare.

In rugby union, that has all but gone, the evolutionary process dictating that the Tri Nations should be the high point of the rugby year in these parts.

But not this time. Indeed, the code's peak has been and gone and it had nothing to do with the Tri Nations or the All Blacks.

Instead, it was, wait for it, a true blue test series – South Africa against the Lions. It had everything and then some: the Springboks sealed the series in the most contentious circumstances in the second test before the Lions blitzed them in the third to prevent a whitewash.

**N**ow connoisseurs must make do with second best, as the Tri Nations lacks the key components needed to hoist it up the wow scale. Having a round-robin format with no final as a focal point is one thing that should be reconsidered.

It's instructive that the All Blacks have played 75 internationals against South Africa, 33 of them in the past 13 years since the Tri Nations started (and just 42 spread over the first 74 years since the countries first messed with each other in 1921). And the ABs have met Australia 32 times since 1996.

In short, the mystique of the All Blacks tangling with the Wallabies and Springboks no longer applies. If anything, winning the Bledisloe Cup – the trans-tasman battle within the overall contest – is of greater significance than claiming the Tri Nations title.

There's nothing boring about winning. The All Blacks have been far superior in that department during the Tri Nations' brief history, snaring the title nine times and also compiling the only positive record of the three countries in terms of wins minus losses (39-17 from 56 matches).

But success in the Tri Nations era has arguably been of little assistance to the All Blacks while immeasurably helping their Southern Hemisphere foes. After all, New Zealand won the Tri Nations in 1999, 2003 and 2007 but did no better than make the semi-finals at the Rugby World Cup in 1999 and 2003 and slumped in the quarter-finals in 2007.

Sit back then for more Tri Nations monotony – and rue the old days long since gone. ■

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## Tri Nations winners 1996-2008

Year	Winner
1996	New Zealand
1997	New Zealand
1998	South Africa
1999	New Zealand
2000	Australia
2001	Australia
2002	New Zealand
2003	New Zealand
2004	South Africa
2005	New Zealand
2006	New Zealand
2007	New Zealand
2008	New Zealand

Hands full: All Black captain Sean Fitzpatrick with the Tri Nations and Bledisloe Cup trophies, 1997.

