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# BREAKING IT DOWN

Having had to totally reinvent himself, Scottish coach Richie Gray is now the force behind the Springboks' breakdown

**I**T'S A horrible question to ask, but what would you do if you were told that the job you had always loved, in your home country, was chips, done, over? We'd all moan like hell, obviously, but after that there would be several different options to take. Not many, you could assume, would pick up a toolbox and head for the shed.

Yet that is exactly what proud Borderer Richie Gray did when his stint coaching for the Scottish Rugby Union was brought to an end. Confined to his own garage, he set about developing what he saw as the perfect machine to help teams practise their rucking.

As his device took off and he began work to reimagine some of the game's most recognisable bits of equipment, he found himself in demand as a specialist breakdown coach. His eventual destination was South Africa and now he faces a showdown with the land of his birth in Pool B of the Rugby World Cup.

Quite a leap but a tale that stands testament to the virtues of graft and a good book of contacts.

A gregarious character with a journeyman's soul, Gray had enjoyed a colourful playing career in Scotland's Caledonia region as a lock. He was a popular and innovative PE teacher, a natural mentor for young players and understandably he was an attractive prospect for the Scottish youth set-up. He had gravitated towards the Border Reivers, a comfortable fit for the man from Galashiels. But the good times there weren't to last as the pro side dissolved in 2007.

"When the Borders went it took me by surprise," says Gray. "We lost a lot of good people, a lot of good rugby folk. I had to redefine myself. Then, two days after leaving, I was asked if I'd like to do some media work for STV. After 12 years of working in rugby I was commentating with Archie Macpherson at a place like Hibs football club. When John Collins, a fellow Gala man, saw me asking questions he almost fell off his chair!"

Forget that football was part of his media life; it had never felt right being away from rugby. The game was in his blood and although he was lost without the sport, he could do something about it. In his words, it came down to the choice of "lie down and die or get up and fight".

He had always had this mentality. Never big enough or heavy enough or fast enough as a player, Gray had to go the extra mile. He took that mentality into his coaching →

→ and afterwards his time in rugby's wilderness – he was never shy about pursuing fact-finding missions abroad. He left the media and took up a post at Borders College and started thinking about the game, what in it really interested him. The breakdown became the crush on his consciousness. He wanted to know everything about the contact area. So he went on the road again.

"I had always struggled to find the perfect rucking drill," says Gray. "I started talking to guys like Richie Dixon, who used to coach Scotland and was working with Georgia. I spent a year analysing the breakdown and went out to study Clermont Auvergne in France. The heavy forwards kept falling over the ruck. They did very little work on body height. No one mentioned body height. I had some ideas.

"After a year and a half, I was working on a machine (the Collision King – a low-slung, backwards-leaning bag fixed to a sled). I built it in my garage. I had an engineer mate look at the ideas and another mate helped out with the welding. I showed it to Richie who called it 'outstanding' and then Jim Telfer came round. He walked around it for 15 minutes without saying anything and then just said, 'Aye'."

Now Gray had those two on board, he needed a big name he had never met before to give it a final stamp of approval. The Scotland head coach at the time was Andy Robinson, who made the trip to Gala to run an analytical eye over the machine. He demanded four for RWC 2011 there and then – but Gray had only made the one.

From there, things snowballed. Rhino got on board and began production. England and Wales snapped up Collision Kings. Word spread. He was asked to take



**Ideas man**  
Richie Gray invented a rucking machine

## "I STRUGGLED TO FIND THE PERFECT RUCKING DRILL, SO I BUILT A MACHINE IN MY GARAGE"

seminars and talk players through his ideas. Former Springbok back-row and respected coach Rassie Erasmus pulled him to South Africa and it was here that Gray hooked up with Heyneke Meyer, a man who already knew his fair share about Gray.

"My path first crossed with Richie way back in the mid-90s," Meyer tells *Rugby World*. "I toured Scotland



**Training aid** Wales using the Collision Kings

### DID YOU KNOW?

Gray has helped create 14 brand-new pieces of equipment and says he has had an input in redeveloping 80% of Rhino's product range – even working with St Helens in rugby league.

with teams from the Teachers' Training College in Pretoria in 1996 and South Western Districts in 1997, and we played against his sides from the Borders. Then, in 2002, he visited a number of provincial teams in South Africa on a personal development trip for Scottish rugby and spent some time at the Blue Bulls.

"After I was appointed Springbok coach in 2012, I identified the breakdown as a key area where we could improve and tried to get him involved as I knew he was the right guy for the job. He first joined us in August 2013 and immediately started making a difference, especially in the individual work he put in with a lot of our younger players, such as Marcell Coetzee."

Gray is one of life's wheeler-dealers. Shrewd and street smart but also disarmingly self-effacing. But what Meyer is hitting on here is Gray's painstaking attention to detail. In our chat he talks of the 160-plus breakdowns in a game, how even three years ago the discipline was being neglected, how this World Cup could see a line in the sand over the need for players to be aware of their own safety and that of their →



**Smash and grab**  
South Africa halt England

# "IT'S A HUGE PERSONAL PRIDE THING. I HAVE A PASSION TO WIN"

### HEYNEKE MEYER ON THE WORLD CUP

"FOR US, every match in the Rugby World Cup is a must-win. It is a unique competition and unlike anything we've played in before. It's longer, all in one country and in one week we have two matches. But the basics will be the same for all the teams

→ opponents in collisions – all owing to good technique. He is the arch acolyte of a niche area.

Meyer sees that. "These days, the breakdown and the speed at which you get the ball back on attack – as well as how you spoil your opponents' ball – is such a vital part of the game," says the South Africa head coach.

"Richie came in and from the first day he has brought in new ideas and drills, which he has also implemented at our provincial unions and even the Springbok sevens team, to ensure our top players are up to speed with modern tendencies and how things work at the breakdown. He has made a massive difference in the way we approach the breakdown in South Africa.

"Richie is a team player, he is a teacher, he is creative, and he has enthusiasm, passion and a will to never stop learning and to never give up. He is one of the most passionate rugby men I've ever met, an incredibly hard worker and meticulous planner. In short, he's added an incredible amount to our team in the last three seasons."

Of course, what this all boils down to is that one of the most innovative and respected coaches in the world game will be facing off against his homeland during this World Cup, the Boks taking on Scotland at St James' Park on Saturday 3 October. Does the man himself have any reservations about that?

"I'd be a complete liar if I said it was a dilemma!" laughs Gray. "I'm so proud of where I come from but in pro sport I want to be the best and I want my players to be the best. It's a huge personal pride thing.

"I have this passion to win – it doesn't matter who against. It's just the same as when Vern Cotter would have wanted to defeat New Zealand last season, even though he is from New Zealand." →



**Point of difference**  
Meyer says Gray has transformed the Boks at the contact area

and, in the end, everything we've worked for comes down to those few weeks in England.

Having said that, I'm extremely excited about the prospect of going to the World Cup – it will be my second one as I was one of Nick Mallett's assistants in 1999. I can't wait. This will probably be the closest World Cup yet.

I have no doubt that player management and recovery will be the greatest day-to-day challenge. It's quite a long tournament and will be the longest tour we will have embarked on as a team since I took over in 2012.

However, we've done our planning

and the players will get enough time to recharge their batteries in between the hard work we have to do on the field. It will also be great to see new parts of England. We've never played in Brighton, Birmingham or Newcastle – but we are not on a holiday.

Big competitions are tough for coaches. I get on well with almost all of them from the top nations as they are the only ones – together with former coaches – who really know what you go through in this job, the pressure, the working environment and the expectations of our countrymen.

For me, it's about living my dream, accepting the responsibility and expectation, making a difference in people's lives, giving hope to our nation and making South Africans proud. I'm pretty sure the same goes for all the top international coaches."