

A GREAT VARSITY MAN

- TOM HAMMAN



Varsity Greats - the Neville Isdell lunch group - from left:

Ian McCullum, John Le Roux, TOM HAMMAN, NEVILLE ISDELL, Dave Stewart, Steve Leith, H.O De Villiers, Piet Olivier, Gus Enderstein, Mike Hoard, Preston Robertson, Neville Leck, Rob Bertram, Carl Snitcher, Gavin Fernie, Dugald McDonald.

by Gavin Fernie. UCT rugby is synonymous with a very special time in the life of thousands of young men over the period of 128 proud years of existence as a rugby club in South Africa. Most men who played rugby at UCT, at whatever level, will tell that it was the best years of their lives. All quickly forget the odd pain and suffering inflicted by opponents or own teammates in fierce practices; or the devastation of not seeing your name on the preferred team sheet on Wednesday. What lingers is the fierce exultation on those special days when it all went right, when the coach almost praised one after a big game, and the favoured young lady smiled adoringly at you. Those were the days!

Throughout those years at UCT, when rugby was the core of one's existence, and academic minima the poor orphan, a hugely influential figure in the rugby devotee's life was the coach. In the sixties many of us had the great privilege to be coached by Tom Hamman. Tom recently turned 90; another of his considerable achievements in a life full of challenges met with grace and style. Those two words sum up Tom for many of us. The bare facts do not tell Tom's story adequately, but in brief they are as follows:

- Born 1920
- Schooling at SACS
- Studied engineering at UCT; started playing rugby for UCT at the age of 16
- Studies interrupted by WW2; Tom was a pilot in the SAAF
- Resumed studies at UCT and completed engineering degree after the war and then completed medical degree, specializing in Radiology in the early sixties.

The first time Tom's name appears in the senior team sheets for Intervarsity is in 1948 as a new member of the 1st. Team which won Intervarsity 12-3. In 1949 Tom was a member of a power packed Combined Southern Universities team which narrowly lost to the 1949 All Blacks 9-11. In the same year, UCT beat the Maties 9-8 in Intervarsity and won the Grand Challenge for that year.

They also toured Kenya and Uganda at the end of the year winning all their 15 games on tour. Tom was an integral part of that touring party.

From 1950 to 1952 Tom captained Varsity and the significant results were: lost Intervarsity 5-11 in 1950, but won the Grand Challenge again. In 1951 the Intervarsity result was a very unusual draw, 0-0 at the final whistle. One can only imagine the relief that the game was finally over. In the same year Tom captained a Western Province Universities side against Combined Oxford and Cambridge in a thrilling 16 all drawn game.

'UCT gained their highest Intervarsity winning total ever in 1952, when, under Tom Hamman they won by 24 points to 8.' In this one sentence, Louis Babrow and Dick Stent's famous UCT rugby book, 'The Varsity Spirit', sums up the great achievements of the UCT RFC under the inspired leadership of Tom Hamman and coached by Louis Babrow. Amazingly Tom's name appears again in 1953 as Captain of the 2nd. XV in Intervarsity, and finally as a team member in 1954, when UCT beat the Maties again in Intervarsity. As they had only drawn the 1953 Intervarsity game, the inference is that no matter how busy he was with his medical studies, the magic name missing on the 1st Team Sheet was Hamman. Truly an amazing record; Seven years of senior rugby at UCT, starting at the age of 18, winning Intervarsity 4 times, and the Grand Challenge twice during that period. Add to that his inspirational captaincy and his other honours against touring teams and one begins to appreciate the calibre of Tom Hamman, the player and captain.

All of us who passed through the hands of Tom Hamman in the 1960's, respected him enormously, and as we got to know him, realized that this quiet man (unless you did not get stuck in on the field) had a knack of letting you express yourself on and off the rugby field, to enjoy your rugby and to listen to his quiet, wise counsel. He analyzed your opposition each week before a club game,

and gave you advice on how to play the opponent to your advantage. None of us will forget the fierce rivalry for first team places at the Tuesday tight practices; these games were often tougher than the league games on Saturday. One particularly important final practice before Intervarsity in the

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mid sixties was like a pitched battle between the shadow 1st. and 2nd. XV's.

UCT had a riches of top class loose forwards at the time, and this resulted in an off the ball incident in which one of Varsity's luminaries, Neville Isdell, who rose in the business world to be worldwide head of Coca Cola, was 'hip-thrown' by his challenger for the coveted spot in the first team. In today's game this would be interpreted as a spear tackle. The rest of the squad stood frozen in horror at the potential damage to our charismatic, flame-haired flanker, but fortunately, Neville uncoiled his long frame off the ground, and got back on his feet, shaken but not stirred. Tom stepped forward and barked at the perpetrator, "OFF, OFF!" That was the kind of man Tom was as a coach. Tough, but fair.

Finally, the incident related by Basil Bey, the legendary Varsity player, 1st Team captain, coach, pre-eminent schools coach, and above all, a character who epitomizes the ethos and spirit of Varsity rugby, sums up the other side of Tom Hamman.

As the story goes, Alistair Williams was dancing with a delightful young lady at a ball held in Nairobi, for the 1958 UCT Touring side to Kenya, managed by Tom Hamman. Alistair felt a great big paw on his shoulder, and that unmistakable gruff voice said, "Make way for a man, Sonny."

We salute you Tom, and wish you many more fruitful years.