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Scrumming Against All Odds: Lives, Voices, and Democratic Education

Esau, Omar. *Scrumming Against All Odds: Voices of SARU Rugby Legends.* Cape Town: Burnet Media, pp. 1-263, 2025. ISBN: 9781990956775.

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Introduction

In South Africa, rugby has long been more than a game. Under apartheid, it became a deeply politicized site of contestation, where questions of identity, justice, and belonging played out in the shadow of state-enforced segregation. For the apartheid regime, rugby symbolized Afrikaner pride and white dominance; for many Black South Africans, it was both a field of exclusion and a stage for resistance. *Scrumming Against All Odds*, edited by Omar Esau, tells the stories of those who chose resistance over accommodation. By gathering oral histories of South African Rugby Union (SARU) players and referees who refused to participate in apartheid's racially segregated sport, the book does more than preserve memory: it enacts democratic education.

To understand the claim that a book about rugby can simultaneously serve as a curriculum of democracy requires a close examination of its accomplishments. Democratic education rests on principles of voice, participation, justice, inclusion, and critical memory. *Scrumming Against All Odds* embodies these values through the way it remembers. It recovers the voices of players long silenced by official archives; it demonstrates how rugby clubs became democratic spaces under conditions of oppression; it restores dignity and recognition to figures deliberately excluded; and it insists that memory itself is pedagogical, serving as a practice of teaching democracy through the act of remembrance.

Narratives of Resistance and Belonging

The opening chapters set the tone by highlighting figures who refused to compromise. Salie Fredericks, remembered through the lens of subaltern studies, chose not to participate in apartheid rugby despite the consequences. In doing so, he modeled a refusal that resonates as a democratic act of defiance. Omar Esau, Senior Lecturer in Curriculum Studies at Stellenbosch University and a scholar

of social justice and curriculum transformation, reconstructs Fredericks' refusal as decolonial pedagogy. For Esau, Fredericks embodies the principle that the subaltern can speak when the historian chooses to listen.

In his second chapter, Esau turns to Yusuf Davids, whose leadership at Roslyns Rugby Club demonstrates how oppressed communities built democratic spaces from below. Davids' commitment to solidarity and agency reveals how local clubs functioned as microcosms of democracy, sites where dignity was nurtured and belonging safeguarded despite wider exclusion. Esau's narrative inquiry, grounded in community pedagogy, amplifies Davids' voice as both leader and educator through sport. Mogamat Noor Davids, historian and community intellectual and Associate Professor of Education at UNISA, focuses on Moegsien "Max Baise" Davids, celebrated not only as a player but as a referee. In a society where fairness was structurally denied, Moegsien's commitment to integrity on the field takes on symbolic weight. Refereeing becomes a metaphor for democracy itself: impartiality and accountability enacted under conditions of hostility.

Mohammad Faaiz Gierdien, a critical pedagogue and Associate Professor Emeritus of Curriculum Studies at Stellenbosch University, narrates the life of Yusuf "Jowa" Abrahams. Abrahams was not only a rugby player but also a moral exemplar, inspired by the martyred Imam Abdullah Haron. For Gierdien, Abrahams' story reveals how sport and politics intermingled: to play with integrity was to act politically, embodying moral courage and civic responsibility. The story of Manie Abrahams, remembered by Nazli Domingo-Salie, transports the reader into the rugby politics of the 1950s and 1960s. Through Walmers Rugby Club, Abrahams found belonging in a time of exclusion. Domingo-Salie's narrative foregrounds community as a democratic virtue, reminding readers that democracy is lived not only in political institutions but also in the bonds of solidarity that sustain communities under oppression.

Sacrifice and Brilliance

Few chapters capture sacrifice as powerfully as the one on Cassiem Jabaar, written by Suraya Jabaar Esau and Achmat Esau. A player of world-class talent, Jabaar refused to benefit from apartheid's "normalization" of segregated sport. He chose justice over personal advancement, modeling the democratic principle of sacrifice for the common good. The family-based testimony also reflects an ethic of shared memory: history as something carried and transmitted by communities, not monopolized by official archives.

Ismail "Miley" Schroeder, celebrated by Mogamat Goosain Abrahams, represents another facet of democratic education. A brilliant backline player, Schroeder's talent lifted the pride of his community. His excellence was not just individual but collective, creating recognition and dignity where apartheid sought to deny them. For Abrahams, Schroeder's brilliance becomes pedagogical: a lesson in how individual achievement can nurture democratic identity for an

entire community. Clement du Plessis, an experienced sports journalist, honors SARU referees such as Graham Petersen and Oswald Jacobs. By focusing on referees as the "unsung heroes," du Plessis widens the lens of resistance. Impartiality and accountability in refereeing become symbols of democracy under siege. His chapter reminds readers that democracy depends not only on visible heroes but also on those who ensure fairness in everyday practices.

Legacies Beyond the Field

The democratic vision of the book also lies in its insistence that rugby was never just about sport. Riyaadh Najaar, written about by Faseeg Manie, exemplifies this point. Najaar's life extended into education and leadership, showing that the virtues cultivated in rugby—resilience, commitment, and solidarity—were also democratic virtues for society at large. Najaar becomes a model of holistic citizenship, extending the meaning of democratic education beyond the game. Faiek "Blatchang" Hendricks, affectionately remembered by Shamila Sulayman, embodied perseverance against hardship. His life story illustrates resilience not as a solitary achievement but as something inseparable from community contribution. Hendricks' democratic lesson is that dignity and justice are always collective.

In a unique contribution, Tauriq Britton tells his own story. His autobiographical chapter is itself an act of democratic self-authorship: refusing to be spoken for, Britton asserts his right to narrate his own identity. The democratic lesson here is profound: individuals must be authors of their own history if democracy is to have meaning. Faiek Davids, a double Springbok celebrated by Ebrahim Galant, stands as a challenge to exclusionary systems. His versatility across rugby codes embodies recognition and fairness, reminding readers that democracy involves breaking down barriers and insisting on inclusion. Naadir Isaacs, written about by Mishka Esau, illustrates resilience across generations. Mishka's younger voice infuses the narrative with intergenerational continuity, reminding us that democratic education is not static but renewed through memory and transmission. Finally, Dale Santon, celebrated in a second chapter by Faseeg Manie, represents triumph against exclusion. His perseverance eventually secured recognition and equality, teaching that democratic justice is often slow but attainable through endurance and persistence.

Scrumming for Justice

In the concluding chapter, I situate these stories within a broader reflection on justice, resistance, and inclusion. I argue that memory, voice, and resistance constitute citizenship learning; to remember is to learn how to be democratic. The conclusion ensures the book is not only a historical record but also a curriculum of democratic education. As editor, Omar Esau organizes the book as an act of engaged scholarship. His refusal to position himself as the sole authority mirrors his democratic commitment: knowledge is co-created with academics,

community intellectuals, family members, and players. By doing so, Esau transforms *Scrumming Against All Odds* from a collection of biographies into a collective democratic project. The book's publication was made possible through the support of Gavin Varejes, founder of the South African Rugby Legends Association (SARLA). Varejes' sponsorship ensures that these stories are not confined to academic audiences but reach wider publics. His role reflects the democratic responsibility of resources: enabling silenced histories to find recognition and ensuring memory is not the preserve of the privileged. Ultimately, *Scrumming Against All Odds* is best understood as a curriculum of democratic education. It shows that democracy is not given but forged in acts of refusal, in clubs that created belonging, in referees who upheld fairness, and in individuals who persevered against exclusion. By recovering these voices, the book does more than preserve history: it educates toward democratic justice, reminding readers that the unfinished work of democracy lies in remembering, resisting, and renewing communities of dignity.

From Rugby Fields to Universities: Lessons for Today

The virtues embodied by the players resonate strongly with the contemporary struggles of South African higher education. Salie Fredericks' refusal to compromise with apartheid rugby parallels the task of academics who must resist authoritarian managerialism in universities today. Cassiem Jabaar's sacrifice, privileging principle over personal advancement, echoes the ethical demand for scholars to place justice before narrow careerism. Ismail Schroeder's brilliance, which uplifted his community, reminds universities that intellectual excellence must serve dignity and inclusion, not elitism.

Equally, Riyaadh Najaar's holistic life, spanning rugby, education, and leadership, offers a model for universities: to educate not only for technical skill but also for social responsibility and civic contribution. Dale Santon's perseverance, which eventually brought recognition, reflects the struggles of students and academics who continue to fight for access, equity, and transformation. His story teaches that equality is won slowly, through persistence and collective resolve. Just as rugby clubs once nurtured solidarity and belonging under oppression, so too must universities cultivate communities of care, dialogue, and participation in the face of persistent inequality. The lesson of *Scrumming Against All Odds* is that democracy is never inherited; it must be continually enacted. On both rugby fields and in lecture halls, justice emerges when ordinary people refuse to be silenced, insist on fairness, and work collectively to sustain dignity.

This vision resonates deeply with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through / with other persons"). *Ubuntu* insists that human flourishing arises not in isolation but through community. The rugby clubs of SARU exemplified *Ubuntu* in practice: players

sacrificed individual advancement for the well-being of their communities, referees upheld fairness for the integrity of the game, and leaders nurtured belonging in the face of exclusion. Likewise, universities today must embrace *Ubuntu* as a guiding ethic, fostering solidarity, recognizing the humanity of each student and scholar, and enacting care as a democratic practice. In doing so, higher education can carry forward the same lesson that these rugby stories teach: that justice and democracy are sustained only when lived through relationships of dignity, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

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