

**ARU LEVEL 4 COURSE**  
**TASK 7 – LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**  
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## **South Africa's Rugby World Cup Dominance: The Art of Winning Collisions in 2019 and 2023**

### **Introduction:**

South Africa's triumphs in the 2019 and 2023 Rugby World Cups stand as a testament to their mastery of the art of winning collisions on the rugby field. This essay explores the key areas where South Africa showcased their physical dominance, emphasizing their ability to win collisions in the following areas the tackle contest, defence, and the set-piece. To showcase their physical dominance in '2019 on their way to triumph South Africa's director of rugby Rassie Erasmus – then the head coach – adopted a system of setting up his bench for maximum impact. By using a six-two split (with six forwards and two back on the bench) the team could maintain a level of physical output up front. This group of six massive reinforcements in the forwards came to be known as the 'Bomb Squad' (RW Staff 2023).

On the way to winning the 2023 world cup the Springboks were the first team to use a bench of 7 forwards and 1 back designed around physical prowess and physical dominance in the collision areas of the game. This led to some in the media to criticise the tactic according to (Imray, 2023) "An overtly forward-heavy bench has been criticized by some as reducing rugby to an uninventive physical barrage — normally of Springboks big men". Tamaiti Williams All Blacks prop in response to the Springboks employing the 7 – 1 split stated before the 2023 final "You've got to match the physicality they are going to bring" (Latham-Coyle, 2023) Drawing on relevant statistics from the past two World Cups, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how South Africa's prowess in winning collisions and physicality became the cornerstone of their success on the global stage.

### **South Africa's Dominance in Winning Collisions:**

#### **Tackle Contest:**

The breakdown, often considered the heart of winning collisions, was an area where South Africa excelled during the 2019 and 2023 world cups. Key players like Kwagga Smith, Eben Ezebeth and big midfielders Damian De Ellende & Deon Fourie allow the springboks to dominate the collision at the ruck and dictate the speed of the game, giving them the ability to use quick ball and unleash their potent and speedy outside backs, or slow their breakdown down to use their kicking game from the base of the ruck to pressure teams with their kick chase pressure. In 2019 they secured 95% of their ball finishing 10<sup>th</sup> (RWC 2019 Statistical Report) and the 2023 WC they won 96.3% of their own ball at the breakdown finishing 4<sup>th</sup> equal for the tournament (Opta Trend Report RWC 2023).

The Springboks physicality was even more prevalent on opposition ball where they exerted pressure on opposing team's breakdown ball with dominant tackles and getting big bodies over the ball to slow down the breakdown. Stats from the 2019 and 2023 highlight South Africa's efficiency at the breakdown, where they were the best

team at both WCs at slowing down opposition ruck ball. In the 2023 world cup oppositions average ruck speed at 4.35s per ruck while Samoa ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> with 4.13s per ruck (Opta Trend Report RWC 2023). Individually Kwagga Smith led all players with the most breakdown steals, and Deon Fourie finished 4<sup>th</sup> in steals. The ability to control the breakdown significantly contributed to South Africa's overall game control and territorial dominance.

### **Defence:**

In the 2019 and 2023 World Cups, South Africa's defence has been a defining factor in their success. The Springboks employ a rush defence which has 13 defenders in the front line and only 2 players in the back field to defuse kicks and line breaks. Because the wingers stay high, they put pressure on the attack by employing a rush defence looking to funnel the attack back infield to where their big forwards are waiting to make big tackles and slow down the breakdown. According to (Bishop, 2019) the system is designed to get two players into the tackle leaving one of the defenders free to get over the ball and be disruptive at the breakdown.

Statistical analyses reveal that in 2019 the Springboks only conceded 1 try in the knockout phase of the tournament (World Rugby Statistical Analysis, 2022) and at the 2023 WC they were 2<sup>nd</sup> only to NZ in allowing 1.14 tries per game over the entire campaign (Opta Trend Report RWC 2023). They consistently boasted high tackle rates in 2023 they attempted 1234 tackles most of all teams making 78.8% finishing fifth in tackle percentage, preventing opposition teams from making significant progress and forcing turnovers. At the 2023 WC Damien De Allende and Siya Kolisi finished 1st and 2nd in dominant tackles made and Eben Ezebeth finishing 5th. Having 3 players in the top five of dominant tackles showcases the Springboks physicality and ability to play without ball in hand.

### **Scrum:**

The scrum is an area that South Africa prides themselves on and is another way they impose their physicality over opposition teams and having used this to their advantage in the 2019 and 2023 world cup. The scrum provides a platform for territorial gains and set-piece plays, with the Springboks consistently overpowering their opponents. They use the scrum to dictate the pace of the game by using the dark arts as a way of slowing down the game to take the pace out of it or to impose their will over opponents physically.

World Rugby data indicates that in 2019 South Africa won the most penalties out of all teams on their own scrum and they won the most turnovers and penalties on opposition feeds according to (2019 Statistical analysis). That dominance was evident in the final where “England were simply unable to exert their usual fluency. They were outmuscled by the powerful Springbok pack who won 11 scrums to England's three’ (Rugby World Cup, 2019). ‘Of the 11 scrums won 6 of them were by way of penalty as the English eight were splintered time and again’ described by (Baker, 23).

The Springboks also use the scrum to exert dominance on opposition scrum ball either winning tight heads or receive penalties by applying pressure on opposition ball when required. The front-row prowess of players like Ox Nche and Vincent Koch was a key factor in South Africa's scrum dominance in the 2023 semi-final and according to Poidevan (2023) changed the scrum contest dramatically with England's substitutes not in the same class. This scrum dominance led to the late penalty goal that won the match over England and put them into the World cup final. 'Without that goal England wins' (Poidevan, 2023). During the 2023 world cup South Africa scrum dominance saw them receive 12 scrum penalties on their own scrum and win 7 penalties of opposition the most in both categories (Opta Trend Report RWC 2023).

### **Lineout:**

South Africa's set piece dominance extends to their lineout as well, where their maul is much revered and is a go to weapon for the Springboks. The Springboks lineout is a source of where most of their tries originate from especially the maul. World Cup statistics reveal a high lineout success rate for South Africa, allowing them to maintain possession and maul or launch effective attacking plays. At the 2019 world cup they had a world cup best win percentage of 99% and also a tournament best 10 lineout steals (World Rugby Statistical Analysis, 2022) as per (RWC Statistical Report, 2022) of the 33 tries they scored 15 of them originated from their lineouts. To highlight how dominant and crucial their maul is in today's game (Imray, 2023) mentioned how in the 2019 the "lineout maul was a crucial try-scoring weapon for the Springboks four years ago". The Springboks backed that up in the 2023 world cup (Opta Trend Report RWC 2023) of the 27 tries they scored 10 of them originated from the lineout, the lineout proved to be the highest source of tries from all teams at both world cups for the Springboks. On the defensive side of the ball, they finished 2<sup>nd</sup> to NZ with 22 lineouts stolen (Opta Trend Report RWC 2023). The Springboks ability to exert pressure on both sides of the ball is testament to their size and physicality. This was emphasised in an article (Napier, 2019) the Boks ground Japan down with their maul ending their World cup by eliminating them in the quarter finals.

### **Impact of Winning Collisions on Match Outcomes:**

#### **1. Game Control and Territory:**

The ability to consistently win collisions, whether in the tackle contest, defence, or set pieces, contributed significantly to South Africa's overall game control. By dominating these key areas, they dictated the pace of matches and asserted territorial dominance. This control allowed them to unleash their attacking prowess or, conversely, slow down the game strategically.

#### **2. Psychological Advantage:**

The physicality exhibited by South Africa in collisions created a psychological advantage over opponents. The fear of facing the 'Bomb Squad' or a forward-heavy bench influenced opponents' tactical decisions, as evident in Tamaiti Williams' acknowledgment of the need to match the Springboks' physicality (Latham-Coyle, 2023). This psychological impact played a crucial role in the outcome of matches, particularly in high-stakes scenarios.

### 3. Blueprint for Success:

South Africa's success in winning collisions established a blueprint for triumph on the global stage. Coaches and teams worldwide are likely to study and learn from the Springboks' physical approach, shaping future coaching philosophies, player development, and tactical strategies. The legacy of their collision dominance will continue to influence the evolving landscape of international rugby.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, South Africa's Rugby World Cup triumphs in 2019 and 2023 were grounded in their exceptional ability to win collisions across all aspects of the game. The statistical evidence underscores the Springboks' dominance in the crucial areas of the game such as the tackle contest, defence, and set peice. The comprehensive nature of their collision dominance not only set them apart from other teams but also established a blueprint for success on the global stage. As described by (Baker, 23) "The Springboks, then (2019 RWC) as now, pride themselves **on their physicality and brutality** at the breakdown, the set-piece and in open play".

The impact of South Africa's collision-winning strategy goes beyond individual performances; it reflects the collective strength and determination ingrained in their team culture. The Springboks' ability to consistently outperform opponents in physical contests speaks to the meticulous preparation, strategic acumen, and resilience that define their approach to the game.

As rugby continues to evolve, South Africa's achievements in winning collisions serve as a benchmark for aspiring teams seeking success at the highest level. The art of winning collisions, exemplified by South Africa, remains a fundamental element in achieving triumph on the rugby field.

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