

Boks hold up the mirror after another loss

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Johannesburg - The Springboks are ready and have made the necessary adjustments after their first three Tri-Nations defeats, Springbok coach Peter de Villiers assured the media and public last week.

However, the conclusion after their fourth defeat from four outings and just a single log point in the competition is that they are simply not good enough or that something is drastically wrong.

It's time for the Springbok management to start taking some responsibility for the state of the team. At least the referee was not blamed for this defeat, although de Villiers said the All Blacks did get the bounce of the ball on all seven occasions. De Villiers and his selection committee must start questioning whether they have the right personnel on the field – and off it.

For the umpteenth time in his career, Bryan Habana shot up from the defensive line to make a try for the opposition that much easier.

Has he been spoken to about that and why does he persist? (And why hasn't he, in all his years of playing rugby, been taught to carry the ball under his left arm when running down the left-hand touchline?) It is also time to start asking questions about the Bok management.

For example, the All Blacks brought on fresh legs and South Africa left three players on the bench as the pace increased.

The All Blacks were exemplary in the way they brought their players onto the field - and the end result fittingly came from replacement Israel Dagg who evaded a tired Bok captain John Smit's tackle.

Does De Villiers not trust his bench? Or doesn't he have the depth of the All Blacks despite saying the contrary?

Whatever the reason, the visitors, playing at altitude, lasted and improved as the Boks lagged.

Is there no other game plan than driving up ball after ball and then kicking it away which resulted in the bulk of the All Blacks points? When the Springboks' backline, out of desperation, had to attack in the last minute, they lost control in the tackle. The turnover – of which there were many – brought the All Blacks victory.

Why were the All Blacks so often able to attack with their backs and the Boks not? While South Africa's one-on-one tackling was outstanding, the All Blacks too often created space where the Boks' defence fell short.

The question why an unfit Ricky Januarie - by admission of the Springbok management – was selected for the first seven Tests of the season before giving Francois Hougaard his first start is another that begs answering.

Hougaard showed he is clearly in a different class from Januarie who is now (at last) said by the Springbok management to be fit for rugby at this level.

All Blacks coach Graham Henry referred to the fitness of the All Blacks in the post-match media interview and had special praise for their fitness coach Nick Gill, saying he deserved credit for the way the team managed to snatch victory in the dying minutes.

"He doesn't often get credit, but he's got this team in great shape and it showed in the last 10 minutes, their fitness is superb," Henry said.

"We finished stronger and showed the ability to hang in there, the ability to do the job under all sorts of stress."

On Sunday, Henry repeated that this was probably the most satisfying Tri-Nations win although he did point out that every one of the previous nine titles were special to the All Blacks.

"But this one is the most recent and current and we're pleased at the way the guys played. Winning the Tri-Nations is always special because you're playing the other two top teams in the world."

Referring to the All Blacks, who conceded three defeats to the Boks last year, he said: "The team's progress has been quite significant. To win at the (FNB) Stadium and at altitude is a huge achievement and very satisfying."

Henry said he hoped the team would keep on improving. "It is important that you analyse the game correctly and it's not all positives and there are some negatives to work on. It's also important to analyse the opposition, to see how they helped you to win, if you know what I mean," he said smilingly.

"I think these are the important factors and that it will keep us getting better."

Henry said the three losses to South Africa last year were indeed a motivating factor for his team's improvement and their fitness.

Similarly the three Springbok losses this year will galvanise them, he predicted.

"There is plenty talent (in South Africa) to pick from and they won't be panicking (after coming so close) – and they shouldn't be panicking." – Sapa