

# The Vodacom United Rugby Championship – It's personal

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Marco van Staden sat down for just a few minutes in between his Vodacom United Rugby Championship shoot at the SuperSport studio in Johannesburg. The shoot was a content day aimed at the second half of a competition that has always had a strong focus on making rugby a game for everyone. Or rather, making rugby more personal.



*Marco van Staden, Vodacom Bulls*

This competition has done a lot for rugby since its inception, but perhaps the greatest thing it has done is make rugby personal – amongst the players and the fans.

Van Staden, in his role with the Vodacom Bulls and the Springboks, knows all about the power you unlock when rugby becomes personal.

“I’ve seen the effect rugby has on a country. From the national team to even what your union or club can do for your city. It’s about giving people a reason to smile on a Saturday and to hopefully keep that smile with them for the rest of the week. There are times when this game becomes personal in terms of giving people hope. You feel like you’re not playing for yourself but for something bigger. Even as a South African player, you bring that physicality we’re known for to a personal level because you’re playing for something bigger. When you see what it means to the people, it overshadows everything and you sense there is a bigger purpose.”

The Vodacom United Rugby Championship has been highly innovative in its ability to tap into the experiences people have and to give this full expression through the game of rugby.

It’s not enough to simply have players talking about their schoolboy rugby days. It becomes far more personal when you dedicate two rounds of the competition to these rugby roots. The recent Origins Rounds celebrated exactly this side of the game and the players were able to wear their school team’s rugby socks. The power of this is their own reflection on a journey that’s taken them from Saturday afternoons playing their hearts out for their school to Saturday afternoons living their schoolboy dreams in the biggest stadiums in the game. And it’s a message to every single schoolboy out there who briefly lifts his head from his homework to be able to think, “What if?”

This game becomes personal through the Jukskei Derby or the North versus South clash – matches that have captivated generations of South African rugby players and which the Vodacom United Rugby Championship elevates even further. These are matches that mean everything to the players and are unique to the game of rugby in their ability to pit teams against each other in 80 minutes of some of the most breathtakingly physical and passionate rugby you will ever see.

And there is nothing more personal than stitches.

The Vodacom Bulls' Marcell Coetzee had to have stitches after their Derby against the Emirates Lions, but the scar from which remains a badge of pride as rivals walked off that field as friends. Even Emirates Lions captain Marius Louw, after that match, could stand in front of the TV cameras and in an exhausted voice and even after a narrow defeat could declare, "That's why we play this game. Flippin' unbelievable. Up and down emotions. Down to the wire. Unbelievable crowd. Goosebump stuff. What an arm wrestle. It's such a privilege to play this game."

Round after round, the Vodacom United Rugby Championship gives us the rugby we all feel in our hearts.

And it works because this competition understands that rugby is deeply personal in its communities, and it connects people beyond just the final score.

Connection in any contact sport is clearly important. But to truly connect in a global sporting landscape that has overlapping seasons and competing interests all vying for fans' attention is where the real art lies.

On this particular day in Johannesburg, Van Staden was part of a glittering list of players including his fellow Vodacom Bulls star Marcell Coetzee, Deon Fourie and Evan Roos from the DHL Stormers, Sanele Nohamba and Marius Louw from the Emirates Lions, and Vincent Koch and Emile van Heerden from the Hollywoodbets Sharks were all the star characters in a content day aimed at showcasing the seriousness, the fun and the emotive side of life at the hard edge of elite rugby excellence.

And even there, away from the flashes of the cameras or the filming of various poses for the TV broadcast, there were those moments that showed just how personal this has become.

Moments when two players from opposite teams chasing different goals say how good it was to see each other again. They ask about their families. They wish each other good luck for the various challenges they will still face. They are genuinely concerned about the rehab from injury their fellow player has gone through.

"When people start speaking about rugby there is something common between them. This game builds relationships," says Van Staden.

So, forget what you were ever told about not making things personal.

The Vodacom United Rugby Championship is personal.

Rugby is personal.

And we wouldn't want it any other way.

**" Rising Vodacom United Rugby Championship sets all-time record audience for single round "** 22 Mar 2024

**" The Vodacom United Rugby Championship – It's personal "** 13 Mar 2024



## Vodacom United Rugby Championship

The Vodacom URC is a global club rugby league where 16 teams from five nations compete across two hemispheres. The URC is made up of teams from Ireland, South Africa, Wales, Italy and Scotland.

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