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Citation:

Solomons, J and Brown, J and Jones, B and Hendricks, S (2024) Editorial Wilbur Kraak: The coach of coaches and researchers. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*. pp. 1-3. ISSN 1747-9541 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541241303669>

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Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

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Wilbur Kraak: The coach of coaches and researchers

Jocelyn Solomons¹ , James Brown^{2,3,4} , Ben Jones^{2,4,5,6,7},
and Sharief Hendricks^{2,4} 

International Journal of Sports Science
& Coaching
1–3

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DOI: 10.1177/17479541241303669

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Abstract

As a coach, coach educator and researcher, Wilbur contributed significantly to the field rugby science, both as an author and reviewer. The aim of this research note, structured as a ‘short report’, is to highlight some of Wilbur’s many work achievements.

Keywords

Community sport, performance analysis, rugby football, rules of sport, tackling

Background

Professor Wilbur Kraak passed away suddenly on the 27th July 2024. Wilbur was many things to many people including, but not limited to: husband, father, friend, rugby player, referee, coach, coach educator, academic, sports scientist, supervisor, and mentor.

Thanks to a touching tribute by Professor Heinrich Grobbelaar,¹ one of his closest friends and colleagues, we can report Wilbur Kraak was born on the 25 April 1984 in the town of Mamre, near Cape Town in the Western Cape, South Africa. We also know, both from this tribute, and from personal experience that Wilbur was one of the nicest, most genuine people. His first question was always to ask about your family and your health and wellbeing, and he was the walking embodiment of a devoted family man.

As a coach, coach educator and researcher, Wilbur contributed significantly to the field rugby science, both as an author and reviewer. The aim of this Guest editorial, structured as a ‘short report’, is to highlight some of Wilbur’s many work achievements.

Methods

A quantitative and qualitative approach was used to review Wilbur’s work. Quantitative data related to Wilbur’s research outputs were retrieved from ORCID (<https://orcid.org/>) and Google Scholar. The qualitative data collection included in-depth interviews with a recent PhD graduate, reflections and a thematic analyses of Wilbur’s research outputs.

Results

Wilbur published 46 peer-reviewed manuscripts, 12 of which were published in this very journal, the *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*. In addition, Wilbur’s work has been cited 560 times in other peer-reviewed articles and he has an h-index of 16. He has, as one would expect with his outgoing, warm and gregarious personality, co-authors from near and far: Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, to name a few. In addition to this, Wilbur was quick to offer himself for time-

¹Division of Sport Science, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

²Carnegie Applied Rugby Research (CARR) Centre, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

³Division of Sport and Exercise Medicine (DiSEM), Department of Exercise, Sport and Lifestyle Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

⁴Division of Physiological Sciences, Department of Human Biology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

⁵Premiership Rugby, London, UK

⁶England Performance Unit, Rugby Football League, Manchester, UK

⁷School of Behavioural and Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

Corresponding author:

Sharief Hendricks, Carnegie Applied Rugby Research (CARR) Centre, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK; Division of Physiological Sciences, Department of Human Biology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

Email: sharief.hendricks01@gmail.com

consuming academic tasks such as reviewing manuscripts, applying for grant funding and acting as an examiner.

Wilbur was also highly sought after supervisor to many Honours, Masters and PhD students. Below is an account of Wilbur's mentorship from Jocelyn Solomons:

'Professor Wilbur Kraak, affectionately known to me as "Mentor," was more than just an academic advisor; he was a lecturer, a line-manager, study-promotor, co-author and confidante. Our relationship, which began during my undergraduate studies, evolved into a deep bond that has had a profound impact on my life.

Initially, I was not a fan of Professor Kraak's teaching style. As a form of silent protest, I set out to excel in his course, determined to prove a point – a determination that I still cannot quite articulate today. However, as I got to know him better, I discovered a warm, approachable individual who genuinely cared about his students. His easy-going demeanour, coupled with his unwavering support, made him a beloved figure in our academic community.

In my Master's year, our relationship deepened significantly. As my co-supervisor for my dance and rugby research, Professor Kraak provided invaluable guidance and support as I relied heavily on his rugby networks. Beyond his academic expertise, he became a trusted confidante, offering sage advice and helping me navigate life's challenges.

One of Professor Kraak's greatest strengths was his ability to see beyond the surface. He recognized my potential and pushed me to strive for excellence. But he also trusted me to do the same for him. He would joke about my "private school English" and ask for my review on an email or book chapter. His unwavering belief in me gave me the confidence to overcome obstacles and achieve my goals both personally and professionally. Our relationship continued to flourish throughout my PhD journey. Professor Kraak's mentorship extended far beyond the classroom, providing me with support and guidance in all aspects of my life while he balanced being my line-manager and study promotor.

As I transitioned into academia as a lecturer, and Professor Kraak transitioned to a different institution, I found a loophole to keep him in my life: he was officially appointed as my mentor through the Early Career Academics Development Programme at Stellenbosch University in 2023. In the same way that he had presented me with my name badge in 2022 as line-manager, when I started my career, he had handed over my name badge as study supervisor, when I received my PhD. He believed in celebrating life and its achievements and in good-old WJK fashion,

organized a pre-graduation celebration for me with family and colleagues just before the graduation ceremony. He ensured that he could share the graduation stage with me, a significant milestone in both our lives as I was his first PhD student.

He offered advice, we celebrated my achievements as well as his, and we planned his speech at my wedding. When I failed to send a meme or text for two days, he would call, he would follow up on whether I landed safely after a conference, or joke about our joint effort to become "famous" whenever we featured alongside each other in any media. We always had this running joke that he knew too much about my life and that we should establish boundaries. It is an understatement to say that his presence in my life was a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

The loss of Professor Kraak is deeply felt, but his legacy will live on through the countless students he inspired. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to have known him and to have learned from his wisdom, kindness, and unwavering support. He will always hold a special place in my heart.

Discussion

Through Wilbur's actions and empirical academic metrics, he has demonstrated to the academic world that it is possible to be both a genuinely great human and a successful academic. Below we outline some of Wilbur's key research themes.

Wilbur's work is highly impactful and innovative. Wilbur had a particular interest in the laws of rugby, which most likely stemmed from his early involvement in rugby as a referee.¹ His early work analysed movement patterns and work-to-rest ratios referees during matches² and how law changes effected time variables (for example, ball in play time) during the South African Currie Cup Tournament between 2007 and 2013.³ Over time, Wilbur took an interest in referee sanctioning of illegal events, which included illegal tackles, illegal rucks and dangerous ruck cleanouts.^{4,5} More recently, Wilbur was part of a team of researchers evaluating the effectiveness of lowering the maximum legal height of the tackle in amateur male rugby⁶⁻⁹ – a study that acted as the seed for the new tackle laws implemented at the community level across all major rugby playing nations. Before his passing, holding true to evaluating law changes in the game, Wilbur published a study on the impact of the 50: 22 kick law changes in South African rugby tournaments between 2021 and 2022.¹⁰

Wilbur was a dedicated coach and researcher, which was a unique position as he had a visceral understanding of the challenges in bridging the gap between coaching or coaches and science. Wilbur was well aware of the importance of

engaging the coach and gaining the coach's understanding and perspective. To this end, he studied coaches access and use of video analysis,¹¹ profiled mini rugby youth coaches,¹² coaches' knowledge and attitude towards concussion,¹³ and their perceptions on the new tackle height laws.⁶ This year (2024), Wilbur and colleagues published two papers related to coaching – (i) coach perspectives on coach-athlete relationships and characteristics of Generation Z academy level rugby union players,¹⁴ and (ii) the relationship between coaching efficacy and effectiveness in South African Women's Rugby.¹⁵ Naturally as a coach, Wilbur also had a keen interest in developing players. His recent work focused on how video-based technical feedback and instruction can be used to improve tackling technique of community rugby players,¹⁶ and how a rhythmic movement intervention has the potential to improve rugby-specific bio-motor skills.¹⁷

Whether studying the laws of rugby or coaches' perspectives, a notable thread in Wilbur's work is his devotion to community rugby, and more specifically, community rugby in South Africa. Another notable quality of Wilbur's outputs is the diversity of national and international collaborations. Finally, Wilbur was not only a coach on the field, but also a coach in the classroom (so to speak). While Wilbur graduated a number of students over the years, a remarkable achievement is the proportion of students he supervised to first author their first publication in an international journal.

We would like to thank Wilbur for all that he taught us while with us and the legacy that he will leave of kindness and good humour. Let us all try to be more like Wilbur.

Declaration of conflicting interests


The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Jocelyn Solomons  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3110-2176>

James Brown  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7778-7783>

Sharief Hendricks  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3416-6266>

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