

# **A BRIDGE TOO FAR**

**An Autobiography**

**By Bryan Britton**

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## **FOREWORD**

This Autobiography is a brilliant exposition of the life of a very clever, able, action orientated but nevertheless self-effacing man.

The extremely interesting and revealing facts given expression in this work, introduce the reader to the cut, thrust and parry of big business and go on to describe in fascinating detail the successful manner in which these issues were handled and managed by Bryan Britton, in order to control the huge undertakings for which he was responsible; to establish a new company; or to advise executive directors. What shines through most markedly too is the fact that Bryan is a creative writer. These facts are articulated in a light hearted manner which makes this Autobiography a pleasure to read.

Where mistakes were made, these are acknowledged with wry humour.

What comes through very strongly to the intellectual and discerning reader is Bryan's understated academic and sporting ability.

Reading between the lines the erudite observer will no doubt acknowledge that there must have been many an occasion when Bryan was steeped in worry and stress, but carried on bravely, turning disadvantage into advantage. It is a demonstration of Bryan's strength of character that he does not articulate many of the concerns that beset him from time to time.

There were also very many light hearted, pleasurable and celebratory times and Bryan highlights these when necessary, but cleverly, the reader is left to imagine the detail.

As a climax to a very successful life, this Autobiography deserves, after being read, to take its rightful place beside the most precious books in a person's individual library.

**Dr. G L Coggin**

Management Consultant

## **PREFACE**

**'If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds worth of distance run'**

### **Rudyard Kipling**

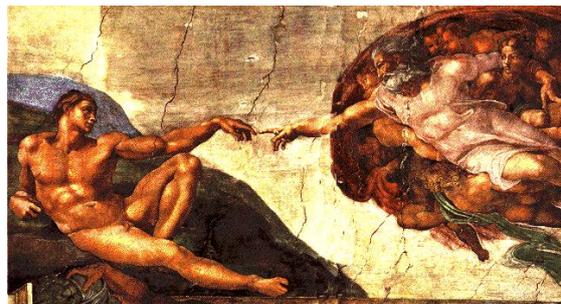
Of all the things I have ever believed, three are these days relevant. Firstly, that which you are not using, give away. I picked up that particular jewel from my mother. It has allowed me to travel lightly with little to weigh me down. The second is that you should get on with today because yesterday, sadly, cannot be undone. I am not sure where this particular treasure came from nor do I care. It has propelled me forward in my journey without as much as a backward glance. And thirdly, be objective and not subjective. I beg your indulgence for breaking my own rule in this diatribe. It is extremely difficult to uphold the principle of objectivity when writing an autobiography.

The problem with these three philosophies is that as you near the end of your journey, the only record of your existence here on earth resides in your head. And having had a stroke, pieces of that recall have, sadly, already gone missing. They say that a book is kept in heaven and when we die we receive an account, warts and all, of our stay on this planet. That does not help the ones we leave behind. I have written this subjective account of my journey in the hope that those whom I have loved in this lifetime, will gain something from the route that I have travelled.

'A picture is worth a thousand words' they say so with this in mind I have re-visited much of my journey by using the modern convenience of the internet. This has enabled me to capture in colour many of the places visited, people encountered and incidents experienced. Where these graphical depictions stirred a memory, I have downloaded them and included them in 'A Bridge Too Far'.

In writing this diatribe I have experienced remorse in looking back on many things that I either did or did not do. I have experienced relief at being finally able to unload some things that I have carried around with me for too long. I have been able to judge more wisely with the benefit of hindsight. I have rejoiced once more in those successes and mourned again the failures. It has been a sobering and cathartic experience revisiting many of the events that have shaped my brief stay on this planet and I sincerely hope that I have recalled them without embroidering, moralising or appearing to be bitter.

I have discovered that the more you learn, the more you realise how little you know. With this in mind I would urge my offspring, in their futures, to keep hurdling obstacles and not to accept boundaries. Yours is the earth and all that is in it and with a healthy belief in God you can achieve any dream. I have always firmly believed in a greater power, a force for



good, a heavenly father, a shepherd, a guide, a protector, a spiritual being – in short God. My personal experience is that prayers are answered though not always in a way that we humans appreciate. But answered they are most certainly.



We do not inherit religion and faith. It is something which slowly evolves through trial and error over time. In order to get started however you need first to *believe* in God and then *be true to your belief*.

Your patience and perseverance will be rewarded as surely as God is my witness. Have faith.

The Catholic Activist Ammon Hennacy (1893-1970) once had this to say:

**'Love without courage and wisdom is sentimentality, as with the ordinary church member.**

**Courage without love and wisdom is foolhardiness, as with the ordinary soldier.**

**Wisdom without love and courage is cowardice, as with the ordinary intellectual.**

**But the one who has love, courage and wisdom, moves the world'**

It is hoped that my loved ones will learn from my mistakes, for better or worse understand their roots, pass on any good that they find to their own offspring and forgive me for any and all of my transgressions. In so doing I truly hope that they will all be able to ease their own paths forward to full, rewarding and productive lives.

**Bryan Gavin Britton  
20 October 2012**

## SUNNYRIDGE ENGLISH MEDIUM SCHOOL



My folks were building a house in the Germiston suburb of Gerdview in the year that I turned five. We lived in Amamzintoti on the Natal South Coast where my father worked at the local Escom Power Station. He had however landed a new job with Metropolitan Vickers, the British supplier of mining headgear equipment. This company serviced many of the colonial and post-colonial mining

operations in Africa and required my father to carry out engineering inspections on headgear and winding equipment on mines from the Congo through Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho to the then burgeoning Witwatersrand and Free State goldfields in South Africa. Over the next fifteen years he would witness the flight of colonial engineering expertise and capital from sub Saharan Africa and the appalling decline in adherence to disciplines of health, safety and efficiency as each country shrugged off the yoke of colonialism and then attempted to embrace democracy and black self-determination.



**Germiston circa 1910**



**Important railway junction**



**Gold mining city**



**Germiston Lake**

We moved into our fancy new accommodation at the end of 1955. Through my parent's extreme hard work and attention to detail the family boasted one of the

most desirable properties in the neighbourhood. The modern house was surrounded by a fairy-tale garden containing tons of imported Palindaba Rock especially trucked in from Pretoria. The attractive rockeries framed three koi ponds complete with waterfalls, water lilies, hanging fuscias and elephant ear plants. Access to the back garden was over a narrow bridge which crossed the exotic ponds. Manicured lawns were framed by herbaceous borders and rare shrubs were interposed with flowering plants. The overall effect was stunning and the property was regularly entered in the Annual Germiston Garden Show. The property usually ranked either number two or three in the list of most beautiful gardens in the city.

The following January I started Grade One at the Sunnyridge English Medium School, a fifteen minute walk from our house in Gerdview.

I am the first son of Desmond, a sportsman from Kimberly, who at the very tender age of eighteen elected to go up North to fight the Germans in World War Two. After the war he gained Eastern Transvaal colours for baseball and cricket and was a first league player at badminton, tennis and squash. Later in his life he became a single figure golfer.

His father, Henry, was an amiable South African from Kimberly who married a very strict and austere lady from Britain called Lillian Bell. Henry met with an untimely death from a burst appendix and the young Desmond was, as a result, brought up single-handedly by his ever fierce mother. Desmond had a younger sister called Valerie who lived with her husband Mervyn Attaberry in Port Elizabeth.



My mother, Constance, was an auburn haired beauty who traced her roots back to Ireland and Germany. Her brother, Ronald, had been killed in an air crash in World War Two putting an end to his promising amateur boxing career.

My maternal grandfather was a jovial and good natured individual of German extraction bearing the surname Hosmer. He was a boxing trainer of some repute and had trained Johnny Holt to a South African Bantamweight Title in 1934. My maternal grandmother was a darling with a cheerful disposition who hailed originally from the Emerald Isle and my earliest memory of her is of a kind and fun loving person. My mother's older sister, Audrey, was also good natured and was married to Bill Wise, a former lifesaver from Australia. They stayed in an apartment on the

Durban beach front with their offspring Tracey and Shaun.



I was seven when my mother proudly produced a younger brother. Russell would grow from the 'Denis the Menace' of the neighbourhood to become a seriously good businessman and, in later years, a very skilful racing driver.

Life in the suburb of Gerdview was a sedate and cosmopolitan one. Our near neighbours were

Austrian, Dutch, British and South African and I grew up being aware that only

subtle differences existed in each of these cultures. The biggest disparity was between the Afrikaans and English speaking South Africans. Despite bearing my father's surname of van der Westhuizen, the Afrikaans neighbours *abhorred English Speakers*. One was made constantly aware of the British infiltration of South Africa in colonial times and



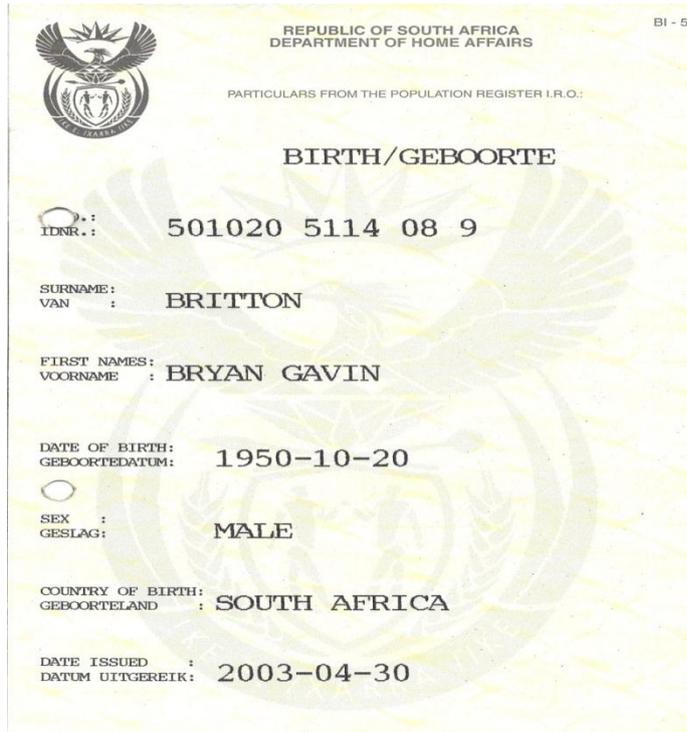
the bitter conflict which dominated this country's history. The Afrikaans Nationalists had come to power just before I was born and my entire life growing up was filled with aggressive Afrikaner sentiment that suggested that English Speakers, especially the one's bearing Afrikaans surnames, were 'verraaiers and/or uitlanders' (traitors and/or foreigners). My peers resented that with an Afrikaans surname, I spoke fluent and accented English and that my father spoke no Afrikaans. In fact, my grandfather Henry never learned to speak nor understand any Afrikaans in his lifetime.



My paternal grandmother was moreover born in that much detested England and my maternal grandparents came from Ireland and Germany. To weight my Anglo Saxon heritage, I was brought up in the predominantly Scottish faith of the Presbyterian Church. My ancestry was very clearly defined by the fact that I received primary education in an English Medium School and then secondary education for eight years in a Roman Catholic School astutely administered and guided by ordained Irish priests. My christian name Bryan, meaning little king, spoke to an allegiance to the crown rather than to any celebrated Boer general. This inappropriate Dutch surname contradicted all of these facts and presented a false facade that suggested that

I was Afrikaans. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I would resent this surname and the connotation that I was somehow linked to the abhorrent Apartheid Regime for the next forty odd years.

You will learn a bit later in this yarn about my crusade to correct this anomaly in the face of staunch Afrikaner Nationalist opposition. The document below is testimony to the final outcome.



REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA  
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

BI - 5

PARTICULARS FROM THE POPULATION REGISTER I.R.O.:

**BIRTH/GEBOORTE**

IDNR.: 501020 5114 08 9

SURNAME:  
VAN : BRITTON

FIRST NAMES:  
VOORNAME : BRYAN GAVIN

DATE OF BIRTH:  
GEBORTE DATUM: 1950-10-20

SEX :  
GESLAG: MALE

COUNTRY OF BIRTH:  
GEBORTELAND : SOUTH AFRICA

DATE ISSUED :  
DATUM UITGEREIK: 2003-04-30

Our next door neighbours were the Wrights. Ronnie Wright's father, Raleigh, suffered from shell shock as a result of too many bad experiences in the tank command at Tobruk. This was while Afrikaners were interred in South Africa as Nazi sympathisers. As a result Ronnie's mom had to call the shots at home. This never deterred Ronnie in the least and he would rise to a very senior post in the Packaging Industry in South Africa later in life. Ronnie took me under his wing growing up. At school it was a boon having an older 'brother' a few classes ahead of you. It meant that you got to know and were accepted by others senior to you. And this meant that

you learned about life and stuff a lot sooner than your peer group. As my life unfolded I would invariably always be the youngest in my group.

I learned about justice at an early age and how the punishment should fit the crime. The crime was getting too absorbed in a neighbour's new train set and not being on time for supper. The punishment was being lashed by my father with an electric kettle cord. The beating was so severe that it resulted in multiple red and purple u-shaped welts all over my body. Some of the welts were so acute that the skin was lacerated and developed into suppurating sores. These had to be carefully treated against infection. The very obvious results of this beating were there to be seen by all. Not only were they the cause for much concern from both teachers and pupils at the Sunnyridge English Medium School in Germiston, but they were the source of enormous embarrassment to me.

The physical injuries took about a month to heal. The mental scars would never heal.

It was about twelve o'clock in Mrs Gibbon's English class. The silver haired, sixty year old was going on about verbs and nouns and things to the class of nine years olds, who were battling to stay awake at this advanced hour. Just then the Sports

Coach, Mr Whitlock, burst through the doorway and with an apology to the disgruntled Mrs Gibbons, began to announce the Under 10 Soccer Side to play at the 'Cabbage Patch' that afternoon. On announcing each player's name, Mr Whitlock would toss a black and gold jersey at the selected player and further glorified the moment by calling out the player's position. With only a few jerseys remaining, my nine year heart old was pounding in my chest and I was mentally composing my excuse for not being selected.

Maybe the high absenteeism because of chicken pox or as a result of some potential spotted by the Coach, I will never know but in a magic moment reduced to a frame a second, the black and gold jersey tumbled through the air towards me accompanied by the barking of 'inside right'.

In that instant I was hooked on soccer for life.

I don't remember the game at the 'Cabbage Patch' or too much about the rest of the season but my love of soccer was born in that year and remained entrenched in the many years which followed.

This passion received an additional injection when a Christmas present of a football from my aunt came with a bonus. This bonus was to take the ball to a sports store in Pine Street in Durban where Les Salton, Danny le Roux and Syd O'Lynn, three famous Springboks of the day, autographed the ball and dispensed a few tips to this wide-eyed youngster.

## CHRISTIAN BROTHERS COLLEGE

The following year I moved from Sunnyridge to start Standard Three at the Christian Brothers College in Boksburg and found, to my horror, that rugby was the compulsory sport for all. The Catholic, Irish, Brothers reckoned that Rugby was the hooligans' game played by gentlemen, whilst Soccer was the gentlemen's game played by hooligans'.



**Christian Brothers College in Boksburg**

My introduction to the hooligans' game came on one of the lower fields early in the new season. In a practice match for the College under-eleven team, I was wandering aimlessly near to the full back spot when a huge up and under came flying my way. Not familiar with the rules of this strange game but very aware that fifteen screaming gentlemen would arrive at my particular spot on the field at precisely the moment the ball reached me, I did what any self-respecting soccer player would do. Without catching the ball I hoofed it directly into touch.

The autumn afternoon grew very still. The red faced Irish Christian Brother, turned Killer Coach, came storming, hassock tails flying, to my now infamous spot on the pitch.

What I was next told to do cannot be repeated for fear of retribution by the papacy in Rome.

I never did figure out why anyone would want to catch a ball that was so eagerly sought by fifteen stampeding and frothing gentlemen.

Over the next eight years I got to grips with the rules and skills required and even began enjoying the game. I progressed to the 'A' team of my age group each year and in 1966 was first selected for the school's First XV.

In those years Christian Brothers College Boksburg was the only English speaking school entered into the Administrator's Cup Rugby Competition in the Transvaal. Notable schools of Afrikaans persuasion included Helpmekaar, Vryburger, Vakkell, EG Jansen, Goudrif and Goedehoop. Saturday mornings were a re-enactment of the Anglo-Boer War, with no holds barred. To our eternal disadvantage was the fact that early marriage, failing matric several times or having a beard would have merited instant dismissal from our school.

Our only advantage against this mature foe was that we could run faster. At fly half I developed the uncanny skill of being able to kick to touch whilst standing on the dead ball line in our own in-goal area.

I recall once being perched on that self-same dead ball line when a particularly slow pass came looping to me from the scrumhalf. This was much slower than the two snarling flanks bearing down on me. With hand speed to impress a conjurer, in sheer panic, I threw a pass to Derek Haw, also delicately perched on that dead ball line.



Derek was a very talented and quick rugby player who would later gain a place in the Senior Eastern Transvaal Currie Cup side. He also held the College two hundred and one hundred metre track records. Even this pedigree did not prepare us at all for the sheer magic which followed.

Derek evaded both opposing centres with impressive sidesteps in his own in-goal area and then hared up field towards the fast advancing fullback. Yet another classy side-step left the fullback groping at fresh air near to the halfway line as he sprinted to score under the distant posts. He had covered more than a hundred metres in what remains the best try that I have ever seen.

We were always at a weight disadvantage at scrum time. Our hooker, Bruce Tait, was therefore forced to develop the deft skill of slipping the bind to free both arms just as the scrum went down. This allowed him to cover the eyes of the opposing hooker just as the ball was being fed into the scrum by the opposing scrumhalf. But for this illegal tactic I doubt whether we would ever have won a scrum.

Besides the Administrators Cup games a season also contained matches against other Catholic Colleges. These included CBC Cape Town, Pretoria and Kimberley, St Thomas Moore in Durban and the Marist Colleges in Observatory and Inanda.

An entirely forgettable game was against one of these other Catholic Colleges. Marist Brothers College Inanda in Sandton, or St. Davids, as it is more widely known, was the scene of a debacle in 1967 which utterly shamed the English speaking school and rugby community in the Transvaal.

The St. David's side included a centre by name Terence Lavery. He was then generally considered to be the natural successor to Paul Nash. Nash was the undisputed hundred meter sprint champion of South Africa and the young Lavery's times for this distance were fast closing on those achieved by Nash. So in this vital rugby clash Lavery became a target. A devilish plan to neuter the Lavery threat was hatched by the CBC side. The plan was to lose the first scrum to allow Marist to get their backline away. The CBC flanks would head from the scrum for the second centre spot and join the CBC centres to affect an ambush on the unsuspecting Lavery.

The plan worked wonderfully well. Lavery was descended upon by four eager tacklers and never rose from the one-sided onslaught. What followed next filled the newspapers and brought much disrepute and ignominy to both of these highly regarded Colleges for many years to come.



Lavery's incensed father tore onto the pitch. Derek Haw's father, acting that day as linesman, stopped Lavery Senior in his tracks with a deft tap to the head with the linesman's flag. That caused both sets of spectators to pour onto the pitch to indulge in a mixture of pugilism and kick boxing. The frantic Official Transvaal Rugby Union referee

ran in circles, shrieking and fiercely blowing on his whistle in vain as players and parents continued to slug it out. This foul and distasteful tableau was unprecedented in schoolboy rugby and it was several minutes before the disgraceful display was finally ended. The match was, as expected, abandoned after only two or three minutes play and the shame-faced players and supporters slunk slowly back to their cars and busses. All to ponder the unnecessary mayhem that had just occurred. I do not have any sane explanation for the events of that shameful morning. Suffice it to say that punishments, recriminations and forfeits were aplenty on both sides and

matches between the two cultured and elegant institutions were banned for several years thereafter.

### **CBC First Rugby XV**



**Back: Bryan Britton (Vice Captain), Robert Stevenson, Shane Callahagn, Stuart Bacon Francis McGeachie, Errol Baker, Paul Christie, Barry O'Brien, Brian Currin, Brian Daniels Bruce Tait, John Abbot, Paul Bird (Captain), Derek Haw, Graham Donald**

Saturdays were made more tolerable by the afternoon soccer match.

The Chairman of the South African Football Association, Mr Danny Stalson, astutely realising that many youngsters were obliged to play rugby as a first sport at school level, registered a soccer club called South Deep. This club was unique in that it held no practices and players were advised of fixtures by post. And yes, because the postal system still worked in those days, some one hundred players in different age groups pitched for soccer matches all over the Witwatersrand on Saturday afternoons.

My earliest memories of my time at South Deep are not good ones. I recall travelling by train from Boksburg to Benoni, Brakpan or Springs for the afternoon soccer match, bravely ignoring any bumps and bruises from the morning's rugby clash and then walking from the railway station to the soccer stadium to arrive just in time to be told that I would be warming the bench. In those days replacements only occurred if the incumbent died. As a result I grew to hate the word 'reserve' and became fiercely determined to always be in the first eleven named. This determination served me well and, over time, I lost my appeal as a perpetual benchwarmer. I must have loved the game very much to absorb so much humiliation and wait so patiently to be called.

Once I became a regular in the team I was always selected as an inside forward and so began watching how the various stars of the day played in that position. Jimmy Greaves, the Tottenham Hotspurs and England number eight, became a hero. Through consistent league performances during the season at South Deep my best friend at CBC, Michael Bowles, and I were both selected for the Under 16 and Under 18 Transvaal High Schools sides. During the month long July school vacations in 1966 and 1967 we toured East London, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town with players selected from all over the old Transvaal Province.



**Port Elizabeth**



**East London**



**Cape Town**



**River crossing**



**In transit**



**Transport of the day**



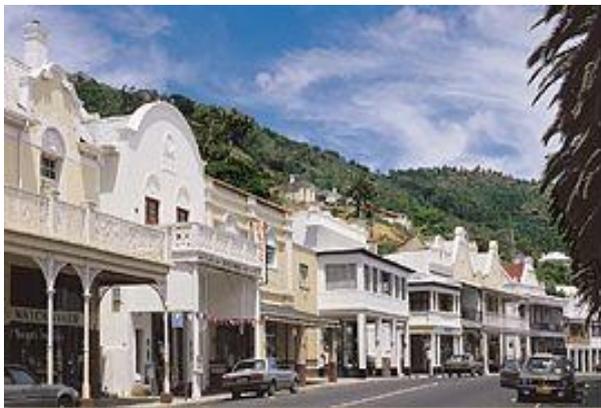


On the 1967 tour we were both elected as Prefects and had the unenviable job of trying to control hordes of teenage footballers all with raging hormones. We, despite these duties, were nevertheless able to do some raging of our own and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

**Kennaway Hotel East London**

On the 1967 tour both of us were also selected to play for Eastern Transvaal in a full inter provincial match against Border in East London. Driving rain, a waterlogged pitch and a 2-0 defeat prevented the match from being a fond memory.

On that tour I recall Mike and I making a trip by suburban train to the Simonstown harbour on the peninsula. This is the home of the South African Navy and the nearby town is a quaint throwback to earlier times. The rail trip around the peninsula afforded us the opportunity of seeing the fantastic Cape shoreline up close for the first time. It is a stunning experience. All in all it was a Sunday well spent and we both got to learn just a little more about the town of Simonstown and see the sights and sounds of this most beautiful and diverse part of our great country.



**Town of Simonstown**



**Railway line around the Peninsula**



Whilst in East London, Mike and I were invited to a musical gig at the home of Jody Wayne. At that time the young Jody had several hits on the South African Top Twenty including the songs 'Patches', 'Sixteen Candles' and 'The Wedding'. Jody had won the Durban Song Festival with the song 'A Voice in the Dark' and then went on to score with his first hit 'Tell Laura I Love Her'. The gathering was a blast with many young people from the singer's orbit present. It would stir Mike and me to later form our own band. Sadly, regular complaints from irate neighbours disrupted our practices thus preventing us from becoming the major rock stars we thought that we could become.



### **Jody Wayne**

But I now digress musically and laterally.

The Germiston contingent of South Deep all became ardent Germiston Callies fans. Callies had become founder members of the National Football League which saw the introduction of professional soccer to South Africa in 1959. After the South Deep game every Saturday afternoon there would be a headlong rush back to Driehoek in Germiston to watch the Callies kickoff at three thirty. Sometime later the introduction of floodlights at Driehoek meant that games were played on Friday evenings and that became a more relaxed and very sociable event with time to meet up with fellow fans and friends. The Callies team never won terribly much in all the years that I supported them but on their home pitch Driehoek and in front of their ardent fans, they were feared by

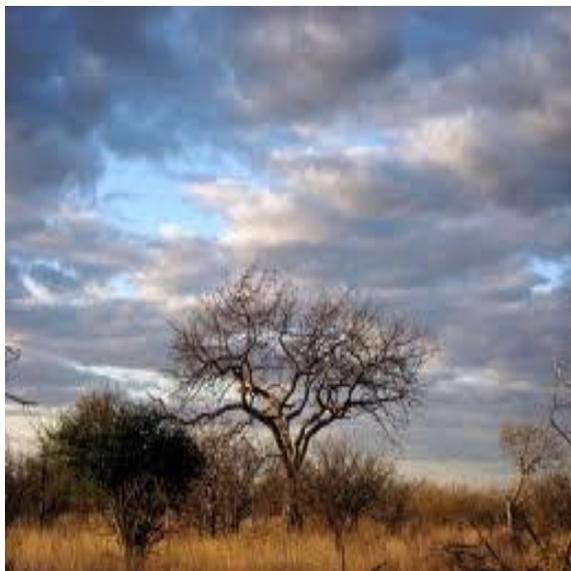
the more successful clubs like Highlands Park, Durban City, CapeTown City, Rangers, Arcadia Shepherds, Southern Suburbs, Addington, Powerlines, Durban United, Hellenic and Lusitano and were responsible for many an upset result.



The Austins were also ardent fans. Pat and Jack Austin hailed from England and had supported Crystal Palace there. I was friends with their older son, Robert, who attended Marist Brothers College Observatory and was a year older than me. Robert also had a younger brother called David. I was very privileged to always be included by the Austins on their many excursions to the Game Parks around South Africa and through them

developed a love for wildlife in general and wildlife photography in particular. Robert and I were very fortunate to be able to hire some serious camera equipment from Gill's Camera Centre in Germiston at minimal cost. Using these hired 1000mm telephoto lenses, mounted through a portal in the roof of Jack Austin's Kombi, we were able to get many brilliant shots of the Kruger animals on our many excursions.

We visited all of the major camps in the Reserve including Orpen, Olifants, Lower Sabie, Letaba, Sitara and Skukuza.



**Typical Kruger landscape**



**Prolific Impala**

The shots presented here are representative of the ones Robert and I were able to capture on these adventures. As colour photography began to overtake the black and white medium we had another advantage. Robert would join the German firm of Tauber and Corsen as a Laboratory Technician in their Material Colorant Division. This Division controlled the manufacture and distribution of inter alia Agfa film, photographic paper and chemicals and enabled us to obtain otherwise very

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