

The Rugby Morkels

South Africans and New Zealanders share a special passion for Rugby football. During the first three decades of the 1900s, the town of Somerset West and specifically the Morkel family played a remarkable role in the sport in South Africa. At family gatherings at Die Bos one could count several Springbok internationals plus others who had played for Western Province (the regional team). My father quipped "The Morkel brains are in their feet". I knew some of them as "uncles" – Oom Gerrit (Gerhard), Oom Harry, Oom Albert, and Uncle Bertie.

The adoration for Rugby and hero worship of its stars were captured in extracts from a 1933 article in Cape Town's *The Argus*. Photos are from the Jubilee edition of the Somerset West Rugby Football Club.

How South Africa's most famous football clan was founded.

By Weldon Broughton

The Cape Argus. 14 October 1933

The Morkels and Rugby

Today (i.e. 1933) if you mention the name Morkel in Somerset West, your listener will at once take you back to the years of 1913 and 1914, when the Morkels made up half of the famous Somerset West team which won the Town Challenge, Grand Challenge and Knock-out cups and set a record which has never been equalled.

"There was W.H. (Boy)", he will say, "and Gerhard, the greatest full-back South Africa has ever had, and Henry, and Jack, and Bertie and Harry, and Albert." And he will tell you that 1914 brought an honour to the club which is envied by other clubs in the Western Province - that out of the 18 first team players, no fewer than 13 were selected to play for the Western Province in the Currie Cup tournament, and that of the 13, seven were Morkels.



SOMERSET WEST'S CRACK TEAM, 1913. (Winners of all three senior Trophies)

Back Row: Albert Morkel, F. Smuts, Harry Morkel, Albert du Toit, Bertie Morkel, Gerhard Morkel, C. Brooke, Gerald Thompson.
Sitting: Henry Morkel, Jack Morkel, Boy Morkel (Capt.), Jack Immelman, W. A. Krige, Malherbe.
In front: Peter Wagner W. A. Eriksen.

(They were referred to by the newspapers as "The team of all the talents with three times the scoring power than any other team.")

Source: *S.W.F.C. Golden Jubilee 1904 - 1954*

But although the family name is forever associated with Somerset West ... the clan spread to other parts of South Africa, notably Kimberley and Johannesburg. And so in the annals of Transvaal rugby you will find the name Morkel prominently mentioned from 1904 onwards. Andrew, W.S. (William Somerset - or Sommie) and Douglas were famous footballers there.

In the year 1914 there were actually 22 Morkels playing first team rugby in various parts of South Africa. This remarkable family record impressed itself on the mind of Sir Abe Baily, and he was contemplating sending a team of Morkels to England when the great war broke out and quashed the idea. The team was to have been composed of 23 members of the family, The 23rd man was Denis Morkel, later an international cricketer. He was playing under 13 rugby at the time and would have been the team's official mascot.

A list of those who won inter-provincial and Springbok caps are as follows:

Played for South Africa:

- 1903: Andrew
- 1906: Andrew and Sommie (William Somerset)
- 1910: Douglas and Boy (William Herman)
- 1912: Douglas, W.H. (Boy), Gerhard, Jack
- 1921: W.H. (Boy), Royal, Harry, Henry, Gerhard
- 1928: P.K. (Pieter Krige)

Played for Transvaal: Douglas, Andrew and Somerset (Sommie)

Played for Western Province: Boy, Albert, Gerhard, Henry, Jack, Harry, Bertie and Royal.



DIE SPRINGBOKSPAN VAN 1921.

In hierdie toerspan is nie minder as sewe Somersetters nie.—'n rekord verteenwoordiging)

Ager: W. H. Townsend, L. B. Siedle, A. P. Walker, A. J. van Heerden, G. W. van Rooyen, Hugo (Tökkie) Scholtz (S.-Wes),
C. du P. Meyer, P. J. Michau.
Middel: W. A. Clarkson, Phil Mostert (S.-Wes), I. B. de Villiers, T. L. Kruger, J. M. Michau, Royal Morkel (S.-Wes), Harry
Morkel (S.-Wes), N. du Plessis, J. S. Olivier, W. C. Zeller.
Sittende: J. C. Tindall, Gerhard Morkel (S.-Wes), F. W. Mellish, Theo. Pienaar (kapit.), H. C. Bennett (bestuurder), W. H. (Boy)
Morkel, (S.-Wes en onder-kapt.), M. Ellis, S. S. F. Strauss, Henry Morkel (S.-Wes).
Voort: J. S. de Kock, Jack Weepner (S.-Wes), W. D. Sendin.

Source: S.W.F.C. Golden Jubilee 1904 - 1954

Some of the more outstanding players:

Douglas Morkel



Source: Springbok Saga p24.

As a place and drop kicker of sheer length and accuracy, Douglas Morkel has probably never been equalled in the history of the game. In 1910 he inspired a member of Dr Smythe's team to write: "Douglas Morkel had our hearts in our mouths in any match he played against us; for he wore red stockings, and a penalty might produce the uncanny spectacle of Douglas sniping at our posts from his own twenty-five yard line". Douglas Morkel is listed in the Guinness Book of Records with the longest kick in rugby.

Gerhard Morkel

But perhaps Gerhard's name was even more of a household word than Douglas's. He was the perfect full-back. He was not a fast runner, but he was always in the right position. His fielding was heart-breaking for his opponents. He could kick with either foot. While he reigned he was regarded as the greatest full-back in the world. His



Gerhard Morkel and his brother Albert. Albert scored Somerset's first in senior rugby at Newlands on May 2, 1908. Gerhard failed to convert but later developed into one of the greatest kickers of all time.

Source: S.W.F.C. Golden Jubilee 1904 - 1954

discovery by the Somerset West team was unique. Bare-headed and bare footed, he stood on the Somerset west station one Saturday morning, one among a crowd of schoolboys who had congregated to see their team entrain for Caledon, whom they were to play in a friendly match. Only 14 players turned up at the station. They looked around and spotted Gerhard, then barely 17 years of age. They decided to fill up the team with him. A hat was sent around for the "bobs" (a bob was a shilling or 12 pence – about ten cents after decimalisation) to pay for his fare. Gerhard acquitted himself so well that day in the full-back position he was made a regular member of the side.

Jack and Boy Morkel

Then there was Jack Morkel and Boy Morkel (Willam Herman) who were almost as famous as Douglas and Gerhard. Boy is numbered as one of South Africa's greatest forwards and an able team captain. In 1912, at the end of the second Springbok tour of Great Britain, the overseas critics described Boy Morkel as the "Prince of Forwards". He played for South Africa against Dr Smythe's team in 1910, captained the 1921 Springboks in the Text matches in New Zealand, and with Gerhard, Jack and Henry, was the mainstay of the Somerset West team in its palmiest days.

Origins

Where did it all start? The well-known Somerset West farms, Onverwacht, Broadlands, Morning Star, Oatlands and Rome, belonged at one time to the Morkel family. Three brothers Morkel married three sisters Myburgh, and their sons used to foregather on the farm Rome after school. Armed with picks and shovels, they cleared space enough for a field. They had to cut away bushes taller than themselves And to keep grass on the field in good condition, they had to lead water from a spring along a furrow, and then cover it up when they were finished. They played barefooted, a common thing even today in Somerset West.

Nicolaas, the first captain, Johnnie (my uncle John), Adrian (Baby) and Albert (Alby) were the first Morkels to play for the Somerset West Club. For a number of years the only matches were minor affairs against Stellenbosch, Caledon and The Strand. The trip to The Strand was made by Cape Cart. (a local horse drawn cart).

In 1893 a subscription list was started among themselves by boy attending the Somerset west Public School for the purpose of buying a rugby football. They each contributed three pence and a Dr. Dieperink kindly made up the rest. But not until 1904 did the Somerset West Rugby Football Club become affiliated to the Western Province Rugby Union. In the first team were four Morkels - Nicolaas, the captain, Albert, Jack and Adrian (Baby).



SOMERSET WEST'S FIRST TEAM, 1909.

Back: J. J. Hendrikz (Hon. Secr.), Gerhard Morkel, T. W. Hahn, Berrie Morkel, Gerald Thompson, I. C. Watson (Treas.)
Middle: Boy Hunter, Charlie de Villiers, Bob Stanford, Johnnie Morkel (Capt.), W. H. (Boy) Morkel, A. Wagner, A. Smythe.
Front: Jack Morkel, Albert Morkel, Jack Immelman, Peter Wagner, Hennie Pienaar.

Source: *S.W.F.C. Golden Jubilee 1904 - 1954*

International fame

They loved their rugby but in those days there were no organised practices on match lines as there are today, no "nursing" of prominent young players, no specialisation. Gerhard Morkel, for example, never made a study of kicking or practised it solely. He took his rugby in the early days of his career as a matter of course, and could kick with either foot naturally. I interviewed the famous Phil Mostert (a well known Springbok captain during the 1920s and 1930s - also from Somerset West) who had played for South Africa in New Zealand. He was in no doubt at all about Gerhard's greatest match.

It was the last Test match at Wellington. Each side had scored a victory, and this was the crucial "rubber" match. For a week prior to the match the Springboks had glorious weather. Forty-eight hours before the match it started to rain. It rained heavily until the ground was almost completely under water when the teams ran on.

This was the match which the New Zealand papers called the world battle for rugby supremacy. New Zealand was football mad. The people could talk of nothing else but the Test. The players were terribly keyed up. The gates opened at 8 am and the crowd flocked in and took their seats in the open stand in the pouring rain. Over 40,000 people witnessed this game in mud and water.

It rained throughout the match and the players' vision was obscured. The Springboks could hardly see their full-back, Gerhard Morkel. But they heard the smack, smack of the ball in his hands as he caught it and they knew they were safe.

Gerhard was well past his prime at that time, but he played a marvellous game on this water-logged field. Not once did he misfield the slippery ball and his kicking for touch bordered on the miraculous. Moffat, the New Zealander, played to Gerhard relentlessly and in the final ten minutes it seemed impossible for the Springboks to hold out. But out of the gloomed loomed Gerhard, an heroic figure to drive the All Blacks back with deadly touch-kicking. No score was a fitting conclusion to the game and also a fitting end to the international career of a great full-back and fine sportsman.

The Morkels remember Gerhard's magnificent display at Newlands (Cape Town) in a Town challenge match against Stellenbosch. Right up until the closing minutes there was no score at all. Then Gerhard got the ball on the touchline ... and dropped a wonderful goal from 35 to 40 yards out to win the game for Somerset West.

They remember Gerhard's wonderful high punts down the middle of the field. In the face of oncoming forwards he was fearless. He just stopped down, picked up the ball and barged through them. As soon as he was out of the ruck he kicked to touch. He could screw kick the ball out with either feet.

The article continues with the exploits of several other Morkel rugby greats.

In a game in England Jack Morkel secured the ball near his own goal line. He ran a little, then executed one of his famous short punts, over the opposing three-quarter's heads. He raced on at full speed and took the ball in his flight. Only the opposing full-back faced him now. So he repeated the short punt. Racing on at top speed, he once again took the ball in his stride and scored under the posts. He had run almost the length of the field, finishing a wonderful piece of work by winning the match for the Springboks.

It remains to tell of some of Douglas Morkel's famous kicks. One that will always be remembered is his penalty goal for the 1912 Springboks against France. The match was really a picnic, for the French backs were very weak. During the game the referee gave a wrong decision, and, not wishing to benefit from a mistake, Billy Millar, the Springbok captain threw the ball to Douglas Morkel and told him to boot the ball back to the full-back. The infringement took place 10 yards inside the Springboks half. Douglas laughed and said: "Billy, I'm going to take a pot shot at goal". The French full-back was standing somewhere on the 25 yard line when Douglas's foot connected with the ball. With a perfect trajectory it soared into the air and the French full-back stood fascinated for a moment and then turned to run behind the goalposts. He had got there when the ball crossed the bar and with mouth wide open he started to clap. And so did the crowd for a long time. One Frenchman ran out of the crowd and kissed Morkel. Billy Millar afterwards said it was the most wonderful dropped goal he had ever seen.

During the visit of Dr.Smythe's team in 1910 Douglas kicked a ball into the trees which used to be behind the old Malay stand at Newlands. The Governor-General and party were seated near the touch-line and Douglas had to ask them to move so that he could get more room for his run. He drop-kicked and the ball went between the posts and far beyond the trees.

Die "Groot Manne" van Somerset Wes

C. Nolte. Translated from *Die Burger Byvoegsel* 9.7.1949

The Somerset West team was so strong in the glory days and they won the competition so regularly that the team was boo-ed when they played at Cape Town and Stellenbosch. At the end of the 1914 season the Rugby Union organised a match between the Somerset West team and the best team (the "all comers") picked from the other clubs. The newspapers predicted a win for the All Comers, but in spite of not playing at their best, the Somerset West team won 15 to 11. The team contained 5 Morkels - Gerhard, Jack, Albert, Royal and Boy.

When Harry Morkel was still at school he struggled to gain a place in the under 14 team. He looked so ungainly and that the general opinion was that he would be good only as a forward. He asked to play at wing and built a reputation in that position. He was big, strong and fast and became a feared player. When an opponent tried to tackle him, he simply pushed him out of the way and carried on running spectacularly - with his knees almost to his chin as he ran. Often 4 to 5 opponents would lie in the dust before he was brought to a stand still. Of Harry, a prominent sporting journalist (E.J. Platnauer) wrote in 1908:

"Harry Morkel- Athlete, Rugby footballer and cricketer. The best hurdler who ever ran over sticks in South Africa. He went to England in 1898, but failed to reproduce his South African form. As Rugby footballer he was a brilliant wing three-quarter".

From various sources come the following stories:

The largest Morkel physically was Royal (Johannes Albertus) born in 1896. He was known for his steamroller tactics. In 1919 ships with Australian Armed Forces stopped over at Cape Town returning from the battlefields of Europe. A rugby team was formed and a match arranged against Somerset West who at that time was the strongest club team around. During the match Royal Morkel burst through and pushed the Australian full back out of the way to score behind the goal posts. Shortly thereafter it happened again. Royal had thrust his way through the forwards and was storming on to the Australian full-back. When the full-back saw him coming, he turned and ran to his own goal posts and sheltered behind one of them. Royal scored the try between the posts and stood amused with his

hands on his hips looking at his unfortunate opponent. By this time the Australian captain caught up and berated his team mate. "What made you run away" he asked. The full-back answered: "I can stop a German tank, but I can't stop this damn Dutchman!"

Royal was 6ft 2inches tall and weighed 230 lbs. He was a good swimmer and boxer and ran 100 yard sprints and even participated in high jump. His team mates told about his love for fish and chips when they played in Cape Town which he drank with ginger beer. For all his strength and sporting prowess, he was also a bit of a hypochondriac and was regularly complaining about aches and pains in the train on the way to a match. Sadly one day his complaints were ignored and he died after a match from an inflamed appendix. He was 32 years old.

Rugby was big in Somerset West in those days, and interest ran high. By the time they caught the train connection back from an afternoon match in Cape Town, it would have been late at night. In 1909 one of the players took two carrier pigeons along when they played away matches. At half time and again immediately after the match pigeons were released with the scores. A young boy waited for the pigeons at their home roost and cycled to the hotel lounge where the scores were posted on a blackboard. Telephone links were still in the future at that time.

Apart from Rugby football, several of the Morkels also excelled in other sports. Playing Rugby in winter and cricket and tennis in summer. A few of the more notable performances were: Denis Morkel toured the UK. in 1929 and Australia in 1931 with the South African cricket team. Harry Morkel represented South Africa in the English Amateur Athletic Championships in 1898. In recent years Albie and Morné Morkel are regular members of the South African international Protea cricket teams. They feature in a story of their own.

By the end of the 1920s, most of the famous rugby players had retired. I was a student in the 1950s when the father of a friend looked at me and commented: "Oh, you are a Morkel. Do you play rugby? The family sure has gone backwards these days". In fact at that time the son of Gerhard, Hannes (Johannes Albertus) Morkel captained the Western Province rugby team for many years (1946 to 1951) and narrowly missed selection as a Springbok. My brother, Charles (Charl Theron Morkel) played for Western Province in 1952 and 1953. He was known as die os van die Suide. (The ox of the South) but his promising rugby career was cut short due to a knee injury.



An historic photograph taken at the Strand rugby grounds a few years ago. Here you have thirteen of the Morkel family together. (From l. to r.): Albert, Pieter (P.K.), Nicolas (first club captain, 1904), Bertie, Johnnie (first senior capt., 1908), Alby, Henry and Gerhard. Then the younger generation, in front: Tinie, Hannes (Gerhard's son), Herman and Hubert and Philip, (Bertie's sons).

Source: S.W.F.C. Golden Jubilee 1904 - 1954

Compiled by André T. Morkel
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Notes and Sources:

Most of the stories are from

“The Morkels as Sportsmen”. p 51 to 54 in P.W. Morkel 1961. *The Morkels: Family History*. Published privately.

This book also contained three newspaper/magazine articles. The 1933 *Cape Argus* story was the more comprehensive, and seemingly the source for some of the later articles

“The Story of the Morkels. How South Africa’s most famous Football Clan was Founded”. Weldon Broughton. *The Cape Argus*. 14.10.1933.

“Die “Groot Manne” van Somerset Wes”. C. Nolte. *Die Burger Byvoegsel* 9.7.1949

“Die Morkels”. Denys O. Rhoadie. *Fleur*. Desember 1947.

The photos and some of the stories are from:

S.W.R.F.C. Golden Jubilee 1904 – 1954. Somerset West Rugby Football Club.

Springbok Saga. A Pictorial History from 1891. Chris Greyvenstein 1977. Published by Don Nelson & Toyota South Africa Ltd.

Family Line

I provide short family lines for five Springboks who were closely related, and origins for the remaining five.

The Five cousins.

Five of the ten Morkel Springboks were closely related and were the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of Hendrik Johannes Morkel (1798 – 1859) who farmed at Onverwacht (Die Bos). As the newspaper articles mentioned, they were also the sons of three Mijburgh sisters who had married two Morkel brothers and a nephew.

The line to Hendrik Johannes (1789 – 1859) is as follows:

- 1st: Philip Morkel (? – 1733) x Catharina Pasman (1691 – 1764).
- 2nd: Willem Morkel (1718 – 1788) x Helena Catharina Malan (1736 – 1825)
- 3rd: Daniel Johannes Morkel (1764 – 1825) x Maria Dorothea Louw (1775 – 1801)
- 4th: Hendrik Johannes Morkel (1798 – 1859) x Catharina Jacoba Theunissen (1803 - 1831)
xx Esther Elizabeth Morkel (1813 - 1880)

Harry (Hendrik Johannes) and Royal (Johannes Albertus) are from the first marriage with Catharina Theunissen. The mother of these two Springboks was one of the three Mijburgh sisters:

- 5th Hendrik Johannes Louw Morkel (1825 – 1864) x Elizabeth Anna Morkel (1830 – 1864).
- 6th Hendrik Johannes Louw Morkel (1865 – 1895) x Sarah Catharina Barbara Mijburgh (1859 – 1925)
- 7th **Hendrik Johannes Louw Morkel (Harry) (1888 – 1957)**
Johannes Albertus Morkel (Royal) (1894 – 1926)

Hendrik’s second marriage with his cousin Esther Elizabeth Morkel produced two families with Springbok and Western Province (WP) offspring, with the two other Mijburgh sisters as their mothers.

- 5th Johannes Albertus Morkel (1844 – 1894) x Hester Anna Mijburgh (1851 – 1903)
- 6th **Philippus Albertus Mijburgh Morkel (Albert) 1883 – 1968) (WP and NZ Military Touring Team)**
Johannes Albertus Douglas Morkel (Jack) (1886 -)
Pieter Gerhard Morkel (Gerhard) (1888 – 1964) Gerhard’s son, Hannes (Johannes Albertus Morkel) captained the WP team 1946 – 1951.
- 5th William Herman Morkel (1849 - ?) x Martha Maria Mijburgh
- 6th **William Herman Morkel (Boy) (1885 – 1955).**

Pieter Krige Morkel (P.K.) is from a line starting with a brother, Daniel Johannes Morkel (1801 – 1843), of Hendrik Johannes (1798 – 1859).

Andries Brink Morkel (Andrew) (1873 - ?) and the brothers **William Somerset Morkel (Sommie)** (1879 - ?) and **Douglas Francis Morkel (Dougie)** (1885 – 1950) came from third generation Willem Morkel (1761 – 1821).

Henry William Morkel (1894 - ?) is descended from third generation Hercules Morkel (1767 – 1804).