Keith Oxlee (1934–1998)

Springbok flyhalf Keith Oxlee, the inspiration behind Natal's playing style in the 1960s and a hugely influential player, died in Durban late in August 1998. The 63-year-old Oxlee underwent a hip replacement operation and was reportedly recovering well at home when a blood clot suddenly ended his life.

Obituaries

(1) Keith Oxlee

Oxlee, who became the first Natalian to win 100 provincial caps, played 19 Tests for the Springboks between 1960 and 1965, scoring five tries in a total of 88 points. It was Oxlee's refreshing approach, his panache in an era of conservative, often grim, rugby, which was his undoubted hallmark.

Keith Parkinson, the president of the Natal Rugby Union, describes Oxlee as a 'Natal legend, without any doubt the greatest I played with or against. He was a great guy, modest but full of fun. This is a great loss for Natal rugby.'

Oxlee's 102 matches for Natal stretched over 16 years (1955–71) and he made his Test debut against the 1960 All Blacks. He became a goal kicker only reluctantly, and relatively late in his career, when press-ganged into kicking the winning penalty as the Boks beat Wales 3-0 in a quagmire at Cardiff Arms Park on the 1960–61 UK tour. Such was his natural talent that he soon became a respected goal kicker, winning matches for the Springboks by landing penalties as well as scoring tries.

Natal rugby was fortunate to stumble upon the right man at the right time. Fielding lightweight packs against beefy opposition, possession was a rare commodity, to be nurtured and kept in hand. The innovative coach Izak van Heerden had the ideal playmaker in Oxlee, and the King's Park crowds in that era were treated to invigorating, free-ranging, 15-man rugby. Van Heerden and Oxlee were men ahead of their times.

The unorthodox became the norm in Natal rugby. Moves were launched from deep defensive positions and Oxlee, adept at involving fast loose-forwards and busy, roving wings in exciting thrusts, kept pulling the strings. Sleight of hand passing, constant switches of direction and astute tactical kicking were features of the Oxlee game and far more physical, talented teams were exposed by this twinkle-toed approach. A Natal style of rugby, based on a mobile pack, sure handling and ambitious running was born.

There were famous moments: the 6-6 draw at King's Park with the formidable All Blacks and the 14-13 win over John Thronett's 1963 Wallabies when Natal went all season unbeaten and were disappointed that there was no Currie Cup title at stake.

Oxlee went on to play 19 times for the Springboks, though one sensed that his tricks for Natal and his non-conformity – both on and off the field – were held against him by the conservative South African rugby hierarchy.

He was at his peak in 1962 when he became the most prolifically-scoring fly-half in South African rugby and dominated the series against the British Lions, scoring all the Springboks' points in the second Test (won 3-0) and the third (won 8-3) and then 16 points in the fourth (34-14). Had he kicked a last-minute penalty from straight in front of the posts instead of running it, he would have broken Don Clarke's world record of 18 points. John Gainsford, the famous Springbok centre, played outside Oxlee in all 19 of his internationals. 'He took the knocks and never gave me anything but clean ball,' said Gainsford. 'That is a mark of greatness in a Test fly-half. He was the finest I ever played with.'

Oxlee, aged 32, retired in 1967 and, in his farewell game, Natal beat the SA Barbarians (with 10 Springboks) 32-22 in front of an adoring King's Park crowd.

Later he became a selector, and he was on the Natal panel four years later when he was begged by the four other members to return to the provincial team to guide a young backline through their teething problems. So, at the age of 36 and obviously lacking match practice, Oxlee returned against Eastern Transvaal at King's Park. I was behind the posts at the city end that day. It was a perfect viewing platform for those who wanted to watch Oxlee weave his magic, draw defences and then suddenly switch the direction of the attack.

And it produced one indelible memory of Oxlee at play. Natal had the feed to the scrum on the halfway line and 15 metres in from touch. As the forwards packed down, Oxlee signalled to his blind-side wing Malcolm Warner, who started to edge infield as if about to join an open-field sortie. With our bird's-eye view we could see the Eastern Transvaal wing leave his post on the touch-line as he followed Warner. Natal won the scrum and Oxlee ran to the open side, dummied to Warner on his shoulder but then stopped and flung a long pass back toward touch. Chuffing up from fullback came Malcolm Swanby who took the ball at full sprint on the unguarded left touchline and ran 50 metres untouched to the corner flag where loose forward Richard Steyn was up to score. It was the most simple of moves, but it was timed to perfection and it worked a treat. And that was Oxlee's secret. He had timing, vision and excellent handling. And his moves, his tricks, worked.

Oxlee played three more games as he steadied the Natal backline in that 1971 season before slipping back into retirement and seeking out the bowling greens.

The British Lions captain Arthur Smith paid him a warm tribute at the end of the 1962 series: 'The trouble with Oxlee is that you never know what the blighter will be doing next.' That is what the King's Park faithful – well, those with long memories anyway – will remember about Keith Oxlee. He brought to rugby an excitement and a sense of adventure. He prompted the romantic upset when the small guys occasionally toppled the brawny. And he did it in style.

JOHN BISHOP