

The Spar Proteas... how we have come a long way. We made a post a few weeks ago asking our followers to vote on which country's netball they were most interested in... New Zealand's Silver Ferns took the W for their unique style of play, precision in attack and defence, and their closely contested test matches with the world's number one, Australia. However... the close followers of the Silver Ferns were our very own Spar Proteas! Let's look at the history of netball in South Africa.

Netball in South Africa originated from British settlers in the early 20th century. Being one of the founding members of the International Netball Federation, South Africa competed in the World Cup the same year in 1960. Notably, this was during the height of Apartheid. During this World Cup, SA finished second to Australia – cementing their place as competitors on a grand scale. Not long after, in 1969, SA was banned from international competitions due to the world's views on the Apartheid regime... This resulted in SA being absent from World Cups for 25 years, creating a major setback for the development of the sport. At the end of Apartheid, SA reintegrated into international netball competitions, but had a long way to go considering the lack of exposure and development of the sport.

Here are some milestones for netball in South Africa:

1960: South Africa became founding members of the International Netball Federation and became the runners-up to first place in the Netball World Cup in the same year

1963: South Africa attends the second netball World Cup and finishes second again

1969: Banned from international netball due to the unethical practices of Apartheid

1994: Readmitted to international netball following the end of Apartheid

1995: Finishes second to Australia in the Netball World Cup

2000s: Continues to participate in international competitions and solidifies themselves within the top 5 consecutively

2014: The Brutal Fruit Netball Cup launches for the first time, a semi-professional league in South Africa

2017: Karla Pretorius is named player of the tournament at the netball world cup, becoming one of the top defenders globally

2020: The Telkom netball league replaces the Brutal Fruit League

2023: South Africa hosts the Netball World Cup for the first time, held in Cape Town.

The Proteas finish 6th, displaying strong performances such as the first-ever draw against New Zealand – the closest SA has ever come to beating the Silver Ferns.

Some notable coaches include:

Marlene Wagner

- Primarily active in the 1980s and early 1990s.
- Coached the South African national team to a silver medal at the 1995 Netball World Championships, marking the country's return to international competition post-apartheid.
- Recognized for her dedication to the sport, receiving accolades such as the Mayoral Award from the Bellville Town Council for outstanding achievement in netball.

Hazel Gumede

- Active as a player and coach during the late apartheid era, transitioning into coaching roles in the 1990s.
- Served as assistant coach for the national team, contributing to victories in international competitions such as the CUCSA Games in Zimbabwe.
- Continued to develop netball at the grassroots level, coaching teams in local communities and at institutions like Technikon Witwatersrand (now University of Johannesburg).

Elize Kotzé (2011-2015)

- A former Proteas player herself, she was head coach of the national team from 2011 until early 2015.
- During her tenure, she helped improve the team's international standing and was instrumental in grooming young talent.
- She led the team to a 5th-place finish at the 2011 Netball World Championships in Singapore.
- Kotzé also coached the team at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Norma Plummer

- Former Australian international netball player and head coach.
- Coached the Australian Diamonds to World Cup victory in 2007 and Commonwealth gold in 2010.
- Appointed SPAR Proteas head coach in 2015.
- Led South Africa to a 4th place finish at the 2019 Netball World Cup — their best result since 1995.
- Known for instilling discipline, fitness, and international professionalism into SA netball.
- Returned to coach the Proteas again in 2022 for the 2023 Netball World Cup in Cape Town, where SA placed 6th.
- Retired from international coaching in December 2023.

Jenny van Dyk

- Appointed SPAR Proteas head coach in 2024.
- Former head coach of the University of Pretoria, Tuks netball team.
- Led Tuks to multiple Varsity Netball titles and USSA (University Sports South Africa) championships.
- Known for her tactical skill, player development, and building high-performance systems.
- Head coach of Gauteng Jaguars, the dominant team in South Africa's Telkom Netball League (TNL), winning 5 TNL titles.
- Previously involved in coaching SA junior teams and served as an assistant coach for the Proteas.

Zanele Mdodana

- Former SPAR Proteas captain and elite player
- Played wing defence (WD) and was known for her speed, leadership, and intercepts.
- Represented South Africa at two Netball World Championships and Commonwealth Games.
- Captained the Proteas in 2012
- Coached Maties Netball and was involved in coaching at provincial and youth level post-retirement.
- A vocal advocate for transformation, women's sport, and empowering girls through netball.

Coaches that stand out in the netball sphere are Norma Plummer, bringing an

international standard of netball to South Africa. She integrated an Australian style of netball into the South African National Team, allowing the Proteas to become a more competitive force to be reckoned with. Next is the duo of Jenny van Dyk and Zanele Mdodana. Van Dyk and Mdodana's passion for development and game interpretation makes them analytical icons. Their knowledge of pressurized situations and tactical gameplay introduces a new level of skill and netball ability. They aim to educate and develop younger generations so that players can be more advanced when they reach a high-performance level.

Looking back at the development of netball, some key players stand out in the sport.

Such are the likes of:

Irene van Dyk: a legendary shooter who later played for New Zealand

Bongi Msomi: a dynamic midcourt player and former captain, renowned for her speed and agility

Karla Pretorius: one of the best defenders in the world

Apex also took to Instagram to ask our followers which Protea legend is their favourite... leading the votes was Karla Pretorius, followed by Zanele Mdodana (the current assistant Protea coach and Apex Netball Academy Director).

We also asked who our followers' favourite rising star was... from which the leader was Sanmarie Visser, followed by Nichol   Breedts (Taljaard). But why did our audience vote this way?

Let's take a look at these four players:

Karla Pretorius

Positions: GD / WD

Born: 12 March 1990, East London, South Africa

Schooling Career:

- Laerskool Hennospark

- Hoërskool Zwartkop in Centurion

University Career:

- University of the Free State (UFS)
- BSc in Dietetics (2014)
- MSc in Dietetics (2018)

Netball Career:

- Player for UFS Kopsies (2009-2015), captaining the team and earning varsity netball player of the tournament in 2014 and 2015
- Represented the Free State Crinums, winning Brutal Fruit Netball Cup titles in 2014 and 2015
- Joined Team Bath in the United Kingdom for the 2015 and 2016 seasons
- First South African player to play in the Australian netball league, known as the Suncorp Super Netball League
- Played for the Sunshine Coast Lightning in Australia's Netball Super League (2017-2023), winning championships in 2017 and 2018
- Vice-captain of the Spar Proteas, with over 77 caps
- Named player of the tournament in the 2019 Netball World Cup

Karla Pretorius is a fan favourite due to her high level of skill, agility, and decision-making. Her leadership and passion for the game shine on and off the court during playing and coaching. Notably, she is not the tallest defender, but her high work rate makes her an unstoppable force in the netball industry.

Zanele Mdodana

Positions: GD/WD

Born: 1984, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Schooling Career:

- Victoria Park High School in Port Elizabeth

University Career:

- Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (now Nelson Mandela University)

- Degree in Sports Management, majoring in netball

Netball Career:

- Began her netball career at age 10
- Played for Nelson Mandela University
- Played for the Eastern Cape Aloes
- Debuted for the Spar Proteas in 2005
- Earned 82 caps for South Africa, participating in the 2006, 2010, and 2014 Commonwealth Games, and one Netball World Cup
- Served as captain and vice-captain of the national team
- After retiring in 2015, Zanele became the first Black head coach of Maties Netball at Stellenbosch University
- 2022 Varsity Netball Title: Mdodana led Maties to their first-ever Varsity Netball championship in 2022, marking a historic moment for the university's netball program
- Back-to-Back USSA Titles (2022 & 2023): Under her guidance, Maties secured consecutive University Sports South Africa (USSA) championships, demonstrating consistent high-level performance
- Cape Winelands Super League: The team successfully defended their title in the Cape Winelands Super League, showcasing their dominance in regional competitions
- Mdodana left a noticeable mark on the Stellenbosch University netball training programme with coaching techniques such as the "hustle" - a technique used to shut down the attack of the opposition
- She was appointed as the assistant coach of the Spar Proteas in 2024
- Mdodana works for the South African sports broadcaster, SuperSport, as a netball commentator and analyst

Zanele Mdodana is a fan favourite due to her continued participation in the sport through netball commentary and coaching. Her passion for players shines through in everything that she does, from posting the players on her social media, such as Sian Moore (whom she attributes a large portion of her success at Maties netball to), to attending school netball camps. She shares her knowledge and continues to grow the sport on the international stage. Netball fans look forward to the new age of netball that she and Head Coach Jenny van Dyk, are offering to the young players of the country.

Prospective Players:

Samarie Visser

Positions: GD / GK

Born: 23 October 2003, Upington, Northern Cape, South Africa

Schooling Career:

- Matriculated from Duineveld High School in Upington in 2021

University Career:

- North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom
- Pursuing a BCom in Marketing
- Initially received a bursary for discus, but chose to pursue netball

Netball Career:

- Initially received a bursary for discus, but chose to pursue netball
- Plays for the North-West University (NWU) in Potchefstroom
- Plays for the North West Flames on a provincial level
- Named Varsity Netball player of the tournament in 2023
- Recognized as the best defender during the Africa Qualifying Rounds for the 2025 Netball World Cup
- Aspired to represent the Spar Proteas at the senior level
- Made her debut for the Proteas during the Margaret Beckford Series in Jamaica
- Named as a training partner for the top team in the Suncorp Super Netball League, the Adelaide Thunderbirds

Sanmarie (Sanna) Visser is a favourite in the netball community due to her exceptional game-reading skills and netball IQ. The training programme at NWU displays their coaching ability and growth within their netball players, focusing on elevation and agility. Such training programmes have elevated the game of players such as Visser. The netball community looks forward to her growth as a player as she displays exceptional talent at her young age.

Nichole Breedt (neè Taljaard)

Positions: WA / GA

Born: 3rd May 1997

Schooling Career:

- Stellenberg High School, Durbanville, Western Cape

University Career:

- Stellenbosch University
- BSc in Sport Science, High Performance

Netball Career:

- Represented South Africa as an U17 player in 2014
- She played for Maties netball at a university level
- Played regionally for Cape Winelands
- Played provincially for the Southern Stings in the Telkom Netball league
- She was selected for the President's XII
- Captained Cape Winelands to victory at the 2021 SPAR National Netball Championships, earning the title of Best Shooter of the Tournament
- In 2021, she was named Player of the Tournament at the Varsity Netball Cup
- Made her senior international debut for the SPAR Proteas in 2022
- At the Fast 5 tournament in 2022, she was named player of the series, assisting her team in securing a silver medal
- In the 2023 Netball World Cup held in Cape Town, she played a pivotal role by scoring the equalizing goal in a 48-48 draw against New Zealand in the last seconds of the game
- In 2024, Breedt joined London Pulse for her debut season in the Netball Super League (NSL) in the United Kingdom, finishing third in the league

Breedt's impressive career makes her a South African netball celebrity. She is known for her fitness, play-making ability, and control of the game. Breedt is also known for "playing the post" – in which she essentially plays herself closer to the shooting pole by passing the ball to the post and catching the rebound. She is also renowned for her GA split, bringing herself into a comfortable shooting range. Being the playmaker that she is, she is also known in the English league for her WA abilities, making accurate feeds, and the agility in her movements.

Looking back at the Spar Proteas, we can see how the history of South Africa has

impacted the game of netball. We also see that players are being cultivated who stand out on an international stage. Under the new leadership of Coaches Jenny van Dyk and Zanele Mgodana, the stage is set for unparalleled growth in the sport.