

Service Spotlight

“Chop wood, carry water.” Dr Sharief Hendricks: An inspirational story of an impactful South African sports scientist.

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Background

South African sports scientist Dr Sharief Hendricks grew up in an area reserved for people of colour after his family was relocated by the Apartheid government. Sharief comes from a family of fruit and vegetable sellers. Growing up around a family of hawkers and helping with the business every day meant the notion of consistent hard work was instilled in him from a young age. The location of his mother’s stall close to the famous Newlands rugby and cricket stadiums in Cape Town also fuelled a passion for sport.

The Path

Sharief registered for a BSc in Sport and Exercise Science at the University of the Western Cape in 2004 graduating Cum Laude. . In 2006, he was selected to play for the Western Province provincial team in the Under 21 Rugby Currie Cup. His thirst for science grew stronger, and in 2008 he registered for an Honours in Physiology at the University of Cape Town (UCT). During his Honours year, he connected with the UCT/Medical Research Council Research Unit for Exercise Science and Sports Medicine whose mission was to apply science to sport and exercise.

He then registered for an MSc with renowned UCT scientist and mentor Professor Mike Lambert, upgraded to a PhD in 2010, graduated in 2012, and thereafter registered for a Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Sport and Exercise Science. During this time, he continued playing rugby for the University. In 2016, he accepted a Research Fellowship at Leeds Beckett University (UK), with Professors Ben Jones and Kevin Till, later broadening his scope to complete a Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Health Innovation at UCT. He is currently a Senior Lecturer within the Department of Human Biology at UCT and a Visiting Fellow at Leeds Beckett University. All a long way from the Newlands Fruit and vegetable stall!

Service

Sharief has over 90 peer-reviewed publications. His primary research focus is improving player welfare and reducing the risk of injury while maximising performance in tackle-based sports such as the Rugby codes: Union, League and Sevens. Subsequently, his research team has identified mechanisms and key risk factors for tackle injury and determinants of performance and has informed policy, designed and developed novel tackle training and testing equipment and guidelines.¹⁻³ His work has informed safe coaching techniques and South African Rugby’s BokSmart injury intervention programme^{4,5} and, along with leading experts, produced a consensus document for video analysis in rugby.⁶ Sharief’s further research interest in science communication⁷ and stakeholder engagement⁸ is reflected in

two leading science communication websites - HealthScienceReviews.com (<https://healthsciencereviews.com>) and RugbyScientists.com (<https://rugbyscientists.com>.)

Awards

From humble beginnings, and through perseverance, Sharief has achieved numerous accolades, setting an example to people with similar backgrounds. In 2019, he was awarded the prestigious UCT College of Fellows Young Researcher Award and listed on the *Mail and Guardian's* Top 200 Young South Africans. He is a two-time finalist (2020, 2021) for the TW Kambule-NSTF Award (an award for South Africa's top scientists), and a Fellow of the European College of Sport Science. He has not just collected honours but is contributing to the elevation of South African sport and exercise science and medicine. He is the President-Elect of the South African Sports Medicine Association (SASMA), the first non-physician to hold this position and an Associate Editor for *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* and *BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Science*, and has been Social Media Editor for the *European Journal of Sport Science* for 8 years. He is also Chair of Research and Science for the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC) and research lead for the South African Cricketers' Association (SACA). Recently, he has been awarded two Professoriate Fellowships (South Africa Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Future Professors Programme Fellowship and the UCT Next Generation Professoriate Fellowship).

On the shoulders of giants

Sharief credits his achievements to the scholarly environment created by UCT. The combination of autonomy, guidance and support, robust research models and academic excellence keeps him inspired. Role players are Profs Mike Lambert, Vicki Lambert, Malcolm Collins and Alison September. He is also thankful to past and current SASMA Presidents – Dr Glen Hagemann (first got him involved), Prof Jon Patricios (strongly encouraged him to run for President), Drs Phatho Zondi and Pierre Viviers (who kept pushing him forward) and finally, the current President, Prof Christa Janse van Rensburg, for her overwhelming support and guidance over the last few years. Lastly, UCT and Leeds Beckett have built a strong collaborative relationship since Sharief completed his Fellowship in 2016, and he acknowledges the commitment of Prof Ben Jones.

Advice for aspiring researchers

From the book titled "The Practice" by Seth Godin (ref), there's a Zen saying, "Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water." To Sharief, this means, irrespective of your goals and what you have achieved, do this daily, and do it well. Each data point collected, analysis run, word written, must be continued as a commitment to the process. The outcomes will automatically follow. "My Mom set the example and now this philosophy holds true to me. A stall is not a permanent structure, so daily my Mom had to unpack and pack up, no matter the weather. Therefore, good or bad day, winning or losing, accepted or rejected, unpack and pack up - chop wood, carry water."

An impact beyond science

Sharief is a mentor for SeaTheBiggerPicture Defenders of Blue Programme, teaching disadvantaged children about science and the ocean (<https://seathebiggerpicture.org>). He is also an Ambassador for MOT South Africa (<https://mot.org.za>) (meaning "courage") started

by Norwegian professional athletes who realised the importance of courage and believing in dreams. The organisation supports youth to take a stand against bullying, violence, and drug abuse, promoting peace, conflict resolution, ubuntu and values-driven culture.

Inside and outside of the laboratory, on and off the sports field, Dr Sharief Hendricks continues to be impactful in the South African scientific and sporting communities. He remains an inspirational example of success rising from Apartheid as he lives by his mantra: "Chop wood, carry water."

References

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