

## Sharks end Absa Currie Cup wait

The Sharks ended their 12-year Absa Currie Cup drought in fine style, with Johann Muller's team beating the Vodacom Blue Bulls 14-9 in an absorbing Absa Currie Cup Final at Durban's Absa Stadium on Saturday evening.

The men from Durban - who had World Cup-winning skipper John Smit playing off the bench, a sure sign of their quality and depth across the board - led 7-3 at half-time, with the Bulls launching a last-ditch attack at the final whistle in shades of the drama-filled 2007 Vodacom Super 14 Final.

However, the Bulls were blown up for an accidental off-side 30 seconds before full-time, with Sharks flanker Jean Deysel - the August Absa Currie Cup Player of the Month - eventually getting the ball into touch to signal referee Jonathan Kaplan's full-time whistle.

"I did think about it (the Super 14 Final) when Frans (Steyn) missed that penalty attempt; it was close to full time and the Bulls had a scrum. But I also thought, no side could be that unlucky twice," admitted a relieved Muller after the match.

"We did miss a few kicks and opportunities, but I thought the guys showed incredible character throughout."

Bulls captain Victor Matfield - a constant menace in the lineouts - was magnanimous in defeat, saying: "The Sharks deserved to win and congratulations to them. We've had a great year, but I suppose somebody has to lose - just like somebody had to (lose) in last year's Super 14 Final."

Man of the match Francois Steyn - a World Cup and Absa Currie Cup winner at the tender age of 21 - scored one of the Sharks' two tries, with scrumhalf Ruan Pienaar responsible for the opening try of the day after good work from winger JP Pietersen in the build-up.

Pienaar converted his own try, with Frenchman Frederic Michalak adding the extras for Steyn's try in the 60th minute. All the Bulls had to show for their effort on the day was two Morne Steyn penalties and a 46-metre drop-goal, with the hosts' defence holding out on a memorable day for the Durbanites.

The Sharks last won the Absa Currie Cup in 1996 - when coach John Plumtree was still playing! - and they had lost four Currie Cup Finals since then (in 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2003), but there was to be no repeat of that on Saturday, much to the delight of the majority of the supporters at a jam-packed and festive Absa Stadium.

Before Saturday's clash, the Bulls had won 22 of the 29 Absa Currie Cup Finals they had played in, whilst the Sharks made it five victories in 10 finals, having won their first four titles in the 1990's. Their first-ever title came against the selfsame Bulls - or rather Northern Transvaal as they were known - in 1990.

Meanwhile, there was some consolation for the Blue Bulls on Saturday, with their junior team winning the Absa Currie Cup Under-21 competition in dramatic style.

The 'Baby Bulls' beat the Free State Under-21's 20-18 in the U21 Final - courtesy of a last-gasp try by Okkie Kruger and a conversion by flyhalf Francois Brummer.

The young Free Staters led 8-6 at half-time, but the plucky Bulls remained in striking distance throughout - right up until Kruger streaked over to level the scores, with SA Under-20 star Brummer calmly slotting the winning conversion.

There was more elation for the Sharks, too, on Saturday as their Under-19 team claimed the Absa Currie Cup U19 title with a convincing 31-18 win over Vodacom WP's U19's in the first match of the day.

Sharks skipper Ross Cronje - who was in fine form with the boot - was a proud man after seeing his side convert their half-time lead into a victory.

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