

What Michael Cheika has in common with Alice Cooper

THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 5, 2015 12:00AM JOHN EALES

Just as Alice Cooper reinvented rock 'n' roll, Cheika's Wallabies belong to the fans

Not many people become famous for being "me too" acts. Impersonators are de rigeur but it takes courage and imagination to change a paradigm. When rocker Alice Cooper and his band emerged, they reinvented rock 'n' roll. Sure they were influenced by the likes of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones but they didn't become them.

From dropping panties out of helicopters at concerts to throwing live chickens into the crowd, the notoriety of their image preceded hits such as *School's Out for Summer*. They were a show before they were famous for being musicians.

When Rod Macqueen took over the Wallabies in 1997 he demanded that it was not good enough to copy the All Blacks, as, by the time they did so, if the All Blacks were any good they would be further ahead again. No, to become No 1 we had to construct our own future.

Michael Cheika is no "me too" act. He confidently sets his themes and backfills the detail. He believes his team's image (selfimage and the fans' view), born of their work ethic, will precede their success, and so does his captain, Stephen Moore.

Moore has been impressive both on and off the field and he is ably supported by his lieutenants Michael Hooper, David Pocock, Adam Ashley-Cooper and now James Slipper, who captains the team against the US in their final outing before the World Cup.

Moore's messaging demands his team plays a style of rugby that makes Wallaby fans proud. It's as simple as that. He knows that if they get that right then the results will look after themselves. It's about hard work and consistency; process before scoreboard. This alignment of captain and coach is crucial. Behind closed doors they may debate as much and as vigorously as they like, but when they front beyond that sanctum they are united in mantra and message, in theme and in detail.

Coaches all stand for something. If there was a Bob Dwyerism it may have been, "The world is flat", well at least backline play. Rod Macqueen's epitaph would celebrate the construction of a winning team, strategy by strategy, person by person, detail by detail.

If there is a Cheikatism it revolves around team identity and the sanctity of the whole squad and not the individual. This has been reinforced by the inclusion in this match of Taquele Naiyaravoro, Sam Carter and James Hanson, from outside his World Cup squad. We are one, everyone is a part of our team and everyone must fit in.

David Kirk relates a story about his All Blacks at the 1987 World Cup and how his coach, Brian Lahore, organised his players to be billeted by families from local rugby clubs for a couple of nights prior to the knockout stages. Kirk described it as humbling and grounding.

Cheika won't do this, but he understands the importance of such symbolism. Like all shrewd leaders, he varies his communications from dog whistles to sirens, with the former targeted and for specific ears and the latter amplified, for general consumption and in no uncertain terms.

In one powerful message he invited players from the 1999 World Cup squad to make the phone call to inform his squad of their selection. It was an honour for all of us asked and a tangible link to the past for the current team.

Among his coaches, Cheika enjoys other links to the past including Nathan Grey. Grey is a beacon of symbolism for Cheika. He is a selfless man of substance and passion. In the 1999 team he wasn't a firstchoice player and, in fact, played only a minute or two in the World Cup final, but he was always ready. Each time a team was announced Grey bore the dagger of his omission, but you wouldn't have known it as he trained as resolutely as ever and focused on how he could help the team win on the weekend. I don't suspect his job description or attitude has changed much. In the semifinal of that tournament, Stephen Larkham kicked his famous drop goal. What's never spoken about is the charge Gray made to set up the ruck in the preceding phase. It was typical of his style, aggressive, accurate and unassuming, and Larkham's goal wouldn't have happened without it. He personifies Cheika's philosophy.

To this day, Alice Cooper respects his fans. "From the moment I leave my house or my hotel room, the public owns me. The public made Alice Cooper and I can't imagine ever turning my back on my fans."

The Wallabies share this in common. It's the fans that make this team worth playing for. And by putting them first, while many of the combinations and detail still require finessing, these Wallabies are on the road to making them proud.