

John wears his heart on his feet

January 19 2012 at 12:30pm
By Justin Nurse



JUSTIN NURSE

John McInroy's Red Sock Friday initiative has become a vehicle for other people to have fun and raise money for causes they are passionate about. Since its official launch in April 2010, nearly 13 000 pairs of socks have been sold to over 50 different countries.

John McInroy was born in Cape Town, but grew up in the UK. After one too many summer holidays in South Africa visiting family, the pull of Africa became too great and John enrolled as a boarder at Bishops for his final two years of school. Thereafter, while studying at UCT, he made his debut as a Springbok hockey player and ended up playing hockey for South Africa until 2006. He then played club hockey while working in Ireland in 2007.

"It was in Dublin where the Red Sock thing emerged. A good friend of mine, Ian Symons ("Symmo"), was also working in Dublin at the time, and we spent an amazing year together. By the end of the year he was due to return to SA to get married; we didn't know when next our paths would cross again, and we wanted something to remember each other by. Something to share on a regular basis.

"Symmo shared a story from his school days in Grey High, Port Elizabeth, regarding its memorial day for people who died in the wars. Symmo would sit in the front row of the chapel, watching an old fellow, Sydney Feinsen, who, year after year, would lay a commemorative wreath while wearing red socks. The red socks became a talking point; something he and his mates had to get to the bottom of.

"Eventually they found out that it was a pact between him and two friends that were prisoners of war in an Italian concentration camp: that if anyone made it out of there alive, they would wear red socks to remember each other by. Symmo and I agreed that we would do the same, and wear red socks every Friday, as Friday is the day to do crazy things like that.

"I've worn red socks every Friday for the last four years, during everything from surfing to job interviews. When you wear red socks, you can't just drift through the day. Something changes, you get noticed. Over the years more and more people have started noticing, and more and more people have joined in. At first it was a spark, something different. A vibe of something bigger than just us as individuals; a camaraderie. It's something positive, something simple.

"I hadn't thought of doing anything with it, it was just something fun. But I distinctly remember the night I woke up with a vision of a map of the world, covered in red socks, spreading energy, uniting like-minded people. I saw Obama wearing red socks, addressing millions at that spot in Washington Square where Forrest Gump speaks, and since that night I've been working on Red Sock Friday for as much of my time as I can.

"I officially launched Red Sock Friday on the April 9 in 2010 with a disk dance flashmob at Cape Town station. We had random people rocking up, wearing their red socks and being part of the vibe. At the end of it we all joined arms and sang the national anthem. It was a poignant South African experience and an awesome, surreal moment to be a part of.

“To date we’ve sold nearly 13 000 pairs of socks to over 50 different countries worldwide. So slowly but surely my dream of a map of the world covered in red socks is coming true. Red Sock Friday is an affair of the heart though; it’s not a commercial enterprise as that undermines the essence of what it’s about.

“Via Twitter and Facebook people contact me and I will mail socks personally. Corporates such as Brandhouse and Avis have also bought our socks, and the proceeds all go to charity. An example of which is ‘Help Hanna Hear’, which raises money for a cochlear implant to help a young girl in Port Elizabeth hear.

“The red socks have become a vehicle for other people to have fun and raise money for causes they are passionate about.”

John has an engaging nature, a bright mind, and itchy feet, which he also put to good use raising money for charity by running for The Pink Drive (a breast cancer charity), driving in the Put Foot Rally, as well as cycling from Cape Town to Pietermaritzburg in 10 days, and then running the Comrades Marathon the very next day, in what is called the Unogwaja Challenge.

By mobilising charity projects and working hard at getting sponsors on board, John has come to understand how sponsorship and social media can work well together, and the importance of brands needing to work with social media such as Twitter and Facebook in order to develop themselves.

“The thing with the charity events that I get involved in is that the relative cash injection required from a sponsor to make the event a success and get a return on your investment is bugger all.

“People get excited in the story and want to share about it. The association with the cause and the people involved really works.

“Working on this (social media-driven charity events) has given me the experience and ability to build other social media campaigns for other brands which I can generate an income from doing.

“This helps take the pressure off Red Sock Friday to survive so that it can just be about covering the cost of the socks and then getting them out there. I don’t want to make any money off it. I should have to work to sustain my own existence, just like everybody else.

“It’s Red Sock Friday that should be allowed to just be.”

John is still striving to find that balance between making Red Sock Friday sustainable, taking on new charity projects, and paying his rent. So to survive financially, he also does some motivational speaking, MCing and acting.

“Outsourcing the production and distribution of the socks has helped with his workload, and John is also in talks with a major retail partner about becoming a Red Sock stockist.

“The beauty of the Red Sock Friday story lies in its simplicity, and how it has touched so many people’s lives without much artillery.

“I’ve pretty much been a one-gunner with my little pellet gun, doing my best. It’s now in a position where someone could come on board and see the potential of it from a CSI and marketing point of view, and give it the next spark that it needs. That would be a great way to get the socks out to more South Africans, and I’m quietly working on that.

“Red Sock Friday is a great story, and it’s more than just an idea. It’s something that I have done. The way that I see it is that I don’t want to spend 80 percent of my time doing something I don’t like, to enjoy 20 percent of my time. I want to try and apply myself to something that I really love as much of the time as possible, and I know that this is something worth hanging on to.

“I don’t know whether or not I am a leader. That’s for other people to decide. The best thing that I can do is to follow what I believe in.

“And that’s what I’ve done with Red Sock Friday. I didn’t start it thinking that I could be the next Mark Zuckerberg. It’s something that I felt, and felt compelled to do it. And by following all of those moments in your life, which are sometimes difficult to do, I think you’ll end up hopefully inspiring other people to do the same.”

You can contact John via e-mail: iwearredsocksonfridays@gmail.com or you can visit his Facebook page at: [facebook.com/iwearredsocksonfridays](https://www.facebook.com/iwearredsocksonfridays)

I Justin Nurse is a freelance journalist and founder of Laugh It Off.

Source: Cape Argus

<http://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/john-wears-his-heart-on-his-feet-1.1216072>

[Accessed 8 Jul 2014]