



Back in 2017, Laurent Labit, the then-backs coach of Racing 92, informed the media that, in his view, Montpellier owner Mohamed Altrad “had bought the French Rugby Federation”. It proved a costly claim for Labit – who is now on the staff of the national team – resulting in a ban from the touchline for 15 weeks and required to settle a €1500 fine.

Labit blamed his outburst, for which he apologised, on his side’s heavy defeat by Montpellier, but it was more the culmination of a simmering resentment at what Labit perceived to be the undue influence of Altrad in French rugby. Just the previous month, the tycoon had demanded that his club be compensated after their Top 14 clash against Racing was postponed in the wake of the shock announcement that Racing planned to merge with Stade Français. The Parisian fusion never came to pass but Altrad’s demand had clearly got under the skin of Labit.

One wonders what he thought when, in 2018, Altrad’s company signed a shirt sponsorship deal with the FFR until the 2023 World Cup, which was reportedly worth €35m.

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The name 'Altrad' has become synonymous with France, as it will with the All Blacks from 2022, after the man whose company has a net worth of \$3.4 billion signed a six-year sponsorship deal with New Zealand Rugby. In return for a reported €70 million, NZR will display the name of Altrad's eponymous company that specialises in construction materials on the shirts of the men's and women's national teams, as well as the All Blacks Sevens, Black Ferns Sevens, Māori All Blacks and the New Zealand Under-20s teams.

Altrad told the French media that the deal also stipulates an "exchanges of skills will take place in particular at the level of coaches, training and, in addition, four matches of the All Blacks will be played in Montpellier between 2022 and 2026".

Some might say Altrad has bought New Zealand Rugby.



The All Blacks will have a new sponsor on their jerseys in 2022 (Photo by Daniel Carson/www.photosport.nz)

So what can Kiwis expect from the man who has given his name to the Blacks and Les Bleus? If Altrad has got an ego the size of the Eiffel Tower, he conceals it well under a rather shy and diffident exterior. Unlike Mourad Boudjellal, the colourful former owner of Toulon, Altrad doesn't have an insatiable desire to be the centre of attention.

But don't be fooled by his unassuming demeanour. This is an exceptional individual, a man who has overcome the most appalling adversity, someone for whom the cliché 'rags to riches' could have been crafted. Were Altrad's life story to be made into a film, it would be dismissed as Hollywood hyperbole.

Altrad doesn't know when he was born, only that it was some time between 1948 and 1955 to a Bedouin tribe in the Syrian desert of which his father was chief. He selected the year 1948 for his passport and from a hat pulled the month and the day – March 9. "I didn't know my

mother, or barely," he told a French interviewer in 2019. "I was born from a rape... my mother was raped twice: the first time she gave birth to my older brother, whom my father kept and who he killed through ill-treatment. I was luckier, in a sense. He didn't want me."

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Altrad's mother died when he was four and he was raised in poverty by his grandmother; a cold woman, by all accounts. As a Bedouin, Altrad had no access to a school but what good would an education be for a shepherd, the profession his grandmother had in mind for him? The boy had other ideas and secretly taught himself to read. Equipped with this precious commodity, Altrad craved to expand his horizons.

He was eventually taken in by a family member who lived in the city of Raqqa, where he enrolled in a local school, passing his exams with distinction. In 1969, he arrived in the Mediterranean city of Montpellier on a university sponsorship with barely a franc in his pocket or a word of French in his head.

Fast-forward a decade and Altrad had not only mastered the language, he had obtained a degree in mathematics and a PhD in computer science, acquired French citizenship and married a Frenchwoman.

But instead of building a life in France, Altrad took a job in Abu Dhabi, working in computers for the national oil company. Five years later, in 1985, while on holiday in France, he and a friend bought a bankrupt scaffolding company. It was the foundation stone of his business empire.

Over the years, some have disputed this story, claiming it is too fantastical to be true. The late Georges Frêche, the Socialist mayor of Montpellier from 1977 to 2004, accused Altrad of being a Syrian secret agent whose background was make-believe. Few took the accusation seriously, particularly as Frêche had a track record of disparaging ethnic minorities.



Montpellier's European Challenge Cup triumphs in 2016 and 2021 are a poor return on Altrad's massive investment
(Photo by David Davies/PA Images via Getty Images)

Altrad is an accomplished man in many fields. He has written three novels and stood as a candidate in local elections. But his genius lies in business. In 2015, he became the first French person to win the prestigious World Entrepreneur of The Year, the judges praising "his ability to build and sustain growth over 30 years, and by his humility and character".

Asked in 2016 for his business philosophy, Altrad replied: "To be a world leader, nothing less than that... the key thing is to have people who are happy in your company."

But while this philosophy has worked in his business empire, it has so far brought him little success in his attempt to build a rugby dynasty.

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Mohed Altrad

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Altrad had had his eye on buying Montpellier for a number of years but, if the stories are to be believed, Frêche did all he could to prevent such a transaction even when he was no longer in office. "As long as I live, never Altrad," Frêche reportedly said about the prospect of

the Syrian acquiring the city's rugby club. Frêche died in October 2010 and seven months later Altrad bought Montpellier for €2.4m.

By a happy coincidence a fortnight after Altrad became the majority shareholder, Montpellier contested their first Top 14 final, losing 15–10 to Toulouse with a young team who included homegrown heroes such as François Trinh-Duc and Fulgence Ouedraogo, who is now in his 18th season with the club.

Altrad must have anticipated that Top 14 finals would become a regular event but there has been just one since, against Castres in 2018, which also ended in defeat. In fact, there have been only two trophies since he bought Montpellier, the European Challenge Cup in 2016 and 2021, a small return for a mammoth investment. A couple of hundred miles along the Mediterranean coast, Boudjellal's millions were rewarded with Toulon winning three Champions Cups and a Top 14 title.

Over the past 10 years, Altrad has hired and fired some top-class coaches, and dozens of top stars from around the world have come and gone without making much of an impression.



Jake White won the World Cup with South Africa in 2007 but couldn't replicate that success at Montpellier (Photo by Patrick Aventurier/Getty Images)

Altrad's biggest mistake was hiring Jake White, who in 2007 coached South Africa to World Cup glory. Narrow-minded and devoid of empathy, his approach to coaching was antithetical to Altrad's business philosophy. He made no attempt to learn the language or understand the culture; instead he shipped in more than a dozen South Africans, eased out several

Frenchmen – including local hero Trinh-Duc – and alienated the public. Altrad eventually backed White in 2017.

Altrad has always insisted that whether it is business or rugby, his motivation is not money but something more profound. “It has never been my driving force, money,” he said in 2019. “My driving force is a revenge, not against man, but against life.”

Nevertheless, Altrad knows the power that money has over a lot of men. He used it to lure Johan Goosen from Racing to Montpellier (possible another cause of Labit’s ire), allegedly paying €1.5m to buy the South African out of a contract that had two and a half years to run. Altrad’s behaviour caused a scandal within French rugby. “The president who’s going to sign Johan Goosen is a bastard,” said Boudjellal. “What he has done is to not respect a contract. If a president signs him, then he endangers all the other Top 14 presidents.”

“**Laporte wept when he was released from custody but Altrad was more stoic. It’s not as if he hasn’t faced more hardship in his life than a couple of days staring at the walls of a police cell.**”

There have also been other controversies, notably the two days he spent in police custody in 2020 when he and FFR president Bernard Laporte were questioned over allegations the Montpellier owner had used his influence to reduce a disciplinary punishment against his club in 2017. The pair denied the accusations and no charges have ever been brought.

Laporte wept when he was released from custody but Altrad was more stoic. It’s not as if he hasn’t faced more hardship in his life than a couple of days staring at the walls of a police cell. In a 2016 interview, Altrad described his childhood as “a lot of adversity at each level... starting from the beginning, the death of my mother, the fact that my father didn’t want to live with me so he cast me away, and so on”.

Decades had passed since the trauma of his youth, explained Altrad, “but believe me this is still flowing in my blood, in my heart. I don’t forget this”.

A psychoanalyst might say it’s why he named a stadium after himself and why his name adorns the shirts of two of rugby union’s great nations; it wouldn’t be the first time a childhood rejection became an adult obsession with respect and recognition.

Altrad’s dream will be a France v New Zealand clash in the final of the 2023 World Cup in Paris. Thirty shirts all bearing his name, now that would seal his reputation as rugby’s premier powerbroker.

More stories from Gavin Mortimer