



'I don't feel valued here' – The full Q&A as Jacques Nienaber suggests he could leave Leinster, hitting out at criticism



Leinster senior coach Jacques Nienaber © Paul Phelan/Sportsfile



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Jacques Nienaber says he is not sure if he will fulfil the final season of his contract with Leinster. The senior coach says he does not feel valued and worries that he has lost the support of fans.

Last summer, the former Springbok defence and head coach signed a contract that takes him up to the summer of 2027, when it is expected he will return home



Springboks, whom he helped to win back-to-back World Cups in 2019 and 2023.



There is now a real possibility he could leave a year early.

The coach defended his record, his defensive system and clarified his role in the Leinster hierarchy. He also pushed back on criticism, particularly from this writer, about his tenure in Dublin and the efficacy of his defensive style with these players.

In particular, Nienaber took issue with the idea that Leinster had 'done a deal with the devil' in terms of sacrificing their attractive playing style by adopting his ultra-aggressive, South African defence in an attempt to end their run of final defeats.



Leinster head coach Leo Cullen © Brendan Moran/Sportsfile

Here is the exchange, which we've edited in parts for brevity.

Rúaidhrí O'Connor: “What did you make of the performance against Bordeaux in Bilbao?”

Jacques Nienaber: “We lost, that’s my assessment. We lost the game.”

RO'C: "What did you learn?"

JN: "A lot of things didn't go well that day. We started well, made too many mistakes, we didn't use our opportunities. We spoke about it last week. We got a lot of 22m entries, didn't capitalise, and if you play in finals, you have to capitalise on your opportunities."

"We had possession, territory, we had everything except the scoreboard. That's probably the flipside, when Bordeaux got the opportunity, they scored and they capitalised."

"They got into our '22 probably only seven times and they scored five times, so their conversion rate's quite good and ours wasn't due to errors."

"We got in there, then we would knock the ball on, or we would get tackled into touch and then the next time we would be late on a breakdown, and then the next one, it will be a knock on or it will be a forward pass, then we lose a lineout."

"It was different things that popped up, it wasn't one particular person that you can make a change and say, 'OK, listen, he's having a bad game' or it wasn't one area that you can say, 'listen, lads, let's sort out the breakdown because that's the area that we're under pressure'."



RO'C: Leinster's error count has been a recurring theme all season, did that come back and bite you in the final?

JN: "If you look at a team like Bordeaux and look at the Top 14 stats, I think they will be in the top three conceding errors or conceding turnovers because they play such a high-risk game, they give you a lot of turnovers, or they give teams a lot of opportunity of turnover ball because they also like it, so they kind of don't mind it."

"There's errors and there's critical errors. Sometimes we make critical errors on defence, which cost you seven points, and sometimes we make critical errors in the kicking game, which gives them unstructured attack, and sometimes we make critical errors on attack."

"You're five metres out or two metres out and you will give an intercept pass between two forward pods or a guy knocks the ball on one metre from the try line. That's a critical error ... I'm not sure why that happens."

RO'C: "Have the issues been apparent in training or just in games?"

JN: "If you go and pull our stats on errors, people will go, 'Yes, you concede 16 to 20 turnovers in a game'. But if you go and look at how much possession we have, you can easily just concede eight turnovers in a game, but you don't have the ball.

"You just kick it away and you defend, and you don't have the ball and you kick it away, you play a territory game. You can easily go that route, if that is the metric that you want to look at. Then you say, listen, we just don't give them any turnover ball. How do you do that? How do you concede turnovers? You must actually want to play with the ball.

'Who fires you? Do you know who fires you? The public, the media, they fire you. Not the CEO, not Shane [Nolan]. He doesn't fire me, but you guys fire us'

Jacques Nienaber

Leinster senior coach

"If you go purely on turnovers conceded, we will also rank high. Like Bordeaux does, but if you go and look at the amount of carries, breakdowns, passes, and you then put that in a percentage compared to other teams, our turnover rate is low, but the count is high."

RO'C: "The last time we spoke, you said you were trying to blend your style with the Leinster way. Is that sapping the players of energy?"

JN: "What do you feel my way is? Do you think I have anything to do on the attack? Honestly."

RO'C: "You said [in November] that you run the rugby programme?"

JN: "I don't tell Tyler [Bleyendaal] how to attack or [Robin McBryde] how to maul or how to win a lineout. Running the programme is, you're co-ordinating all the different areas and making sure that what we decide on Sunday when we meet, 'Listen, what do we need to beat Stormers?'

"You don't understand what I mean. So, it's maybe a good thing that we spend some time on it. On a Sunday, you will go, 'Review, what was wrong? Preview, what do we need to win?' and then is there areas that overlap, 'Lads, which are the critical areas?' It's these areas and then you go, 'OK, how much time are we going to allocate?'. We've only got like 180 minutes in a week. We're going to allocate so much time to that. That is running a rugby programme.

"You make sure that everybody is aligned and happy with the amount of time they get to fix the areas in their department. To work on new things in their department and you just make sure that you

manage that.”

RO’C: “Is it possible to attack the way you attack and defend the way you defend successfully?”

JN: “I don’t think they [Bordeaux] went multi-phase a lot. Why did they kick the ball so much? They felt pressure, and that’s brilliant. Pressure defence, pressure defence, pressure defence. Three phases, kick the ball.

“I don’t think our defence is taking a lot of energy ... I think our defence complements our attack because we don’t have to defend for long passages, so we can actually utilise our energy in attack.

“I see it a little bit differently. People see line-speed as ‘yes, you spend lots of energy’, but we normally don’t spend it for long periods of time. You put in intent, yes, when you have a set, but I don’t think the sets are long.”

‘I’m quoting Rúadhí here, “You signed a deal with the devil, you need to get rid of that devil, he’s killing Irish rugby”.’

Jacques Nienaber

Leinster senior coach

A colleague asks Nienaber if he will definitely be here next season.

JN: “If, like he [this writer] said, I’m ‘a devil’, so if it’s according to him, probably not.”

We point out that it’s not up to journalists.

JN: “Who fires you? Do you know who fires you? The public, the media, they fire you. Not the CEO, not Shane [Nolan]. He doesn’t fire me, but you guys fire us. You fire all coaches because the pressure builds up and builds up, and the fans then build the pressure on them, and then they just ask this and say, ‘Listen, lads, I think we must part ways’.

“There’s a misconception that people get fired by the CEOs. That is because of pressure put on CEOs by the boards, by people listening.

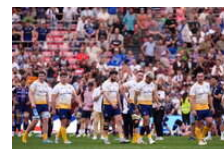
“Or let’s say the board member has dinner with his mates and his friends, and they go, I’m quoting Rúadhí here, ‘You signed a deal with the devil, you need to get rid of that devil, he’s killing Irish rugby’. That is how you get fired. Then he goes, ‘Maybe they’re right, maybe they are’, and that’s how you get fired.

“So your question is, listen, am I going to be here? I hope so. OK, currently I’m not sure, to be honest.”

Why, he is asked?

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Rúaidhrí O'Connor: At the end of a chastening Bilbao afternoon, Leinster's Cullen and Nienaber project was reduced to rubble



JN: “Because I don’t think people value me here,” Nienaber said. “They don’t value me here. They don’t.”

We wonder does Leo Cullen, Leinster’s head coach, value his senior coach.

JN: “It’s not for Leo, it’s for people [that] don’t value. The moment you lose the team or the fans, you’ve got to go. The moment you lose the changing room or the club, the fan-base, you’ve got to go. You could just hang there and take your cheque, but no. They don’t want you there.”

RO’C: “Do you believe you’ve lost the dressing room?”

JN: “No.”

RO’C: “What about the fans?”

JN: “I’ll ask you this, do you think that a team that’s lost a European final and is playing in a semi-final, that haven’t won a trophy for four years [before] we won the URC last year – do you think a coach then loses the changing room, if that’s your track record? I’ve been here three years, coached two finals and a semi-final of Europe. One semi-final loss, two final losses. Yes, loss. URC, semi-final and a final. Won one.”

As we understand it, the players are still on board with Nienaber’s coaching. A colleague asks if he wants to fight and show that he is the man for the job.

James Lowe of Leinster dives over to score his side's eighth try against Lions at the Aviva Stadium © David Fitzgerald/Sportsfile

JN: “Listen, I say I can only fight through results, can’t I? I’m asking, am I that shit ...”

RO’C: “I don’t think you’re shit.”

JN: “You say that, Rúaidhrí, you say that. You don’t think it, but you honestly say that.”

ROC: “I’ve never said that.”

JN: “You say, ‘You’re making the deal with the devil, this risk isn’t paying off’. Are you supporting me?”

ROC: “I’m not here to support. I’m here to report and call what I see.”

JN: “And you see the wrong thing.”

ROC: “I think you’re one of the best coaches in the world, but I don’t think you’re a good a fit for Leinster.”

JN: “So, you’re not supporting me.”

ROC: “It’s not my job to support, that’s been my position for a number of years, and I’m happy to be proved wrong. I don’t think the club is buying in to your style of play, you’re now playing a hybrid game that takes too much energy.”

JN: “You liked me when I was at Munster, you loved me when I was at Munster.”

ROC: “I like you, I enjoy talking to you, but that’s a different thing.”

JN: “I actually thought you were from Munster, but they told me you were from UCD. No, this guy liked me at Munster, f***!”

Another reporter asks Nienaber whether, with Cullen saying everything is up for review, he would change his defence.

JN: “If it will be successful for the club, yeah, I will always serve the club. The moment you are not serving the club, your ego is done.

“Before I went to Munster, I coached the drift defence at the Stormers and we were pretty good at it, have a look. We didn’t concede too many tries in Super Rugby.

“It’s not the case that I don’t understand the other system, there’s not one that’s better than the other. You must believe in one, the team must believe in one. If the players don’t believe in that any more and we have to do a drift defence, it’s ‘can I coach them the best drift defence in the world to make them win?’ If the answer is no, then shit, I’m not the right guy.

“If the answer is ‘yes, I can do it’, that’s the thing. Can you be the best value for the club. It’s always the club first, that’s the thing. I’m not looking for supporters.”

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